

# HOW KARABAKH KHANATE WAS JOINED TO THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE: HISTORICAL MYTHS AND REALITIES

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AFTER THE KAZAN MEETING OF THE PRESIDENTS OF RUSSIA, AZERBAIJAN AND ARMENIA, THE NUMBER OF STORIES ABOUT THE HISTORY OF NAGORNO-KARABAKH ON THE PAGES OF VARIOUS MEDIA OUTLETS BEGAN TO INCREASE. IN MOST OF THEM, THE HISTORY OF NAGORNO-KARABAKH BOTH IN THE SOVIET PERIOD AND IN THE PERIOD OF ITS BEING JOINTED TO THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY WAS SERIOUSLY DISTORTED.

**D**istortion, and at times crude falsification of the history of actual events by professional historians, causes deep regret. Who profits from this reworking of real events and the creation of invented history in order to support present-day political circumstances, when a factually correct history has been scrupulously prepared by Russian officials and when the actual correspondence of the military and diplomatic services of Russia has been

preserved in Russian archives?

With the arrival of Russia in Karabakh in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a new political situation emerged. The policy of Russia, directed toward the establishment of a social-ethnic base in the form of Armenians, led to the strengthening of the Christian element in Karabakh. The disputes observed today have roots that reach precisely to those times. Having finally conquered Georgia in 1801, Russia moved toward the borders of Azerbaijan. General P.

D. Tsitsianov, who commanded Russian forces in the Caucasus, laid siege to Ganja, Azerbaijan's biggest city, in March 1803. Having overcome the stiff resistance of the population led by Javad-khan, Russian forces entered the city on 3 January 1804.

In order to strengthen his positions in the Trans-Caucasus, Tsitsianov had to conquer the Karabakh, Shaki and Shirvan khanates, which were considered the strongest in this region. During the course of long negotiations,



*The Shahbulag fortress, 18th century*

Tsitsianov threatened these khanates, demanded that they consider the sad experience of Ganja and, taking into consideration the military might of Russia, accept its protection without offering resistance. In doing so, Tsitsianov understood perfectly well that Iran had interests in the region and therefore did not push events. Moreover, he had to consider the strong military potential of the Muslim khanates.

Finding himself constantly “between the hammer and the anvil” (Russia in the north and Iran in the south), Ibrahim Khalil-khan, the ruler of Karabakh, decided to conclude “a solemn promise” with Russia, a treaty which in fact became the first legal document on the path to joining Karabakh to Russia. The treaty between the Karabakh Khanate and the Russian Empire on the transition of the khanate under the power of Russia was signed in the military encampment at Kurakchay on 14 May 1805, so it went down in history as the “Kurakchay Treaty”. The document consists of 11 articles and gives Russia a one-sided primacy. From then onwards, the Karabakh Khanate rejected all attempts at independent interna-

tional ties with third countries. Moreover, the Karabakh Khanate lost the right of independent communication with the neighboring khanates. And the Karabakh khan was also required to contribute 8,000 *chervontsy* (24,000 Russian rubles) to the Russian treasury every year and pay for the expenses of his grandson who was held hostage in the residence of the commander in chief in Tiflis. One of the most difficult conditions of the treaty was an agreement on the deployment in the Shusha fortress of 500 Russian soldiers with cannons.

The only article of the Kurakchay Treaty that could be seen as favoring Ibrahim Khalil-khan was the obligation by Russia not to interfere in the internal affairs of the khanate. Interestingly, shortly after the treaty was signed by a decree of Aleksandr I on 8 July 1805, Ibrahim Khalil-khan was given the rank of general and from that moment on, as a lieutenant general, he had to subordinate himself to the commander-in-chief of the Russian forces in the Caucasus. The treaty, being a diplomatic document, testifies that the Karabakh Khanate became a protectorate of Russia precisely as a Muslim state. [1]

The seizure of the strategically vital Karabakh Khanate, in fact, meant the beginning of the complete subordination of all the khanates of northern Azerbaijan. The mountainous part of the khanate enabled real control over all the western districts of Azerbaijan. Subsequent actions did not represent a major problem for Russia. At the same time, different khans considered the historical fates of the people in their own way and could not create a single union. Justly assessing the importance of the joining of Karabakh to Russia, Prince P. D. Tsitsianov reported to the Russian emperor after the signing of the Kurakchay Treaty on 22 May 1805 that, given its geographic location, Karabakh serves as the gate to Azerbaijan and brings Georgia closer to Baku, the seizure of which was planned for the fall. [2]

The Azerbaijani khans had a close watch on the first Russian-Iranian war (1804-1813). While they desired the victory of the southern neighbor, they were also afraid of it and never abandoned hope that the results of the war would enable them to enhance their own independence. The Russian army, in turn, did not particularly trust the local Muslims. In 1806, when Iran attempted to attack Shusha, Major Lisanevich, the chief of the fortress garrison, wary of the unexpected actions by the Karabakh khan, slaughtered the entire family of Ibrahim Khalil-khan with the exception of one son, Mehdi Guli-aga. This confirmed the symbolic nature of the Karabakh khan's promotion to the rank of a lieutenant general of the Russian forces. At the same time, having dealt with Ibrahim Khalil-khan, Russia did not change the status of his khanate. Mehdi Guli-aga, by order of Emperor Aleksandr I of 10 September 1806, was named ruler of Karabakh in place of his father. [3]

As a sign of Mehdi Guli-aga's status



as the administrator of the khanate, Emperor Aleksandr I presented him with a banner and sword set with precious stones. And just as in the Kurakchay Treaty, so too in the emperor's appointment of Mehdi Guli-aga as ruler of Karabakh, there is reference to the Javanshir family as the rulers of Karabakh, both mountainous and lowland, and to the fact that all strata of the population are subordinate to Mehdi Guli-aga. The new khan was filled with hatred of the Iranians and distrust for the Russians who had slaughtered his family, but in the end, the anti-Iranian attitudes came out on top.

The victory over Napoleon led to a toughening of Russia's eastern policy. General A. Yermolov, who was appointed governor of the Caucasus in 1816, did not trust the Muslim people, seeing them as a potential enemy. For this reason, he sought the opportunity for the formal liquidation of the khanates, which he thought could become the nucleus of a movement for independence. Yermolov's representative in Northern Azerbaijan, an Armenian General V. Madatov, actively helped him in this. Slowly but steadily, they realized their plan. In 1819, they liquidated the Shaki khanate. Unable to resist Russian pressure, Mehdi Guli-aga fled to Iran, and the Karabakh khanate was converted into a Russian province. A. Griboyedov wrote that together with the khan, 3,000 Muslim families moved to Iran. Thus, in spite of what had been written in various treaties, the liquidation of the khanates reached its logical conclusion.

In 1826, the second Russian-Iranian war began. And again, the main events unfolded in Karabakh. For 48 days, the Iranian forces laid siege to Shusha, but could not take the city. On 10 February 1828, in the settlement of Turkmanchay near Tabriz, the two sides concluded a new peace treaty, whereby all the khanates of

Northern Azerbaijan, including Karabakh, Nakhchivan and Irevan, became part of the Russian Empire.

There were many interesting moments in the process of joining the South Caucasus to Russia. A number of Armenian and Russian historians and certain political circles have been claiming lately that Karabakh was joined to Russia as an Armenian district. Certain contemporary Russian and Armenian scholars insist that in the course of the entire 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Armenians of Karabakh made up 97 per cent of the region's total population. A question arises: if this was really the case, why then wasn't it an Armenian state that arose in Karabakh in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century but a Karabakh khanate which was led by representatives of the famous Turkic tribe of the Javanshirs? Indeed, there is no single precedent in history where three per cent of the population could create a state on the backs of the other 97 per cent.

However, a careful study of the international legal documents of this period raises some interesting questions concerning the form of the inclusion into Russia not only of Karabakh, but also of Armenia proper. Thus, Georgia, according to the Georgiyev treaty of 1801, and the Azerbaijan khanates, by the Gulustan (1813) and Turkmanchay (1828) treaties, were included in Russia. A reasonable question arises: According to what treaty, agreement or declaration did Armenia and the territories to which it makes claims pass into Russia? Well-known Armenian historians have found a very easy answer. Not observing scholarly ethics and historical evidence and not being restrained by long established historical truth, they write that "According to the Gulustan Treaty of 1813 which ended the Russian-Persian War of 1804-1813, along with other north-eastern provinces of Eastern Armenia

(Lori-Pambak, Shamshadin, Zangazur, Kafan and Shoragel districts), the Ganja and Karabakh khanates were transferred to Russia as well ... According to the Turkmanchay Treaty (February 1828), which ended the second Russian-Persian War (1826-1828), the Yerevan and Nakhchivan khanates and Ordubad district passed to Russia. This completed the final unification of all eastern Armenian lands to Russia." [4]

In an effort to support their falsification of history, they cite the collection of documents published by G. Yusefovich in Petersburg in 1869. [5] They do so even though they know perfectly well that neither the Gulustan nor the Turkmanchay treaties contain any reference to Armenian lands. Nor is there a reference to Christian lands. There is only reference to Muslim khanates and their unification with Russia. The vast majority of the population of the Irevan khanate consisted of Muslims and this was reflected in Russian sources. In 1828, for example, when the "Armenian oblast" was created within the borders of the Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates, three-quarters of its population were Muslims. This is confirmed by a letter of General Paskevich to the chief of the General Staff, where he expressed his dissatisfaction with the actions of General Krasovsky, the chief of the "provisional administration" of Irevan, and of Archbishop Nerses, a member of this administration. Paskevich criticizes Krasovsky for allowing Nerses to exert unlimited influence on all affairs when "three quarters of the oblast population consist of Muslims." [6]

The khanates' loss of their special status meant the transformation of Karabakh into a colony, and this process lasted for decades. In this period, the administrative division of the Trans-Caucasus was frequently changed and only had finally formed by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Following the liquidation of the khanates, the *comendant* system of administration was introduced in Northern Azerbaijan. All of Karabakh with a center in Shusha was included in the Military-Muslim District. However, such distribution certainly did not correspond to the ethnographic, historical, and religious peculiarities of the local population.

Demography was gradually converted into a political instrument. At the dawn of Armenian resettlement into these areas, a document of 19 July 1811 noted that there lived 12,000 families in Karabakh oblast, of which 2,500 were Armenian and the rest were followers of the religion of Muhammad. [7] In 1823, the Russian administration prepared "A Description of the Karabakh Province," which contained statistical data on the district population and its ethno-religious composition. Judging by the statistical data prepared by Russian institutions, there were 600 settlements in the Karabakh oblast, of which 450 were Muslim and only 150 Armenian. [8] According to this reliable source, 20,095 families lived in Karabakh oblast in 1823, of them 15,729 were Muslims and only 4,366 (21.7 per cent) were Armenians.

According to the 1832 census, the number of families in Karabakh reached 20,456, but the number of Armenian families over this same period rose to 31.6 per cent. [9] In Shusha, considered the center of Karabakh, of the 1,532 families in 1823, 1,111 were Muslim (72.5 per cent), 421 were Armenian (27.5 per cent), but already by 1832 this figure reached 44.9 per cent. Russian military historian V. Potto notes that the first major resettlement of Armenians to Karabakh took place in 1828. He writes that on 16 March 1828, some 40,000 Armenian families left Persia for Irevan. However, because of a shortage of bread, 5,000

families were forced to wait on the shores of the Aras, but were eventually sent to Karabakh. [10]

Russian writer S. Glinka provides some interesting data on the movement of Armenians from Iran to Karabakh. The political nature of the resettlement of Iranian Armenians to Muslim lands just seized by Russia is clearly evident in the appeal to the Persian Armenians by an active participant of this resettlement, G. Lazarev: "Christians! According to reliable rumors which have reached me, badly intentioned people are trying to disseminate not only foolish and false news, but even to sow fear in those seeking resettlement over Russia's good intentions and to change the desire of their hearts." [11] He writes further that "Armenians from various settlements, emboldened by Turkmanchay, moved toward Karabakh," [12] and in the course of three and a half months, "more than 8,000 families crossed the Aras." [13] In the spring of 1828, when the Armenians moved toward the Aras, Paskevich issued a directive to resettle the poorest in Karabakh. [14] As a result, in 1832, Armenians formed 31.6 per cent of the Karabakh population, with Muslims still retaining their majority of 68.4 per cent. [15]

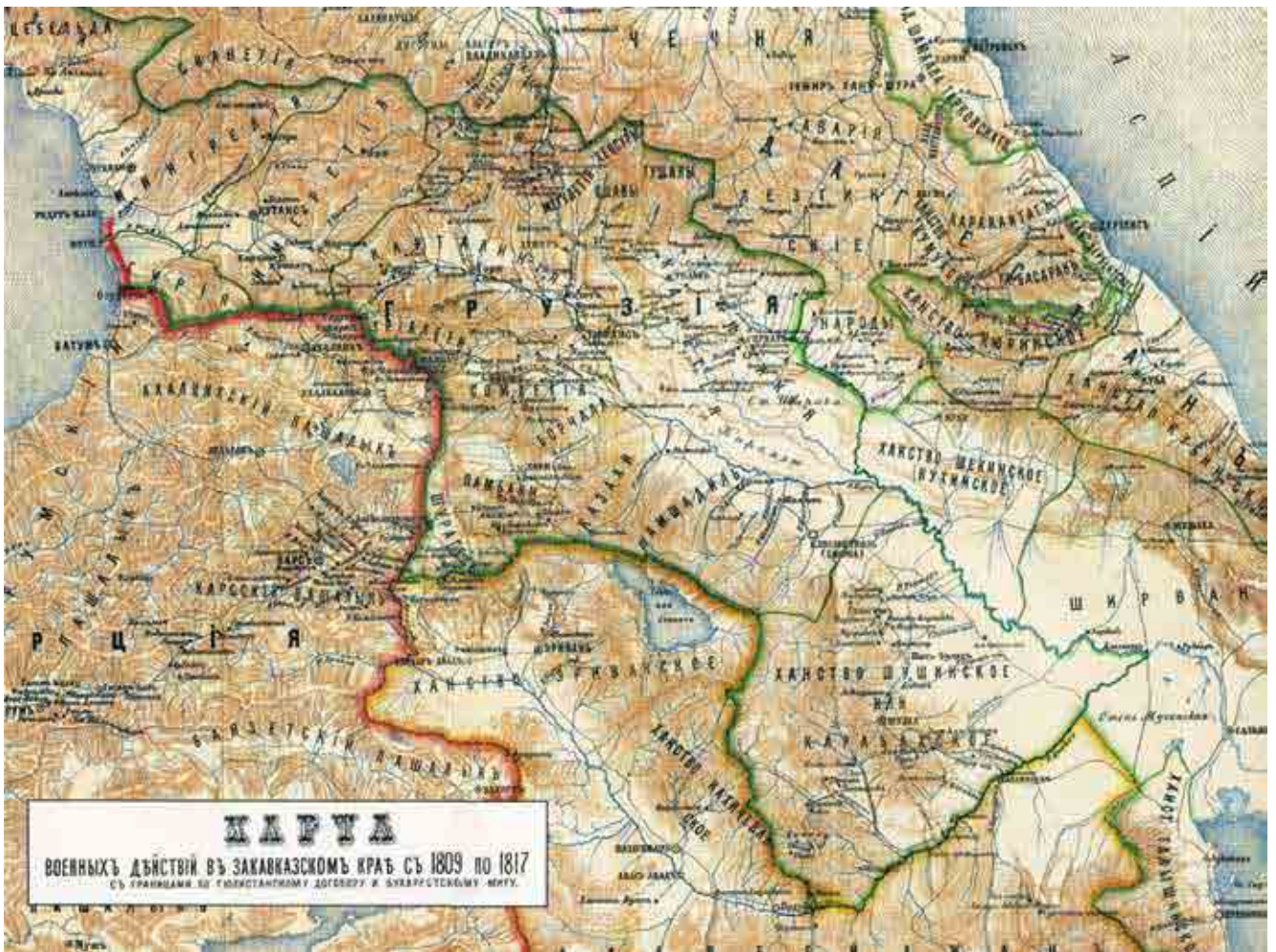
After 1828, the resettlement of Armenians into the Muslim provinces of the South Caucasus was regulated by Paragraph XV of the Turkmanchay Treaty. [16] By a decree of Emperor Nikolay I on 21 March 1828, "an Armenian oblast" was established on the lands of the former Irevan and Nakhchivan khanates. [17] The Russian general and Georgian Prince A. Chavchavadze was named the head of "the Armenian oblast." [18]

In the second volume of the historical novel of Catherine's time, "The Favorite" by V. Pikul, there is an interesting conversation between Count G. Potemkin and Catherine II, in which

the former advises that the appearance of new Armenian communities in the Trans-Caucasus will create problems in the future. When writing his historical novels, Pikul scrupulously worked in the archives and strictly guided himself on the basis of historical documents. At the moment of the formation of this oblast, 75 per cent of its population consisted of Muslims. Whereas 49,875 Muslims lived with 20,073 Armenians during the period of the Russian conquest, then immediately after the formation of "the Armenian oblast" 45,200 Armenians were resettled from neighboring countries. [19] The situation in Nakhchivan oblast evolved in a similar way. By the end of the Russian occupation, 17,138 Muslims and only 2,690 Armenians lived there. With the liquidation of the khanate, 10,670 Armenians resettled there in a short interval of time. Similarly, in the Ordubad part of Nakhchivan, where initially 7,247 Muslims and 2,388 Armenians lived, 1,340 Armenians were resettled in order to change the balance between them. [20]

Russian researcher N. Shavrov published a book in 1911 in which he noted that 40,000 Armenians from Iran and 84,600 from Turkey resettled in the Caucasus in 1828-1830. They were settled in Yelizavetpol and Irevan provinces, where there were almost no Armenians prior to that. Shavrov wrote that "of the 1.3 million Armenians living in the Trans-Caucasus, more than a million are settlers. We resettled them here." [21]

Apparently, the desire to completely Christianize the Trans-Caucasus was strong. But the specific features of the situation led the Russians to act carefully, and A. Griboyedov, Russian ambassador to Persia, warned that the Armenians would remain permanently in the lands to which they were resettled, something that could trigger problems with the



indigenous Muslim population. [22] Such concerns were shared by the Azerbaijanis. The Armenians started to settle down on Azerbaijani lands and to display hostility toward Azerbaijanis. I. Chavchavadze justly noted in his appeal to Armenians seeking to settle in Georgia that they must not view those accepting them as enemies. [23]

In the course of the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the last two decades, Azerbaijan and its people experienced pain and suffering for their “hospitality” to Armenians. 🌱

*The maps used in this article have been borrowed from “The Karabakh Saga” by Emin Mammadli.*

## References

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