

The Irano-Russian Wars' Ethno-Demographic Consequences in the South Caucasus

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Introduction

Karabakh was predominantly inhabited by Muslims. While its lower areas were inhabited by Muslims, its mountainous areas were predominantly inhabited by Armenians, who had been awarded varying degrees of autonomy by the Iranian Shahs, who were similar to modern day Azeris Turkic-speaking Shiite Muslims. Although Iran was a Shiite country and Shiite Muslims enjoyed privileges Armenians were not generally maltreated either. It is not my purpose to label different ethnic groups with stereotypes. My scope is to discuss and describe the Armenian demographic changes in Iran and the South Caucasus as the result of the Irano-Russian wars.

The South Caucasus has made part of consecutive Iranian empires, in a way or another, whenever, there was a unified Iranian empire. It has been the case in the Pre-Islamic era as well as in the Islamic era. With the notable exceptions of Ottoman occupation of part of western south Caucasus, it has made part of the Iranian empires since the Safavid until the Qajar eras.

Shah Abbas had moved around 60,000 Armenian families, or 300,00-350,000 Armenian persons from the South Caucasus to central Iran and the Caspian shores in the 17th century (Gregorian 1998: 39; Hovian 2001:13), of which about 50,000 were settled in and around the Iranian capital of Esfahan (Pasdermadjian 1998: 294; Hosseinpour et al. 1995: 58). Many Armenians regard this event as harsh and genocidal (Hovian 2001: 13). Although such a description, i.e. genocide, does not make any sense, the Armenian migration, did had demographic consequences for the Armenian demography.

A few points should be made, however. The Armenian Church itself contacted Shah Abbas of Iran and convinced him to resettle Armenians in the Iranian interiors in order to spare them the harshness of the Irano-Ottoman wars (Gregorian 1998: 35). Second: The Iranian authorities, notably Shah Abbas I in the Safavid era and the Crown prince Abbas Mirza in the Qajar era) were generally benevolent towards Armenians. They prospered in they prospered in their new homelands. Armenians enjoyed much freedom and autonomy in Iran. In any case their position was much better compared to those in the Ottoman empire. (Gregorian 1998: 39- 46; Pasdermadjian 292- 304; Hovian 2001: 13-22 and 275- 312). Even prior to Armenian migration during Shah Abbas I era, there lived Armenians in the territory of contemporary Iran (Hovian 2001: 11). Nevertheless, due this migration the number of Armenians in central Iran increased sharply.

The demographic situation in Iran and the South Caucasus, however, changed with the advances of the Imperial Russia, a mighty Orthodox Christian power, towards the Caucasian dominions of a weakened and chaotic Iran. Russia defeated Iran and Iran was forced to, sign tow treaties, Gulistan (1813) and Torkamanchay (1823). As a result Iran had to cede a large territory in the South Caucasus to Russia. Armenians sided

generally with their coreligionists Russians as the predominantly Turkic-speaking Shiite population of the South Caucasus supported Iran, with the country they associated themselves and regarded themselves part of. Nevertheless, a strict black and white generalizations is not at its place, as both many Shiite Muslim and Armenian leaders and individuals chose at times different sides which were more beneficial to their position (Bournoutian 1998: 60) and Russia was not always very benevolent towards Armenian ambitions as it tried to confiscate the Armenian churches properties and Russianize Armenians at times (Pasdermadjian 1998: 451- 462; Hosseinpour et al. 1995: 70).

In the 19th century only about 100,000 Armenians (Bournoutian 1998: 55; Hovian) remained in Iran, out of a population of 400,000 (Bournoutian 1998: 55). The number of Armenians scattered in the South Caucasus was 500,000 (Bournoutian 1998: 60). The local Muslims in the South Caucasus were mostly Turkic-speaking Shiite Muslims, who are called Azeri or Azerbaijani today, among whom lived also a number of Kurds and Persian-speakers. Below are discussed the effects of the Irano-Russian wars on the Armenian demography and Muslim- Armenian relations.

Irano-Russian wars and their aftermath

Russia conquered the South Caucasus in the first half of the 19th Century and its conquest and sovereignty in the South Caucasus was confirmed by two treaties with the Qajar Iran, that had lost a rather large part of its territory to the Tsarist Russia (Hunter 1997: 437-438; Hunter 2006: 112; Bournoutian 1998: 59-67; Cornell 2001: 37). These two treaties, the Gulistan (1813)¹ and Torkamanchay (1828),² were a beginning point for the new political realities in the region, and as they were very humiliating are referred to in Iran as *Nangin* or *Shum*; two Persian words with very negative connotations (See e.g. Hunter 1997: 437-438; Takmil Homayun 2001: 29-39; Hosseinpour et al. 1995: 3). These two treaties were manifestation of a new geopolitical and ethno-political order. They marked the beginning of the “colonization” of the South Caucasus by Russia and changed the demography and ethno-political power relations in the South Caucasus. While the Shi’ite Muslims were the favorites in the Iranian times, the Orthodox Christians became the favorites of the Russians. Although after the Russian conquest the number of Armenians in the South Caucasus increased, the ethnic map of the region until early 20th century was still very different from what it was at the end of the 20th century, and from what is now. In the 19th century Armenians lived mainly in the urban centers all around the Caucasus, in Georgia and in the territories of the modern day republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia. The predominantly rural Azerbaijanis, who at that time were called Tatars, Muslims, Shi’ite Turks or even Persians by different people(s) and sources (see. e.g. Bronevskiy: 2004 [19th century]; Tstustiev 2006), lived scattered all around southern part of Transcaucasia.

¹ Gulistan Treaty, Russian text is available at: <http://www.hrono.ru/dokum/ruper1813.html>
Gulistan Treaty, English text is available at: <http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Iran/golestan.htm>

² Torkamanchay (also other spellings are possible) Treaty, Russian text is available at: <http://www.hist.msu.ru/ER/Etext/FOREIGN/turkman.htm>
Torkamanchay Treaty, English text is available at: <http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Iran/torkmanchai.htm>

The territory of modern day Armenia was inhabited predominantly by Muslims, but changed rather fast in favor of Armenians. From the mid 20th century until the end of 1989, however, there evolved a nearly ethnically homogenous republic of Armenia and a republic of Azerbaijan and Georgia, in which the titular groups formed respectively more than 82% and 70% of their total populations, according to the last Soviet census (1989).

The Russian conquest of the Caucasus was an important event and needs more discussion, because it clearly shows the allegiances based on religions, but also qualifies this simple black and white picture. First, although Orthodox Christians were subordinated to Shi'ite Muslims, they were still tolerated and could get along rather well with their Shi'ite (and Sunni) neighbors who shared similar culture. Russia was a foreign power and sought its own interest, which at some cases coincided with those of Christians and while at some other cases did not. As can be read below, (a significant part of) the Christian Georgian population, both the nobility and peasants were not quite happy with the Russian supremacy in their native lands.

At the end of the 18th century Iran was weak, while a strong vital Orthodox Christian Russia was approaching Transcaucasia. Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar, the Iranian king of the time, who was establishing his sovereignty all over the Iranian territories, had waged wars in many regions with success. In his Caucasian campaign, Agha Muhammad Khan sacked Tbilisi (1795). He saw Georgia and in general the South Caucasus as part of his Iranian dominions. Agha Mohammad Khan, a eunuch, who did not enjoy much popular respect, is known to be a cruel ruler. His infamous massacre of Kerman, a Shi'ite Persian-speaking city in Iran, was similar or worse than that of Tbilisi. Tbilisi had a mixed cultural composition. Next to Christian churches there were always a Shi'ite mosque alongside a Sunni one (which was destroyed by Agha Mohammad Khan) (see Sanikidze 2008: 164-168).

Javad Khan, the main Shi'ite Muslim political figure at the frontline of the Russian-Iranian front, similar to the Iranian ruling dynasty belonged to the Qajar tribe. He sided with Iran and resisted the Russian rapprochement. After Agha Mohammad Khan's death in Qarabagh (1797), in his letter (1803) to Pavel Tsitsianov the Imperial Russian commander and the head of the Russian troops in Georgia, Javad Khan wrote that he still regarded himself loyal to Iran. Although he admitted in his letter, that in a context of Iranian weakness, he was obliged to subordination to Russia, as his letter indicates, he believed in an Iranian victory and hoped to can safeguard his and his constituency's position, and declared war to Russia. He probably realized that with the erosion of Iranian sovereignty and ascendance of Russia, the position of Christians will be enhanced at the cost of that of Shi'ite Muslims. After the Russian conquest of the South Caucasus the social position of Shi'ite Muslims and Christians, notably, Armenians reversed. His hopes for an Iranian victory proved futile as he was killed one year later (1804) when Russians attacked and conquered the Ganja Khanate. Generally speaking, unlike Armenians, the Turkic-speaking Shi'ite Muslims of the Caucasus, entered the Russian empire reluctantly and with a bad grace.

Alexander Batonishvili, a prince of the house of Bagrationi, was a throne pretender and was supported by Iran and some members of Georgian nobility, whose efforts towards crowing him as the king of Georgia was of no avail (Bournoutian 1984, 1998: 75 note 38; Suny 1994: 70- 72; Farmanfarmaian 2009:38). He was a companion of the Iranian crown prince Abbas Mirza, who was tasked with fighting against Russia and

the re-conquest of the lost Iranian dominions in Transcaucasia. The last plot to reinstall the Georgian monarchy, by the kingship of prince Alexander, was nipped in the bud. In accordance with the Iranian tradition that the *Vali*, (i.e. a governor with a high degree of autonomous capabilities) was recognized by Iran also as the king of Georgia, Alexander was regarded as the Georgian *vali in absentia* in his exile in Iran (Farmanfarmaian 2009: 38).

The Russian domination altered the religious map of Transcaucasia. The Russian conquest altered the religious demography in the Caucasus. While Armenians of neighboring Iran and the Ottoman empire were encouraged to settle down in the newly conquered Russian territories, Muslims left. Today family names such as Iravani, Nakhjevani, Qarabaghi, Shirvani, Lankarani etc. are in abundance in Iran. These family names can be translated as respectively from Yerevan, Nakhichevan, Karabakh, Shirvan and Lenkoran, all cities and areas located in the modern day republics of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenians regarded Russia “as their liberator from the Muslim overlordship (Swietochowski 1985: 39).”

Shiite Muslims resisted the Russian conquest. Ganja, Yerevan and Baku were the scenes of local Shiite Muslim fierce resistance against the advancing Russian troops. Tsitsianov was not able to conquer Yerevan, which was defended by the local Muslims supported by the Iranian army, headed by the crown prince Abbas Mirza (Pasdermajian 1998: 363) Tsitsianov was killed in 1806 in Baku (Pasdermajian 1998: 363, Hosseinpour et al 1995: 60). Many Armenians supported Russia actively. The Armenian general Madatian fighting in favor of Russia, as well as the many Armenian volunteers, were essential in the Russian reconquest of many areas in the South Caucasus, after the temporary reinstallation of Iranian sovereignty there by Abbas Mirza and his troops (Pasdermajian 1998: 364- 365; Hosseinpour et. al. 1995: 60). Due to the fact that the Iranian authorities had initiated a policy of active protection of Armenians in Yerevan, many Armenians there cooperated with Iran or remained neutral. Still the anti-Iranian agitation of Nerses, an Armenian spiritual leader, shows that there existed general anti-Iranian and pro-Russian sentiments among Armenians, even there, at least among certain circles of the local Armenian elite (Bournoutoian 1998: 68; Hosseinpour et. al. 1995: 60-61). Perhaps the most essential Armenian contribution was of those in Ganja, Karabakh and Zangezur (Bournoutian 1998: 65- 67; Hosseinpour et. al 1995: 60), which resulted into the early Russian victories in, and conquest of, the heartland of the South Caucasus:

Armenians of Ganja, Karabakah and Zangezur [in the southern part of modern day Armenia and the western part of the modern day republic of Azerbaijan] openly sided with the Russians during the first Russo-Persian war. They were instrumental in the Russian successes. Of those [Muslim] khanates in 1805...During the second Russo-Persian war [Which ended in a Russian victory], the Muslim population of Karabagh and the Caspian region welcomed the surprise Iranian attack, which had caught the Russian command off guard and would have annihilated the Russian administration and garrisons had not the Armenians and their armed volunteers protected the latter until the arrival of the Russian army (Bournoutian 1998: 66).

Russia returned the Armenian favor generously. Although the Russian supremacy in Transcaucasia enhanced the position of Christians vis-à-vis Muslims, it notably was more beneficial for Armenians than any other (Christian) ethnic groups there. Meanwhile the Armenian merchants in eastern Georgia prospered. Georgians saw commerce as shameful

and disdained Armenians who dominated the Transcaucasian urban economy (Suny 1993: 37-39). Although the Imperial Russian attitude toward the Armenian merchants and church was ambivalent and fluctuated, it was generally in favor of preferential treatment for Christians and notably Armenians (see Suny 1993: 34-41).

Armenians, a people with significant international connections, were influenced by the European ideas about nationalism at the end of the 19th century. The idea of a national homeland, in the Transcaucasian lands, where their ancestors lived, was certainly attractive to them. The Torkamanchay Treaty offered the Armenians of Iran the right to settle down in the lands conquered by Russia. Consequently 35,000- 45,000 Armenians left Iran for the South Caucasian territories of the Russian Empire (Hosseinpour et al. 1995: 61; Pasdermadjian 1998: 365; Hovian 2001: 19; Bournoutian 1998: 56). Although many more Armenians may have left Iran for Russia, the migration of Armenians from Iran is not are not the sole factor responsible for the of the Armenian population in the South Caucasus. In fact, the largest part of the Armenian migrants to the South Caucasus were from the Ottoman Empire, with its peaks at the end of 19th century and the the First World War and its aftermath.

Already in the 19th century Armenians had better socio-economic positions than the local Muslims, despite the latter's demographic predominance in the eastern part of the South Caucasus. A clear ethno-religious division of labor was visible in the oil industry in Baku; while Armenians profited from the oil industry, Muslims formed the bulk of unskilled labor force (Ahanchi 2011: 7-9; Atabaki 2003: 417; Siwetoehowski 1985: 39; O'Balance 1995: 29). As Atabaki (2003: 416-417) puts it:

We have useful data on the ethnic composition of the workforce in the Baku oilfield...In the case of the Baku oilfield, Iranian workers constituted the majority of unskilled foreign workers in the region...The labour market in the Baku oilfield was initially segmented by race, with oil companies hiring mainly Russians and Armenians for jobs requiring skill and literacy, and Muslim workers, Iranians, local Tatars and Dagestanis for lower-paid unskilled jobs.

As a result of these social and economic discrepancies Armenians were detested by their neighbors in the South Caucasus. Inter-ethnic clashes between Armenians and Muslims erupted in the South Caucasus, already before the First World War, Armenian genocide and the mass migration Armenian refugees from the Ottoman Empire. They erupted the first time after the Russian revolution of 1905, when various parts of the Russian empire were struck by wide scale unrest.

The violence began in Baku but spread all around Transcaucasia. In total between 3,100 and 10,000 persons, mostly Muslims, died in the South Caucasus as the results of the violence. As Luigi Villari (1906: 269) writes, Muslims in Nakhichevan, who received support and weapons from Persia, had the upper hand. "Indeed, all the available data suggests that the Muslims, who were usually on the attack suffered greater losses than the Armenians, though not overwhelmingly so." (Swietoehowski 1985: 41). The fact that Muslims suffered higher losses than Armenians did is an evidence of the better organization and military superiority of Armenians (Swietoehowski 1995: 39-40).

The inter-ethnic violence, erupted again a decade later. During the (aftermath) of the First World War and the Russian civil war (1917-23). It is not surprising that the inter-ethnic violence in the South Caucasus has always emerged when the central

authorities in the Russian empire or the Soviet Union were weak, or lacked at all, such violence occurred in the period following the Russian revolution of 1905, in the period of the First World War and the Russian civil war, and in the era of Glasnost and Perestroika and dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The ethnic homogenization of republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia continued in the Soviet times. In the Soviet time Azerbaijan became more Azerbaijani and Armenia became almost ethnically homogenous Armenian. For example, Baku had become a predominantly Azeri city in the late 1980s, while that city had harbored a diverse population of local Azeris, Armenians, Russians, diverse European groups and in addition Iranians, mostly Iranian Azeris who had migrated there to work in the oil industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (see Atabaki 2003). Although Georgia did not become homogenously Georgian, even Georgia became more Georgianized during the Soviet times. For example, Tbilisi (Tiflis), a city in which Armenians, Azeris and Russians constituted a large part of the population, became a predominantly Georgian city after Georgians from various regions of Georgia settled down there and large numbers of non-Georgians left that city, notably for their titular republics.

Due to the effects of the Soviet nationalities policy, due to which the titulars identified themselves with their corresponding territory and in the context of a salience of ethno-nationalism after the Glasnost and Perestroika, Georgia and Azerbaijan got involved into ethnic conflicts, which endured after their independence. In these republics the ethnic minorities that were titular in lower ranked autonomous areas rebelled against the hosting states and demanded independence. After a relatively short period of fighting they reached a cease fire agreement with their host state. These are the cases of Armenian –Azerbaijani ethno-territorial conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Georgian-Ossetian ethno-territorial conflict over South Ossetia, and the Georgian –Abkhazian ethno-territorial conflict over Abkhazia. The other two conflicts in Georgia have once again erupted in August 2008, when Russia actively intervened and invaded Georgia. Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has remained indeed a frozen conflict since the corresponding ceasefire (1994).

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