

# CAUCASUS HISTORY – Social Structure

## Overview

In the Caucasus, since the ancient times class boundaries have always existed and societies were divided into social layers according to their wealth and lineage. This hierarchy included the upper class - the monarch and nobles; the middle class – knights or soldiers, and city dwellers; and the lower class – slaves, or laborers and peasants.

This stratification existed for centuries till the Bolshevik Revolution. The Soviets' official doctrine was to create a classless society and establish the *dictatorship of the proletariat*. However, after Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) a new class, the so called *Nepmen* (private entrepreneurs) appeared, but it was liquidated as a class at the end of the 1920s. After the 80s, the official doctrine was violated by the existence of a ruling class that was made up of high-ranking party officials and people who held key administrative positions called the *Nomenklatura*.

## ANCIENT PERIOD

### SOUTH CAUCASUS:

**GEORGIA:** In Georgia, a class of wealthy aristocrats who later became rulers of the south Caucasus were led by a sovereign whose authority was hereditary. According to the *Geographica* written by Strabo, the Georgian population was divided into groups: at the top were the king and aristocrats, then the clergy, knights, landlords, and slaves.

**ARMENIA:** Armenian social stratification carried influences of Persian customs. The monarchy was at the top. The nobles, knights, city dwellers, laborers, peasants came after the monarch, and slaves were the lowest class. Slave labor was mainly used in the construction of palaces, fortresses, temples and irrigation canals.

**AZERBAIJAN:** During ancient times, there were state organizations in the south and large tribal unions in the north of the Caucasian Albania. These unions were governed by tribal leaders. Within the tribal unions, at the top of the layers, tribal leaders, warriors and priests. Second layer included military officials and farmers, the third layer consisted of common people. There were a fourth class of free men who engaged with agriculture, crafts and trade.

### NORTH CAUCASUS

**CHECHNYA:** The Nakh people were a clan-based and egalitarian society. Chechen (and Ingush) society has always been unstratified. Each clan was ruled by a chieftain. Clans and villages were autonomous. Clans were different sizes but equal in status.

## Discussion/Questions

1. How did the Persians influence the social structure of the South Caucasus?

## Reading

- 1- Chernykh, E.N., *Nomadic Cultures in the Mega-Structure of the Eurasian World*, Academic Studies Press, 2017
- 2- Khachikyan, A., *History of Armenia, A Brief Review*, Edit Print, 2010.
- 3- Payaslian, S., *The History of Armenia, From the Origins to the Present*, Palgrave McMillan, 2007.
- 4- Rayfield, D., *Edge of Empires, A History of Georgia*, Reaktion Books, 2012.
- 5- Zardabli, Ismail bey, *The History of Azerbaijan*, Rossendale Books, 2014.

## **POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD**

### **SOUTH CAUCASUS:**

**GEORGIA:** In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Georgian nation was split into patroni (lord, master), and qma (vassal or serf).

The aristocrats or upper-class nobles were divided into two classes: Tavadi and Didebuli. Eristavi was another class name used for the prince and upper-class nobles till the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The lowest member of this class were called Aznauri.

Till the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Georgia had a traditional class structure, partly sharing the class structure of the Ottomans and the Persians. The country was ruled by kings, and below the king there were princes of various ranks and major and minor landed gentry.

**ARMENIA:** In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, at the top of the social strata was the king. The state's ruling class was divided into major and minor feudal landlords. Major feudal lordship was hereditary, while minor landlords gained their positions based on their service. The State Council included only major landlords. The nakharars (princely lords) were the real masters and they had their own armies. For example, the Bagratuni family was one of the nakharars. The nakharars governed by ter or nahapet. The second rank was the azats (ostaniks - knights) comprised of middle and minor nobility. At the lowest strata were the Ramiks and shinakans (peasants), and struks (slaves).

### **AZERBAIJAN:**

In the 10<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> century, the leading class was composed of the king, who was both head of the army and ruler, clergymen, warriors, farmers and ordinary people. The peasants were divided into two groups: uluc and azad (free) peasants.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the feudal leading class included the Sultan, military aristocracy-amirs and commanders of military garrison, meliks (local settled nobility), civil bureaucracy, and the clergy (theologians and lawmakers).

In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, at the top of the strata was the shah who had unlimited authority, then came military aristocrats, supreme Shia confessors, civil aristocrats and main local aristocrats. The main part of the urban population was composed of craftsmen and tradesmen. Big land-owners, merchants, clergy, and administrative officers had the highest status in the urban population.

### **NORTH CAUCASUS:**

**CHECHNYA:** The social structure of the North Caucasian society was based on the clan or tribal system. The tribal bonds were very strong among the Vainakhs in determining their social and political relations. Within the Vainakh society, there was no aristocracy. They were composed of large families and clans and their members considered themselves free and equal to each other.

At the top of the feudal structure was the *èèla* (the prince) followed by the nobility, *uzdens* (vassals and clergymen), *halkhoi* (freemen), *yalkhoi* (servants), *lesh* (serfs), and finally *yïisarsh* (the slaves and war captives).

At the lowest level of the social structure, there was an extended family. These families shared common property and responsibilities. Closely related extended families formed a clan, and the unification of the clans formed the tribes.

### **Discussion/Questions**

- 1- How could the tribes stick to tribal bonds and elect their leaders through a democratic system in the North Caucasus?
- 2- How did the people in the South Caucasus preserve their traditional class system despite numerous invasions and occupations?

### **Reading**

- 1- Coene, F., *The Caucasus An Introduction*, Routledge, 2010.
- 2- Khachikyan, A., *History of Armenia, A Brief Review*, Edit Print, 2010.
- 3- Payaslian, S., *The History of Armenia, From the Origins to the Present*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.
- 4- Celikpala, M., *Search for a Common North Caucasian Identity: The Mountaineers' Attempts for Survival and Unity in Response to the Russian Rule*, Thesis, Bilkent University, 2002.
- 5- Akhundova, N., *The History of Azerbaijan, "Short course of lectures"*, Baku Business University, 2018.
- 6- Zardabli, I. B., *The History of Azerbaijan: from ancient times to the present day*, Rossendale Books, 2004.
- 7- *Historical Dictionary of Georgia*, The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2007.
- 8- *Edge of Empires, A History of Georgia*, Reaktion Books, 2017.

## **EARLY MODERN PERIOD**

### **SOUTH CAUCASUS**

**GEORGIA:** At the top of the social stratum was the monarch. The upper class was divided into three classes: the senior nobility, *didebulni*; the lesser nobility, *aznaurni*; and the lowest class who worked as officials in the king's estates, the *msakhurni*. The lower classes included the urban population, free peasantry, serfs, and slaves.

**ARMENIA:** At the top of the social stratum was the king. As the second class, there were nobles, the *nakharars*, who had princely status in the country. The *nakharars* also survived in the region until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Under the Persians, *the Melik's* (princes) were another class that played an important role in defending the Armenian character of their country against occupants.

**AZERBAIJAN:** In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, at the top of society were the khans, sultans, meliks, clergy, beys, aghalars, and elbeyi. The khan was the head of the country and possessed unlimited power. Below him were the khan's council and the courts that played an essential role in the administrative system of the khanates. The court organs were divided into the divan, shariat and asnaf. Beys and aghalars had control over the peasants. The peasants were divided into *raiyats*, *rancbars* and *elats*. The elbeyi fulfilled a military obligation.

### **NORTH CAUCASUS**

**CHECHNYA:** In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the *tukhumtaip* egalitarian system continued. Social distinctions in Chechen society were based not on class, but rather on geographic tribal unions called *tukhums* which consisted of a number of clans called *taips*. Each clan has its own supreme council of elders. The council included the oldest *taip* members called *aksakkals*.

## 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### SOUTH CAUCASUS

**GEORGIA:** During the Russian annexation, Georgian society was hierarchical, and the country was still ruled by royal families. Below them were the princes, the *tavadi*, and below the princes there were two classes of nobility: *aznauri* or *takhtis aznauri* which were dependent on the king, and *mtsire aznauri* which served the princes, aznauri, and the Church. Peasants made up the bulk of Georgian society. Later all royal families were deposed by the Russians and exiled elsewhere in the Empire.

**ARMENIA:** When the Russians moved in Armenia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Armenian nobility disintegrated and what left in Armenia were the middle class (craftsmen or merchants) and a mass of peasants. Under Russian rule, the middle class prospered when capitalism and industrialization arrived in Transcaucasia.

**AZERBAIJAN:** The Khanates were ruled by the Khans. After the annexation by the Russians, the Khanates were dissolved and the territory was administered by Russian officials. After the khanates overthrown, the higher class became the *bays*. The peasants constituted the lower class. The second class were *kandkhudas*. The third class was consisted of merchants and artists.

### NORTH CAUCASUS:

**CHECHNYA:** The basis of Vainakh social structure was the *teip* (tribe). Each teip had a council of elders led by *thamda* (civilian chief). *Teips* consisted of several *gars* (clans). At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were 130 *teips*. Two-thirds of them formed nine *tukkhums* which were Chechen; the five *tukkhums* were Ingush; and the rest belonged to the outside tribal unions.

#### Questions:

1- Based on the readings, did the Russians implement cultural assimilation or administrative assimilation during the 19<sup>th</sup> century?

#### Readings:

- 1- Hovannisian, R. G., "Russian Armenia. A Century of Russian Rule", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* Neue Folge, Bd. 19, H. 1 (MÄRZ 1971), pp. 31-48.
- 2- Jaimaoukha, A.M., *The Chechens: A Handbook*, RoutledgeCurzon, 2005.
- 3- Zelkina, A., "Islam and Society in Chechnia: From the Late Eighteenth to the Mid-Nineteenth Century", *Journal of Islamic Studies*, July 1996, Vol. 7, No. 2, ISLAM IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS (July 1996), pp. 240-264.

## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### SOUTH CAUCASUS:

**GEORGIA:** In the 1920s-1930s, all the classes existed during the Russian Empire (the nobels, clergy, merchants, townsman, rich peasants *kulaks*) were forcibly moved from their homeland, deprived of their possessions, or totally eliminated. The Proletariat was the new ruling class. After Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) a new class so called *Nepmen* (private entrepreneurs) appeared and it was liquidated as a class at the end of the 1920s.

The Soviet Union's official doctrine was to built classless society where everybody was equal, and to establish the *dictatorship of the proletariat*. However, after the 80s, this system changed and the ruling class became high-rank party officials and the people who held key administrative positions called the *Nomenklatura*.

With the Collectivization during Stalin, there was a new class *kolkhozniki*, peasants who worked in collective farms. The other class *sluzhashchie* (white color employees).

## **ARMENIA:**

The instrument of revolution was not the peasantry, but the urban working class. At the top of the social ladder was an urban bourgeoisie, merchants and industrialists. These groups also controlled the developing market economy in the Caucasus. The official Soviet Armenian threefold classification consisted of *sluzhashchie* (white color employees – state officials), workers and peasants. Baku had a developing Armenian middle class, that was loyal to the Russian administration. During Stalin's Collectivization, a new class of peasants, *kolkhozniki* were united in collective farms. Land owner's class was liquidated.

**AZERBAIJAN:** The majority of Azerbaijanis were peasants. In late 1918, Baku had a developing Armenian middle class. There was also working class working in the oil industry. During Collectivization, peasants, *kolkhozniki* were united in collective farms.

## **NORTH CAUCASUS:**

**CHECHNYA:** Chechen society was organized as *tukkhum* (unions of clans) and there were about 100 mountain and 70 plain *teips*. Each *teip* had its own elected council of elders. The head of the council was a civilian chief (*thamda*). *Teips* are divided into *gar* (branches), and *gars* into *nekye* (patronymic families). During the Soviet Union, the village assemblies with their councils of elders were abolished. The Soviets weakened traditional *teip* institution. Since 1990, new *teip* structures were created. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Chechen National Congress was formed and elected its president. A new class, the elites took shape after the demise of the Soviet Union.

## **Questions:**

1- By introducing a *New Economic Policy* (NEP), why did the Soviets create a new wealthy class like *Nepmen* contradicting the establishment of a classless society?

## **Readings:**

- 1- Layton, K.S., *Chechens Culture and Society*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.
- 2- Gachechiladze, R. "The Social Structure of the Population as a Social Dimension of the Democratic System (the Case Study of the Republic of Georgia)", NATO programme of "Democratic Institutions Fellowship", Department of Human Geography, Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia, 1995-1997
- 3- Fitzpatrick, S. "Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia", *The Journal of Modern History*, Dec., 1993, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Dec., 1993), pp. 745- 770
- 4- Payaslian, S., *The History of Armenia: From the Origins to the Present*, PalgraveMacMillan, 2007.
- 5-Jaimoukha, A., *The Chechens, A Handbook*, RouledgeCurzon, 2005.