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## RUSSIAN AND IRANIAN RELATIONS IN THE LAST THIRD OF THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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### *Abstract*

The article considers Russian-Iranian relations in the last third of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. An analysis of the political struggle in Iran was carried out. The country was weakened by the internecine struggle, and Russia decided to take advantage of the situation in order to establish its influence in Northern Iran. However, Russia failed due to the resistance of the Iranians. In addition, the successors of Peter I and Catherine II believed that military forces in Northern Iran could cause serious international complications. In Russia, there was no bourgeois class capable of implementing a long-term project of overseas colonial acquisition. The deaths of the monarchs caused serious changes in the Russian foreign policy. And finally, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the territory of Russia was expanding at a tremendous pace. For the political subjugation and economic development of this vast territory, time and effort were required. When Russia completed the conquest of the Caucasus and Central Asia by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain, France, and a number of other European countries had had strong positions in Iran, and Russia had to become only one of the participants in the economic enslavement of this country.

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**Keywords:** Russia, Iran, Caspian coast, 18<sup>th</sup> century, civil strife.



## **1. Introduction**

The Caucasus, Iran and the Caspian coast have occupied a prominent place in eastern political relations since the early 1920s. After the end of the war with Sweden and the conclusion of the Nishtadt peace in 1721, Peter I turned to the Caucasus. The paramount task was to strengthen Russian positions on the Caspian coast, including the Caucasian and Iranian sides. For this purpose, the Caspian expedition of Peter I was accomplished. Thanks to the decisive actions of the Russian tsar (military and diplomatic), Russia had strong positions in the North Caucasus, parts of Transcaucasia and Northern Iran. Sukhorukov (2009) writes that Russian-Iranian relations continued to remain equal until 1723, when, according to the Petersburg Treaty, Iran had to make political and commercial concessions. Russian citizens had the right to live in the Persian territory, move and trade. The entire north of the country, including Mazandaran and Gilyan, was transferred to another state (Sukhorukov, 2009).

## **2. Problem Statement**

After the death of Peter I, during the “troubled era”, Russia lost all Peter’s achievements in the Caucasus and Iran. Ten years after the Persian campaign, Russia gave all the lands back to Persia (Zhiltsov, 2016). However, Russia aimed to strengthen its positions in the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea.

Palace intrigues, changes of rulers and favorites, European problems diverted attention of the Russian government from the Caucasus. The situation in Iran changed. In 1747, the ruler of Iran Nadir Shah was killed, and his empire collapsed. The country plunged into the abyss of internecine wars. In 1760, Kerim Khan Zend won this struggle and united the entire territory of Iran under his authority.

In the late 1860s, Russia intensified its activities in the North Caucasus; Iran and Turkey were the focus of its foreign policy. The defeat of Turkey in the 1768–1774 war with Russia allowed tsarism to come to grips with the conquest of the entire Caucasus and the basin of the Caspian Sea. This task was facilitated by the fact that another opponent of Russia in was busy with its internal problems.

## **3. Research Questions**

Relations between Russia and Iran in the last thirds of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The article aims to describe relations between Russia and Iran.

## **5. Research Methods**

The methodological base of the research is descriptive-historical, comparative-historical, systemic methods based on the principles of historicism, complexity and objectivity. This allows us to see the relationship between Russia and Iran in interaction with other historical events and phenomena. These principles and methods make it possible to evaluate events and facts, taking into account the specifics of a particular period in the history of Russia and the Caucasus.

## 6. Findings

Since the late 1860s, Russia intensified its activities in the North Caucasus, and Iran and Turkey became the focus of its foreign policy. The defeat of Turkey in the 1768–1774 war with Russia allowed tsarism to come to grips with the conquest of the entire Caucasus and the basin of the Caspian Sea. The fulfillment of this task was facilitated by the fact that another opponent of Russia Iran was busy with its internal problems since the late 1770s. In 1779, the ruler of this country, 80-year-old Kerim Khan Zend, died and a fierce internecine war broke out again. The leading forces were the feudal lord of the Qajar tribe Aga-Mohammed Khan, his brother Murtaza-Kuli Khan, one of the heirs of Kerim Khan Zend – Ali Murad Khan Zend, the ruler of Gilyan Khedayyat-Ola Khan and others. The situation in Iran was the same as it was on the eve of the Caspian expedition of Peter I., Zhiltsov (2016) notes:

*... Russian pays more and more attention to Persia. In June 1779, Catherine II issued a decree, which instructed G.A. Potemkin to send a military detachment to Rasht to pacify the Gilan Khan and build military fortifications. ... The decision was dictated by the unrest in Persia and the threat of the Turks in the Caspian Sea. The situation which had prompted Peter I to take a trip to the coast of the Caspian Sea. (p. 62)*

In the second half of the 1870s, the tsarist government, knowing about illness of the Iranian ruler Kerim Khan Zend followed the affairs in this country predicting a civil war after his death. In order to be ready for the interference in Iranian affairs, in 1778 the Russian government ordered to build four warships and four transport bots in the Kazan Admiralty (Butkov, 1869). In 1780, these vessels arrived in Astrakhan, and at the end of June 1781 they aimed for the Iranian shores. The commander of the expedition Count Mark Voinovich had a task to “establish a Russian commercial settlement on the Caspian Sea in order to establish trade relations with eastern India” (Butkov, 1869, p. 62). Arriving in the Gulf of Astrabad, Voinovich intended to build a Russian trading settlement and fortress in Ashref, which occupied a very important strategic position on the entire Caspian coast. However, the head of the large Iranian tribe, Kajar Agha-Mohammed Khan ("smart, cunning, lucky, well educated") (Kuznetsova, 1976), who controlled the Gilyan and Mazendaran provinces, refused to give Ashref, but allowed to settle in another place. As a result, Voinovich established a settlement near Gorodovin, on the coast of the Gulf of Astrabad. According to the plans of the Russian government, this settlement was to become an outpost for the spread of Russian influence in Northern Iran and the development of Russian trade with the East.

In the context of the internecine war that has been going on in Iran since 1779, Russia hoped to take advantage of one of the candidates for the Shah's throne. To this end, the Russian consul Tumanovsky established relations with Khedayyat-Ola-khan, Ali-Murad-khan Zend and Aga-Mohammed Khan. Some of the Iranian feudal lords were interested in such relations with Russia, hoping to receive military assistance in the fight against their opponents.

In 1780, Khedayyat-Ola-khan, expelled from Gilani, asked for protection, and in 1781 he took refuge at the Russian consulate. In 1781, Ali-Murad Khan entered into negotiations with Voinovich about possible military assistance from Russia.

Aga-Mohammed Khan Kajar was interested in the development of Russian-Iranian trade and economic relations, but the construction of a military-trade settlement of Russia in the Gulf of Astrabad, the relations of Khedayyat-Ola-khan and Ali-Murad-khan with representatives of Russia, especially with Voinovich caused fears that Russia could interfere in the political processes in Iran (Kuznetsova, 1976). At the end of 1781, by the Aga-Mohammed Khan's order, Voinovich and other Russian officers from Gorodovin were treacherously captured by the Iranians and the Russians were forced to break down the fortifications and destroy the battery. This sharply complicated the relations of the Aga-Mohammed Khan with Russia.

The most favorable conditions for Russia's penetration into Northern Iran were created in 1784. In January, Khedayyat-Ola-khan turned to the Russian government with a request to send 3,000 soldiers to help him. He promised to give his possessions (i.e., Gilan province) under the Russian protection. However, in 1780, Khedayyat-Ola-khan behaved extremely inconsistently towards Russia: he "forgot" about his promises as soon as the situation temporarily improved. And his weight in the political life of Iran had significantly decreased. Therefore, Prince P.S. Potemkin (the head of the Russian administration in the Caucasus), supporting the Khedayyat-Ola-khan's request, did not begin any serious negotiations with him. Relations with Ali-Murad-khan Zend, who by the beginning of 1784 controlled Northern and Southern Iran and was one of the main contenders for the Shah's throne, seemed much more promising for Russia. In the spring of 1784, he sent an ambassador to Russia for military assistance in the fight against his Iranian opponents and possible Turkish intervention. He promised to give Russia the Caspian and northwestern provinces of Iran. Lieutenant General P.S. Potemkin sent Colonel Tamara to Iran to negotiate with the Khan. However, in February 1785, when Tamara was still on the way, Ali Murad Khan suddenly died.

Russia sought to strengthen its positions in Iran without large military forces. Prince Potemkin, who determined methods of the Russian policy in St. Petersburg, believed that Russia would be able to achieve its goals with the help of one of the candidates for the Iranian throne. In St. Petersburg, they feared that the use of military forces to solve Russian problems in the Caspian Sea "would aggravate the relations with the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and European countries" (Kesselbrenner, 1987, p. 11).

After the death of Ali-Murad Khan, the Russian government asked Potemkin to find another strong contender for the Iranian throne who would be ready for an alliance with Russia. "Ali Murat Khan died, but the desire of the shah's will not die in anyone" (Kesselbrenner, 1987, p. 19).

In the mid of the 1880s, Aga-Mohammed Khan is opposed by his brother Mortaza-Kuli Khan, who enjoyed certain support of the Khajar khans. Russia decided to make another bet. Mortaza-Kuli Khan was interested in Russia. By the end of the 1880s, the Aga-Mohammed Khan began to prevail in the internecine struggle. Having suffered defeats, Mortaza-Kuli Khan sent Aga-Mohammed Bek to Potemkin. The ambassador was empowered to sign an agreement with Russia in exchange for urgent military assistance – two thousand soldiers and several warships. However, the Russian government did not want to bind itself to the obligation to provide large-scale military assistance to Mortaza-Kuli Khan. According to P.G. Butkova, "Prince Potemkin found him (Mortaza-Kuli Khan. – Auth.) worthy to rule in Persia: he did not need important benefits to achieve this" (as cited in AVPR, 1797).

In response to Mortaz-Kuli Khan's appeal for help, the commander of the Caspian Flotilla, Major General Shishkin received an order to "show Murtaza-Kuli Khan the favors and types of benefits under the pretext of protecting merchants without entering in a fight and a war" (Muriel, 1980, p. 23).

In August 1792, Mortaza-Kuli Khan, having lost almost all of his possessions and having only the last hope for Russia, offered Russia to conclude an agreement on his transfer to the Russian citizenship under very favorable conditions: he wanted to receive the right to build fortresses on free Iranian territories, place garrisons, and collect taxes. He was ready to pay Russia's expenses on military operations in Iran.

Implementation of Russian imperial plans for Northern was interrupted by the death of Peter I. The death of Catherine II prevented the Russian army from marching to Iran in 1796. Pavel I immediately stopped the advance of Russian troops in Iran, and they returned to the North Caucasus. "Zubov's campaign fulfilled the Catherine's task – the annexation of Transcaucasia to Russia. But the short-sighted policy of Paul I who focused on the West, nullified the achievements of Russia in the Transcaucasus" (Sukhorukov, 2009, p. 62). "The campaign brilliantly launched ended," Zisserman (1881) wrote. – For several months, the entire western coast of the Caspian Sea, all the nearby khanates were in our hands; the main owners of the Dagestan tribes expressed humility, Georgia could easily have been secured from intrusions. One order destroyed all the fruits, made the population consider us frivolous people acting without thought, without a specific purpose.

For the second time during the same century, we came to the Caspian Sea, conquered the land, incurred monetary expenses, lost people, and left leaving everything..." (Zisserman, 1881, p. 26).

In 1797, the Aga-Muhammad Shah moved to the Caucasus. Not hoping for Russia's help, many Caucasian feudal lords submitted to the Shah, many residents went into forests and mountains. And only the assassination of Aga-Mohammed Shah prevented a new Iranian invasion into the Caucasus.

## 7. Conclusion

Thus, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Russia made two attempts to conquer the Caspian coast of Iran but failed. The main reasons were the resistance of the Iranians to foreign intervention and invasion; fears of the successors of Peter I and Catherine II; the absence of the bourgeois class capable of implementing a long-term project aimed at overseas colonial acquisition. The deaths of Peter I, Catherine II caused serious changes in the Russian foreign policy. There was another important reason: "In the era of Catherine the Great, Russia was expanding at a tremendous pace. No other European state increased its territory by 200 thousand square meters (AVPR, 1797). For the political subjugation and economic development of this vast territory, time and effort were required. When Russia completed the conquest of the Caucasus and Central Asia by the second half of the 19th century, Britain, France, and some other European countries had already had strong positions in Iran, and Russia had to become only one of the participants in the economic enslavement of this country.

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