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ADMINISTRATIVE-TERRITORIAL CHANGES IN NORTHERN AZERBAIJAN IN THE 1840S

1840'LI YILLARDA KUZHEY AZERBAIJAN'DA İDARİ-BÖLGESEL DEĞİŞİKLİKLER

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Öz

Bu makale, 1840'lı yıllarda Kuzey Azerbaycan'da yaşanan idari-bölgesel değişiklikleri ve bunların siyasi, ekonomik ve sosyal etkilerini detaylı bir şekilde anlatmaktadır. Bu dönemdeki temel idari değişiklikler, Rus İmparatorluğu'nun Güney Kafkasya'da yürüttüğü politikaların bir parçası olarak askeri ve yönetim yapılarında gerçekleştirilen yenilikleri kapsamaktadır. Araştırma makalesinden anlaşıldığı üzere, 1828 Türkmençay Antlaşması'ndan sonra Rus İmparatorluğu'nun Azerbaycan topraklarında yaptığı reformlar sonucunda yerel yönetim yapıları değişmiş ve yeni idari-bölgesel birimler kurulmuştur. Rusya, hanlıkları ortadan kaldırarak yerine komutanlık idare sistemini uygulamaya koydu. Komutanlar, yerel halkın yaşamına müdahale ederek ekonomi ve sosyal yapının düzenlenmesinde büyük rol oynadı. Ancak bu yönetim yöntemi, sömürü ve baskı yaratarak ciddi hoşnutsuzluklara neden oldu. Sonuç olarak 1840'ta bu sistem kaldırıldı ve idari reformlar hayata geçirildi.

Anahtar kelimeler: Rusya, Azerbaycan, Kuzey, komutan, Türkmençay, hanlıklar, idari.

Abstract

This article provides a detailed description of the administrative-territorial changes in Northern Azerbaijan during the 1840s and their political, economic, and social impacts. The main administrative reforms of this period, implemented as part of the Russian Empire's policies in the South Caucasus, included innovations in military and governance structures. Research from the article clarifies that after the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828, the reforms carried out by the Russian Empire in Azerbaijani territories altered local governance structures and established new administrative-territorial divisions. Russia abolished the khanates and replaced them with a commandant administration system. The commandants interfered in the lives of the local population and played a significant role in regulating the economy and social structure. However, this governance method led to exploitation and oppression, causing widespread dissatisfaction. As a result, in 1840, this system was abolished, and administrative reforms were introduced.

Keywords: Russia, Azerbaijan, North, Commandant, Turkmenchay, Khanates, Administrative.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 19th century, Azerbaijan's internal and international situation was highly complex. The territory of Azerbaijan was marked by feudal fragmentation. The Azerbaijani khanates were not fighting to create a unified state but rather to expand their own territories, seize neighboring khanates' lands, and preserve their independence. Continuous internecine wars, intensifying conflicts between feudal lords and peasants (who constituted the majority of the population), and economic decline characterized Azerbaijan's internal situation. Russia's imperial ambitions in the South Caucasus and the destructive invasions by Iranian aggressors further exacerbated tensions.

During this period, both Russia and the Qajar dynasty of Iran sought to dominate Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus as a whole. By the late 18th century, the deaths of Catherine the Great and Agha Mohammad Shah Qajar shifted the dynamics. Emperor Paul I withdrew Russian troops from the South Caucasus, while Fath Ali Shah, newly enthroned, focused on consolidating his power. Instead of uniting against foreign threats, the Azerbaijani khanates continued their internal strife, missing the opportunity to rally against external enemies. After Paul I's assassination, his successor, Alexander I, resumed Russia's expansionist policies in the

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South Caucasus. Simultaneously, the Qajar state, encouraged by European powers, began preparing for war against Russia.

Thus, the First and Second Russo-Iranian Wars in the first half of the 19th century led to the division of Azerbaijani territories between these powers and marked the end of Azerbaijan's traditions of statehood.

"Abolition of the Azerbaijani Khanates and the Treaty of Turkmenchay"

The khanates that offered armed resistance against Russia—Ganja, Quba, and Baku—were swiftly destroyed. After Yermolov returned from Iran to Tbilisi, the focus shifted to the vassal khanates. Understanding that these vassal states would rise against Russia in the event of a new war with Iran, the commander-in-chief did not hesitate to employ direct provocations to eliminate the khan dynasties. In 1819, the first to be abolished was the Sheki Khanate. Its last ruler, Ismayil Khan, was poisoned under the orders of the Armenian General Madatov. Despite the Iranian government issuing an official statement on the matter, the khanate's entire treasury and properties were confiscated, and the khan's family was utterly eradicated. That same year, the Kazakh and Shamshaddil sultanates were dissolved, followed by the Shirvan Khanate in 1820 (2).

In Karabakh, Mehdiqulu Khan was replaced by his nephew, Jafargulu Agha. Using Jafargulu Agha's name, they fabricated a false denunciation alleging that Mehdiqulu Khan intended to assassinate Madatov. Mehdiqulu Khan was forced to flee to Iran, while Jafargulu Agha, who had hoped the Russians would elevate him to the khanate, was instead exiled to Simbirsk. All the wealth of the Karabakh Khanate was transferred to the Russian treasury, with countless land estates, herds, and flocks confiscated. In 1826, the vassal existence of the Talish Khanate was also terminated.

The Treaty of Turkmenchay. On November 6, new negotiations between Russia and Iran began in Dehkargan. Serious disagreements over the issue of reparations led to the breakdown of talks on January 7. Russian troops advanced. On January 28, Urmia was captured, and on February 8, Ardabil fell. The signing of the treaty was expedited. On the night of February 9-10, the treaty was signed in the village of Turkmenchay near Tabriz (6).

The Treaty of Turkmenchay consisted of 16 articles. Some terms of the Treaty of Gulistan were retained here, with new clauses added regarding reparations and other matters. Article I declared eternal peace between the parties. Article II stipulated that Iran would pay Russia 20 million silver rubles in reparations. Article III affirmed the transfer of the Erivan and Nakhchivan khanates to Russia. Article IV defined the borders. The Caspian Sea was confirmed as a zone where only Russia could maintain a naval fleet. Article XV addressed the resettlement of Armenians from Iran to the South Caucasus.

The treaty was ratified by Russia in March 1828 and by the Qajar dynasty in July. The Treaty of Turkmenchay was the most severe of the agreements Iran signed with Britain, France, Russia, and Turkey in the 19th century. This treaty plunged Iran into a state of dependency on Russia.

Commandant Administrative System

During the Russian invasion of Northern Azerbaijan, a new administrative governance system began to take shape. The khans who resisted the Russian troops were stripped of their authority, and the khanates were transformed into districts (*dairə*) and provinces (*əyalət*), headed by commandants. These commandants were appointed from among Russian officers of the rank of major or higher by the commander-in-chief of the Russian forces in the Caucasus. After the annexation of the Ganja and Baku khanates, the khanate administration in these territories was abolished, and the commandant governance system was implemented. In some cases, a transitional system was briefly established before the commandant system was introduced. For example, after the Quba Khanate was occupied in 1806, it was governed by a temporary council of local nobles until 1810.

In the remaining parts of the country—the Karabakh, Sheki, Shirvan, and Lankaran khanates—the previous administrative system and governance apparatus were preserved during the first stage of occupation. These khanates had been annexed to Russia through treaties, granting them a special status. While the khans retained their internal administrative rights to some extent, their authority and jurisdiction were significantly curtailed. Russian military forces were stationed within the khanates, and the khans were incorporated into the list of tsarist generals, tasked with carrying out orders from the Caucasus commander-in-chief (8).

However, the Tsarist regime eventually abandoned reliance on its vassals. The Sheki Khanate was abolished in 1819, followed by the Shirvan Khanate in 1820, the Karabakh Khanate in 1822, and the Lankaran Khanate in 1826, all replaced by commandant-administered districts. In Northern Azerbaijan, the provinces of Talysh, Shirvan, Sheki, Karabakh, Baku, and Quba were established, along with the Yelizavetpol district, the Jar-Balakan province, and the Gazakh and Shamshadil administrative zones. The historic Azerbaijani territories of Nakhchivan and Irevan were incorporated into the "Armenian Province" (*Erməni vilayəti*) by the Tsarist regime. The provinces were grouped into two districts: the "Muslim Provinces District" (centered in Shusha) included Sheki, Shirvan, Karabakh, and Talysh, while Baku and Quba provinces were part of the "Dagestan Military District" (centered in Derbent).

The commandant governance system was a product of the despotic colonial regime imposed by Tsarism and a concrete manifestation of its policies. In practice, all power in the provinces was concentrated in the hands of the commandants, who were granted extensive authority. Even government circles acknowledged that "despite over 30 years passing since the annexation of some provinces in the South Caucasus, the governance here still bears traces of the arbitrary, reckless, and chaotic administration of its former rulers." The commandants' abuses of power led to unprecedented criminality and corruption, with the population subjected to relentless exploitation (9).

Senators Kutaysov and Mechnikov, who inspected the South Caucasus region, reported to the Tsar in 1831: "While serving as military district chief of the Muslim provinces, Prince Madatov unlawfully seized others' properties, forced the population into unpaid labor for his benefit, and forged documents in others' names... Had Prince Madatov been alive, he would have faced trial for these acts." In their report to the Minister of Justice, the senators wrote: "Examining the governance of the Muslim provinces, the mind recoils in horror at the tyranny of the administrators and the suffering of the people. Here, humanity has been utterly crushed, justice forgotten, and the law reduced to a tool of oppression" (3).

Reforms Implemented in Northern Azerbaijan in the 1840s. The implementation of Tsarist economic policy in Azerbaijan and attempts to exploit the region's natural resources were, among other factors, hindered by the influence of the commandant governance system. This system of administration, even according to high-ranking Tsarist officials, was "plundering for state revenues and destructive for the welfare, happiness, and morality of the region's inhabitants."

The commandant governance system inflicted significant damage on the state treasury. Commandants, military unit commanders, and officials affiliated with the Russian administrative apparatus embezzled a substantial portion of the collected taxes, while also squandering state land and resources. These military leaders, who were officers of the armed forces, were incapable of managing and distributing state revenues effectively.

The law on administrative-judicial reform in the South Caucasus was approved by Nicholas I on April 10, 1840. The reform was implemented everywhere from January 1, 1841. It altered the administrative structure of the South Caucasus, aligning it with the general Russian administrative-territorial system (1). The South Caucasus region was divided into the Georgia-Imeretia Governorate, with its center in Tiflis, and the Caspian Region, with its center in Shamakhi. The governorates and regions were further divided into districts (uyezds), which were subsequently divided into subdistricts (volosts).

Most of the Azerbaijani territories were included within the Caspian Region, which comprised seven districts: Shamakhi (formerly the Shirvan province), Shusha (Karabakh province), Nukha (Sheki province), Lankaran (Talysh province), Baku (Baku province), Derbent (Derbent, Tabasaran, and Karakaytak provinces), and Quba (Quba province, including the Samur district). The Derbent and Quba districts were placed under the special jurisdiction of the Derbent military district.

Following the principle of "divide and rule," the Tsarist government incorporated some parts of Azerbaijani lands into the Georgia-Imeretia Governorate. These included the Yelizavetpol District, along with the Gazakh and Shamshadil detachments; the Balakan District, created from the Jar-Balakan province and the Ilisu Sultanate; the Iravan District; and the Nakhchivan District, which included the Ordubad area (7). Subdistricts were established within the districts, many of which corresponded to the territories of former mahals (administrative units). In total, 32 subdistricts were created in Azerbaijan.

The supreme administration of the South Caucasus remained in the hands of the commander-in-chief of the local troops, who was directly appointed and dismissed by the emperor. The commander-in-chief held broader powers than the governor-general, including the authority to annul decisions of the governorate administrative bodies and remove officials from their positions.

The reform led to the abolition of military-commandant administrations, replacing them with new civil administrative structures similar to those in the interior provinces of Russia. The governor headed the

governorate administrations as the representative of supreme authority, while the head of the Caspian Region led its administrative bodies.

The law of April 10, 1840, also brought significant changes to the judicial system of the South Caucasus. The administrative-judicial reform had some objectively positive aspects. It facilitated the elimination of feudal fragmentation, enabled the introduction of a unified monetary, measurement, and weight system, and accelerated the abolition of the rahdar tax. These developments contributed to the establishment of a stable administrative and judicial system, which in turn fostered the growth of industry and trade (5).

However, the 1840 administrative-judicial reform simultaneously intensified the national-colonial oppression of Tsarism. Azerbaijani officials were removed from administrative bodies and courts, and Russian officials were appointed to all positions. All clerical work was conducted exclusively in Russian. Taxes imposed on peasants living on treasury and private landholdings were increased, monetary obligations were introduced, and a series of other measures further exacerbated dissatisfaction among the peasantry and urban poor.

The administrative-judicial reform significantly heightened social tensions under Tsarist rule. During the reform process, the government decided that Russian nobility should serve as the Tsarist regime's primary support base and should be settled on the tiyul lands (feudal land grants) of local Azerbaijani beys (lords) and aghas (chiefs). After some hesitation, the Supreme Administrative Council issued decisions on February 13, 1841, for the Georgia-Imeretia Governorate, and on March 24, 1841, for the Caspian Region, to remove beys and aghas from the administration of villages. These rulings deprived them of their tiyul lands, causing widespread dissatisfaction among all social groups.

A new wave of anti-colonial uprisings and peasant unrest forced the government to reassess its policies. To investigate the causes of local dissatisfaction with the reform, Tsar Nicholas I dispatched special inspectors—Count Chernyshev, the Minister of War, and State Secretary Pozen, chairman of the Caucasus Committee—to the South Caucasus. Chernyshev and Pozen, shifting the blame onto the already discredited Kankrin, were forced to acknowledge the failure of the reform (4).

In 1842, new imperial institutions were created to manage Caucasian affairs—a special committee under the Minister of War and the separate Fourth Department of the Imperial Chancellery. Seeking to end the war with the mountain peoples quickly and consolidate its position in the Caucasus, the Tsarist government replaced the Transcaucasian Regional Administration with the Caucasus Viceroyalty in 1844. The Viceroy was the custodian of the autocracy's "supreme rights" and was granted exceptionally broad powers. Count S. M. Vorontsov was appointed Caucasus Viceroy. He held full civil and military authority and could appeal directly to the emperor in all matters. Changes were also made to the administrative-territorial organization of the region. Between 1846 and 1849, the Georgia-Imeretia Governorate and the Caspian Region were replaced by five governorates—Tiflis, Kutaisi, Shamakhi, Derbent, and Iravan. This administrative-territorial division further fragmented Azerbaijani lands; nearly all governorates incorporated portions of Azerbaijani territory.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the 19th century, Azerbaijan's feudal fragmentation and lack of a unified state created conditions for its occupation by neighboring powers. As a result, a struggle between Russia and Iran to seize Azerbaijan began, culminating in war between them. The process of dividing Azerbaijani territories, initiated by the Treaty of Gulistan (1813), was finalized by the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828). Consequently, Azerbaijan's northern lands, with the Aras River as the border, were annexed to Russia, while its southern territories became part of the Qajar state.

Russia, having occupied Azerbaijan, abolished the authority of local khans under various pretexts and seized the territories and properties of the khanates. Khanates that resisted Russia militarily—such as Ganja, Quba, and Baku—were swiftly destroyed. Upon General Yermolov's return from Iran to Tiflis, the focus shifted to the vassal khanates. Aware that these khanates might side against Russia in the event of a new war with Iran, the commander-in-chief did not hesitate to employ direct provocations to eliminate the ruling dynasties.

In 1819, the Sheki Khanate was the first to be abolished. Its last ruler, Ismayil Khan, was poisoned on the orders of Armenian General Madatov. Despite the Iranian government's formal protest, the khanate's entire treasury and properties were confiscated, and the khan's family was stripped of all possessions. That same year, the Gazakh and Shamshadil sultanates were dissolved, followed by the Shirvan Khanate in 1820. The entire wealth of the Karabakh Khanate was transferred to the Russian treasury, with countless landholdings, herds, and livestock confiscated. In 1826, the vassal existence of the Talysh Khanate was also terminated. After the occupation, a commandant governance system was introduced in Northern Azerbaijan. However, due to

widespread discontent and uprisings, Tsarism abolished this system and transitioned to the guberniya-uezd-okrug administrative-territorial division used in Russia.

Thus, by the 1820s, Russia had temporarily dismantled Azerbaijan's national-statehood traditions, though it failed to erase them entirely from the people's consciousness.

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