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Heightened Smuggling of Weapons and Ammunition from Southern Caucasus to Northwestern Iran on the Eve of World War I

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Abstract

Documents newly found in the Historical Archives of Azerbaijan Republic reveal that as early as 1912 Ottoman agents were engaged in attempts to entice the Transcaucasian Muslims against Russia and prepare them for the war, which would break out a year-and-a-half later, namely the First World War. Ottomans encouraged the smuggling of Russian weapons and ammunition to regions bordering the Southern Caucasus, especially Northwestern Iran, counting on the sympathy of the Turkophones therein against the Russians, or on their antagonism towards the presence of Russian forces in their own territories. The heightened smuggling of Russian weapons and ammunition alarmed the Russian authorities who began looking into the cases of smugglings in an attempt to prevent or minimize them. Their findings, as expressed in their correspondences, pointed towards an extensive smuggling network headed by an Iranian émigré named Karbalā'ī who ran it with members of his own family and in collaboration with a number of Russian officials.

Keywords

Southern Caucasus – Northwestern Iran – Tsarist Russia – Ottoman Empire – Iranian emigree smugglers – Ottoman agents – Shahsevan tribe – weapons trafficking

1 Introduction: Historical Background

Economic hardships and poverty during the 19th and early 20th centuries in Iran compelled many Iranians who were unemployed or very low-paid to seek better job opportunities elsewhere. The existence and development of various industries in the Southern Caucasus, and most notably the oil industry in and around Baku, formed major 'push' and 'pull' factors, which attracted an increasing number of Iranians to try their luck therein (Belova 1956: 114; Hakimian 1985: 444–447; Xosroupanāh 1999: 13–47; Xosrouzādeh et al. 2018: 64, 69).

Only a small number of those Iranian émigrés managed to become wealthy. Some, like Yūsif Karbalā'ī, managed to do so by engaging in illegal activities, including weapons and ammunition trafficking, gradually developing a network, which consisted of family members living on both sides of the Irano-Russian border along the Southern Caucasus, as well as a number of local Russian administrative officials and military officers. The latter were open to bribes in money and gifts despite the risks of being caught out, or, indeed, the risks to others should these weapons be aimed at Russians in the future. Such cost-benefit calculations enabled Karbalā'ī to run his operation for many years, and even when he was caught and found guilty of illegal arms trafficking,¹ he was only lightly fined and released (Shahvar/Mishaev 2022).

The phenomenon of arms trafficking from Russia was already identified during the last two decades of the 19th century. Iran was one of the prime destinations for such goods in response to growing demand, mostly through the Southern Caucasus. The growing weakness of the Qajar rule gave rise to tribal aspirations for greater autonomy and to growing opposition to the corrupt Qajars, with the struggle between pro-Constitutionalist and anti-Constitutionalists providing clients on both sides (Clark 2013: 231–258). The reports from Russian special agents dating from the early 1910s already spoke of unprecedented trafficking of Russian weapons and ammunition into Iran, stressing the increased arming of Iranian nomadic tribes. The smugglers were able to bypass the military bases and posts of the Russian army in the Southern Caucasus by various means and in full cooperation with workers at the rifle-producing factory. These reports pointed towards the Russian border-posts along the Russo-Iranian land border in the Southern Caucasus as the main smuggling points, although another common route was by way of ships or fishing boats through the Caspian Sea.

1 See "File against Karbala'i", June 17-August 2, 1912, *NHARA/45/1/130*.

2 Reports of Colonel Ziss on Weapons and Ammunition Smuggling to Iran

Colonel Ziss, the commander and commissioner of the Russian Border Guard along the Irano-Russian border in the Southern Caucasus, seems to have played an important role in the indictment of the Karbalā'ī family. His role is reflected, among other things, in a detailed report describing the phenomenon of smuggling Russian weapons and ammunition into Iran, which will be dealt with shortly. The report was sent from the office of Alshevsky, the governor of Baku province, to Martynov, the mayor of Baku city. The report was the fifth in a series of documents, sent from Alshevsky to Martynov over a period of two months, all aimed to update the mayor of Baku on the smuggling of Russian weapons and ammunition into Iran and to urge him to marshal Baku city's police and detective forces, which were under his authority, to deal with each and every illegal arms-trade case, and especially those to Iran.² From this report it is also clear that Alshevsky turned to Ziss and asked him for information regarding these smuggling activities. Ziss, on his part, claimed that he did not have the necessary means to stop the smugglings or even to gather extensive information on the matter; but he added that he did have in his possession some information (although some of it was rather general) that had brought him to a range of important insights on the smuggling of Russian ammunition to Iran. These insights were as follows:

1. Most of the ammunition reached the hands of the smugglers straight from the producing factories and their warehouses in soldered metal boxes—that is, in their original boxes and without any opening marks. Ziss regarded the possibility that Russian officials might be involved as those who delivered the weapons and ammunition to the smugglers as “a negligible phenomenon, if it at all existed”.
2. A large amount of ammunition smuggled into Iran was of a modern model (cone-shaped bullets) that had not yet been used by the Russian army in the Caucasus region. Thus, Ziss believed that “it is likely [that the ammunition] was stolen from the European part of Russia”.
3. The Iranians called these modern bullets “Peterburg bullets”, which Ziss took as an indication that they were, indeed, stolen from St. Petersburg.
4. The main transit station of the smuggled weapons and ammunition was Baku city. Ziss claimed that there was ample evidence for this from the residents of the Ardabil district in northern Iran who had been ques-

² Alshevsky to Martynov, June 23, 1912, *NHARA/46/1/222*, no. 640.

tioned by Russian criminal investigators. In support of this, Ziss reminded Alshevsky of the findings of the interrogation he sent to him on May 19, 1912. The name of the interrogee was Agha Bek Khalfali, and from his name and title, it could be deduced that he was the chief of the Khalfali clan of the Shahsevan tribe in Northwestern Iran.

5. A huge amount of the ammunition went to the Shahsevanis, with one shipment alone, containing 40,000 bullets. We will return to this affair later as it exposed Karbalāī as a significant figure in the illegal arms trade and also revealed the large quantities of Russian ammunition smuggled into Iran, part of which reached the Shahsevanis who attacked the Russian border positions, pouring on them an incessant rain of bullets, which in one case continued unabated for some ten hours.
6. The main smuggling routes were as follows:
 - A. From Lenkoran to Russian Astara camouflaged as passenger luggage;
 - B. From Astara to its periphery;
 - C. From Russian Astara to Iranian Astara through fishing boats;
 - D. From Baku to Enzeli and on to Iranian Astara;
 - E. From Baku by land and through the periphery of the city;
 - F. From Baku to the south by ships to any Iranian Caspian port.

Ziss added that the operation of smuggling involved refugees from Iran to Russia, adding that their starting point was Baku and the two parts of the city of Astara (Russian and Iranian). Ziss had sent Alshevsky six reports between March 19 and May 24, 1912, saying that the analysis of all the information in his detailed reports could be a starting point for a deeper investigation into the smuggling.³

3 Russian Intelligence on the Ottoman Agents amongst the Muslims of the Southern Caucasus in 1912

The scope of correspondence in 1912 regarding the smuggling of Russian weapons into Iran is significant and should be addressed in the historical context in which they were written, a context that at times was highlighted in these correspondences, such as in those involving the head of the gendarmerie and detective section of Baku province, Colonel Leontiev. In a letter to Martynov, Leontiev clearly indicated that, based on the work of his detectives report-

3 Commander, 29th Brigade to Alshevsky, June 7, 1912, *NHARA/46/1/222*, no. 750.

ing from the field, the Ottoman government had sent many agents to Baku province who were inciting the local Muslims against the Christians in general and the Russian authorities in particular. He added that those Ottoman agents were moving around under the guise of clerics or dervishes of the popular Islamic orders and, thus, they managed to evade the suspicion of the local law enforcement officials.⁴

The head of the gendarmerie and detective section of Baku province was a senior authority. Based on his position and intelligence-gathering network, it is possible to assess the strong reliability of the details given by him, which he had received from his detective agents in the field. Therefore, his testimony about the activities of the Ottoman agents among the Muslims of the Southern Caucasus is presented here first, even though chronologically speaking, there is also evidence from the beginning of 1912, which will be discussed shortly.

Although WWI had not yet erupted in 1912, it is quite widely known that by that time Russo-Ottoman relations were already tense. Intensive Ottoman preparations against Russia were known to Russian intelligence, and Russian agents frequently reported to St. Petersburg on such preparations (Ter-Oganov 2015: 103–108). The Turkophone elements in Northwestern Iran, such as the Shahsevans of Iran, whose “Turkic identity and culture are overwhelmingly dominant among them” (Tapper 1997: 25), along with the Muslims of the Caucasus, formed together as possible allies for the Ottomans against Russia (Reynolds 2011: 82–106; Meyer 2014).

We now move to the earlier testimony, from the beginning of 1912, with regards to the activities of the Ottoman agents within the concentrations of the Muslim population in the Southern Caucasus. This testimony is from February 1912 and comes from the head of the Police division responsible for the railway network in the Southern Caucasus. The testimony was sent directly to the Special Section of the Royal Commissioner’s office in the Southern Caucasus, in the city of Tiflis (Tbilisi). After having received this testimony, its content and analysis was then forwarded by Col. Shiotkin, the head of the above-mentioned Special Section, to the mayor of Baku.⁵ The testimony itself is quite unique as it places the main subject of this article—the smuggling of Russian weapons and ammunition from the Southern Caucasus to Iran and the eastern vilayets of the Ottoman Turkey—within the historical context of anticipation before the outbreak of WWI. Admittedly, the date of the WWI’s outbreak was not known in advance, but as early as the beginning of 1912 there was an expectation that

4 Leontiev to Martynov, October 27, 1912, *NHARA/46/1/222*, no. 5590.

5 Colonel Shiotkin to Martynov, February 28, 1912, *NHARA/46/1/222*, no. 475.

war was quite imminent, and the Ottoman agents wished to incite the Muslim population of the Southern Caucasus and prepare them for the war. In his letter to Martynov, Shiotkin reported that as part of his duties, an undercover detective got off the train to Baku at one of the peripheral stations to meet with a local Muslim collaborator. The latter took the undercover agent to a local coffee shop (more likely, *chaykhana* or teahouse), revealing before him a disturbing situation as far as the Russian government was concerned. The meeting place was not only a place for catering but also a place for social gatherings where the locals used to have lively discussions about the impending war. From among those present, the collaborator marked two people and the undercover detective eavesdropped on their conversations with others gathered there. He concluded that they were “intelligent looking” agents of the Ottoman authorities, and that their purpose was to prepare the local Muslims to assist the Ottomans with the outbreak of the war. The two claimed before the gathering crowd that the Germans had promised to side with the Ottomans, and that Iran (or at least some of the armed forces within it, like the tribes living near the Iranian-Russian border in the Southern Caucasus area) would do the same. The undercover detective further stressed that the Ottoman agents had asked some of the local Muslims, whom he knew well, to purchase as much Russian ammunition as they could. They promised a handsome payment in return and explained that this was very necessary because it was already clear that the outbreak of a great war was inevitable and that it would begin soon. From these two Ottoman agents, it was clear that Iran was also a desirable target for smuggling Russian ammunition. The attitude of all the locals who had gathered at the café, towards the two Ottoman agents, was of respect and reverence towards those of higher authority. It is further stated in Shiotkin’s letter that later, through further work, the undercover detective revealed that, in addition to the two above-mentioned Ottoman agents, there were eight more agents operating in the Southern Caucasus at the same time, all promoting the very same agenda as their two colleagues described here.⁶ This, as well as other reports by undercover detectives about Ottoman initiatives and activities, could explain the sharpening of vigilance and the feeling of imminent danger that the heads of the Russian administrative and enforcement institutions in the Southern Caucasus felt already in 1912, about a year-and-a-half before WWI. This is reflected in the letters and reports by officials, like Ziss, Alshevsky, Leontiev, and Shiotkin, as well as in a series of other letters from Russian administrative and enforcement agencies that will be discussed below.

6 Shiotkin to Martynov, February 28, 1912.

4 The Shahsevan Tribe and Their Need for Weapons and Ammunition

The location of the Shahsevans of Moghan and Ardabil in Northwestern Iran with their fertile summer and winter quarters on international trade routes and near to two of the most important Iranian cities, Tehran and Tabriz, had attracted the attention of the neighboring Ottomans and Russians, desirable as a prize of conquest or as a bridgehead against the other. Indeed, from the 16th century onwards, Ottoman and Russian (and later Soviet) forces each occupied Shahsevan territory on a number of occasions (Tapper 1997: 25–26, 162–168, 190–282). The most recent presence of foreign forces on these territories, prior to the 1912 events discussed here, were those of Russian forces. On June 9, 1912, the Special Section at the office of the governor-general of the Caucasus issued a letter to the mayor of Baku city informing him that the Shahsevan tribe in Iran had stepped up their preparations to attack Russian forces in their tribal territories and that, to that end, they had received a massive supply of stolen Russian weapons.⁷

In addition, few days earlier, Alshevsky had also received a warning letter from Ziss about an unusual influx of Shahsevan tribesmen to Baku city. Ziss stressed that such a large number of Shahsavans in that city, and during unusual hours, indicated that their interest was in smuggling Russian weapons.⁸ On the increasingly common trafficking of weapon and ammunition Ziss had already reported as early as March 1912, and by May of the same year senior members of the Russian government and enforcement agencies in the Southern Caucasus had grasped the dangerous significance of this increasingly active smuggling ring to the safety of Russian forces in the region. One of the expressions of their vigilance was that in a short period of less than a month Alshevsky sent four alerts to Martynov about various cases of weapons' smuggling, and that by the Shahsevans alone.⁹

On June 15, Martynov also received a targeted alert from the office of the governor-general of the Caucasus about the arrival of a group of Shahsavans to Baku city for the purpose of smuggling Russian weapons. Attached to this warning was a request to report to the office of the governor-general after the smugglers had been located and arrested.¹⁰

7 Special Section, Caucasian Viceroyalty to Martynov, June 9, 1912, *NHARA/46/1/222*, no. 1216.

8 Commander, 29th Brigade to Alshevsky, May 30, 1912, *NHARA/46/1/222*, no. 464.

9 Alshevsky to Martynov, May 11, 21, 26, and June 6, 1912, *NHARA/46/1/222*, nos. 490, 519, 539 and 570 respectively.

10 Special Section, Caucasian Viceroyalty to Martynov, June 15, 1912, *NHARA/46/1/222*, no. 1280.

With the acceleration of weapon smuggling, the number of successfully foiled smuggling operations also grew. Despite this, and probably because of it, the frequency of the smuggling operations continued to increase (as can be seen from Alshevsky's warning letters mentioned above). The fact that senior figures of the Shahsevan tribesmen had been caught and were under investigation did not deter the smugglers either. The intensification of weapons smuggling activities attested to their determination and raised tensions even in the governor-general's office. The governor-general wrote an exasperated letter on June 20, 1912, to Martynov, demanding that he concentrate all the means at his disposal toward the foiling of Shahsevans' smuggling operations. The letter emphasized that according to the testimony that Ziss managed to extract from a Khalfali clansman named Samed Bek, Baku was the center of smuggled Russian weapons and also the center of their further distribution to the Shahsevan destinations in Iran. It was further emphasized that the smugglings had reached such monstrous proportions that the Shahsevans, according to the information provided by Samad Bek, were already prepared for a widespread attack on the Russian forces stationed on their tribal territories.¹¹

What is said in the last sentence corresponds with the aforementioned multi-section report from June 7, 1912, by Ziss, where he detailed the almost incessant flood of Russian bullets fired by the Shahsevans on the Russian forces, which had continued for 10 long hours, a shooting that Ziss described as "tool experiment". A more extensive attack would have been much more severe, hence the governor-general's call for decisive action against the smuggling rings.

It is likely that following such a referral from the governor-general's office to Martynov, most of the resources were, indeed, mobilized towards the increased efforts to foil the smuggling attempts. However, their success was probably very partial. On July 9, 1912, a letter from the governor-general's office was sent to Martynov, informing him of extensive activities, on both sides of the Southern Caucasus region of the Irano-Russian border, by members of the Karbalā'i family—an Iranian family, with some of its members being residents in Russia. The letter began with a reminder about another Russian ammunition smuggling case, which took place during the first half of May 1912, when thousands of bullets were smuggled in woolen sacks. The operation was discovered thanks to Ziss who was able to secure the cooperation of "the commander of the Iranian Astara customs station, a certain Mr. Andrei". The seized bullets were shipped

11 Special Section, Caucasian Viceroyalty to Martynov, June 20, 1912, *NHARA/46/1/222*, no. 1327.

from Baku port to Enzeli port, where they were received by two members of the Karbalā'ī family, named Abi and Abu al-Faraz. The latter also accompanied the shipment of bullets from Russian Astara to Iranian Astara, while in other cases the other members of the Karbalā'ī family did the same, those being Murad, Asad, and Sharbat-'Ali, all residents of Ardabil.¹² The next letter to the mayor of Baku regarding the smuggling of ammunition (which, like all the other documents discussed in this sub-chapter, are from the same file of the governor of Baku province), discusses a routine case of ammunition smuggling. The importance of this letter is in its leading us directly to Javat district in Baku province where Yūsif Karbalā'ī himself lived.¹³ He was the head of a crime family who controlled and operated the smuggling of Russian weapons and ammunition through the Javat district. He ran the smuggling operations of his extensive family through crony capitalism, via connections, which he maintained with leading officials of the local Russian administration in Javat district. The most extensive smuggling case that was well recorded and associated with his name involved the smuggling of 40,000 bullets from Baku to Iran by ship.¹⁴

New documents recently discovered in the Historical Archives of Azerbaijan delve into this affair and link Karbalā'ī to all the issues discussed in this article. Most important of all is the report sent by the commander of the Border Brigade at the Elizabetpol province, holding the rank of Rotmistr, to Colonel Ziss. The former reported to Ziss that the Shahsevan tribe had joined forces with Nūrūz Khān, the chief of the Qoja-Beylī clan (Tapper 1997: 429), for a joint militant offensive against the Russian forces with a view to expelling them from their territories. He further informed that within Iran itself, anti-Russian propaganda had expanded accordingly, and that the market for weapons and ammunition was growing. He added that the name of the person who accompanied the 40,000 bullets shipment, from Baku to the border area, was Javat, who resided on the Russian side of the border, while Ayaz—the brother of Nūrūz Khān Qoja-Beylī—came to meet Javat in order to receive the shipment from him.¹⁵ The information, which was supplied on this matter by Javat during his investigation led Alshevsky to update Majit Talishkhanov, the head of the Javat district, on the matter, demanding from him to investigate into it and extend his information and intelligence gathering efforts.

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- 12 Special Section, Caucasian Viceroyalty to Martynov, July 9, 1912, *NHARA/46/1/222*, no. 1455.
 13 Ashevsky to Martynov, July 29, 1912, *NHARA/46/1/222*, no. 771.
 14 "Protocol of Investigation", July 4, 1912, *NHARA /45/1/130*.
 15 Commander, Elizabetopol' Brigade to Commander, 29th Brigade, May 27, 1912, *NHARA/46/1/222*, no. 20.

Talishkanov did as ordered and as a result he was able to identify Karbalā'ī as the person who through his extensive network handled the smuggling operations.¹⁶

5 Conclusions

Illegal trafficking of Russian weapons and ammunition along the Southern Caucasus region of the Irano-Russian border had been noticed by Russian authorities already by the late decades of the 19th century, but it was during the time of heightened tension between Russia and the Ottoman Empire on the eve of WWI that these activities especially alarmed the Russian authorities, both the local and the imperial. On the background of such tense relations, Russians became aware of the activities of Ottoman secret agents who were working to entice the local Muslim population of the Southern Caucasus against their Russian rulers by attempting to revive their religious sympathies. As the events of WWI showed, the Ottomans failed to attract the Muslim uprising against Russia.

The Ottomans also tried to involve Turkophone tribes in Northwestern Iran against the Russians. Here, the Shahsevan, a Turkic tribe, and especially its Khalfali and Qoja-Beyli clans, may have had pro-Ottoman tendencies, but they also had their own reason to resent the Russians. They were probably the main clients in Northwestern Iran for smuggled Russian weapons and ammunitions, which they used against the Russian forces, more for the defense of their tribal territories than out of solidarity with the Ottoman cause.

In these smuggling activities Yūsif Karbalā'ī stands out in both the large quantities that he and his family network smuggled from Russia into Northwestern Iran and also with regards to his close ties with high local Russian officials in the Southern Caucasus. The impending war and all that was said about the activity of Ottoman secret agents operating in the Southern Caucasus, as well as the heightened smuggling of Russian weapons and ammunition, form the background to Karbalā'ī's indictment as the head of the weapons and ammunition smuggling network, which operated between the Russian district of Javat in Baku and Ardabil on the Iranian side. The punishment, which was given to Karbalā'ī for such a severe crime (which endangered Russian soldiers, security, and interests), was only a light fine. It was proof of Karbalā'ī having very strong connections among top Russian military personnel and administrative workers who assisted him in his illegal activities and benefitted from

¹⁶ "Protocol of Investigation", *ibid.*

them, but did not want their involvement to be exposed; yet it was also a kind of warning to Karbalā'ī that following the intensive investigation into his activities in 1912, they wanted Karbalā'ī to downgrade the scope of his high-profile smuggling activities with regards to weapons and ammunition, or even cease them temporarily, especially in a period of Ottoman and Shahsevan activities against the Russians.

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