A century of Russian rule

Azerbaijan is the name for the stretch of land contained by the southern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains on the north, the Caspian Sea on the east, and the Armenian highlands in the west: in the south its natural boundary is less distinct, and Azerbaijan merges here with the Iranian plateau.

From the time of ancient Media and Achaemenid Persia, Azerbaijan was drawn into the orbit of Iran. One theory for the etymology of its name gives a derivation from Atropatene, a Persian satrap in the time of Alexander the Great. Another, more popular explanation traces its origin to the Persian word azer, "fire" — hence Azerbaijan "Land of Fire," because of its numerous Zoroastrian temples, their fires fed by the plentiful local sources of oil. Azerbaijan retained its Iranian character even after the conquest of the region by Arabs and conversion to Islam in the mid-seventh century; only some four centuries later, with the influx of the Oghuz Turks under the Seljuk dynasty, did the country acquire a large proportion of Turkic inhabitants. The original population became fused with the immigrant nomads, and the Persian language was gradually supplanted by a Turkic dialect that evolved into a distinct "Azeri" or Azerbaijani language.

After the thirteenth-century Mongol invasions, Azerbaijan became part of the empire of Hulagu and his successors, the Il-Khans, then passed under the rule of the Turkmens who founded the rival Qara Qoyunlu and Aq-Qoyunlu states. Concurrently, in the fifteenth century, there flourished a native Azerbaijani state of Shirvan shahs. In the early years of the next century Azerbaijan became the power base of another native family, the Safavids, who through a vigorous policy of centralization built a new Persian kingdom on the foundation of the Shi'a branch
of Islam. The Safavid dynasty lasted for more than two hundred years; its rule ended in 1722, having been undermined by internal strife and the Afghan invasion.¹

Azerbaijani khanates and the conquest by Russia

In 1747 Nadir Shah, the strong ruler who had established his hold over Persia eleven years earlier, was assassinated in a palace coup, and his empire fell into chaos and anarchy. These circumstances effectively terminated the suzerainty of Persia over Azerbaijan, where local centers of power emerged in the form of indigenous principalities, independent or virtually so, inasmuch as some maintained tenuous links to Persia’s weak Zand dynasty.

Thus began a half-century-long period of Azerbaijani independence, albeit in a condition of deep political fragmentation and internal warfare. Most of the principalities were organized as khanates, small replicas of the Persian monarchy, including Karabagh, Sheki, Ganja, Baku, Derbent, Kuba, Nakhichevan Talish, and Erivan in northern Azerbaijan and Tabriz, Urm, Ardabil, Khoi, Maku, Maragin, and Karadagh in its southern part.² Many of the khanates were subdivided into mahals (regions), territorial units inhabited by members of the same tribe, reflecting the fact that the residue of tribalism was still strong.³ An outgrowth of the medieval institution of qīta (state land grant) was the state ownership of most of the land. Plots were distributed as nonhereditary grants to bāys and aghas for services rendered to the ruler, the khan.⁴

Besides the khanates there existed even smaller principalities, sultanes, which usually ended up as dependencies of the former. Some of the khanates expanded at the cost of their neighbors or reduced the latter to the status of clients. In the northern part of Azerbaijan the khanates of Sheki, Karabagh, and Kuba became the most powerful.

Azerbaijan lacked a tradition of unity within an autochthonous, independent statehood, and in the second half of the eighteenth century such statehood could have arisen only through
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The vigorous expansion of one of the khanates. Soviet Azerbaijani historiography devotes special attention to the wars of the ambitious Fath ‘Ali Khan of Kuba, perceiving in them an attempt at the unification of the country. Fath ‘Ali indeed extended his control over large areas of Azerbaijan, but his aspirations were even higher: He was intent on repeating the feat of the Safavids, who had used Azerbaijan as a base for imposing their power over all Persia. In any case, Fath ‘Ali’s schemes came to grief in 1784 when the Russian armies operating against Turkey from the Caucasus Mountains posed a threat to his rear guard. Russia had grown concerned that the expansion of Kuba would create an undesirably strong state in what it saw as its future sphere of influence. Fath ‘Ali found himself forced to relinquish most of his conquests.

The pattern of inconclusive wars continued, the khans making and breaking alliances among themselves as well as with the neighboring powers of Russia and Turkey. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, as the Ottoman state sunk deeper into decline, the shadow that Russia cast over Transcaucasia lengthened ominously.

Russian interest in the region was of long standing and had diverse motivation: the lure of the lucrative trade with Persia and Asiatic Turkey; the desire for local raw materials such as silk, cotton, and copper; the drive for the colonization of sparsely populated lands. But the overriding attraction was the strategic value of the Transcaucasian isthmus. Russia’s military involvement here reached back to the time of Peter the Great, whose Persian Expedition of 1722 was aimed at extending the Russian presence in the direction of the Indian Ocean. The Russians had seized a strip of the Caspian coast down to Lenkoran, but their first venture into Azerbaijan ended in 1735 when Nadir Shah rolled back the frontier to the Terek River.

Russia’s southward advance resumed, on a more extensive scale, under Catherine II (1763–1796). After the seizure of the Crimea and the Kuban River territory in 1785, most of the Caucasus range fell under Russian administration. By that time Russia had already begun to plan an active role in the politics of the Transcaucasian states. Insecure on his throne, the Georgian king of Kakheti-Kartli, Irakli II, was the first to sign a treaty obtaining Russian protection in 1783. His example was followed by Sol-
omon I of Imereti and Murtazali, the Daghestani ruler of Tarku. In due course hegemony turned into outright conquest, the latter stage beginning in 1801 when Tsar Alexander I (1800–1825) proclaimed the creation of the Georgian gubernia (province) consisting of the lands of the former Kakheti-Kartli kings. The new province also included the sultanates of Kazakh and Shamshidil, the first of the Azerbaijani territories to the incorporated by Russia.  

To secure a strategic hold over Georgia the Russian commander of the Caucasus, General P. Tsitsianov, deemed it necessary to extend his control over the Azerbaijani khanates in the direction of the Caspian coast in the east and the Araxes river in the south. Primarily military considerations drove him to carve out for Russia the northern part of Azerbaijan. Technically, Tsitsianov’s goal was not incorporation, but rather the imposition of treaties whereby the khanates would accept submission to Russia, a form of vassalage. In some cases, namely Karabagh, Shirvan, and Sheki, this acceptance was affected peacefully. The terms of the resultant treaties guaranteed the khans unrestricted authority in the internal affairs of their states and the right of succession. In return, they agreed to admit Russian garrisons, to pay tribute – in cash or in kind, which included silk, – and, most importantly, to accede to the Pax Russica by surrendering their rights to wage war and conduct foreign policy.  

Toward those khans who were reluctant to follow suit Tsitsianov applied persuasion by force of arms. In 1804 his troops laid siege to Ganja, where in a memorable show of resistance the local khan, Jävad, was killed in battle. Jävad’s realm was incorporated forthwith into Russia as an uyezd (county) of Elizavetopol, the new Russian name given to Ganja in honor of the Tsar’s wife. Another act of defiance to Tsitsianov’s tactics of intimidation was the prolonged fighting in the mountainous area of Jar-Belokan. Tsitsianov, murdered in 1806 upon his arrival in Baku to demand the submission of the khanate, has passed into history as the chief architect of the Russian conquest of Transcaucasia.  

An additional complication Russia faced in carrying out this

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*The name Elizavetopol never found acceptance among the Azerbaijanis, who continued to call the town Ganja. We will generally use the name Ganja here except when context requires the use of the official Russian name.
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conquest was the challenge of Persia. The new dynasty founded by the Qajar tribe, which had put an end to the long internal strife in the kingdom, was now poised to contest Russia for sovereignty of what had once been Persia's northern marches. In 1804 an army under Abbas Mirza, the son of the king, Fath 'Ali Shah, with reinforcements from the khans of Erivan and Nakhichevan, moved against the Russians. Defeated promptly at Etchmiadzin, the Persians withdrew, then reappeared in the spring of 1806, arousing an insurrectionary fever in Karabagh and Sheki, both of which had recently accepted Russian overlordship. The war continued for several years, although at a sluggish pace with the Russians suppressing intermittent uprisings as well as subjugating the khanates of Baku and Kubã (in 1806) and Talish (in 1809). Only in 1812, after ending the concurrent war with Turkey, did they pursue vigorous fighting against Persia. The brief and successful Russian campaign of 1812 was concluded with the Treaty of Gulistan, signed the same year. The treaty's provisions concerning Azerbaijan ratified the status quo resulting from the Russian military presence, and Fath 'Ali Shah renounced his sovereignty over the khanates of Karabagh, Baku, Sheki, Shirvan, Kubã, and Derbent. The shah's claims to the northern Azerbaijani khanates were dismissed on the ground that they had been independent long before their occupation by Russia. This amounted to the first and only recognition of Azerbaijani independence, albeit in the past tense.

The Gulistan settlement proved to be merely the end of the first round in the duel of the two powers for the prize of Transcaucasia. Thirteen years later, the conflict flared up anew when Fath 'Ali Shah sent his army across the Gulistan Treaty border. In May 1826 the Persians occupied Lenkoran, Shamakha, and Nukha and besieged the Russians in Shusha. Abbas Mirza, once again at the head of the troops, entered northern Azerbaijan expecting wide support from a population disgruntled from a quarter-century of Russian domination. In essence, the Qajars hoped to appear champions of the rights of Azerbaijani khans whom the Russians had driven into exile. They were also counting on the sympathies of those rulers who only nominally retained a tenuous power and felt humiliated as vassals of the tsar.

Indeed, the khan of Talish immediately started a rebellion against the Russian garrison, and in Karabagh, Shirvan, and
Sheki the population enthusiastically welcomed the returning khans or their descendants. Nonetheless, in the Azerbaijan of that period it was not unusual to find natives fighting on the side of the Russians, driven by the desire for booty or following the mercenary tradition of a people who had for centuries supplied soldiers for the shah’s elite forces. There also surfaced a growing current of pro-Russian orientation among some bāyās and aghas who were faced with a choice between subjection to Russia and the ruthlessness of the Qajars.

The Russians, chronically short of manpower in Transcaucasia, were thus able to draw upon local resources to fill the ranks of their militias and auxiliaries. Even though Georgians and Armenians were considered more reliable than Muslims, still in the first Persian war a voluntary “Tatar” cavalry detachment was formed for the defense of Kazakh.* The volunteers remained in the service of the tsar, and by 1810 additional Muslim units were raised. In the second war with Persia, the same Kazakh contingent assisted the Russians in their victory at Shamkhorai. Another “Tatar” squadron distinguished itself in the Battle of Ganja, which turned out to be decisive for the campaign.

After the Persian defeat at Ganja, Tsar Nicholas I (1825–1855) replaced General A.P. Ermolov with the new commander in chief of the Caucasus, I. Paskevich, who brought the war to a victorious end when his forces pushed as far south as Tabriz. With the road to Tehran wide open, Fath ‘Ali Shah sued for peace, and on February 10, 1828 the Treaty of Turkmanchai ended the war. As the Russians were facing the prospect of another conflict with Turkey, they tempered somewhat the harshness of their terms. With regard to Azerbaijan, the treaty was largely a re-statement of the Gulistan provisions, but the shah was forced additionally to cede to Russia the khanates of Erivan and Nakhichevan and the area of Ordubad.

The Treaty of Turkmanchai, which also opened a greatly weakened Persia to Russian commercial and political influences, closed the period of Russo–Persian rivalry in Transcaucasia. Persia fully acknowledged Russian domination over the region, and

*The term Tatar was customarily used by Russians to refer to various Turkic-speaking peoples of Russia. As a misnomer with regard to the Azerbaijanis, it will be put hereafter in quotation marks.
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the third, more distant party to the contest, Turkey, would soon make a similar concession. The war between Russia and Turkey, which had begun within a few months of the Turkmanchai settlement, quickly turned into a series of Ottoman defeats, both on the Balkan and the Caucasus fronts. This time the Russians enlisted the Azerbijanis on the even larger scale, capitalizing on the antagonism of the Shiites toward the Sunni branch of Islam which the Ottoman State symbolized. At the Battle of Erzerum, it was the charge of the Karabagh Regiment that decided the day. The impressive military feats of the Azerbijanis opened for them careers in the tsarist army, an advantage the Christians of Transcaucasia already enjoyed. In the words of the nineteenth-century traveler and historian Arminius Vambery, the Muslims “adopted the habit of attending the Russian military schools and the Alikhanovs, Taghiros and Nazirovs became rivals of the Lazarovs, Melikos and other Armenians.”

The war with Turkey, which ended in the Treaty of Adrianople (September 1829), won for Russia the eastern coast of the Black Sea, including Akhaltsik. By pushing its frontier to the southwest, Russia firmly established its strategic control over Transcaucasia.

The treaties of 1828 and 1829 confirmed the fact of the Russian conquest and sanctioned the permanent division of Azerbaizani territory into two parts – the larger, approximately two-thirds, remaining with Persia and the smaller annexed by Russia. Some half-million Azerbijani-speaking Muslims passed for the first time under the rule of a European power, and henceforth the path of their history would take a different course from that of their ethnic brothers in Persia.

The population of the Russian-held part of Azerbaijan aside from the Azerbijanis, included several ethnic minority groups: the Lezghians in the northernmost areas, the Persians along the Caspian coast and especially in Talysk, the Kurdish and Turkic-Scythian nomads in the south, and in Karabagh, Armenians, whose number rose dramatically after the Russian conquests as a result of their mass immigration from Persia and Turkey. Following the Turkmanchai peace, Nicholas I decreed the formation of an Armenian okrug (district) comprising the territories of the khanates of Erivan and Nakichevan, where the concentration of the immigrants was particularly heavy.
The Turkic-speaking Muslims of Russian Azerbaijan, commonly called Shirvanis, differed from those of the Persian part in one essential respect: There was a comparatively large proportion of Sunnis among them. The Russian estimates of the 1830s, although based on incomplete data, show that the ratio of the Shi’ites to Sunnis was almost even, with a slight edge in favor of the latter. While the sectarian distribution did not correspond with the political divisions into khanates, the Sunnis formed a majority in the northern and western areas of the country, subject to religious influences from the mountainous citadel of Sunnism, Daghestan.

The same roughly 50:50 ratio still appears in the statistics of 1848, but figures for the 1860s indicate that the proportion of Sunnis had markedly declined. It stabilized subsequently at the level by which the Shi’ite Twelvers of the Jafariite rite held a clear majority of 2:1 among the population as a whole. The decrease in the proportionate strength of the Sunni element was the result of their emigration to Turkey, a trickle that turned into a torrent after the final suppression of Daghestan by Russia.

The Shi’ite–Sunnī split ran deep and it found its reflection in Azerbaijani attitudes toward the nineteenth-century Russian wars. The tsardom was able to make use of the Shi’ites against Turkey not only in 1828 but also in 1855–1855 as well as against the anti-Russian resistance spreading from Daghestan. By contrast, the Sunnis showed signs of restiveness at the time of Russo–Ottoman conflicts, tending to give support – sometimes armed support – to the Daghestanis; finally, many of them demonstrated their disposition by joining the outflow of Muslim emigrants from Russia.

In Daghestan a ghazavat (roughly, crusade) against Russia had been under way since the late eighteenth century, but an additional stimulus that reinvigorated the struggle of the mountainers there was the emergence of the religious–social movement of Muridism, an outgrowth of the Sufi Naqshbandi order. From 1834 on, the imam (religious leader) of the Murids was Shamil, an outstanding warlord who waged the ghazavat on a hitherto unprecedented scale. In the first years after assuming leadership, he inflicted a series of humiliating defeats upon the Russians.
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and pushed their lines back to where they had been a half-century before.25

The echoes of the Daghestani war resounded in a wave of insurgency that swept parts of Azerbaijan in the post-Turkmanchai decade, the last armed challenge to the Russian conquest. As reported by a colonel of the gendarmerie, Viktorov, "in some localities large groups numbering on occasions up to thousands of men could be gathered within two or three days on Shamil's orders."26 The same report pointed out the effects of the Murids' successes on the attitudes of the population: "Truth and conscience compel me to inform your Excellency that the feelings of fear instilled in the inhabitants by our victorious armies are disappearing as the result of six or seven years of unsuccessful fighting."27

Of the four local Azerbaijani uprisings in the 1830s, three broke out in areas with substantial Sunni populations and were directly or otherwise under the influence of the Murids. The descent of the Daghestani warriors into the Jar-Belokan jamaats (agricultural communities) sparked repeated popular revolts in the years 1830–1832.28 In what became the largest of Azerbaijani insurrections, some twelve thousand inhabitants of Kuba took to arms in 1837 on the call of Shamil, who urged them to express their grievances by fighting the Infidel.29 Their rebellion was put down with the assistance of the native militia from the predominantly Shi'ite Shirvan. The next year, in Sheki, the entry of the armed bands of the Daghestanis again stirred the population to an uprising, but this subsided as soon as the mountaineers withdrew.30

Among the Shi'ites, a major insurrection broke out in the heavily Persian-populated Talysk, where in 1831 the former khan, Mir Hasan, succeeded in arousing many inhabitants to an attack on the Russian garrison. Others natives, however, took the side of the Russians, and in the end Mir Hasan had to retreat across the Persian border.31

Uncoordinated and local in scope, these violent outbreaks of disaffection lacked any clear-cut ethnic or social content that might have been a source of sustaining power. Still, they made their impact felt on the increasingly frantic experiments to which the tsarist resorted in its search for a policy to consolidate its hold over Transcaucasia.
The breakup of the khanates and administrative reforms

With the onset of Russian rule there appeared in Azerbaijan the unmistakable features of colonialism. Azerbaijani territory became a military outpost controlling the strategic corridor for the Russian penetration of Persia, a process that progressed apace after the Turkmanchai Treaty of 1828. Azerbaijan was viewed as a potential source of raw materials and as an area suitable for the resettlement of populations from other parts of the Russian Empire. Indeed, the very word colony with reference to Transcaucasia gained currency among tsarist officials who had studied the example of French rule in Algeria. The tsar’s finance minister, T. E. Kankrin, defined the term and elaborated on its implications for the policy he recommended: “When Transcaucasia is described as a colony,” he wrote in a memorandum to Nicholas I in 1827,

the assumption is made that the government would stop short of incorporating this region into the state outright. It is not expected that Transcaucasia would be made into a part of Russia or the Russian nation, insofar as its way of life is concerned; rather, these lands should be left in their position of Asiatic provinces, but hopefully governed more efficiently than in the past.39

The aftermath of the conquest saw few and limited modifications in the way the Azerbaijanis had been ruled, and cases of the abolition of khanates, such as Ganja or Baku, were quite exceptional. At first, the tsardom preferred to adopt the indigenous governmental structures to its own needs. The khanates of Talysch, Shaki, Karabagh, Shirvan, and Nakhichevan, the Jar-Belokan jamaats, and the sultanate of Ilisu were all left intact. In allowing a khan or sultan to retain much of his powers, the Russians’ prime consideration was either his loyalty to Russia or his political usefulness to the Russian authorities through his influence over the population. Moreover, the preservation of a khanate’s administrative machinery alleviated the strain on the scant supply of Russian officials available and held a promise of financial savings.40 Only gradually and rather inconsistently did the military government take to disposing of the khan’s regimes altogether. General A.P. Ermolov, who in 1810 became the com-