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EMBASSY OF NADER SHAH AFSHAR IN RUSSIA

Nader Shah. 18th century painting by an Oriental artist



In the 18th century, running permanent diplomatic missions within the courts of other states was not yet an established practice in the East. Therefore, exchanges among embassies, along with diplomatic correspondence, were the main option in establishing and maintaining intergovernmental contacts. Information about the embassies of the ruler of Iran (Persia) Nader Shah is interesting in many ways. This data sheds light on the relations among major empires, the political situation in the Caucasus region, the diplomatic etiquette and ceremonial rituals of that time period. The issue of Nader Shah's embassies is also fascinating from the viewpoint of assessing the extent of the impact of cultural and civilizational differences on the course and outcomes of diplomatic negotiations.

The political and socio-economic crisis that engulfed the Safavid state by the early 1720s ultimately led to its collapse, which was largely facilitated by the uprisings of the conquered nations. One of such riots, staged by the Afghan Ghilzai tribe in the Kandahar province, brought about the formation of an independent Afghan principality. Taking advantage of the military and political weakness of the Safavid state, **the Afghan feudal elite carried out a raid into the Safavid state's territory in 1722, which resulted in the seizure of its capital, Isfahan.** The Shah's regime, led

Crowning portrait of Empress Anna Ivanovna

by Shah Sultan Hussein (1694-1722), surrendered to the Afghan leader Mir Mahmud, admitting that it was completely incapacitated (2, p.15).

Capitalizing on the conducive situation, the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire seized a part of the Safavid state's territory (the Caspian region campaign of Peter the Great in 1722-1723 and the hostilities of 1723-1726, respectively). As a result, **Russia captured the narrow Caspian zone stripe, while Turkey took control of the rest of the southeastern Caucasus and western Iran.** Nevertheless, the conquerors' expectations on submissive subordination of the weakened Safavid state to outside forces turned out to be erroneous. The bitter ramifications of the Afghan, Turkish and Russian assault triggered a rise of the liberation struggle against the invaders under the leadership of **Nader**, a talented military leader from the Afsharid dynasty (footnote 1).

Information about Nader's childhood years and adolescence is essentially unavailable today. It is only known that he was captured together with his family during one of the raids by Khorezm Uzbeks, but escaped soon thereafter. Having returned to Khorasan, he enlisted in service for the ruler Abivarda Baba Ali Bay, changing his name to Nader Gulu Bay. Having formed a small army, Nader gradually subjugated several provinces of Khorasan. According to available sources, during this very time period, **in 1726, 37-year-old Nader Gulu Bay began his service for Shah Tahmasib II** (footnote 2) under the name Tahmasib Gulu Khan. According to Avramov, "on September 8 (1726), Nader Gulu Bay, an Afshar, whose rank was changed by the Shah and who was named Tahmas Kuli Khan, arrived in Kachan [Kuchan-Khabushan] with about 5,000 people-strong cavalry and infantry (8, l. 19A and 19B). Following the death of Fath Ali Khan Qajar in 1726 (footnote 3), Tahmasib II appointed Nader commander-in-chief of the Shah's armed forces.

Nader started working for Shah Tahmasib during the period when the Safavid territories in the South Caucasus were occupied by Russia and the Ottoman state. Despite this challenging situation, **Nader accomplished a seemingly unattainable task: first, he expelled the Afghans, and soon thereafter, he achieved liberation of the South Caucasus, essentially restoring the previous borders of the Safavid state.**

According to M.Aksworski, if it weren't for Nader Iran would have faced the same fate as Poland, i.e. partial or full division among its neighbors (3, p. XV). Taking ad-



vantage of the setback in the war with the Ottomans, Nader Khan overthrew Tahmasib II in August 1732 and proclaimed his underage son Abbas III as the Shah. However, from then onward, Nader Khan ruled the country on his own.

As his reins of power strengthened, Nader forced the Ottoman Empire and Russia to return all of the seized Safavid territories. Russia, which realized that it would not be able to control the land in the Caspian region any further, agreed to hand them over under the **Treaty of Resht (January 21, 1732) and the Treaty of Ganja (March 21, 1735)**. In conclusion of hostilities and long-lasting negotiations, the Ottoman Empire also returned the seized Safavid land. In accordance with the **agreement signed in March 1736, the Ottoman-Safavid borders envisaged in the 1639 treaty were reinstated** (13, p. 201-202). Also in March 1736, Nader, who had become the sovereign ruler of the country by that time, deposed the Safavids at a congress in Mughan and proclaimed himself as the shah (6, p.104).

Nader Shah did not settle for the restored borders of the Safavid state and soon embarked on the path of



Empress Anna Leopoldovna

their expansion. The following inscription minted on a coin in honor of his accession to the throne speaks volumes about his imperial ambitions: *"Let the whole world be aware of the enthronement of Nader, the future conqueror of the Universe."*

In the winter of 1738, he began a **campaign in India, which ended in March 1739 with the capture of Delhi, the capital of the great Mughal Empire.** Overall, **Nader Shah reached the peak of his power by 1739.** By that time, the Russians and the Ottomans were expelled from all the formerly possessed Safavid areas, Khiva and Bukhara were conquered and the Mughal emperor, who had been accused of aiding the Afghans, was overwhelmingly defeated. Following the takeover of Delhi, the victor seized control over the entire treasury and the untold wealth of the Mughal dynasty.

While in Hassan Abdal, Nader Shah delegated exuberant ambassadorial missions to Istanbul and St. Petersburg in the fall of 1739 (12, p. 190) to notify his foes of the conquest of India. The ambassadors embarked on their long trip on October 23, 1739. Representatives of each embassy were carrying valuable gifts, including elephants to be presented to the two monarchs.

Undoubtedly, as an outstanding strategist and

pragmatist Nader was pursuing far-reaching goals. He sought to demonstrate his might to Russia, thus preventing further intrusions into the South Caucasus from the north. Interestingly, Nader Shah issued instructions to his ambassadors, including those on hiring ship foremen in order to equip and develop his own shipbuilding and shipping in the Caspian Sea. The new shah's other plans pertained to the Ottoman Empire as he intended to forge a new alliance with this state.

Throughout the first half of the 18th century, Nader Shah had rather intense diplomatic exchanges with Russia. **The importance he attached to the relations with the Russian Empire is evidenced by his embassy mission delegated to the court of Empress Anna Ivanovna in 1739.** Prior to sending the mission, he instructed his secretary and historiographer Mehdi-kuli Khan Astrabadi while still in Delhi to send a letter to the Russian resident representative in Isfahan, I.P. Kalushkin, which was subsequently received on October 5, 1739. A list of gifts slated for Anna Ivanovna, her sister and niece was attached to the letter. That letter was included in Kalushkin's report to the Russian government and its copy was later found in the Astrakhan archives (10, p.11-12).

Sardar Bay Kirklu was put in charge of the embassy in Russia. However, in the wake of the delay relating to the embassy in Kizlyar, Sardar Bay had to come back and was succeeded by Muhammad Hussein Khan. P.G. Butkov noted, "Upon defeating the Mughals, Nader sent an embassy mission of his close relative and grand equerry to the St. Petersburg court in order to announce this victory in early 1740 with 16,000 troops and 20 cannons" (9, p. 209). The new embassy of Nader Shah departed on October 23, 1739, reaching St. Petersburg as late as October 2, 1741.

The purpose of the embassy of Muhammad Hussein Khan, a family member of Nader Shah, was primarily **to report on the victories over Bokharans and Indians, as well as to resolve a number of controversial issues.** One of the available sources says, *"As a representative of a powerful monarch who bragged about conquering the whole world, Hussein Khan was heading to St. Petersburg with very generous gifts and 14 elephants. The ambassador was accompanied by a dressed-up entourage comprised of 128 people...Certainly, not a single embassy had appeared until then before the court of a friendly power with such an impressive military force. On December 9, 1739, the Afshar embassy arrived in Kizlyar where the alarm*

*Bracelets. Gold, porcelain enamel, precious stones.
State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg*

was sounded. Furthermore, the embassy mission was barred by the Astrakhan governor, Duke Sergei Golitsyn, as no orders had been issued in this regard from St. Petersburg beforehand. Five infantry and six dragoon regiments were dispatched hastily to the Volga and they set up a camp in front of Astrakhan. The ambassador was informed that the Afshar troops were not allowed to cross the border and it would be impossible to provide food for the servicemen along the route. Therefore, they were advised either to go back or disband the troops. Following long-lasting talks Nader Shah acquiesced and the ambassador, accompanied by 2,000 people-strong entourage (footnote 4), which was followed by 14 elephants, embarked on a long trip. Pending further travel, the embassy mission stayed in Kizlyar until August of the following year. Finally, permission was granted for the embassy to leave St. Petersburg. On September 11, 1740, Hussein Khan solemnly entered Astrakhan and was greeted there by the governor with troops and a proper ceremony, salutation and cannon firing" (14).

On September 18, 1740, the embassy left Astrakhan for Tsaritsyno with 170 horse wagons. In the Don steppes, 120 more people from the entourage joined the ambassadors. Therefore, the newly appointed chief commissioner, Major-General S.F. Apraksin issued an order to have the embassy representatives seated and place their baggage on 800 carts. While on his way Hussein Khan wrote a notifying letter to Vice-Chancellor A.I. Osterman, saying, "The dignified and plenipotentiary, supremely honorable, superior minister and supreme vizier, may his happiness last forever in prosperity! I wish you well-being bestowed upon by God and happy being to the fullest extent. Upon announcing friendly compliments, may your highness be aware that I am Hussein Khan, a trusted ambassador of the great Nader Shah" (14).

According to the source, Hussein Khan made a stop-over in Kuzmina Gat in the vicinity of Tambov, on March 7, 1741. On the following day the ambassador solemnly entered Tambov; a Siberian dragoon regiment lined up with an orchestra and banners. Local officials were in attendance as well. At 4 p.m., Hussein Khan, who was until then resting in a Bokino hut, attached a feather of the Shah to his hat and saddled his horse, starting a ceremonial procession all the way to Tambov along the so-called Great Astrakhan Road. **On June 2, the Afshar embassy left Tambov with 700 wagons. Exactly one month later, the Embassy solemnly entered Moscow.** The mission was greeted near the Danilov Monastery by troops, chan-



cellery employees, equestrian Moscow merchants and a large choir of trumpeters. The procession was moving in the following order: a team of grenadiers was walking in front. The merchants and servants were moving along. They were followed by ceremonial coaches, Semyonovsky Lifeguard Regiment and General Apraksin's cavalry. The marchers proceeded with elephants and embassy music. The ambassadorial cavalry, commissaries and the acting state counselor, Duke Golitsyn, who was inferior to the ambassador, were marching behind them. They were followed by Ambassador Hussein Khan himself, with an Afshar flag, in addition to the assistants and an Afshar military detachment. A total of 2,128 Persians entered Moscow, and as soon as the ambassador arrived in his apartment, the Moscow commander-in-chief came to visit him" (14).

Hussein Khan, who was satisfied with the hospitality he enjoyed in Moscow, wrote in a letter to Nader Shah, "As the dignified ambassador, Amir Hussein Khan, who was exalted by the infinite mercy of the king of kings, I sacrifice myself upon your blessed feet. You are the king of kings who bestows light to kings with well-being, decorates heads with wreaths and rules all nations... Here's my message..." (14).

On September 29, Hussein Khan solemnly entered Petersburg. "The ceremonial procession was as follows: Horse Guards; 14 elephants, two each in a row; Afshar music; the embassy carriage; imperial cavalry with factory horses with non-commissioned stallmaster and riders; generals, the headquarters and subaltern officers; Princes Dolgoruky and Shakhovskoy; Count Saltykov and Hussein Khan riding in a carriage of horses harnessed in pairs. They were accompanied by grooms, butlers, stalwarts, and fast walkers. Trailing the procession were the bearers of the Afshar banner" (14).

Since the embassy mission was on its way to meet Anna Ivanovna, but arrived to be hosted by Ivan Antonovich (under the regentess Anna Leopoldovna), the



*Dagger. Steel, gold, enamel, emeralds, rubies.
State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg*

sion could have been to seize Astrakhan and also carry out notable conquests if it witnessed unreinforced borders. However, his real intention was apparently to ask princess Yelizaveta Petrovna's hand in marriage, and he pledged to introduce Christian law in his states. He was then 60 years old. Perhaps, the princess could have complied with this request, but it seemed extremely questionable and was thereby rejected" (9, p. 210).

Thus, the following answers were given to the main demands of Hussein Khan: "1. the Shah sought to enter a relationship with Russia based on wedlock and this was rejected (i.e. the hand of crown princess Yelizaveta Petrovna); 2. Afshar prisoners as well as the Georgians and Armenians were not handed over at the Shah's request; 3. the Nogais were not ceded to the Afshar side; 4. shipwrights were not provided for shipbuilding in Persia; 5. chapelmasters were not sent in to teach music; 6. weavers of woolen wallpaper were not provided; 7. Afshar merchants were not authorized to trade without duties" (14).

Solemn presentation of the Shah's gifts began in conclusion of the ambassador's speech. "Anna Leopoldovna, Ivan Antonovich and Yelizaveta Petrovna were presented with pieces of precious satin, diamond belts, golden cups decorated with diamonds, a small valuable table, three feathers for decorating caps and hats, finger rings and boxes...At the same time, Hussein Khan announced that the ruler of the world had ordered to free all Russian prisoners..." (11)

A total of 22 items, 15 rings and 14 elephants were delivered to the Russian side (10, p. 12). The gifts of Nader Shah included a golden ring decorated with rubies, emeralds and a big diamond that belonged to Shah Jahan (1627-1658), one of India's powerful rulers from the great Mughal dynasty (footnote 5).

It is noteworthy that **thanks to those gifts of Nader Shah, the Hermitage Museum currently possesses a unique collection of Indian golden vessels dating back to the 17th century and the early 18th century. Such exhibits are not available even in the museums of India itself.** The gifts presented by Nader Shah's embassy to the Russian Tsar's court later became a one-of-the-kind collection, despite its rather small size, which is about 20 items (10, p. 14).

The embassy mission was in Petersburg during the 1741 coup and returned in November 1742 with friendly letters from Empress Yelizaveta and gifts, which mostly included wines and vodka. Evidently, **the political out-**

Afshar embassy representatives were introduced to the ruler Anna Leopoldovna on October 2, 1741. Entering the audience hall, Hussein Khan made three bows in front of the throne and having handed over the Shah's letter in the prescribed manner, began the following high-flown speech: "This is a friendly and highly benevolent letter on the part of His Majesty, the supreme and dignified Solomon, who illuminates the state, decorates the power's throne, who was granted authority and possession of the world by the mercy of God, the ruler of the Iranian state, Nader, who bestows the crown upon the Indian and Turanian kings..." (14).

P.G. Butkov noted, "The ambassador, in a speech made as he was hosted by the emperor's mother, Grand Duchess Anna, said that his sovereign wanted to divide the attained Mughal riches with such a kind ally as the Russian emperor. **A part of the Petersburg ministry feared that the Shah's actual intent in sending this embassy mis-**

*Jewelry box. Marble, gold, emeralds, rubies.
State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg*



come of the visit turned out negative, and it was not a mere coincidence that armed clashes broke out on the two countries' shared border as early as in 1742. Nader Shah threatened to conquer Russia, Russian resident representative in Iran I.P. Kalushkin reported.

In the wake of the souring of bilateral relations, the Russian Empress sent a reinforced corps under the command of Lieutenant-General Tarakanov to the borderline area (12, p. 250-251). Another reason for the tension was apparently Russia's unwillingness to have another powerful Islamic neighbor, along with the Ottoman Empire. In any case, the subsequent Russian policy in the region was aimed at undermining the power of the Afshar state.

Footnotes:

Footnote 1. The Turkic origin of the Afshar tribe is confirmed by a number of sources, including al-Kashgari,

who said, "Afshars pertain to one of the branches of the Turkic Oghuz people. Oghuzes are Turkomans consisting of 22 branches" (15, p. 55-56); Ali Akbar Dekhoda: "Afshars are one of the notable Turkic tribes" (1, p. 3112), etc.



*Tray and a little box. Gold, enamel.
State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg*



Bracelets. Gold, a corundum, rubies, emeralds. State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

Footnote 2. The son of Shah Sultan Hussein, Tahmasib (1722 (9)-1732), who fled Isfahan, accompanied by 800 Qajars, back in June, declared himself Shah Tahmasib II in November (7, p.113).

Footnote 3. Fath-Ali Khan Qajar, the ruler of Astrabad, was one of the most powerful rulers of the Safavid state, who acted as the commander-in-chief of Shah Tahmasib's army.

Footnote 4. P.G. Butkov notes that the ambassador was allowed to "take only 3,000 people with him and he had to leave everyone else behind" or "his retinue was comprised of 3,000 people, as well as 14 elephants, which were sent to the emperor by the shah (during the reign of underage Ivan) (9, p. 209-210).

Footnote 5. Only 17 items and one ring remained from among the presented gifts (4). The following inscription is stamped on the inner side of the ring: "The second possessor of the rapprochement of two luminaries in the same sign." That ring was slated for archery; it was to be put on one's thumb to protect it when releasing the bowstring. It is a ceremonial item shaped as a combat ring (22, p.12-13). ♦

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*Plate. Gold, enamel.
State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg*

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