

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

OF PRIVATE PEASANTS IN NORTHERN AZERBAIJAN AFTER THE ADOPTION OF AGRARIAN LAWS IN 1846-1847

### **SITUACIÓN SOCIOECONÓMICA DE LOS CAMPESINOS PRIVADOS EN EL NORTE DE AZERBAIYÁN TRAS LA ADOPCIÓN DE LAS LEYES AGRARIAS EN 1846-1847**

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#### ABSTRACT

The agrarian problem in northern Azerbaijan during the second half of the 19th century is a crucial topic for understanding the socio-economic transformation and consolidation of tsarist power in the region. Despite the importance of the agrarian laws of 1846-1847 in formalizing feudal relations and establishing new frameworks of land rights, previous studies have left unexplored the actual conditions of their implementation and subsequent legislative amendments. Based on primary sources from the State Archival Funds of Russia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, this article analyses the conditions under which these agrarian legislative documents were implemented, as well as the changes made by the government to the Rural Regulations. The findings reveal that the implementation of these laws was fragmentary, limited by bureaucratic delays and the imprecise delimitation of territories, which prevented the full implementation of their provisions. Furthermore, the changes introduced, such as the restriction of the judicial and police powers of landowners, had a limited impact on improving the situation of peasants. These findings underline the persistence of feudal structures and show that, despite modernization efforts, agrarian reforms were truncated by structural problems, laying the groundwork for future legislative interventions, such as the agrarian reform of 1870.

#### Keywords:

Russia, Northern Azerbaijan, Supreme Rescript, Rural Regulations, taxes.

#### RESUMEN

El problema agrario en el norte de Azerbaiyán durante la segunda mitad del siglo XIX es un tema crucial para comprender la transformación socioeconómica y la consolidación del poder zarista en la región. A pesar de la importancia de las leyes agrarias de 1846-1847 para formalizar las relaciones feudales y establecer nuevos marcos de derechos sobre la tierra, los estudios anteriores han dejado sin explorar las condiciones reales de su implementación y las modificaciones legislativas posteriores. Basándose en fuentes primarias de los Fondos de Archivos Estatales de Rusia, Azerbaiyán y Georgia, este artículo analiza las condiciones en las que se implementaron estos documentos legislativos agrarios, así como los cambios realizados por el gobierno en las Regulaciones Rurales. Los hallazgos revelan que la implementación de estas leyes fue fragmentaria, limitada por retrasos burocráticos y la delimitación imprecisa de los territorios, lo que impidió la plena implementación de sus disposiciones. Además, los cambios introducidos, como la restricción de los poderes judiciales y policiales de los terratenientes, tuvieron un impacto limitado en la mejora de la situación de los campesinos. Estos hallazgos subrayan la persistencia de las estructuras feudales y muestran que, a pesar de los esfuerzos de modernización, las reformas agrarias se vieron truncadas por problemas estructurales, sentando las bases para futuras intervenciones legislativas, como la reforma agraria de 1870.

#### Palabras clave:

Rusia, Azerbaiyán del Norte, Rescripto Supremo, Reglamento Rural, impuestos.

## INTRODUCTION

Agriculture, understood as the set of socioeconomic practices linked to the cultivation of land and the production of food, has historically been a fundamental pillar for the development of civilizations (Burchardt, 2007; McIntyre, 2021). Its importance lies throughout history not only in the fact that this activity supports the food security of populations, but also in structuring power relations, property systems and social hierarchies (Calo, 2020; Rossi et al., 2019). In the Caucasus, an area of ethnic diversity and strategic geopolitical importance, agriculture acquired a central role in imperial policies, given its economic potential and its capacity to consolidate territorial domains. Integrated into the Russian Empire after the treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828), Azerbaijan faced a process of transformation under the Tsarist administration (Gozalova, 2017; Larin, 2022). The region was characterized by a feudal social structure with beks and agalars (local lords) who exercised control over land as well as peasants. The region became a laboratory for agrarian reforms aimed at consolidating Russian control, but these measures clashed with local traditions and generated tensions, as evidenced by the peasant uprisings of 1841 against land confiscation (Zeynaloglu, 2020). The 19th century in Azerbaijan was thus marked by the struggle between the centralizing ambitions of St. Petersburg and the resistance of rural elites and communities to losing their privileges or autonomy (Melvin, 2024). In this context, the agrarian problem emerged as a critical issue. The laws of 1846-1847 sought to formalize relations of feudal dependence under imperial supervision, regulating land rights and peasant duties. However, their implementation faced bureaucratic obstacles, local resistance, and contradictions inherent to a system that sought to modernize without radically altering the status quo.

In the 1840s, the Russian Empire's government recognized the importance of addressing the agrarian issue. While not yet daring to take measures affecting Russian landlords, the authorities focused on reforms in the national periphery, where non-Russians predominated among landowners: in the Kiev General Government in 1847-1848, the new Livland Regulation in 1848, and a series of agrarian laws in the South Caucasus, including Northern Azerbaijan. Until the early 1840s, tsarism pursued a policy of denying the rights of Azerbaijani feudal lords and attempted to establish "Russian nobility" in the region.

The decrees of Tsar Nicholas I issued on April 25th and May 28th, 1841, which initiated a campaign to confiscate all villages belonging to the agalars of Gazakh, Shamshadil, and Borchaly, as well as the tiyul lands belonging to the beks of the Caspian region, caused serious discontent

and uprisings in these areas. Under these circumstances, in 1845, the governor of the Caucasus, Count M.S. Vorontsov, insisted on establishing the land rights of the beks and agalars to secure their obedience. He wrote to the tsar that these actions "would strengthen our dominion in this region more than any deployment of military settlers and military successes in the mountains against Shamil himself" (Central State Archives of Georgia, 1845, p. 29).

Nicholas I also recognized the ineffectiveness of the previously implemented policy. In a conversation with M.S. Vorontsov, the tsar acknowledged it as "erroneous" and instructed him to "address the arrangement of the Muslim estate, beks, and agalars." In April 1845, following the governor's instructions, the head of the Civil Administration of the Transcaucasian Territory, P.A. Ladinsky, began drafting a law on land arrangements for local feudal lords and the relationship between landowners and peasants (CGIA of Georgia, 1845, pp. 22, 31-32).

Based on the project prepared by the Caucasian Viceroyalty and the Caucasian Committee, on December 6, 1846, Nicholas I issued a rescript that legitimized and strengthened the land rights of local feudal lords, confirming their full hereditary ownership of both mulki and tiyul lands. Analysis of the rescript reveals that the government emphasized determining the land rights of Azerbaijani feudal lords, dedicating 10 out of 12 points to this matter (Baxmanli, 1937, p. 105,107,343,347).

While recognizing the lands as hereditary property of Azerbaijani landlords, the authorities did not extend this right to the peasants living on these lands. According to paragraph 7 of the rescript of December 6th, 1846, privately owned peasants remained in their former places of residence but were reclassified "in the category of state settlers." Instead of various designations such as rayat, ranjbar, khalis, and nukers, they "received one common name - mulkadar-tabigi (dependent - M.A.)". Since the land was recognized as the property of feudal lords, according to paragraph 8 of the rescript, peasants were obliged to perform various duties for the landowner in exchange for land use. Additionally, the feudal lords were granted rights of police supervision over the villagers (Baxmanli, 1937, p. 106).

To establish the relationship between landowners and peasants, Settlement Regulations were issued on April 20th and December 28th, 1847. The first regulation detailed the relationship between beks and peasants in Shemakha and Derbent provinces, which included Shamakhi, Nukha, Lankaran, Baku, and Kuba counties. The regulation of December 28th, 1847, addressed the Agalars and peasants of the Kazakh, Shamshadil, and Borchaly sections

(Central State Historical Archives of Azerbaijan, 1846, p. 6). Based on archival materials, these laws did not apply to the entire territory of Azerbaijan, particularly to the Elizavetpol, Ayrum, and Kebirli sections and the Zagatala district (Central State Archives of Azerbaijan, 1870, pp. 66–72). In 1851, the Regulations were extended to the Derbent and Erivan provinces that were part of Northern Azerbaijan.

We believe that understanding this historical context is essential to assess how these reforms shaped the socio-economic reality of private farmers in northern Azerbaijan. Therefore, the objective of this study is to provide a thorough analysis of the legislative foundation that shaped Russia's agrarian policy in Northern Azerbaijan during the mid-19th century, namely the Supreme Rescript of December 6, 1846, and the Rural Regulation of 1847. On the basis of Russia's, Azerbaijan's, and Georgia's archival documents. In this research it is explored the circumstances of enforcement of these legislative documents, the government's amendments to the Rural Regulations, and the causes of their implementation. In addition, the study analyzes the socio-economic transformation of private entrepreneur villagers, highlighting the incomplete and step-by-step nature of the agrarian reform.

## DEVELOPMENT

The provisions of 1847 consisted of four chapters. The first chapter of each Regulation dealt with the land arrangement of peasants. The second chapter determined the duties of peasants toward beks and agalars, the third chapter outlined the rights and obligations of owners and peasants, and the fourth chapter detailed the responsibilities of local Transcaucasian authorities in implementing these Provisions. Additionally, the Regulations of April 20th, 1847, included four clauses relating to members of khan families. Their nukers were exempt from treasury taxes and were not permitted to move to other lands. Peasants living on khan family lands were allowed to move only to state lands and only with the consent of the Caucasus governor. According to M.S. Vorontsov, this measure “would show the khan's families that the government has special respect for them, and simultaneously, would bind them with gratitude and attract them to our side” (Central State Archives of Georgia, 1845, p. 59).

According to Article I of the Regulations, owners were required to provide every male aged 15 and above with “at least 5 acres of suitable land for arable farming, gardening, cattle breeding, and horticulture.” Before the 1847 Regulations, no law established allotment sizes, and feudal lords were not obligated to allocate specific amounts of land to peasants. However, the Statute did not specify

the constituent parts of these allotments, which tsarist officials noted as diminishing the significance of Article I. Furthermore, there were no guarantees ensuring compliance with the first article's conditions, as no relationship was established between allotment sizes and duties (CGIA of Georgia, 1865).

According to Article 3 of the Regulations, villagers were obligated to perform duties only in exchange for land use. This principle was also reflected in paragraph 8 of the December 6, 1846 rescript. Consequently, landowners were required to allocate land to all peasants, including ranjbars; otherwise, the latter would be exempted from duties to feudal lords and would become state peasants. The second chapter of the Regulations enumerated peasant duties and specified their implementation. Peasants were required to fulfill obligations such as maljahat, servant allocation, corvée, livestock pasture fees, and a cash tax from nomadic residents (Article 4 of the April 20 Regulations). Article 6 established that maljahat was 1/10 of the harvest owed to the owner. However, if a peasant used seeds and production tools borrowed from the feudal lord for land cultivation, “the peasant was to agree with the owner on the crop allocation measure in the latter's favor, provided that the highest measure of this allocation would not exceed one-fifth of the total crop” (Andreyev, 1847, p. 46).

Maljahat was one of the heaviest duties imposed on peasants. The peasant was obliged to divide the crop within three days after harvesting, which was not always advantageous. If the owner lived within the estate boundaries, the peasant had to transfer the owner's share within 3 days after harvest; if the owner lived elsewhere but within 50 miles, the transfer period extended to 15 days. The burden of this duty was further increased by the fact that peasants were responsible for the harvest's safety until they delivered the owner's share (as per the April 20 Regulations). Though all other pre-existing natural duties were abolished, the articles on maljahat created opportunities for landowner abuse and worsened the peasants' situation.

Peasants were also required to pay a monetary duty (chorbashi) for grazing cattle on feudal lords' land. Additionally, nomadic residents were subject to feudal exploitation. Articles 27-28 of the April 20 Regulations required them to pay landowners “4 silver rubles per family annually for the right of nomadism” and chorbashi according to local custom. Beyond natural and monetary duties, the laws mandated other obligations to landowners. According to Article 11, peasants were required to provide one female servant from every fifteen families (Baxmanli, 1937, pp.

86–89). However, this requirement to provide female servants sparked significant peasant discontent.

Russian Caucasian scholar M.N. Kuchaev wrote that when these articles were announced, all beks were surprised by the obligations imposed on peasants, which they had never previously required from their taxpayers, as these requirements contradicted local customs and moral standards. When villagers learned of the new obligation to provide female servants to owners, they informed the local county chief that fulfilling this duty would violate their local customs and laws. Consequently, the governor suspended the execution of Article 11, taking responsibility for this decision (Kuchaev, 1887, p. 23). This reaction alerted the authorities, and the December 28, 1847 Regulations subsequently incorporated local customs and traditions. Article 10 of this later Regulation specified only male servants were to be appointed.

The labor service duty (*biyar*) was a heavy burden on the inhabitants. Before the agrarian laws, it was unregulated, like other duties, and reached up to 8 days annually. The new laws established *corvée* days at 18 days per year for each peasant family. At the owner's request, they had to provide one worker with livestock and, where necessary, with tools (Article 19 of the April 28, 1847 Regulations). During these days, peasants were required to perform various tasks: plowing land, sowing, harvesting, building houses, and transportation, among others. While the April 20 Regulations set 18 days, Article 18 of the December 28th Regulations reduced this to 8 days annually for labor service, though these later regulations only applied to a small region of Azerbaijan. To protect the interests of feudal lords who lacked their own economy or didn't need work during all these days, the Regulations included articles allowing them to charge 10 silver kopecks per working day from each family instead of requiring a worker, but no more (Articles 21 and 20). The labor service duty extended beyond *biyar* performance, as the earlier *evrez* obligation to the owner remained in effect. This required no more than 2 days annually, during which peasants cultivated private land and erected buildings. The owner was required to feed workers during these tasks, and the entire crop belonged to the feudal lord. *Evrez* labor was also used to build canals, bridges, roads, and various structures necessary for general welfare (Baxmanli, 1937, p. 87).

Article 40 of the April 20 Regulations and Article 34 of the December 28, 1847 Regulations, which established peasants' rights to relocate to other lands, were particularly significant. Article 34 was implemented immediately upon announcement, while Article 40 took effect in 1852, stating: "Villagers are permitted to relocate from the owner's land in 2 cases:

1. If the destination village is located in a community, the receiving owner's consent is required.
2. If villager purchases land according to the rights of all free states in the empire, but not less than 5 acres for each male soul aged 15 or older. One year after the villager's relocation to the acquired land, local authorities must register them with the nearest state-owned village and impose standard taxes and duties.

In both cases, relocation is permitted only when the villager has fulfilled all duties to the current landowner as determined by this provision, and must always be carried out with the provincial head's permission, upon county chiefs' proposal". Thus, despite the authors' intent to prohibit peasant relocation in the draft laws, the authorities could not implement such a restriction. While the conditions made transitions difficult, this did not constitute a formalization of serfdom for privately owned peasants. The April 20 Regulation established punishments for peasants "for failure to fulfill their duties and unauthorized resettlement" (Article 45) (Baxmanli, 1937, pp. 90–91).

Contrary to the views of Hasanov (1957, p. 5), Petrushevsky (1936, p. 31), and Aghayan (1956, p. 52) regarding the 1840s agrarian legislation, the December 6th, 1847 rescript and the 1847 Regulations did not introduce serfdom in Azerbaijan. Instead, they legitimized and consolidated existing feudal-dependent relations by establishing, for the first time, specific peasant duties and allotment sizes. Notably, such regulation had not yet been implemented in Russia; these same principles for regulating allotments and duties were later applied in the Kiev Governor-General in 1847-1848, where Polish landowners predominated, and in other national regions. These measures did not affect Russia's central provinces until the abolition of serfdom on February 19th, 1861.

After issuing the December 6th, 1846 rescript and the 1847 Regulations, the tsarist government began implementing them. However, implementation was neither particularly effective nor immediately widespread throughout Azerbaijan. The authorities' actions were marked by inertia, and many difficulties and controversies arose during the agrarian reform's implementation. According to paragraphs 7 and 8 of the 1846 rescript, all dependent persons, primarily *Rangebars* who lacked allotment land but served beks as domestic servants or were permitted by beks to pursue urban crafts and trade, were freed from any dependence on their masters. The beks' dissatisfaction with these provisions prompted M.S. Vorontsov to propose treasury payments of 5 rubles annually per family for 25 years, beginning that year (Baxmanli, 1937, p. 163).



Although Prince M.S. Vorontsov's proposal to compensate the beks was initially canceled, his successor as Caucasian governor in 1856, Prince Baryatinsky, approached the Caucasian Committee chairman, Prince A.F. Orlov, proposing compensation for "130 bek families for income lost through the liberation of 3,281 peasant families from their personal dependence". This issue remained unresolved for another decade. Finally, in December 1865, a committee decided to grant these beks monetary compensation of "5 rubles annually for 25 years per peasant family, beginning from when said villagers entered the treasury and were subject to taxation as state peasants" (Baxmanli, 1937, p. 177,181).

The changes implemented by the tsarist government in agrarian legislation during the 1840s significantly impacted the socio-economic conditions of privately owned peasants in the 1860s. According to the regulation approved by the Caucasian Committee on September 19th, 1866, the judicial and police powers of the beks and khan family members were abolished. However, some aspects of the 1840s agrarian laws were either not implemented or only partially implemented. Many land-related disputes arose that could not be resolved at the Caucasian governor's level and were subsequently referred to the Senate's Appellate Department (Liarli, 2007, p. 100). Several articles were modified, including Articles 6 and 7 regarding the distribution of harvested crops from lands cultivated under various economic conditions, and Article 21 (Baxmanli, 1937, p. 131,175), which allowed payment for biyar to be determined by mutual agreement between owner and peasant, rather than the fixed 10 kopeks, when the owner lacked their own farm. Article 40, which restricted peasants' free movement from one owner's land to other farms, was also amended (Baxmanli, 1937, pp. 176-177).

The first article of the 1847 Regulations required landowners to allocate at least 5 acres of suitable land to each male over 15 years of age, but 1869 data reveals this requirement was not met. Peasants in the Kazakh, Borchaly, and Shamshadil regions used allotments that not only failed to reach 15 acres per smoke (where one smoke represented 3 adult male souls), but barely achieved half this proportion, and often less. Peasants in other counties faced similar conditions. In the beck estates of the Elizavetpol district, each smoke received no more than 10 dessiatines; in the Shusha district, between 10 and 15 dessiatines; in the Lankaran district, an average of 7 dessiatines; and in the Javad district, no more than 3-5 dessiatines of land (CGIA of Georgia, 1865, pp. 21-22). Consequently, peasants experienced severe land shortages.

## CONCLUSIONS

The 1846-1847 agrarian laws in northern Azerbaijan failed to cover the entire territory, as their application was restricted to certain areas. Government efforts to extend their reach to other regions were hampered by bureaucratic delays, a situation that persisted until at least 1870, making clear the inadequacy of a truly inclusive and uniform agrarian policy. Furthermore, the absence of precise delimitation of lands and the complexities inherent in defining land rights prevented the reforms from achieving their objectives. The lack of clarity in the allocation and regularization of property created a scenario in which expectations of transformation of the agrarian system were frustrated, with the implementation of the reforms constantly hampered by technical and legal problems.

In response to these difficulties, the government introduced some amendments to the original legislation. These included the deprivation of landowners of certain judicial and police powers, and adjustments to the articles relating to the transfer of peasants. However, these reforms were partial, since by the time the agrarian law of 1870 was published, several of the fundamental aspects - such as the allocation of land to all feudal lords on a hereditary basis or the establishment of a 5% tax on production - had not been fully implemented. The impact of the legislation was also felt in the economic sphere of the region. Faced with the excessive burden of meeting the natural obligations imposed on the harvest, peasants opted to diversify their economic activities, especially through the expansion of livestock farming. This change in the productive structure was a direct response to legislative pressure, which, although seeking to regulate agrarian relations, ended up encouraging transformations in the rural way of life.

Finally, it is important to highlight the historical continuity in the development of agrarian legislation: the May 1870 legislation is successively linked to the laws of 1846-1847. The unresolved issues of the 1840s, which later served as the basis for the 1870 reform, demonstrate the persistence of structural problems. Furthermore, although the 1847 laws legalised feudal dependency in northern Azerbaijan and consolidated the power of tsarism in the Caucasus, these measures, by regulating peasants' obligations without substantially improving their situation, perpetuated existing inequalities in rural areas.

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