

GEOPOLITICAL PROCESSES IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN THE 80S–90S OF THE 18TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

The 80s–90s of the 18th century were one of the periods in the history of the South Caucasus characterized by complex and contradictory political processes. Due to its important strategic position in the system of international relations, the region was at the center of attention of major powers. In particular, the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Qajar state were engaged in political, military, and diplomatic struggle for the South Caucasus. The region's rich economic resources, its location on important trade routes, and its military-strategic significance further intensified this competition. After the collapse of the Afsharid Empire, centralized authority weakened in the South Caucasus, and a number of small feudal states emerged in the region. The absence of a unified political entity created favorable conditions for the intervention of foreign powers. Individual khanates formed alliances with various great powers to ensure their own security, which further complicated the political situation in the region.

Keywords: South Caucasus, Azerbaijani khanates, Kartli-Kakheti kingdom, military-political situation, geopolitical competition

1. INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the 18th–19th centuries, on the eve of the occupation of the South Caucasus by Tsarist Russia, the internal and international situation in the region was extremely grave. The fragmentation of the South Caucasus, including the territory of present-day Azerbaijan, into small feudal state entities – khanates, the ongoing struggle among khans for control over the territories of neighboring khanates, the intensifying contradictions between feudal lords and peasants, and economic decline were characteristic of the region's internal situation during that period.

During this period, the main goal of the Russian Empire was to strengthen its position on the shores of the Caspian Sea, penetrate the South Caucasus, and expand its access to warm seas. During the reign of Catherine II, Russia began to pursue its Caucasian policy more actively. Russian diplomacy established relations with the khanates in the region and, in some cases, sought to bring them under its protection.

The Ottoman Empire, another major regional power, sought to maintain its positions in the South Caucasus. The Ottoman state paid particular attention to its relations with the Georgian and Azerbaijani khanates. However, the internal political and economic problems of the Ottoman Empire in the late 18th century weakened its ability to exert influence in the region. Nevertheless, Ottoman ruling circles viewed Russia's strengthening in the South Caucasus as a threat and took various diplomatic steps against it.

In the 1790s, one of the states that played an important role in the political life of the region was the Qajar state. After Agha Mohammad Shah Qajar came to power, he began consistent military-political activity aimed at restoring the borders of the former Safavid state and strengthening his position in the South Caucasus. Uniting the Azerbaijani khanates under his political rule and re-establishing control over

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Georgia constituted the main directions of the shah's Caucasian policy.

Thus, in the 1780s–1790s, the South Caucasus turned into an arena of international rivalry. The struggle among regional powers had a serious impact on the political map of the region and its future historical development. The events of this period laid the foundation for the South Caucasus to enter an entirely new political situation in the 19th century.

The main objectives set in the article are: to scientifically analyze the political processes that took place in the South Caucasus during the 1780s and 1790s; to examine the impact of the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk on the subsequent political development of the region and the system of international relations; to evaluate the political and military activities of Agha Muhammad Shah Qajar aimed at restoring the historical borders of the Safavid state; and to determine the causes, course, and consequences of the Russian campaign led by General Valerian Zubov in 1796, which influenced the future political fate of the South Caucasus.

The main tasks set in the article are as follows:

- The comprehensive analysis of the military-political situation that had formed in the South Caucasus during the 1780s, as well as the balance of forces and geopolitical processes in the region;
- To analyze the political circumstances that led to the signing of the Treaty of Georgievsk, the content of the treaty, and the nature of the relations that developed between Kartli-Kakheti and Russia;
- To determine the impacts of the Treaty of Georgievsk on the system of international relations in the South Caucasus and on the subsequent political development of the region;
- To examine the geopolitical strategy of the Russian Empire concerning the South Caucasus in the 18th century, its expansionist objectives, and the main directions of its military-political activities aimed at consolidating its position in the region;
- To assess the causes, objectives, and impact on the political situation in the region of the Russian military campaign conducted in 1796 under the command of General V. Zubov.

2. POLITICAL PROCESSES AND BALANCE OF FORCES IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS IN THE 1780S

The 1780s were also marked by internal rivalry between Fatali Khan of Quba and Ibrahimkhalil Khan of Karabakh, both of whom sought to unify the Azerbaijani lands under a single political authority. Erekle II played a significant role in the deterioration of relations between these two rulers. Viewing Fatali Khan and Ibrahimkhalil Khan as the principal obstacles to the realization of his political objectives in the region, he attempted to prevent their rapprochement and ultimately succeeded in winning Ibrahimkhalil Khan over to his side (History of Azerbaijani-Georgian Relations, 2013, p. 29–30).

Ibrahimkhalil Khan's rapprochement with the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in the 1780s was driven by clear political considerations, as he viewed Fatali Khan of Quba with growing concern. By that time, Fatali Khan had succeeded in bringing the Tarki Shamkhalate, the Shamakhi Khanate, the Baku Khanate, and several other feudal entities under his influence. In this context, the occupation of Ganja in cooperation with Georgian forces and the tactical alliance with Erekle II constituted only one aspect of Ibrahimkhalil Khan's broader efforts to counter Fatali Khan's policy of political unification. His rapprochement with the Georgian ruler was also influenced by the fact that, during Fatali Khan's campaign against Karabakh earlier that year, Erekle II had dispatched a sizeable military detachment under the command of his sons, George and David, to assist Ibrahimkhalil Khan (Butkov, 1869, p. 74).

At the end of the 18th century, the ruler of Georgia, Irakli II, faced both external and internal problems. He wanted to turn Georgia into a strong and independent state, but the political fragmentation in the country prevented him from achieving this goal. In particular, the nobles of Kartli were dissatisfied with Irakli's rule and wanted Kartli to be governed separately. Taking advantage of this discontent, Prince Alexander Bakarovich, from the House of Vakhtang, laid claim to the throne of Kartli (Romanovsky, 1902, p. 263).

In his fundamental work, Butkov provides information about Alexander's activities and writes: "Prince

Alexander, requesting the Shamkhal to help him seize the throne of Kartli, tried to convince him that the Tsar of Imereti, Solomon II, the nobles of Kartli, and the Dagestanis were also ready to support this initiative. He promised to give 50 rubles to each of the Shamkhal's men, and to repeat this payment once Tiflis was captured. Although the Shamkhal showed some inclination toward Alexander's proposal, he stated that it was necessary to discuss the matter with the ruler of Derbent (Khan of Quba - A.A.), Fatali Khan. For this reason, on August 27, 1782, Prince Alexander, accompanied by Prince Alexander Amilakhvari, set off for Derbent. Amilakhvari had already left Georgia and taken refuge in Russia back in 1771 due to Tsar Irakli's harsh treatment of his lineage; now, he had come from Petersburg to Prince Alexander's side and joined him in the hope of taking revenge for Irakli's insults against him" (Butkov, 1869, p. 116-117).

During this period, Georgia suffered from continuous Lezgin raids. Since Irakli did not have a sufficient regular army, he relied on mercenary forces. However, these detachments frequently plundered the population, further destabilizing the country. As a result of wars, internal strife, and heavy taxation, the country's economic situation had severely deteriorated. Consequently, realizing that he could not defend the country on his own, Irakli turned to Russia for protection (Romanovsky, 1902, p. 265).

In 1783, the Treaty of Georgievsk was signed between Russia and the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti. By the Treaty of Georgievsk, the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti accepted the protectorate of the Russian Empire and renounced its dependence on Iran and other states. According to the treaty, Russia undertook to guarantee the territorial integrity of Georgia and the security of its ruling dynasty; in return, Georgia's foreign policy, military activity, and the confirmation of its rulers came under the control of the Russian Empire. At the same time, the Georgian church and nobility were integrated into the imperial administrative system, significantly restricting Georgia's political and religious independence. Thus, while the treaty was formally aimed at ensuring the security of Georgia, it actually established the legal foundations of its political dependence on the Russian Empire (Butkov, 1869, p. 122–127; Baumer, 2024, p. 135; Rayfield, 2012, p. 250).

Additionally, the treaty included four secret supplementary articles. The first article regulated the relations between Erekle II and King Solomon I of Imereti, with Empress Catherine II acting as a mediator and calling upon the parties to maintain peace. The second article provided for the deployment of two Russian battalions on Georgian territory, thereby confirming Russia's permanent military presence in the Caucasus. The third secret article stipulated that the King of Kartli-Kakheti would receive all possible military assistance in the event of war. Under the fourth article, Russia undertook not only to provide military support but also to back Erekle II's territorial claims through diplomatic means (Butkov, 1869, p. 127–128; Baumer, 2024, p. 135).

With the establishment of direct diplomatic relations between Saint Petersburg and Tiflis, an important stage began in the process of Georgia's integration into the Russian Empire. Within this framework, Colonel Stepan D. Burnashev was appointed as the first permanent Russian plenipotentiary representative to Georgia. Furthermore, two sons of King Erekle II—Prince Mirian and Prince Teimuraz—visited Russia and were received at the Imperial Court. Later, Erekle II appointed Prince Garsevan Chavchavadze as ambassador to Russia (Gvosdev, 2000, p. 60).

However, the expected results were not fully achieved after the treaty. Internal discipline and order within Georgia remained weak. Local nobles were unwilling to submit to the central authority, and many of those called up for military service deserted the battlefield. Russian military leaders also assessed the situation in Georgia as severe.

When the issue of accepting the Kingdom of Georgia under the supreme authority of the Russian Empire came to the fore, the Christian feudal lords of Karabakh reached out to the Russian court through secret representatives to declare their loyalty. They hoped to be liberated from the yoke of foreign rulers through Russian intervention and promised that they could provide material support to the Russian troops. In an appeal signed by archbishops and meliks on March 2, 1783, it was stated that it would be easy to

sustain 30,000 Russian troops on their fertile lands for 5 years. With the approval of Empress Catherine II, Prince Grigory Potemkin created hope that this appeal would receive a positive response (Butkov, 1869, p. 142).

The complex political processes unfolding in the South Caucasus during the 1780s were characterized by both internal strife and the strategies of foreign powers to establish themselves in the region. Faced with Fatali Khan of Quba's attempts to unify the Azerbaijani lands under a single state, the insidious policy pursued by King Erekle II of Kartli-Kakheti fueled separatism among the khanates.

Unable to cope with both the dynastic struggles and feudal disobedience within Kartli, as well as the continuous Lezgian raids, Erekle II was compelled to seek the protection of Tsarist Russia. Although the Treaty of Georgievsk, signed in 1783, was formally intended to guarantee the security of Georgia, it in fact undermined the country's internal and external sovereignty and legitimized Russia's permanent military and political presence in the South Caucasus.

At the same time, this treaty prompted the Christian subjects of the region, especially the Armenian meliks of Karabakh, to integrate more closely with the Russian court and to bring their separatist activities against the local Muslim khanates into the open. Thus, the Treaty of Georgievsk and its geopolitical consequences brought stability neither to Georgia nor to the South Caucasus as a whole.

3. THE RISE TO POWER OF AGHA MUHAMMAD SHAH QAJAR AND HIS MILITARY-POLITICAL STRUGGLE FOR THE RESTORATION OF THE HISTORICAL BORDERS OF THE SAFAVID EMPIRE

After the death of Karim Khan Zand, as a result of the struggle for power between the Zands and the Qajars in Iran, Agha Muhammad Shah Qajar managed to come to power. Having assumed the title of Shah, Agha Muhammad Shah Qajar subjugated the khanates of South Azerbaijan and then decided to attack the territory of North Azerbaijan. His main goal was aimed at restoring the historical borders of the Safavid Empire.

Meanwhile, while Agha Muhammad Khan was in Tehran, in May 1795, in Ardabil, under the leadership of Nurali Khan, the gathering of troops began—according to some sources numbering 50,000, and according to others 100,000, along with artillery under the direction of the French (Mammadova, 2003, p. 6).

Academician P.G. Butkov, noting that the main intention of the Qajar in coming to the north of Azerbaijan was to subjugate all the rulers to himself, either by force of arms or by agreement, and then to direct his forces against the Georgian king, states that the Qajar, in early 1795, addressed all the khans of Azerbaijan, including Shirvan, demanding that they submit to him and send hostages (Butkov, 1869, p. 332).

As early as 1794, Ibrahimkhalil Khan of Karabakh and the Khan of Erivan sent their envoys to Istanbul. They hoped that, remaining faithful to the friendship that had existed since ancient times, the Ottoman state would not withhold its help against Agha Muhammad Khan. However, the Ottoman government refused to assist the khans, citing its treaty with Iran.

P.G. Butkov notes that the Karabakh Khan's refusal to comply with Agha Muhammad Khan's demands, despite having renewed his alliance with Erekle II, was motivated by the fact that the Qajar ruler had executed his nephew, whom he had previously sent as a hostage (Butkov, 1869, p. 332). Ahmad Bey Javanshir likewise reports that Abdulsamad Bey, whom Ibrahimkhalil Khan had dispatched as a hostage, was put to death together with all his attendants. Consequently, although Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar demanded that another hostage be sent in his place, Ibrahimkhalil Khan refused to comply with this request (Huseynov, 2012, p. 146).

In relation to the Qajar ruler, who had sent his envoys to the rulers of the South Caucasus, the local rulers adopted different positions. Thus, Javad Khan, the ruler of Ganja, who was wary of a possible alliance

between the Georgian king Erekle II and Ibrahimkhalil Khan of Karabakh, assessed that rapprochement as a direct threat to his own political power and therefore showed inclination towards the Qajar ruler. Muhammadhasan Khan of Shaki also demonstrated a similar position, believing that Agha Muhammad Khan would be victorious.

Butkov, providing information about Sheikhali Khan's appeal to Gudovich, writes: "*In July 1793, Sheikhali Khan of Derbent (the Quba khan) sent his highest official, Mirza Hasan, to Dagestan with a request to accept him, together with the peoples living in Derbent, Quba, Kulaghan, Mushkur, Shabran, Baku, Salyan, and Lankaran, into eternal subjection. The envoy, on behalf of the khan and with full authority granted to him, swore an oath of allegiance.*" (Butkov, 1869, p. 294).

However, since Agha Muhammad Khan, through his envoys, had promised Sheikhali Khan that if he submitted, he would appoint him as the ruler of all Shirvan, Sheikhali Khan also took the side of Agha Muhammad Khan. Because Sheikhali Khan, who was under pressure from Russia, considered the threat coming from the north to be more dangerous for his rule than Agha Muhammad Khan (Dubrovun, 1886, p. 19).

Huseyngulu Khan of Baku, who intended to protect the Baku Khanate from Sheikhali Khan by becoming a Russian subject, was hesitant despite having applied for Russian subjection, and occasionally inclined towards Agha Muhammad Khan (Butkov, 1869, p. 295).

Mir Mustafa Khan, the Khan of Lankaran, who incurred the wrath of Agha Muhammad Khan for granting asylum to Agha Muhammad's brother, Murtuzgulu Khan, and for his father's ties to the Russians, refused to submit. In order to seek Russian protection, he sent his close relative, Zaman Bey, to General Gudovich with this request. Despite being turned back by Sheikh Ali Khan of Quba, the Khan's envoy arrived in Astrakhan on a warship in October and requested to be taken under Russian protection (Butkov, 1869, p. 333).

In the summer of 1795, Agha Muhammad Khan sent a detachment from Gilan against Mir Mustafa Khan, the Lankaran khan. This force devastated many areas of the Lankaran Khanate, and most of the mulberry trees in Lankaran were destroyed. Mir Mustafa Khan, together with his family, first fled to Salyan, and then sought refuge from the Russian troops stationed on Sari Island. The ship's captain, acting on the instructions of the Russian state, granted the khan asylum (Mammadova, 2005, p. 98). According to Butkov, at this time one of the khan's wives, his mother, sister, and son were taken captive. At the same time, although Agha Muhammad Khan sent troops in 60 kirjims (small vessels) from Anzali and Mazandaran with the intention of landing on the coast of Lankaran, a Russian frigate (warship) prevented this. Butkov reports that Mir Mustafa Khan soon regained his possessions, but never submitted to Agha Muhammad Khan (Butkov, 1869, p. 333-334).

At a time when the internal and external situation had become tense not only in Azerbaijan but throughout the South Caucasus, Kelbali Khan, who came to power in Nakhchivan, did not have sufficient forces to resist Agha Muhammad Khan. Therefore, he sent his cousin Abbasgulu Khan, who aspired to seize power in the khanate, as a hostage to Agha Muhammad Khan. Although Agha Muhammad Khan was aware that Kelbali Khan had sent Abbasgulu Khan away with the aim of removing him from his own presence, he nevertheless accepted the hostage from Nakhchivan (Nakhchivan History, 2014, p. 73).

T.Mustafazade, grouping the khans of North Azerbaijan according to their relations with Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar, notes that Javad Khan of Ganja, Sheikhali Khan of Quba, and Muhammadhasan Khan of Shaki pursued a policy inclined towards Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar, while the khans of Karabakh, Erivan, Shamakhi, and Lankaran harbored hostile relations towards Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar. The khans of Baku and Nakhchivan, however, were undecided (Mustafazade, 2005, p. 168). The Qajar army, which launched a campaign in three directions, was to capture Erivan and Nakhchivan with one part, Karabakh and Georgia with another, and Shirvan and Dagestan with the third.

In the late summer of 1795, Agha Muhammad Khan launched a campaign into the South Caucasus with

an army of approximately sixty thousand men. His primary objectives were to bring the Karabakh Khanate under his control and to punish Erekle II, who had refused to submit to his authority and had instead sought closer relations with Russia. However, despite besieging Shusha, the capital of the Karabakh Khanate, for a month, he failed to capture the fortress. Consequently, the Qajar ruler turned his forces toward Tiflis and began his march against the Georgian capital. According to Butkov, Agha Muhammad Khan demanded that Erekle II recognize the supreme authority of the Qajar state, return the large diamond that had been taken from Azad Khan by the Georgian king and was regarded as part of the family treasury of Nader Shah Afshar's descendants, send one of his sons to him as a hostage, and hand over the watch that had been presented to the Georgian monarch by G.Potemkin. (Butkov, 1869, p. 341). However, Erekle, who found himself in a desperate situation, was discouraged from entering into negotiations with Agha Muhammad Khan by I.V.Gudovich, the commander-in-chief of the Russian forces in Georgia. Gudovich advised him to prolong the negotiations through various pretexts, assuring him that Russian military assistance would soon arrive.

Cavad Khan, the ruler of Ganja, and Malik Majnun also participated in the campaign against Georgia as guides for Agha Muhammad Khan's army. The main reason for Javad Khan's participation in this campaign was Erekle II's interference in the internal affairs of the Ganja Khanate and his claim to occupy it (Huseynov, 2012, p. 152). The Georgian historian Teimuraz Bagrationi, in his book "The History of David Bagrationi," notes that Kelbali Khan of Nakhchivan also took part in the campaign against Georgia, and writes that the commander of Agha Muhammad Khan's army, Kelbali Khan Kengerli of Nakhchivan, did not allow the destruction of the city's places of worship and royal tombs (Guluyev, 2013, p. 21).

In the battle that took place between 8 and 11 September 1795, the combined forces of the Kartli-Kakheti and Imereti kingdoms, which had failed to receive the promised aid from Russia, were routed by the troops under the command of Agha Muhammad Khan, and the eastern part of Georgia was temporarily incorporated into the Qajar state. On this matter, researcher G.Mammadova notes that the cabinet of Catherine II, having sacrificed Georgia in the prevailing political circumstances, essentially began to implement an eastern policy aimed at entering the South Caucasus and seizing the western coast of the Caspian Sea (Mammadova, 2003, p. 8).

Academician P.G.Butkov provided a detailed account of the events that took place during the capture of the city. Having rapidly advanced from Ganja to Tiflis with cavalry forces accompanied by contingents from Ganja and Erivan, Agha Muhammad Khan seized the city without encountering significant resistance, plundered it, and set it on fire. The stone bridge over the Kura River connecting Avlabari with Tiflis was destroyed. During the sack of the city, the crown sent by the Russian court and twelve cannons presented by Catherine II were captured, while nearly 10,000 people were taken prisoner. (Butkov, 1869, p. 339–340)

Erekle II's reliance on Russia did not yield the expected results, and the forces of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti and Imereti were defeated by the army of Agha Muhammad Shah. The occupation and destruction of Tiflis temporarily shifted the balance of power in the region in favor of the Qajar state, while simultaneously triggering the beginning of a new phase in Russia's South Caucasus policy.

4. THE STRENGTHENING OF RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL POSITION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AT THE END OF THE 18TH CENTURY

The events of 1795 influenced not only the fate of Georgia but also the geopolitical future of the South Caucasus as a whole, laying the groundwork for the deepening of open competition between the Qajar state and the Russian Empire over the region. This process ultimately resulted in a more active intervention by the Russian Empire in the South Caucasus and a fundamental transformation of the region's political map.

P.G.Butkov notes that "*The Russian government did not expect such weakness from the Georgians, and such audacity from Agha Mohammad Khan.*" Upon receiving information about the destruction of Tbilisi, Catherine II instructed General Gudovich to send two cavalry detachments to Georgia (Butkov, 1869, p. 343-344). Aiming to conquer the South Caucasus, the Russian government set a goal to establish Russian

administration over Dagestan and the entire Caspian littoral territory up to the Aras River, including the Shirvan region (Butkov, 1869, p. 367).

General Gudovich, the commander of the Russian forces in the Caucasus, sent messengers to the rulers of Dagestan and Azerbaijan, attempting to assure them that Russian assistance would be dispatched shortly. One such envoy, Abdulla Sadykhov, visited Derbent in late October and delivered Gudovich's letter to Sheikh Ali Khan, who was in Quba at the time. Claiming that Russian troops would soon be sent to Dagestan, Gudovich demanded that Sheikh Ali Khan seek the protection of Russian aid. In response, Sheikh Ali Khan requested that the Russians send money to enable him to gather mercenary forces from among the highlanders (Butkov, 1869, p. 261).

At such a time, the Russian forces under the command of Major General Savelyev, which had set out from Kizlyar, approached Derbent in mid-February 1796. Savelyev sent envoys to Sheikh Ali Khan, who had arrived in Derbent, and proposed a defensive alliance against Agha Muhammad Khan, but his offer was rejected. T.T.Mustafazade, a researcher of the history of the Azerbaijani khanates period, explained this by the fact that Sheikh Ali Khan had managed to improve his relations with Huseyngulu Khan of Baku at that time (Mustafazade, 2005, p. 174). In addition to reconciling with Huseyngulu Khan of Baku, Sheikh Ali Khan had also, as P.G.Butkov wrote, improved his relations with the rulers of the Tabasaran estates adjacent to Derbent—the Qadi of Tabasaran, as well as Surkhay Khan of Gazikumukh (Butkov, 1869, p. 274).

Intending to realize the colonial ambitions that Russia had been striving for since the time of Peter I, the Tsarist government aimed to reinforce Baku, which was considered the most important port on the Caspian Sea, as well as other strongholds in this area. Concerned about the entry of Qajar troops into the South Caucasus, which could threaten Russia's southern borders, and also intending to seize this region, the government of Catherine II sent an army to Azerbaijan under the command of V. Zubov in April 1796. To this end, the instructions sent by Catherine II to V.A.Zubov on February 19, 1796, stated that the purpose of the campaign was to establish political order and stability in Iran (Butkov, 1869, p. 274-276). Meanwhile, Agha Muhammad Khan, wishing to avoid a clash with the Russian troops, left the South Caucasus with a vast amount of booty.

Before the campaign, Zubov addressed the Azerbaijani khans with a special letter, calling on them to submit to the Russian Tsar. Regarding this campaign, the Russian military historian V.A.Potto wrote that after V.Zubov settled matters with Qajar Iran, he was to seize Anatolia and, from there, threaten Istanbul (Potto, 1899, p. 290).

As we know, the organization of the Russian army for the military campaign to the South Caucasus under the leadership of Count V.A.Zubov took place in February 1796. The attack plan was prepared in three different directions: 1) the Caspian fleet was to head to the shores of Baku and Lankaran; 2) the troops in Georgia were to advance toward Ganja and Karabakh; 3) and the main forces were to pass through Kizlyar and launch an attack in the direction of Derbent and Baku (Butkov, 1869, p. 360).

In the instructions issued by Catherine II to Zubov on 19 February 1796, the principal objective of the campaign was presented as the restoration of peace and political stability in Iran. P.G.Butkov, who personally participated in the expedition, provided extensive information regarding its aims and objectives in his account of the campaign. According to these instructions, V. Zubov was tasked with putting an end to political fragmentation in Georgia, expanding the authority of Erekle II from the Aras River to the Ottoman frontier, facilitating the incorporation of the Ganja and Erivan Khanates into the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti, capturing Baku on the Caspian coast and transforming it into a logistical base for Russian forces, and destroying the military power of Agha Muhammad Khan in order to enable the landing of troops in Gilan with the support of Murtuzgulu Khan (Butkov, 1869, p. 360–364). By emphasizing that the campaign was intended to liberate Georgia and strengthen the authority of the Georgian kingdom, the Karabakh meliks, and Ibrahimkhalil Khan of Shusha, who had resisted Agha Muhammad Khan, Butkov effectively sought to obscure the expansionist and aggressive character of the expedition.

On April 29, at a distance of 18 versts from Derbent, the Caspian Corps, led by Zubov himself, merged with Savelyev's detachment and approached the city on May 2, demanding that Sheikh Ali Khan surrender the city without bloodshed. However, the Khan rejected this proposal and began to fight, offering resolute resistance until May 10 (Butkov, 1869, p. 380-384).

On 10 May, Russian forces began bombarding Derbent through a breach that had opened in one of the city's towers. Part of the population, acting through Khizir Bey, whom they had chosen as their representative, urged Sheikh Ali Khan to surrender in order to save the city from destruction. Having no alternative, Sheikh Ali Khan, accompanied by the leading notables of Derbent and Quba, presented himself before Count Zubov and submitted to Russian authority. Subsequently, Fatali Khan's daughter, Perijahan Khanum, was appointed temporary ruler of Derbent and Quba (Bakikhanov, 1991, p. 176).

Leaving three infantry battalions, 200 Cossacks, and four field guns in Derbent under the command of Savelyev, Zubov proceeded toward Quba. Encountering no resistance, he occupied the city on 6 June and subsequently advanced in the direction of Baku (Mustafazade, 2013, p. 220-221). Realizing the futility of resistance, Huseyngulu Khan also surrendered Baku. On 13 June 1796, the keys to the Baku fortress were formally presented to Zubov. After dispatching Major General Rakhmanov to Baku with a detachment consisting of three infantry battalions, two cavalry squadrons, and three field guns, Count Zubov continued his advance into the territory of the Shamakhi Khanate.

Regarding the capture of Derbent, Butkov notes that Russian troops advancing into Azerbaijani territory encountered strong resistance at the fortress of Derbent. In order to prevent further bloodshed, Sheikh Ali Khan was compelled to open the gates of the city, which had been subjected to continuous bombardment by the enemy's numerous artillery pieces (Butkov, 1869, p. 358-359). Following this success, General Zubov occupied several khanates of Northern Azerbaijan and began preparations for an advance toward Qajar Iran. In September 1796, Ibrahimkhalil Khan dispatched his son, Abulfat Khan, and his vizier, Vagif, to V.A. Zubov. Through these envoys, he requested that the Russian command accept the Karabakh Khanate under Russian protection (Butkov, 1869, p. 405). In reality, this decision represented a pragmatic diplomatic measure that Ibrahimkhalil Khan considered necessary under the prevailing political and military circumstances.

Soon, a substantial part of the Shamakhi Khanate also came under the control of Russian forces. During this period, Sheikh Ali Khan, who was accompanying the advancing Russian army as an honorary prisoner, managed to escape near Shamakhi (Potto, p. 289). Returning to Quba, he took refuge in the village of Gryz and subsequently traveled to Shaki to seek the support of Salim Khan. Failing to secure the assistance he desired, he then proceeded to Dagestan to assemble an armed force (Butkov, 1869, p. 395).

The situation in the Ganja Khanate was likewise extremely tense, as the khanate had been under siege by the forces of Erekle II and Ibrahimkhalil Khan since the beginning of 1796. Finding himself with few alternatives, Javad Khan appealed to Zubov in September, requesting that Russian troops be dispatched to Ganja to counter the threat posed by Agha Muhammad Shah Qajar (Butkov, 1869, p. 406). In reality, Javad Khan was compelled to seek Russian protection in order to safeguard his khanate from the ambitions of Erekle II and Ibrahimkhalil Khan. According to Butkov, Javad Khan voluntarily surrendered the city to the Russian forces advancing on Ganja under the command of Rimsky-Korsakov and presented him with the keys to the fortress gates (Butkov, 1869, p. 412).

Confident that the Russian government would protect them from the Iranian threat and reinforce their political authority, the khans sought to place themselves under Russian suzerainty, believing that such a step would guarantee the continued existence of their khanates.

Likewise, Kelbali Khan engaged in negotiations with Valerian Zubov and corresponded with the Russian General Nesvetayev with the aim of preserving the independence of the Nakhchivan Khanate (Guliyev, 2013, p. 68).

During the summer and autumn of 1796, Sheikh Ali Khan, in alliance with Surkhay Khan of

Gazikumukh and the Akushans, conducted military operations against Russian forces in the Derbent and Quba regions (Butkov, 1869, p. 391). The extent of this resistance is evident from the Battle of Alpan, which took place on 1 October 1796 between the allied forces commanded by Sheikh Ali Khan and Russian troops. During the battle, the detachment under Lieutenant Colonel Bakunin suffered a crushing defeat, with seven officers and 245 soldiers killed (Butkov, 1869, p. 402).

From the very outset of the campaign in Azerbaijan, V. Zubov's decision, taken in accordance with the instructions issued to him on 19 February 1796, to replace "stubborn and unfaithful" khans with rulers more loyal to Russia, led to a sharp deterioration in his relations with the local khans. This hasty policy prompted the Azerbaijani rulers to distance themselves from Zubov and unite in opposition to the advancing Russian forces. According to the conclusion reached by the researcher G. Mammadova, this development ultimately determined the fate of the campaign (Mammadova, 2003, p. 27).

Following the death of Catherine II, the four-year reign of Paul I represented a distinct stage in the realization of Russia's interests in the Caucasus. During this period, both the direction and the substance of Russian policy differed significantly from those pursued under Catherine II, and the empire's Caucasian policy was no exception. One of Paul I's first acts upon ascending the throne was to order the withdrawal of the troops that Catherine II had dispatched to the South Caucasus.

The instructions issued to Zubov stipulated that those rulers of the territories occupied by Russian forces who remained loyal to Russia would be permitted to withdraw into the borders of the Russian Empire together with their close followers under the protection of Russian troops. Accordingly, the last units of the Caspian Corps left the South Caucasus in March 1797 and, under the command of Lieutenant General Bulgakov, passed through Baku before reaching the Terek River in June 1797. Another part of the Caucasian Corps withdrew from Ganja to Georgia. Furthermore, an order issued to Count Gudovich on 9 March 1797 instructed the evacuation of Russian troops stationed on Sari Island. According to the directive, only one or two warships were to remain there (Butkov, 1869, p. 423–424).

In conclusion, V. Zubov's campaign, undertaken at the initiative of Catherine II's government, ended without producing the results expected by Russia. Despite the considerable military and financial resources invested in the expedition, its objectives remained unfulfilled. According to Leviatov, the total cost of the campaign amounted to approximately 1.7 million rubles in contemporary currency (Leviatov, 1948, p. 188).

In the spring of 1797, following the withdrawal of Russian troops from the South Caucasus, Agha Muhammad Shah launched another campaign into the region with a large army. Entering Karabakh, he succeeded in capturing the fortress of Shusha. Describing these events, Butkov notes that while Agha Muhammad Shah was in Ardabil, he received information that Ibrahimkhalil Khan intended to leave Karabakh. Consequently, he advanced toward Karabakh with an elite cavalry force of 12,000 men. Meanwhile, Ibrahimkhalil Khan departed for Jar-Balakan together with his close followers. As a result, Agha Muhammad Shah entered the undefended fortress of Shusha without encountering any resistance. After establishing himself in Shusha, he appointed Ibrahim Khan's nephew, Muhammad Bey, as khan. At the same time, a detachment of his troops stationed in Mughan crossed the Kura River with the intention of occupying the site previously used as a Russian military camp. Javad Khan of Ganja, who had been summoned to Shusha by Agha Muhammad Shah, was subsequently arrested (Butkov, 1869, p. 428).

Butkov reports that, after notifying the Azerbaijani khans of his intended campaign in Georgia and Azerbaijan, Agha Muhammad Shah followed his customary policy of demanding hostages and sent his brother, Aligulu Khan, to Erivan. He further notes that the economic conditions in the Azerbaijani khanates were extremely difficult at the time. In Ganja, for example, a quarter of a loaf of bread reportedly cost 30 silver rubles. Despite these hardships, the Azerbaijani khans nevertheless found the means and determination to resist Agha Muhammad Shah (Butkov, 1869, p. 427).

Agha Muhammad Shah further accused Muhammad Khan of Erivan of corresponding with Zubov and imposed upon him a fine of 500,000 manats. Unable to pay the full amount, Muhammad Khan managed to

provide only 200,000 manats and was compelled to sell his possessions to cover the remainder (Aliyev & Hasanov, 2007, p. 104). However, according to Butkov, Muhammad Khan was nevertheless arrested on the Shah's orders and taken to Qazvin together with his family (Butkov, 1869, p. 428). Thereafter, Agha Muhammad Shah advanced with a cavalry force of 12,000 men and captured the fortress of Shusha.

Agha Muhammad Shah Qajar sent decrees to the rulers of Azerbaijan and Dagestan, threatening them and demanding their submission. The commander dispatched to Nakhchivan was instructed to deport the population of the Nakhchivan Khanate to Iran and to destroy its villages. According to P.G. Butkov, Kelbali Khan, the ruler of Nakhchivan, personally appeared before the Shah bearing gifts in an attempt to obtain his mercy. Although Agha Muhammad Shah accepted the gifts, he ordered Kelbali Khan to be blinded as punishment for maintaining contacts with the Russian command and seeking Russian protection (Butkov, 1869, p. 427–428).

Javad Khan of Ganja appeared before Agha Mohammad Shah in Shusha, but the Shah ordered his arrest for having surrendered the city to the Russians during Zubov's Caucasian campaign (Bakikhanov, 1991, p. 178). Agha Muhammad Shah also dispatched a messenger to summon the Baku Khan, Huseyngulu Khan, to his court. He too was arrested for having surrendered Baku to Russian forces without resistance. A decree was subsequently issued placing Baku under the administration of Sheikh Ali Khan. Huseyngulu Khan's family and relatives were taken to Tehran, while an indemnity was imposed on the population of Baku (Butkov, 1869, p. 429–430).

When examining the political situation in the South Caucasus on the eve of the Russian conquest, it should be noted that plans to resettle Armenians from Qajar Iran to the South Caucasus and to establish a Christian stronghold in the region had already formed part of Russian imperial policy during this period. Thus, while in Saint Petersburg, the Karabakh meliks Jamshid and Fridon submitted a petition requesting permission to settle, together with their subjects, on Georgian lands under Russian control, specifically in the territories designated for the resettlement of Armenians from Qajar Iran. According to Butkov, the Tsar, considering that "*the establishment of a new Christian society in Georgia corresponded to the interests of imperial policy*," instructed Kovalensky to allocate land to the meliks on the most favorable terms (Butkov, 1869, p. 450).

5. CONCLUSION

As can be seen, the events that unfolded in the South Caucasus during the second half of the 18th century reshaped the political map of the region and altered the balance of power among the Russian, Ottoman, and Iranian empires. Agha Muhammad Shah Qajar's campaign to the South Caucasus was, on the one hand, a manifestation of the Qajar state's attempt to restore its historical rights over the region, and on the other, it became one of the primary pretexts for Russia's military-political expansion in the South Caucasus. The course of events demonstrates that during those years, the South Caucasus became a battleground not only for local political forces but also for major empires, which significantly impacted the political stability and social development of the region.

Overall, the closing decades of the eighteenth century, on the eve of the Russian conquest of Northern Azerbaijan, constituted a critical turning point in the history of the South Caucasus. The gradual shift in the regional balance of power in favor of the Russian Empire enabled it to adopt a more assertive policy toward the region. Exploiting the political fragmentation and instability that characterized the South Caucasus during this period, Tsarist Russia significantly intensified its military and political expansion, thereby laying the foundations for its subsequent domination of the region.

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