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**BETWEEN EMPIRES: AZERBAIJAN'S TURKIC-MUSLIMS
IN THE CRIMEAN WAR (1853 – 1856)**

Abstract. The Purpose of the Study. *This article aims to analyze the role and participation of the Turkic-Muslim population of Azerbaijan in the Crimean War of 1853 – 1856 and to identify the main forms of their*

involvement in military, political, and social processes during the conflict. **Research Methodology.** The study is based on the principles of historicism and objectivity and employs comparative, analytical, and problem-chronological methods. The research relies on the archival materials, official correspondence of the Russian military authorities, and published documentary collections, as well as the Russian and Ottoman historiography. **Scientific Novelty.** The article systematizes dispersed archival evidence concerning Azerbaijani participation in the Crimean War and highlights both their service in the Russian Imperial Army and their involvement in anti-Russian movements and contacts with the Ottoman Empire. A chief focus is on Muslim cavalry units and individual Azerbaijani officers whose activities have not been sufficiently examined in previous studies. **Conclusions.** The Crimean War (1853 – 1856) constituted a critical moment for the Turkic–Muslim population of Azerbaijan as an imperial borderland society. Documentary evidence indicates that Azerbaijani participation in the conflict unfolded along two intersecting trajectories: service in Russian military formations – often mediated through elite status and imperial patronage – and various forms of resistance, including desertion, cross-border raiding, and attempts at coordination with Ottoman and Qajar actors. The Russian command's persistent anxiety about rebellion and transborder mobilization highlights the fragility of imperial control in the South Caucasus during wartime. At the same time, the operational deployment of Muslim cavalry regiments demonstrates the pragmatic dependence of the Russian Empire on local manpower and frontier expertise. Yet this reliance was accompanied by distrust, as religious affiliation and kinship networks could undermine the expected discipline of imperial service. Overall, Azerbaijani wartime behavior appears less as an expression of stable “loyalty” and more as a contingent strategy shaped by local interests, communal solidarities, and the broader aspiration to escape colonial subjugation.

Key words: Crimean War, Azerbaijan, Turkic–Muslim population, Caucasus, Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire.

МІЖ ІМПЕРІЯМИ: ТЮРКСЬКО-МУСУЛЬМАНСЬКЕ НАСЕЛЕННЯ АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНУ В КРИМСЬКІЙ ВІЙНІ (1853 – 1856)

Анотація. Мета дослідження. Стаття має на меті проаналізувати роль і участь тюрксько-мусульманського населення Азербайджану в Кримській війні 1853 – 1856 рр. та визначити основні форми його залучення до військових, політичних і соціальних процесів у період конфлікту. **Методологія.** Дослідження ґрунтується на принципах історизму та об'єктивності; використано порівняльний, аналітичний та проблемно-хронологічний методи. Джерельну базу становлять архівні матеріали, офіційне листування російської військової влади, опубліковані документальні збірники, а також праці російської та османської історіографії. **Наукова новизна.** У статті систематизовано розпорошені архівні свідчення щодо участі азербайджанців у Кримській війні та висвітлено як їхню службу в Російській імператорській армії, так і залучення до антиросійських рухів та контактів з Османською імперією. Особливу увагу приділено мусульманським кавалерійським підрозділам і діяльності окремих азербайджанських офіцерів, яка досі недостатньо висвітлена в попередніх дослідженнях. **Висновки.** Кримська війна (1853 – 1856) стала переломним моментом для тюрксько-мусульманського населення Азербайджану як спільноти, що мешкала на імперському прикордонні. Документальні свідчення вказують на те, що участь азербайджанців у конфлікті розвивалася за двома протилежними напрямками: служба в російських військових формуваннях (часто зумовлена елітним статусом та імперським покровительством) та участь у різноманітних формах опору, зокрема дезертирстві, транскордонних набігах та спробах налагодити взаємодію з османськими й каджарськими силами. Постійне занепокоєння російського командування щодо можливих повстань і транскордонної мобілізації підкреслює крихітність імперського контролю на Південному Кавказі в умовах війни. Водночас залучення мусульманських кавалерійських полків до бойових дій демонструє прагматичну залежність Російської імперії від місцевих людських ресурсів і знань специфіки прикордоння. Утім, ця залежність супроводжувалася недовірою, оскільки релігійна приналежність і родинні зв'язки могли негативно впливати на дисципліну, якої вимагала імперська служба. Загалом поведінка азербайджанців у воєнний час може бути схарактеризована не стільки як вияв сталої “лояльності”, скільки як ситуативна стратегія, що формувалася під впливом місцевих інтересів, спільнотної солідарності та прагнення позбутися колоніального панування.

Ключові слова: Кримська війна, Азербайджан, тюрксько-мусульманське населення, Кавказ, Російська імперія, Османська імперія.

Problem Statement. The Crimean War of 1853 – 1856 was a major imperial conflict whose Caucasian theatre placed the South Caucasus under exceptional military and political strain. For the Turkic-Muslim population of Azerbaijan – incorporated into the Russian Empire after 1828 – the war intensified dilemmas of authority, identity, and survival. Azerbaijani participation ranged from service in the Russian military formations to desertion, cross-border mobilization, and cooperation with Ottoman forces, making the period a revealing case for understanding contingent loyalties on an imperial frontier. A similar complexity can be observed in Kozelsky's (2008) analysis of the Crimean Tatars, which shows how wartime conditions transformed Muslim communities from subjects of the Russian Empire into objects of heightened surveillance and suspicion. The Crimean case suggests that wartime loyalty among Muslim populations in Russia's borderlands was neither fixed nor uniform, but was shaped by local circumstances, military developments, religious affiliations, and perceptions of state authority.

Review of Recent Research and Publications. Azerbaijani participation in the Crimean War is documented in 19th century imperial sources, such as Berge's (1888) compilations and the military histories of Bogdanovich (1876) and Potto (1895), which focus mainly on operations and neglect social dynamics. The Soviet and post-Soviet historiography examined the Caucasian front more systematically: Ibragimbeyli (1971) analyzed troop deployments, while Hajiyeve and Chingizoglu (2011) and F. Hajiyeve (2014) highlighted Azerbaijani officers and frontier figures. International scholarship on the Crimean War, including Kozelsky's (2008) study of the Crimean Tatars during the conflict and Badem's (2010) comprehensive history of the Ottoman Crimean War, provides a broader framework for understanding the war's social, political, military, and imperial dimensions. Kozelsky (2008) demonstrates that the Crimean War significantly affected Muslim populations beyond the battlefield, as wartime insecurity, official suspicion, religious tensions, and population movements reshaped the relationship between the Russian state and Crimean Tatars. This perspective is particularly relevant to the South Caucasian context, where Azerbaijani Muslims likewise occupied a complex position between military service, imperial suspicion, and cross-border connections with the Ottoman Empire. Recent international studies have further broadened the perspective on Muslim mobility in imperial borderlands, yet Azerbaijani involvement is still treated as marginal or episodic. The interactions of Azerbaijani elites and militias with the Russian and Ottoman authorities remain insufficiently integrated. This article addresses this gap by combining documentary, military, and social analysis to reassess their roles in the war.

The purpose of the article aims (1) to clarify the principal forms of Azerbaijani participation in the Crimean War; (2) to analyze the role and internal tensions of Muslim cavalry units within the Russian army; and (3) to assess documentary evidence concerning preparations for uprising, desertion, and flight to Ottoman territory.

Research Results.

The "Transcaucasian Muslim Cavalry Regiment" Composed of Azerbaijanis in the Crimean War

During the Crimean War, the "Transcaucasian Muslim Cavalry Regiment," composed of Azerbaijanis and incorporated into the Imperial Russian Army, also took part in military operations. This regiment was established on 2 June 1835. The Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire (CCLRE) records this as follows: *"Two irregular cavalry regiments were to be created: the Muslim Regiment (from Muslims and other Transcaucasian peoples) and the Caucasian Mountaineer Regiment (from the Circassians, Kabardians, Chechens,*

Kumyks, and other highlanders). Each regiment had its own banner, a four-year service term, and its personnel was renewed every two years. Each regiment consisted of 600 horsemen under one commander, deputies, sultans and their assistants, plus limited non-combat staff (a physician and pack carriers). The units were divided into six hundreds, and included officers who knew Azerbaijani (Tatar). Commanders were the Russian officers fluent in Azerbaijani. Members were required to serve in their traditional national dress and provide their own weapons and horses (CCLRE, 1836, pp. 695–697).

Pursuant to an order dated 11 March 1839, a total of thirty individuals – one uber-officer, four vakils, and twenty-four horsemen – were selected from among the Caucasian Muslims and sent to Saint Petersburg in April to be incorporated into the Emperor's Personal Grand Convoy (CCLRE, 1839, pp. 202–203). In 1849, the Transcaucasian Muslim Cavalry Regiment was awarded the St. George Banner for its service in suppressing the uprising in the city of Debrecen in Hungary (Bqajnikov, Dзамikhov, Kesheva, Fomenko, 2015, p. 32; Gizetti, 1901, p. 21).

Azerbaijani Colonel Hasan beg Aghalarov, who distinguished himself in military operations and was later promoted to the rank of lieutenant general, was awarded the Fourth-Class Order of St. George on 28 August. In recognition of his service, he was appointed a commander of the Transcaucasian Muslim Cavalry Regiment in 1852 (Ismailov, 2019, pp. 28–29). In addition, Dadash beg Mammadbaghir beg oghlu, Rza beg Huseyn beg (February 1851), Haji beg Ahmadaga oghlu, Khanjan beg Mustafa beg oghlu, Sharif beg Mammad-Huseyn beg oghlu (February 1853), Mammadhasan Agha Mehvali agha oghlu, and Khudaverdi beg Gorchubashiev (June 1855), all of whom were incorporated into His Imperial Majesty's Special Convoy, were also awarded the insignia of the Military Order of St. George (Ismailov, 2019, p. 29).

On 10 January 1852, the Transcaucasian Muslim Cavalry Regiment was reorganized into a formation consisting of four hundreds. These hundreds fought against the Ottomans as part of the Imperial Russian Army during the Crimean War. An acting commander of the Separate Caucasian Corps after replacing Vorontsov, wrote the following to War Minister Dolgorukov: *"Four Muslim cavalry regiments were formed, namely: Regiment 1, composed of the population of the Shusha district; Regiment 2, composed of inhabitants of the Shamakhi, Nukha, and Lankaran districts; Regiment 3, composed of the population of the Yelizavetpol district; and Regiment 4, composed of inhabitants of the Irevan Governorate"* (Ibragimbeyli, 1971, p. 159).

In general, by the mid-19th century the Russian Empire sought to strengthen its positions in the Balkan Peninsula. To this end, gaining control over the Bosphorus (Istanbul) and Dardanelles straits and securing unrestricted access to the Mediterranean Sea constituted a strategic priority. Great Britain, France, and the Ottoman Empire, in turn, attempted to push Russia away from the Black Sea coasts. As Jebb and Cilvan wrote as early as 1888: *"Whereas in earlier times Turkey fought for its own interests, at present other nations were fighting for Turkey in pursuit of their own interests"* (Lane-Poole, 1966, pp. 340–341). The struggle between Orthodox and Catholic clergy over the "Holy Places" in Palestine served as the pretext for the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War of 1853 – 1856, known in history as the "Crimean War" or the "Eastern War." On 26 June 1853, Russia occupied Moldavia and Wallachia, the territories belonging to the Ottoman Empire. As a result, on 27 September (9 October) the Ottoman Empire issued an ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from these territories and, before the expiration of the fifteen-day deadline, initiated military operations (Ibragimbeyli, 1971, p. 101). On the Caucasian front, Ottoman forces under the command of Abdi Pasha advanced from Kars

toward Alexandropol (Gyumri). On 2 November 1853, the first engagement took place over the village of Bayandur, resulting in heavy Russian losses. Badem (2010) provides a more detailed account of the fighting around Bayındır, noting that the Russian forces included more than 1,000 Muslim Azerbaijani (Karapapak) irregular cavalry under the command of General-Major Prince Iliko Orbeliani (Badem, 2010, p. 159). According to Ottoman accounts discussed by Badem, the Ottoman forces encountered these irregular cavalry units during the advance toward Bayındır, where the subsequent fighting demonstrated the complex involvement of Muslim cavalry formations on both sides of the Caucasian front. In this battle, the soldiers of Azerbaijani Colonel Hasan beg Aghalarov particularly distinguished themselves (Ibragimbeyli, 1971, p. 112). On 11 November, the Russian units attempting to enter Ottoman territory via the Akhalkalaki–Childir route were met at the border near the village of Kenarbel in the Childir district by volunteer detachments of Karapapakh-Terekemes under the leadership of Suleyman beg. These groups had resettled after the Russo-Turkish War of 1828 – 1829 from Borchaly and Javakheti to villages along the shores of Lake Childir – Goldali (Urta), Terekeme Chayi (Gochguden), Ildirimtepe (Rabat), Kogas, and Meredis. Without waiting for regular forces, and together with the detachment of Haji Huseyn Pasha arriving from Ardahan, they launched an attack, killing fifty Russian Cossacks and capturing four, who were sent to Ardahan. For these feats, Haji Huseyn Pasha of Ardahan was granted the rank of Mirimiran Pasha, while Suleyman beg of the Childir Karapapakhs was awarded the rank of Kapucu-bashi of the Sublime Porte “for loyalty and trustworthiness.” On 1 December 1853, however, the Ottomans were defeated by the Russians at Bashgedikler. Lieutenant General M. Bogdanovich emphasized the great significance of the outcome of the Bashgedikler engagement for the South Caucasus region, noting that the Muslim population of the region, awaiting the moment of the Russian defeat, was prepared to rise up everywhere and attack Russian provinces. Russian historian V. Potto, who participated in the war as a senior officer of the Novorossiysk Dragoon Regiment, described the position of the “Caucasian Tatars, raised on tales of the *qachaq* (this was the term used for those who fought against the oppression of the ruling elites and Tsarist officials) movement,” as follows (Bogdanovich, 1876, p. 251): “*Our slightest setback at one point could have had terrifying consequences not only for our army but for the entire South Caucasus region. We knew well that the appearance of Turkish banners on the right bank of the Arpachay after a victory would be sufficient for almost the entire population of the South Caucasus to turn their weapons against us*” (Potto, 1895, p. 9). After the Battle of Bashgedikler, military operations were suspended for six months due to the onset of a harsh winter in the frontline region (Potto, 1895, p. 42). Russian commanders sought to use this pause effectively, endeavoring by all means to win over the Caucasian Turks to their side, achieving partial success. At the beginning of 1854, the commander of the Separate Caucasian Army, Lieutenant General V. I. Behbudov, granted amnesty to fugitives who had taken refuge in Turkey on the condition that they serve in the Russian army. At the end of May 1854, a militia detachment of three hundred volunteers enlisted in the Russian army was sent to Gyumri under the command of Colonel M. T. Loris-Melikov. The national composition of these militias consisted of Russian Muslims. Maintaining discipline among them was difficult, as they could leave the detachment at will and return home. Nevertheless, due to their excellent knowledge of the terrain where the war was being fought, their services as guides and scouts were invaluable. On 24 July, a fierce battle took place near the village of Kurekdere in the vicinity of Kars between Russian forces and the army of Erzurum Governor Zarif Mustafa Pasha. For his bravery at Kurekdere, the deputy commander of the Muslim Cavalry Brigade, Qajar was promoted to the rank of colonel. After this

engagement – considered their greatest victory of 1854 – the Russians were no longer capable of continuing the war and returned to Gyumri. V. Potto described the significance of this battle as follows: “*In the Battle of Kurekdere, the Russian force of sixteen thousand defeated a well-armed Turkish army of sixty thousand... there were no reserves, no second line: they fought without relying on any detachment and defeated the Turks... The battles of Bashgedikler and Kurekdere are the Kagul (decisive in the Russo-Turkish War of 1768 – 1774) and Rimnik (decisive in the Russo-Turkish War of 1787 – 1791) of our era*” (Potto, 1895, pp. 47–48). A prolonged calm was established on the Caucasian front. In early 1854, the Novorossiysk Dragoon Regiment sent to the front reached Bashkechid in mid-March and remained there for about a month. During the course of military operations, the figure that most troubled the Russians with sudden cross-border raids was Borchaly Hashimoghlu and the detachment he led. To prevent these attacks, special guard posts were established in the border villages of Javakheti (Hajiyev, 2014, pp. 90–94). In April 1855, the Ottomans decided to resume their offensive. Prior to the war, in 1853, the Ottomans were unable to meet their need for artillery horses from local breeds, which were of small stature, and therefore relied on studs in Asia Minor. In the Childir Sanjak neighbouring the Doukhobor villages, it was well known that the Russian settlers possessed excellent draft horses. On 2 March 1855, on the Crimean front at Gozleve (modern Yevpatoria), the Russian forces were defeated by the allied armies of the Ottoman Empire, the Kingdom of Sardinia, and Great Britain and France, which had declared war on Russia a year earlier, in 1854. Tsar Nicholas I committed suicide, and Alexander II ascended the throne. In May, the experienced general Nikolai Nikolaevich Muravyov was appointed commander of the Separate Caucasian Corps and Viceroy of the Caucasus (Hajiyev, & Chingizoglu, 2011, pp. 42–45). He had previously served as chief of staff of I. F. Paskevich’s army during the Russo-Persian War of 1826 – 1828 and as commander of a grenadier brigade during the Russo-Turkish War of 1828 – 1829. Muravyov later recorded his recollections of this war in a two-volume work entitled “The War Beyond the Caucasus in 1855”. The Ottomans also changed their commander, appointing Shukru Pasha in place of Zarif Pasha. At the outset of the 1855 campaign, all three divisions of the Russian army fighting on the Caucasian front – the Alexandropol, Irevan, and Akhaltsikhe divisions – included irregular cavalry regiments and volunteer detachments composed of Azerbaijani aghas, begs, and their retainers: “*The army included several Muslim cavalry units: Karabakh and II Shirvan regiments (500 horsemen each), plus a 300-man Borchaly detachment, in the Alexandropol division; the III Muslim Cavalry Regiment (500 horsemen) with the Akhalkalaki militia in the Akhaltsikhe division (right wing); and the IV Muslim Cavalry Regiment (500 horsemen) from the Irevan Governorate on the left wing*”. At the end of May 1855, the Ardahan fortress surrendered to the Russian army. Thereafter, fighting on the Caucasian front focused primarily on Kars. The strategically vital fortress of Kars blocked Russian routes toward Erzurum while opening routes toward Tiflis for the Ottoman army. The Ottomans clearly understood that the primary objective of Russian forces was the capture of Kars and therefore organized the fortress’s defense meticulously, even employing foreign engineers to strengthen its fortifications (Hajiyev, & Chingizoglu, 2011, p. 45). At that time, volunteers gathered and led by Aslan Pasha, governor of the Childir Sanjak – mostly Karapapakhs from Childir and surrounding districts – were also present in Kars. Regarding the commanders of the irregular units defending Kars, General M. Bogdanovich wrote: “*Among the Turkish commanders, the most notable were Karim Pasha, an experienced and popular leader known as Baba Karim; Huseyn Pasha, a brave Circassian from the Ubykh tribe; and Hashimoghlu, a former Borchaly resident whose surprise attacks*

and knowledge of the terrain made him especially dangerous for the border provinces” (Hajiyev, 2014, pp. 92–93). The commander of Russian forces in the Caucasus, N. Muravyov, in the section “Commanders of the Turkish Troops” of his work, emphasized that among the best commanders of the volunteer units of the Turkish garrison in Kars were Karim Pasha and Circassian Huseyn Pasha, as well as Haji Teymur agha, originally from the Malatya–Diyarbakir region and “fond of pomp,” and Ali beg, leader of the Laz volunteers. He added: “*Hashimoghlu, a former resident of Borchaly who had fled to the Ottoman side and later became a staff officer, was among the most renowned figures of the Kars garrison. A well-known qachaq, he was famous for his bravery and knowledge of the terrain and long terrorized the South Caucasus border population with raids and captives, yet remained unpunished*” (Hajiyev, 2014, p. 93). In early June 1855, Kars was surrounded by the Russian forces. The besieged inhabitants of Kars were supplied with provisions by the Karapapakhs of Shorayel and Zarshad. Among the fighters of the young volunteer detachment from Kars under Osman agha, Karapapakhs constituted the majority (Hajiyev, & Chingizoglu, 2011, p. 46). Haji Huseyn agha, a resident of Azad village near Kars under Russian occupation, from 16 June – the first day of Ramadan Bayram – regularly transmitted information to the Turkish side regarding the condition of the Russian forces. He informed the Turks of the identities of two Armenians and one Muslim spying for the Russians in Kars. As a result, although the Russians suspected him and sentenced him to death, he managed to escape. His house was looted, and Azad village was completely evacuated and deported to Hajiveli village. At the end of the war, Haji Huseyn agha was awarded the Fifth-Class Order of the Medjidie; due to his need for assistance, he was granted a one-time payment of 25,000 gurush (coins) and a monthly pension of 500 gurush. On 20 June, the *qachaq* detachment of the “renowned Hashimoghlu” left the besieged fortress of Kars and captured thirty empty wagons belonging to merchants returning to Gyumri after selling their goods at the Russian military camp near Mount Boyuk Yahni. In the second half of June, Muravyov ordered part of his forces to continue the siege of Kars, while he himself marched with the remaining units toward the Soganli Mountains to destroy the Turkish reserve supply depots. At that time, 350 fighters of the III Muslim Cavalry Regiment were stationed in the Childir Sanjak. On 20 June, the regiment’s commander, V. Orbeliani, learned from spies that the detachment of Aslan Pasha, governor of the sanjak, intended to attack them. Judging his forces insufficient to remain in the area, he withdrew via the Goydag direction and fortified his position at the Sulda (Suldinsk) Cossack post on the Akhalkalaki–Ardahan road. On 23 June, as Muravyov advanced toward Engikoy in the Soganli Mountains, a bloody engagement occurred near the village of Sulda between five hundred irregulars of Aslan Pasha and the cavalry of the III Muslim Cavalry Regiment, forcing Aslan Pasha’s forces to retreat. For bravery displayed in this battle, by Muravyov’s order of 13 September, Captain Mansur agha Vakilov, a commander of the Kazakh sotnya (hundred) of the III Muslim Cavalry Regiment, was awarded the Fourth-Class Order of St. Anna “for bravery.” Militia praporshchik (ensign) Mirza Mashadi Sharif oghlu of the Kazakh beg half-hundred was promoted to the rank of podporuchik; wakil Mammadshah beg Aghasultanov of the Borchaly beg half-hundred was granted the rank of yunker with the right to wear a silver tassel on his sword hilt; Qachaganli Suleyman agha Mammadhasan oghlu Topchiyev received a silver medal inscribed “For Bravery”; and vakils Ibrahimkhalil agha Ilyas agha oghlu (Kazakh beg half-hundred), Mustafa agha Mirzali agha oghlu Vakilov (Kazakh hundred), Aghajan beg Jalil beg oghlu Altukov (Yelizavetpol hundred), and Ali Karim oghlu (Kazakh hundred) were also rewarded. General Muravyov explained the great importance for the Russians of repelling Aslan Pasha’s volunteers, who sought to cleanse their native land –

Childir – of Russian forces, as follows: *“The Doukhobor villages were saved from plunder... Moreover, the Muslim cavalymen of the III Regiment, recruited with coercion and hesitation, shed the blood of their co-religionists – Karapapakhs with whom they were bound by kinship and other ties – and from that moment served with a loyalty that could hardly have been expected of them”* (Hajiye, & Chingizoglu, 2011, p. 39). By late June, the II Shirvan Muslim Cavalry Regiment under Colonel I. Yadigarov was stationed in the village of Oguzlu to secure the road between Qanikoy, where the corps commander’s camp was located, and Gyumri. On the night of 7–8 July, Yadigarov’s deputy, Lieutenant Colonel Omar agha – emphasized by Russian sources as a close relative of the former Shirvan khan Mustafa Khan – broke through Russian guard posts with thirty-one men and defected to Kars to join the Ottomans. Although nineteen later returned, this incident further reduced the already limited Russian trust in Muslim militias (Hajiye, & Chingizoglu, 2011, pp. 47–48). V. Potto wrote: *“Our militias are animated by a special fighting spirit. A few days ago, a small detachment evaded Turkish cavalry pickets on a dark night and brought two double-peaked tents from their camp. It is said they even sought permission to secretly enter Kars and blow up the powder magazine, but were refused. Was there not another intention behind this request? We must be cautious with them. The recent defection of their colonel Omar beg to Kars with twelve militiamen inevitably casts suspicion on those serving alongside him”* (Hajiye, & Chingizoglu, 2011, p. 40). Dr. Sandwith, chief physician of the hospital in Kars at the time, described Omar agha’s arrival in his memoirs: *““Sunday, on 8 July – This night the alarm was sounded... Forty irregular Muslim cavalymen known as Karapapakhs deserted Russian service and arrived under the command of a miralay, throwing the entire camp into great excitement. This miralay, named Omar, wore a Georgian (Circassian) coat and bore a pair of very fine epaulettes. Marshal Vasif Pasha received him warmly and conferred upon him the rank of mirliva. Thus he became Omar Pasha”* (Hajiye, & Chingizoglu, 2011, p. 41).

The case of Azerbaijani Muslim cavalymen who defected to the Ottoman side should also be understood within the broader wartime context of Muslim populations in the Russian Empire. As Kozelsky (2008) demonstrates in the case of the Crimean Tatars, the Crimean War intensified the Russian official concerns about the loyalty of Muslim subjects and contributed to increased surveillance and suspicion. In the South Caucasus, however, these dynamics interacted with the proximity of the Ottoman frontier, local kinship networks, and the availability of cross-border military and political alternatives, making questions of loyalty particularly fluid.

According to the Russian officers who participated in the war, including the chief of staff of the Irevan detachment, Colonel (later Major General from 1861), Muslim militias in the Russian army was not indifferent toward their co-religionists: *“Based on observations and facts, soldiers and Cossacks concluded that Muslim militias spared the Turks and during combat sometimes fired into the air or used blank cartridges. Anyone escaping the hands of unruly Cossacks or soldiers would seek refuge with a Muslim militiaman, identifiable by dress and appearance as distinct from Armenians. Although Armenians greatly desired to kill Muslims, they lacked the courage to face open death”* (Hajiye, & Chingizoglu, 2011, p. 42).

After the Ottoman fleet was defeated at the Battle of Sinop on 18 (30) November 1853, Britain entered the Black Sea with its forces and opened a front against the Russian navy (Ibragimbeyli, 1971, p. 106). Austria adopted the same position. As a result, Russia’s subsequent plans to seize further territory from the Ottoman Empire failed, as the war expanded to encompass Europe. It should be noted that this period coincided with the peak of

the Chechen national-liberation movement under Imam Shamil in the Caucasus, a situation both Shamil and the allies sought to exploit against Russia. Although the Russians realized that continuing the war was increasingly pointless, they persisted in order not to lose prestige among the Slavic peoples of the Balkans and did not abandon their claims to the Holy Places. In 1854, Istanbul obtained its first foreign loan from Britain to continue the war under favourable European conditions. That same year, a tripartite Ottoman – French – British alliance treaty was concluded, prohibiting the Ottoman state from engaging in separate negotiations with Russia. Agreements were reached in London on 10 May and with Austria on 14 June 1854, providing for the evacuation of the Russian troops from the Danubian Principalities and obligating Austria to send troops to assist the Ottomans if necessary. The Kingdom of Sardinia also announced its accession to the alliance. In the autumn of that year, Russian troops withdrew from the Danubian Principalities. Despite voices within Ottoman ruling circles calling for the signing of a peace treaty, European powers insisted that the war was not over, largely because Russia had not renounced its claims to the Holy Places. Consequently, the fierce struggle between Catholic and Orthodox churches led to the further expansion of the war. Military operations took place in Crimea, the Caucasus, along the Danube, in the Baltic Sea, and partially in the Far East, and the war ended with Russia's defeat. Despite the fall of Sevastopol in August 1855, the Ottoman garrison at Kars was defeated on 28 September of that year. By the end of 1855, military operations ceased, as the allies had achieved their objectives and Russia was no longer capable of continuing the war (Sarinay, 2006, pp. 204–207). On 30 March 1856, the Paris Peace Treaty was signed with the participation of representatives of Britain, France, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Austria, Prussia, and Sardinia. As the defeated party, Russia returned Kars to the Ottoman state (Hajiyevev, & Chingizoglu, 2011, pp. 192–194). Russia's acquisition of dominance in the Black Sea placed the Straits and Istanbul under direct threat. At the same time, such a course of events caused serious concern among the European powers. Britain and France intervened in the matter and attempted to bring the parties to a common agreement; however, these efforts proved futile due to Russia's refusal. In response, Britain and France issued an ultimatum to Russia, putting forward the following demands: (a) Russian troops were to withdraw from Wallachia and Moldavia; (b) the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire was to be respected; (c) Tsarist Russia was to renounce its claim to act as the protector of Orthodox Christians. The demands imposed on the Ottoman Empire were as follows: (a) equal rights were to be recognized and implemented for all subjects; (b) discriminatory treatment of Christians was to be avoided; (c) mixed courts were to be established; (d) taxes were not to be levied on the Christian population. The Tsar rejected the ultimatum and the demands and ordered the army to advance by crossing the Danube River. In response, Britain and France declared war on Russia on 12 March 1854. While entering the war as allies of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France also sought to secure advantages that would meet the approval of European public opinion. To this end, treaties were signed in Istanbul on 12 March 1854, in London on 10 May of the same year, and on 14 June thereafter. The treaty concluded with Austria envisaged the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Danubian Principalities. At the same time, Austria undertook the obligation to provide military assistance if necessary. For this reason, on 15 March 1855, Sardinia also announced its accession to the alliance. At that time, soldiers of Britain's "Coldstream" Guards were awaiting orders in the Haydarpaşa district of Istanbul to depart for Crimea. While the war was ongoing, a Greek uprising broke out in the Epirus, Aetolia, and Thessaly provinces of the Caliphate. Observing that all

warnings had proved ineffective, France deployed troops to the port of Piraeus and imposed a blockade on Greece. This compelled Greece to adopt a neutral stance. As a result, Russia lost its ally in the war (Hajiyev, & Chingizoglu, 2011, pp. 202–203). In March 1856, following the conclusion of the Treaty of Paris, this military unit was reduced, and by order dated 24 August 1856 the two-hundred-man detachment was disbanded. On 5 January 1857, the Transcaucasian Muslim Cavalry Regiment was completely abolished. The services rendered up to that time by the regiment's commander, Hasan beg Aghalarov, were highly appraised, and he was promoted to the rank of major general. After the dissolution of the regiment, its St. George's banner was transferred to the Tiflis base and, in 1882, in accordance with Decree No. 280, it was sent to the Artillery Museum in St. Petersburg. At present, this banner is preserved in the Weapons and Banners Collection of the Azerbaijan National Museum of History under inventory number 444 (Ismailov, 2019, p. 30; Gizetti, 1901, 21, pp. 70–71; Azerbaijan flags, 2005, pp. 35–41).

Preparations for an Azerbaijani uprising and flight to the Ottoman Empire

During the Crimean War, the Russians were naturally more concerned about the Caucasian front than about other theaters of war. The reason for this was that the khans of the Azerbaijani khanates they had occupied, who had taken refuge in the Qajar state, as well as the local population suffering under harsh Russian colonial oppression, repeatedly and albeit covertly manifested their desire to rise in rebellion against Russian rule at every opportunity. For instance, in a letter dated 15 June 1855 addressed by General Muravyov to Prince Behbudov, who was stationed in the village of Magharajiq, it is stated that although during the Crimean War of 1853 – 1856 the principal threat to Russia from the Ottomans and the European powers was expected from the direction of Georgia, precautionary measures were nevertheless being taken on the Caucasian front of the empire, including in Karabakh, and the document included detailed information on each district (Berge, 1888, p. 354). Similarly, in a secret letter dated 19 November 1855 from Anichkov to Prince Behbudov, information is given about the presence in Qajar territory of individuals descended from the former khans of the Northern Azerbaijani khanates who had once sought refuge there, and about their intention, with British assistance, to reclaim their former domains. Among these individuals, mention is made of Mir Alinaqi Khan, a descendant of Mir Hasan Khan of Lankaran, as well as Abbasqulu Khan Javanshir, a former governor of Ardabil and a member of the Karabakh khans dynasty. Abbasqulu Khan is even described as a person of considerable influence in the Shusha district (Berge, 1888, p. 548). In addition, it is reported that Fatali Khan, the son of Haji Aghalar Karabaghli, had previously served the Russians but was at that time a tumen commander in Persia and had drawn closer to Great Britain, which was interested in employing him for contacts with Karabakh. At the end of the letter, it is noted as follows: *"I do not know by name the relatives of these three individuals, but within our borders they are known both to the authorities and to the entire population, and observing their activities is by no means useless and will not, under the present circumstances, make the work of the district chiefs more difficult"* (Berge, 1888, p. 549). In a secret report dated 1 June 1854 from Lieutenant General Reutt to General Read, reference is likewise made to the activities of individuals from several districts of Azerbaijan during the Crimean War. It states: *"In his report of 26 May, the chief of the Nakhchivan district informed the military governor of Irevan that Sadig Beg, son of Huseyn Beg, and Alakbar, son of Baba Khan, residents of Daralayaz who had returned from the Turkish town of Bayazid, in the village of Argoz, and Shirin Sultan, son of Nabi Beg, a resident of that locality, in the village of Erinja, had read proclamations to the Muslims – primarily to the nomadic population – calling them to rebellion and, allegedly presenting decrees issued to them by the serasker of Bayazid, invited the Muslims to rise against our government..."* (Berge, 1888, p. 619). In the same document, the

administration of the Daralayaz district was promised to Sadig Beg, while that of Nakhchivan was promised to Shirin Sultan. In return, they were to incite mounted and armed Muslims to rebellion. Such correspondence also involved Shusha. In this regard, certain information can be obtained from petitions addressed to Prince Khasay and General Jafarqulu Khan by Haji Jafar, a resident of the village of Malibeyli, and by his relative Asad, son of Karbalayi. There are even notes in the report concerning “the Tatars carrying letters to Turkey in the name of the aforementioned individuals and of Sheikh Shamil” (Berge, 1888, p. 619).

Major General Yuryev, in a communication addressed to General Muravyov from the city of Tiflis on 9 April 1855, also reports that he had learned of secret correspondence conducted by the Prime Minister of the Qajar Shah with the inhabitants of Nakhchivan, Lankaran, and Karabakh. The continuation of the report states: “*After Shirin Sultan committed treason and fled with his close associates to Turkey (the Ottoman Empire), on the night of 23–24 July the 23rd Don Cossack Regiment detained two Tatars who were attempting to cross the Araz River along the border line. Papers were found on them. At the initial interrogation, these individuals stated that they were mullahs from the Shamakhi Governorate and the Shusha district—one Mullah Rahim, son of Aziz Ali, and the other Mullah Mammad-Huseyn, son of Bayram... On the seized paper, two addresses in Arabic were indicated, directed from the inhabitants of Yelizavetpol, Karabakh, Lankaran, Ordubad, Nakhchivan, and Irevan to the pashas of Kars and Bayazid... They stated what oppression they had suffered at the hands of the Russian government and expressed their wish that the Turks should take possession of their country, noting that the Turks were awaiting them at the Araz River and that at that moment they would cross over to their side*” (Berge, 1888, p. 644). These facts once again clearly demonstrate that Azerbaijanis were seeking ways to free themselves from Russian occupation.

Azerbaijanis Serving in the Russian Imperial Army during the War

During the Crimean War, those who fought on the side of Tsarist Russia were primarily Azerbaijani begs, khans, and their sons. In particular, members of the khan and beg families of the Karabakh Khanate, which had voluntarily accepted Russian suzerainty by the Kurakchay Treaty of 14 May 1805, were prominent among them. For example, Ali beg Sultanov from Bakhtiyarli village in the Pusyan district of Karabakh was a landowner who possessed numerous encampments and villages. During the Crimean War, he fought under Sevastopol as part of the Gusar Regiment and, for his bravery on the battlefield, was awarded an order and promoted to the rank of cornet (Hajiye, & Chingizoglu, 2011, p. 183).

The most renowned Azerbaijani general serving in the Tsarist army during those years was undoubtedly Faraj beg Agharzagbeg oglu. A native of Shusha, Faraj beg received his initial military education at the Tiflis Cadet Corps and in 1837 began service in the Muslim Cavalry Regiment of the Separate Caucasian Army. In the seventh year of his service, as the best guard rotmistr, Faraj beg was sent to St. Petersburg as a squadron commander and was appointed to the position of Leib Guard commander. He became a favourite of the Emperor and of his wife, Maria Alexandrovna. In 1844, Tsar Nicholas I and his wife Maria Alexandrovna baptized Faraj beg and adopted him as their godson. From that year onward, Faraj beg was known as Nikolai Nikolaevich. Owing to his extraordinary military abilities and personal valor, Faraj beg Aghayev rose to the rank of colonel within ten years of service. When the Crimean War broke out in 1850, Colonel Faraj beg Aghayev organized a cavalry regiment composed of Azerbaijani warriors from Karabakh and became its commander. Various archival documents, as well as reports and letters sent to his command, demonstrate that Faraj beg's cavalry regiment, consisting of men from Shusha, fought against a corps of sixty thousand troops in the battles for Kurekdere. In 1854, a militia regiment formed from Ossetians was also attached to Faraj beg's regiment. Holding a high post as commander of

a cavalry unit, Faraj beg was awarded a gold dagger inscribed “For Bravery,” numerous military orders, as well as the First Class Order of St. Anna adorned with the imperial crown and, for a second time, the First Class Order of St. Anna with swords, in recognition of his military service and heroism as a commander. For his leadership during the years of 1853 – 1856, Faraj beg Aghayev was promoted to the rank of major general. At the very beginning of the war, Count Vorontsov, who informed St. Petersburg about the organization of the Karabakh cavalry detachment under Faraj beg Aghayev, noted that owing to Colonel Faraj beg, volunteer units were rapidly assembled. Having served faultlessly in the army for nearly forty years, Faraj beg Aghayev retired in 1882 with the rank of lieutenant general. Until the end of his life, he worked in the Tiflis Charitable Society, and Lieutenant General Faraj beg Aghayev died in Tiflis on 26 November 1891. Another Azerbaijani officer from the Pusyan district of Karabakh was Eyvaz beg, son of Yusif beg, from the Haji Alili clan. During the Crimean War, he served in the Tsarist army and attained the rank of ensign (*praporshchik*) (Hajiyev, & Chingizoglu, 2011, pp. 189–192). Ali beg, son of Safarali beg, from the Giyamaddinli–Safarali beg clan of the Kabirli district, participated in the Crimean War with the rank of staff captain. When the Crimean War began in 1853, a cavalry regiment composed of local begs was organized, and Ali beg Safaralibeyov joined this detachment. One year later, on 29 June, for his distinction in the battle of Chingil, he was awarded the Fourth Class Order of St. Anna. Nazareli beg Rustambeyov from Muradkhanli village in the Bargushad district of Karabakh was awarded a silver medal for his valor during his service in the Crimean War as an ensign. Another participant in the war in the ranks of the Tsarist army with the rank of ensign was Haji Agha beg Dilaghorda from the Dilaghorda clan of the Dizagh district of Javanshir (Hajiyev & Chingizoglu, 2011, pp. 196–198). In addition to the individuals mentioned above, Ibrahim beg Hajibeyov from Shusha served with the rank of second lieutenant, and Ahmad beg Javanshir, from the village of Kahrizli, who had been educated at the Pavlov Cadet Corps and served in the Gusar Regiment named after Konstantin Nikolaevich, may also be noted. In particular, Ahmad beg Javanshir was awarded an order for the courage and bravery he displayed on the battlefield and was promoted to the rank of staff rotmistr. He became known among the people by the nickname “Urus Ahmad beg” (Hajiyev, & Chingizoglu, 2011, pp. 209–210).

Najaf beg Melikaslanov from the village of Tug in the Dizagh district participated in the Russo-Ottoman War with the rank of ensign. In 1854, he was awarded the Third Class Order of St. Anna and the Second Class Order of St. Stanislaus (with swords); in 1855, the Second Class Order of St. Anna; two years later, the Third and Fourth Class Orders of St. Vladimir; and in 1860, the Fourth Class Order of the Persian Order of the Lion and the Sun.

A. F. Geyrot notes that two cavalry detachments composed of Karabakh natives, totaling about 1,000 horsemen, were formed and were praised for their valor. On 2 November 1853, Caucasian troops under Major General Ilya Orbeliani fought near Bayandur against Abdi Pasha’s much larger forces, displaying courage despite heavy losses (Ibragimbeyli, 1971, p. 112). In February–March 1854, a volunteer cavalry regiment of 1,170 men was raised in Azerbaijan for the Caucasian front, including contingents from Shusha, Shamakhi, Nukha (Sheki), and Lankaran. Major General Chilyayev reported that Shamakhi cavalymen were experienced hunters and that militia detachments were formed twice in the governorate during the war (Ibragimbeyli, 1971, p. 147; Berge, 1888, pp. 510–511).

In general, during the Crimean War of 1853 – 1856, the Russians formed regiments at the expense of the population of Karabakh and employed them in the war against the Ottomans (Berge, 1888, p. 405), subsequently returning those who had completed their service to Shusha. For example, Regiment No. 1, with a cavalry strength of 100 men, was returned

to Shusha on 20 November 1855 (Berge, 1888, p. 166). In the document entitled “The Transcaucasian Muslim Cavalry Regiment formed in Warsaw in 1854,” it is noted that the completion of the regiment formed from the Shusha district was achieved on 15 May 1854: “The armament of each horseman cost 138 rubles 69 coins, and 54 rubles were paid for each cavalryman’s horse. The equipment of each pack carrier cost 119 rubles 24 coins, and the pack horse cost 46 rubles 89 coins. In the Shusha district, for 70 riding horses, a total of 5,438 rubles was paid, at a rate of between 65 and 80 rubles for each” (Berge, 1888, p. 637). In a report dated 7 November 1855 from Lieutenant General Prince Behbudov to General Muravyov, the dates on which territories in the South Caucasus came under Russian control are listed in chronological order. In effect, this information reflects the order of preference for recruiting volunteers into the Russian army from the populations of these regions. The population of Karabakh (Shusha district) is listed first, while that of the Ganja Khanate is mentioned last (Berge, 1888, p. 656).

Mirza Farzali beg Fatalibeyov from the Atyamazli clan of the Otuziki district, who had volunteered for service in the Caucasian Cavalry Regiment in 1848, also took part in the Crimean War, serving first as a deputy (naib) and from 1855 as an ensign; he was awarded several campaign medals (Hajiye, & Chingizoglu, 2011, pp. 205–206). Zeynalabdin beg Rafibeyov Javanshir from Shusha served in the Karabakh Muslim Cavalry Regiment, later in the Tsar’s Leib Guard, and during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1853 – 1854 held the ranks of militia deputy and centurion (yuzbashi) before being promoted to ensign and subsequently to second lieutenant (Hajiye, & Chingizoglu, 2011, pp. 214–215).

The Azerbaijani population of the Irevan Governorate took part in the Battle of Chingil through the IV Azerbaijani Cavalry Regiment (1854). Among its members was Ismail beg Gutgashinli. Ottoman commanders sent him secret letters urging uprisings against Russia, but these were intercepted in Gyumri (Ibragimbeyli, 1971, pp. 227–228).

Regarding the participation of Azerbaijanis in the battles of the Crimean War, Wrangel, the commander of the Yerevan detachments of the Russian army, wrote in a letter dated 30 July 1854 to the commander-in-chief of the Separate Caucasian Corps that, in addition to Captain Ismail Khan and Second Lieutenant Kalbali Khan, Captain of the IV Regiment Huseyn-Sultan, Ensign Ali Khan, and Pasha Khan had also taken part in the fighting. The valor displayed in battle by Jafarqulu Agha of Yerevan was also specially noted in the communication (Ibragimbeyli, 1971, pp. 230–231).

Conclusion. The Crimean War (1853 – 1856) constituted a critical moment for the Turkic-Muslim population of Azerbaijan as an imperial borderland society. Documentary evidence indicates that Azerbaijani participation in the conflict unfolded along two intersecting trajectories: service in Russian military formations – often mediated through elite status and imperial patronage – and various forms of resistance, including desertion, cross-border raiding, and attempts at coordination with Ottoman and Qajar actors. The Russian command’s persistent anxiety about rebellion and transborder mobilization highlights the fragility of imperial control in the South Caucasus during wartime. At the same time, the operational deployment of Muslim cavalry regiments demonstrates the pragmatic dependence of the Russian Empire on local manpower and frontier expertise. Yet this reliance was accompanied by distrust, as religious affiliation and kinship networks could undermine the expected discipline of imperial service. Overall, Azerbaijani wartime behavior appears less as an expression of stable “loyalty” and more as a contingent strategy shaped by local interests, communal solidarities, and the broader aspiration to escape colonial subjugation.

Prospects for further study include a closer prosopographical reconstruction of Azerbaijani officers and militia leaders across districts, a systematic mapping of transborder

correspondence networks, and a comparative analysis of Muslim auxiliary formations across different imperial theaters of the Crimean War.

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