
Florence Hellot-Bellier. *Migrations des chrétiens d'Azerbaïdjan iranien vers Tiflis au XIX^e siècle*

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Florence Hellot-Bellier. « Migrations des chrétiens d'Azerbaïdjan iranien vers Tiflis au XIX^e siècle », in : Florence Hellot-Bellier et Irène Natchkebia, édts., *La Géorgie entre Perse et Europe*. Paris, L'Harmattan, 2009, p. 221-235.

- 1 This contribution describes the massive emigration as of 1860s of thousands of Christians from Persian Azerbaijan to the Russian southern Caucasus, where they provided a much needed, and presumably cheap, work force for the booming regional economy (It also touches on Armenian emigration after the end of the Second Russo-Persian War). These Christians, mostly Nestorians, worked in all areas of Georgia, as agricultural hands and as workers in the many factories and on the projects for building railways and ports, including those in Batumi and Baku. They apparently had a marginal role in the nascent oil industry in Baku, which attracted more Muslim Persians than Christians. Although many of these emigrants were seasonal workers, returning home was not simple, since they were easy prey for greedy local officials, Persian and Russian alike. They tended, therefore, to stay in Russia. Despite the geographical proximity, fewer emigrants returned from Russia than from the United States (p. 233).
- 2 By and large, Hellot-Bellier agrees with the historical sources and modern scholarship in setting this emigration down to socioeconomic factors, in particular the ruthless exploitation of Christian peasants by their Muslim landlords. However she rightly emphasizes the importance of religious and political factors (the consequences of the 1828 Treaty of Torkmānčāy, which facilitated Russian penetration of Persia). The

purported Russian “protection” of Christians in Azerbaijan was, in fact, a ruse for playing the Persian government against its Christian subjects and thus paving the way for the Russification of Christians, those who emigrated to Russia as well as those who stayed at home. These Christians were, in turn, supposed to help Russia eventually occupy Azerbaijan. According to the author, this emigration represents a great loss to Persia and was a mixed blessing for the emigrants themselves. These topics are still relevant and sensitive today: emigration, the relationship between central governments and ethnic or religious minorities, and the weakness of minorities, who can easily be used as scapegoats or political tools. The distribution of Russian passports to foreign nationals is a ploy still used by the Russian government to destabilize its neighbors. The defense of “Russian citizens in danger” was a pretext for the 2008 invasion of Georgia. Finally, it should be pointed out that this contribution and the one by Ter-Oganov [cf. c.r. n°261] should be read together owing to their subject matter.

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