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THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE AZERBAIJANI LANDS NORTH OF THE ARAZ RIVER (1801–1828)**

Araz Nehri'nin Kuzeyindeki Azerbaycan Topraklarında Sosyo-Politik Durum
(1801–1828)

Abstract

This article examines the socio-political conditions in Northern Azerbaijan during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The study focuses on the period marked by sustained military conflict and administrative transformation in the South Caucasus, during which Azerbaijani territories north of the Araz River were progressively incorporated into the Russian imperial system. The analysis demonstrates that ongoing warfare, changes in governance structures, and the reorganization of fiscal and administrative practices had a profound impact on local socio-economic conditions. Administrative measures implemented by imperial authorities prioritized revenue generation and territorial consolidation, contributing to increased economic pressure on local communities. At the same time, demographic changes resulting from military activity, population displacement, and shifts in settlement patterns further reshaped the social landscape. By examining these processes through contemporary documentary sources and historical literature, the article provides a structured assessment of the factors that shaped socio-political relations in Northern Azerbaijan during a period of significant transition.

Keywords: Northern Azerbaijan, Russian Empire, South Caucasus, population, socio-political conditions

Öz

Bu makale, on dokuzuncu yüzyılın ilk çeyreğinde Kuzey Azerbaycan'daki sosyo-politik koşulları incelemektedir. Çalışma, Güney Kafkasya'da uzun süreli askeri çatışmalar ve idari dönüşümlerle şekillenen bir döneme odaklanmakta; bu süreçte Araz Nehri'nin kuzeyinde yer alan Azerbaycan topraklarının kademeli olarak Rus İmparatorluğu'nun idari yapısına dâhil edilmesini ele almaktadır. Analiz, devam eden savaşların, yönetim yapılarındaki değişimlerin ve mali-idari uygulamaların yeniden düzenlenmesinin yerel sosyo-ekonomik koşullar üzerinde derin etkiler yarattığını ortaya koymaktadır. İmparatorluk makamları tarafından uygulanan idari tedbirler, gelirlerin artırılması ve bölgesel denetimin pekiştirilmesini öncelikle; bu durum yerel topluluklar üzerindeki ekonomik baskının artmasına yol açmıştır. Bununla birlikte, askeri faaliyetlerin neden olduğu demografik

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değişimler, nüfus hareketleri ve yerleşim düzenlerindeki dönüşümler de toplumsal yapıyı yeniden şekillendirmiştir. Dönemin çağdaş belge kaynakları ve tarihsel literatür temelinde yürütülen bu inceleme, Kuzey Azerbaycan'da söz konusu geçiş döneminde sosyo-politik ilişkileri belirleyen etkenlerin sistematik bir değerlendirmesini sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Kuzey Azerbaycan, Rus İmparatorluğu, Güney Kafkasya, nüfus, sosyo-politik koşullar*

Introduction

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the socio-political conditions in Azerbaijan were shaped by fragmentation and structural instability. Following the collapse of centralized authority in the mid-eighteenth century, Azerbaijani territories were divided into a number of small political entities known as khanates. This situation persisted into the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In the regions north of the Araz River, khanates such as Baku, Karabakh, Sheki, Shamakhi, Guba, Ganja, Irevan, and Nakhchivan exercised local authority. Relations among these entities were marked by recurrent conflicts, temporary alliances, and shifting balances of power, which hindered the formation of a stable and unified political order. At the same time, military campaigns conducted by neighboring states to expand their influence in the South Caucasus further intensified existing political and administrative challenges.

A significant body of written material plays an important role in examining this historical context. Following the incorporation of the Caucasus into the Russian imperial system, the city of Tbilisi assumed the function of an administrative and cultural center for the South Caucasus. In order to administer the diverse populations of the region, imperial authorities established numerous administrative bodies, departments, and scholarly societies, alongside scientific and cultural institutions. From the early nineteenth century onward, these organizations produced a wide range of publications, including books, documentary collections, periodicals, and statistical compendiums.

Among these publications were collections dedicated to administrative description, statistical reporting, and ethnographic observation, as well as documentary series compiling official correspondence and reports. Of particular significance is the multi-volume documentary corpus assembled by the Caucasian Archaeological Commission, which began publication in Tbilisi in the second half of the nineteenth century under scholarly supervision. These volumes include official documents such as reports, letters, decrees, and administrative correspondence, alongside statistical materials including tax registers and fiscal accounts. As a whole, these sources provide detailed insight into the socio-economic and political conditions of Azerbaijan and neighboring regions, reflecting the administrative practices and local realities of the khanates during a period of profound transformation.

“Military Occupational Regime” Established by the Russian Empire in Northern Azerbaijan during the First Qajar–Russian War (1804–1813)

On the eve of the Treaty of Turkmenchay, almost the entire territory of Northern Azerbaijan, with the exception of the Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates, had come under the control of the Russian Empire. Under these conditions, a military-based administrative regime was introduced in the occupied territories. The imperial authorities dismantled existing local governance structures and replaced them with new administrative mechanisms subordinated to military command. The primary objectives of this administration focused on examining local fiscal arrangements, restructuring taxation practices, and expanding the revenue base of the imperial treasury (Abdullayev, 2005; Amrahov, 2022).

The consequences of prolonged military operations were reflected in the deteriorating economic conditions of rural communities across Northern Azerbaijan. Villages experienced widespread financial distress, while multiple layers of internal taxation and externally imposed fiscal obligations placed heavy burdens on the khanates. According to official documentation, outstanding financial liabilities reached significant levels by 1811, amounting to 23,790 chevrons in Shirvan and 16,815 chevrons in Karabakh (Paulucci, 1811). In this context, the commander-in-chief of Russian forces in the Caucasus, Marquis Paulucci, communicated with the Minister of Finance, Guryev, proposing that the accumulated debts be rescheduled rather than annulled. Specifically, he suggested that the liabilities of Shirvan be distributed over a three-year period, while those of Karabakh be extended over six years (Paulucci, 1811). This approach indicates that the imperial administration prioritized fiscal recovery through temporal adjustment rather than debt cancellation.

Available documentation further indicates that during the initial phase of the conflict between 1804 and 1813, socio-political conditions were particularly strained in certain regions, including the Jar-Balakan community. Records show that for non-compliance with central directives, the community was subjected to a levy amounting to 220 poods of silk, valued at 6,679 chevrons. Contemporary correspondence also reflects the perception among imperial military authorities that segments of the local population were associated with resistance activities. In January 1813, official statements included references to the potential use of artillery measures against the settlement (Dzharskoe obshchestvo, 1813). Taken together, these materials illustrate that governance in Northern Azerbaijan during this period relied heavily on military-administrative instruments. The combination of fiscal pressure, enforcement measures, and centralized control shaped local socio-political conditions and defined the operational character of imperial authority in the region during the early nineteenth century.

Social, Economic, and Political Indicators of Russian Occupation in Northern Azerbaijan (1804–1827)

As a consequence of the administrative and fiscal policies implemented by imperial authorities, living conditions in the provinces and khanates of Northern Azerbaijan deteriorated significantly. In response to the practices of local officials, segments of the population relocated from one khanate or province to another, and in certain cases crossed external borders. Documentary evidence indicates that population displacement reached substantial levels during this period. According to data recorded in the fifth volume of the *Akty Kavkazskoi Arkheograficheskoi Komissii*, an average of 2,628 families departed from the Karabakh Khanate between 1806 and 1812. During the same years, 2,217 families were taken abroad as captives, resulting in the loss of nearly one quarter of the khanate's population.

Financial obligations imposed on the remaining population continued despite these demographic changes. Correspondence from the commander-in-chief of Russian forces in the Caucasus, Rtishchev, addressed to Mehdiqulu Khan of Karabakh on June 18, 1812, concerned the repayment of debts amounting to approximately seventeen thousand chevrons accumulated by the local population. The letter emphasized the continuation of fiscal responsibilities for subsequent years and addressed the mechanisms for their fulfillment (Rtishchev, 1812). The same document indicates that the remaining sum of approximately eight thousand chevrons was to be redistributed among the population that continued to reside in the khanate. This redistribution was presented in the form of administrative guidance, reflecting the fiscal priorities of the imperial authorities in territories under their control (Rtishchev, 1812).

Comparable conditions were observed in other regions of Northern Azerbaijan under Russian administration. Orders issued by the commander-in-chief of Russian forces in the Caucasus illustrate the measures adopted in response to population movements. Official directives required the immediate return of peasant families who had left their places of residence to their former settlements across provinces and districts. These orders also outlined the application of punitive measures and financial penalties for unauthorized relocation, demonstrating the administrative approach taken toward population mobility during this period (Ermolov, 1824; Starkov, 1825). Overall, available documentation suggests that population movements within Northern Azerbaijan during the years of conflict were closely connected to security concerns arising from military operations. In seeking safety, residents relocated to areas distant from active hostilities. The response of imperial authorities prioritized enforcement and administrative control, relying on regulatory and punitive measures rather than accommodation. These practices constituted a defining feature of the socio-economic and political environment in Northern Azerbaijan during the period of Russian military presence.

The measures implemented by imperial authorities were also evident in regions such as Sheki, Shirvan, Yelizavetpol, and the Gazakh area of Northern Azerbaijan. Between 1818 and 1820, both in-kind and monetary taxes were imposed on the peasant population of these territories. In parallel, efforts were undertaken to collect arrears accumulated in previous years, while certain fiscal arrangements were restructured in accordance with administrative priorities. These practices reflected a systematic approach to consolidating fiscal control over the occupied territories (Abdullayev, 2005). In Northern Azerbaijan, administrative arbitrariness reached a level at which the Caucasus Command-General actively restricted the movement of peasants belonging to the treasury and private entrepreneurs. Measures were adopted to prevent their relocation from one place to another, effectively limiting population mobility. This policy functioned as an extension of the serfdom-related regulations applied within the Russian Empire to the rural environment of Azerbaijan (Abdullayev, 2005). These practices were accompanied by a marked increase in petitions and complaints submitted by the local population. In 1814, peasants from the Shamshadil district addressed more than 311 petitions to the Command-General, emphasizing the severity of taxation and requesting practical measures to alleviate the burden. Despite the volume and persistence of these appeals, the fiscal policies in question remained unchanged, and no substantial concessions were introduced (Abdullayev, 2005). Another factor that intensified socio-political tensions in Northern Azerbaijan on the eve of the Treaty of Turkmenchay was the systematic collection of new statistical data concerning property ownership and taxation in the khanates occupied during the Russian–Qajar wars. To this end, censuses were conducted in Sheki in 1819 and 1824, in Shirvan in 1820, and in Karabakh in 1823. These surveys aimed to identify villages under state and treasury control, categorize the peasant population, and determine tax obligations inherited from the khanate period. According to the census data, 98,488 individuals were registered in the Sheki province, of whom 81.3 percent paid taxes to the treasury, while 18.7 percent were subject solely to private obligations. The province comprised 163 villages, 111 of which were under treasury administration (Ermolov, 1824). Similar statistical measures were undertaken in the Karabakh province in 1823. The data recorded 17,101 families, with approximately 65 percent residing on feudal estates and 35 percent on treasury lands. A total of 35 statistical tables were compiled for the province. Officials responsible for these surveys, including treasury advisers Mogilevskii and Ermolov, expressed concern regarding the presence of a significant number of individuals not registered as taxpayers. Particular attention was drawn to married brothers lacking separate legal documentation or residing within the same household. The inclusion of these individuals in tax registers was viewed as a means of increasing revenue collected for the treasury (Mogilevskii & Ermolov, 1823). Overall, these measures demonstrate that imperial administrators sought to obtain

comprehensive information about the financial and taxation systems of Northern Azerbaijan, prioritizing the interests of the state and treasury. The implementation of these policies contributed to increasing economic dependence on administrative institutions and reshaped relations between the local population and governing authorities.

An additional factor exacerbating socio-political conditions in Northern Azerbaijan was the burden placed on the local population to meet the provisioning needs of Russian military forces during the wars. As military operations expanded and troop numbers increased, the responsibility for supplying food, particularly meat and wine, was imposed on local communities. In 1817–1818, the Caucasian corps numbered approximately 17,000 personnel, a force that required substantial daily provisions. Authorization for these arrangements was granted by Tsar Alexander I. By the outbreak of the second Russian–Qajar war, the size of the corps had nearly doubled, consisting of 31 battalions, 30 squadrons, and 11 Cossack regiments. In addition, garrisons stationed in centers such as Shusha, Baku, Derbent, and Shamakhi accounted for up to 7,000 troops. Specific orders were issued by the commander-in-chief to ensure the provisioning of these forces, further increasing the economic pressures borne by the local population (Abdullayev, 2005). Arbitrariness and misappropriation by imperial officials also contributed to shortages of food products and episodes of hunger in several regions. These difficulties became particularly visible during the provisioning of Russian military forces in 1826–1827. In the summer of 1827, the commander-in-chief of Russian troops in the Caucasus, I. F. Paskevich, allocated 10,944 manats for the transportation of provisions from Astrakhan to Baku, including 34,101 quarts of flour, 40,000 quarts of rusks, 45,000 quarts of groats, and other supplies. This allocation illustrates the scale of logistical challenges and the strain placed on local resources during the period (Abdullayev, 2005). At the same time, the imperial government introduced a series of measures aimed at consolidating its position in the South Caucasus, including the territories of Northern Azerbaijan incorporated into the empire under the Treaty of Gulistan. One such measure was the preferential customs tariff enacted in 1821, which imposed a five percent duty on goods imported from Western Europe. Government officials, particularly the Minister of Foreign Affairs K. V. Nesselrod, regarded this policy as a mechanism for stimulating regional trade and economic integration (History of Azerbaijan, 2007). Within this broader framework, a project submitted in 1828 by A. S. Griboyedov in cooperation with the civil governor of Tiflis, P. D. Zaveleyski, to I. F. Paskevich is noteworthy. The proposal, entitled “Russian–South Caucasus Trading Company,” emphasized the economic potential of the South Caucasus and outlined plans for organizing trade routes and collection points for local products. The project highlighted the strategic importance of areas where Kakheti, the Sheki Khanate, and the Yelizavetpol district converged, presenting them as suitable locations for

exchange between local producers and Russian merchants (Sources on the history of Azerbaijan, 1989). Subsequent developments, however, demonstrated that the preferential tariff of 1821 did not lead to significant growth in domestic industry. During this period, no new factories were established, and production in sectors such as winemaking, silk manufacture, and cotton textiles did not undergo substantial improvement (History of Azerbaijan, 2007). One of the more notable initiatives undertaken by the imperial administration on the eve of the Treaty of Turkmenchay was increased attention to sericulture in Northern Azerbaijan. In 1825, the commander-in-chief of Russian forces in the Caucasus, A. P. Ermolov, issued orders to expand mulberry plantations in the Shamakhi region. In correspondence with the Minister of Finance in 1829, he emphasized that the production of high-quality silk in the Shirvan province was a priority, noting that more than one million mulberry trees had been planted on his orders (History of Azerbaijan, 2007). As a continuation of these measures, a silk-processing factory began operating in 1827 in Khanabad near Nukha. Research indicates that this enterprise belonged to the state treasury and functioned as the largest industrial establishment in the South Caucasus at that time, employing approximately ninety wage laborers (History of Azerbaijan, 2007). In order to meet the demand of Russian industry for silk, further measures were implemented in the Shirvan, Sheki, and Karabakh provinces. An order issued in 1824 by the chief administrator of the Caucasus mandated the purchase of 1.2 million mulberry seedlings and the expansion of plantation areas, including the transfer of saplings from Sheki to less productive lands. Low-yield grain and arable lands were repurposed for sericulture, leading to the establishment of 240 new garden areas in 1824–1825 with the participation of approximately 200 herder families. Additionally, around 4,000 peasants were mobilized for twenty days to construct three irrigation canals from the Goychay River to supply these gardens with water (Ermolov, 1824; Starkov, 1825). Following similar initiatives in Sheki and Shirvan, an order was issued in 1824 to establish mulberry plantations in Karabakh. As a result, eighty-five mulberry gardens were created on rice-growing lands in six villages of the Karabakh province. According to the terms set out in the order, half of the silk produced was to be transferred to the treasury, while the remaining portion was to be cultivated by peasants under conditions defined by fiscal obligations (Abdullayev, 2005).

Conclusion

The analysis of the foregoing material indicates that, on the eve of the Treaty of Turkmenchay, the socio-political conditions in the territories of Northern Azerbaijan under Russian control were marked by serious structural and economic strain. Prolonged military operations in the South Caucasus coincided with significant administrative reorganization and fiscal intervention, which together exerted sustained pressure on local economic life. These processes unfolded within a broader regional context

shaped by competing political objectives, shifting balances of power, and the strategic and economic significance attributed to the region.

During this period, the economy of Northern Azerbaijan was adversely affected by warfare, population movements, and changes in administrative and fiscal practices. Demographic decline occurred as a result of casualties, captivity, and the relocation of populations seeking security away from zones of conflict. These developments altered settlement patterns and disrupted agricultural production, trade, and local forms of economic organization. Fiscal measures implemented by the imperial administration prioritized the stabilization of revenue flows and the consolidation of treasury income, often without sufficient accommodation of local socio-economic conditions.

Administrative practices introduced in the former khanate territories emphasized centralized control and the enforcement of fiscal obligations. Measures aimed at increasing tax collection, regulating population mobility, and provisioning military forces placed additional demands on local communities. In certain instances, population displacement and resistance were addressed through punitive or corrective mechanisms rather than conciliatory policies. At the same time, the logistical requirements of sustaining Russian military forces during ongoing conflicts further intensified the material burden on the population.

Taken together, these factors contributed to a climate of heightened tension and social strain in Northern Azerbaijan during the early nineteenth century. The cumulative effects of military activity, administrative restructuring, fiscal pressure, and demographic change shaped the lived experience of local communities and influenced their interactions with governing authorities. The documented appeals and petitions addressed to central institutions reflect attempts by segments of the population to seek relief within the existing administrative framework, underscoring the complex and multifaceted nature of socio-political relations in the region during this transformative period.

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