

## Article

# The Establishment and Dissolution of the Subbotnik Communities of Petrovka as a Case Study Reflecting Shifts in Russian Geopolitical Interests toward Raskol'nik Religious Settlements in Southern Caucasus, 1909–1915

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**Abstract:** Toward the middle of the nineteenth century, a large Subbotnik community established itself in the village of Privol'noe in the Lankaran district of Baku province in Southern Caucasus. By early 1909, however, the names of two small Subbotnik communities—both in the settlement of Petrovka, near Privol'noe—began to appear in the documents of the Baku province administration. While the Privol'noe community has been thoroughly studied, those of Petrovka remain largely unexplored. At their peak, Petrovka's two Subbotnik communities were divided, belonging to different Jewish streams, and segregated from each other. Based mainly on documents from the National Historical Archives of the Republic of Azerbaijan (NAHARA), this study uncovers these communities and compares their religious life with each other. It does so in the context of the Russo-Ottoman and Irano-Russian geopolitical rivalries in Southern Caucasus. The study explains how and which aspects of this struggle led Russia to originally establish communities like Petrovka at the start of the examined period. It further explores why Russia later lost interest in supporting the Petrovka communities by the end of said period.

**Keywords:** Subbotnik settlements; Southern Caucasus; 19th–20th centuries



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## 1. Introduction

Before settling in the Caucasus, the Subbotniks lived among the Orthodox (Pravoslav) Russian population. In the second half of the eighteenth century, some Orthodox Russians began Judaizing, earning the name “Subbotniks” (“Subbota” in Russian means “Sabbath”) for observing the Sabbath—one of the most important principles in Judaism (Zhuk 2011, p. 336; L'vov 2011, p. 14). As they deviated from Orthodoxy like other Raskol'nik sects (“Raskol”, meaning “schism” in Russian, thus referring to schismatic groups rejecting Orthodoxy),<sup>1</sup> the Subbotniks soon faced persecution in central Russia, especially in their main places of residence, between Voronezh and Saratov (L'vov 2011). In 1825, and after regarding them (and other Raskol'niks) as a domestic threat, Czar Alexander I (r. 1801–1825) decreed to expel all those who openly identified themselves as Raskol'niks, including the Subbotniks, from central Russia. Accordingly, they were exiled to remote and peripheral regions, such as Siberia and the Caucasus, thus making 1825 a milestone in the oppression of the Subbotniks (Breyfogle 2011, p. 371). Part of the exiled Subbotniks were settled in Southern Caucasus, and it is this group, especially those settled in the Lankaran district of Baku province, which forms the focus of discussion in this article.

The main claim of this article is that the settlement of the Subbotniks that were settled in Lankaran was not only for punitive purposes, but also served Russian geopolitical interest in the region. Therefore, this study is set in the historical framework of Russia's domestic threats and its regional geopolitical rivalries in Southern Caucasus and in the theoretical context of Russia's shifting interests. While these interests were at first to view

the Subbotniks as a domestic threat (thus the necessity to distance them from central Russia), later on, those interests shifted to view them as a buffer in Russia's regional rivalries in Southern Caucasus, and finally, shifting to having no interest in them at all. Therefore, the main assumption in this article is as follows: that Russia's fluctuating approach toward the Subbotnik communities of Petrovka—located in the Lankaran district of Baku province (gubernia) in Southern Caucasus—was indeed tied to its geopolitical rivalries against Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire, namely the two regional powers which bordered Russian-controlled Southern Caucasus from the south and west, respectively.

Apart from discussing the Petrovka communities, this article addresses the following questions: How did the Russo-Ottoman and Russo-Iranian struggle create a shared interest between the Subbotniks and the Russian government? What was the expression of such shared interests? Were there other factors apart from the Subbotnik of Lankaran's interest to freely and openly practice their religious beliefs and the Russian interests of having non-Muslim communities diluting the majority Muslim population of Southern Caucasus and forming as a buffer against Russia's regional rivals? Does the reason for the appearance of Petrovka's Subbotnik communities in the records of the Russian administration in the Lankaran district of Baku province at the beginning of the discussed period and its disappearance from those records at the end of that period correspond to the above-mentioned geopolitical rivalries? And if so, what are its expressions? Where did Petrovka's Subbotnik communities ultimately go, and based on what geopolitical circumstances and considerations did the Russian government lose interest in them?

## 2. Background

By 1828, following the two Irano-Russian wars at the beginning of the 19th century (1804–1813 and 1826–1828, which were ended by the Treaties of Golastan and Turmanchai, respectively), all of Southern Caucasus—which nominally were part of Iran—came under Russian control. Yet, cross-border ties—ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural—continued to persist (Multiple Authors 2011). It was therefore in Russia's interest to settle non-Muslims in Southern Caucasus in order to dilute the majority Shi'ite and pro-Iranian Muslim population in that region, especially in border districts like Lankaran. For Russia, the Subbotniks, as well as other Raskol'niks, seemed to be suitable tools for that purpose. Russia even gave those Subbotniks free-of-charge tracts of land to live and work on, and thus the Privol'noe community was created (in Russian, "Privol'no" means "free") (L'vov 2011, p. 29).

The completion of the Russian conquest of Southern Caucasus, located to the east of the Black Sea, added a new arena of conflict to the Russo-Ottoman rivalry, which before the conquest of Southern Caucasus was mainly limited to the north and west of the Black Sea. As far as the Ottomans were concerned, they saw the reality of the majority of the Caucasus being populated by Muslims as an opportunity of tilting them to support the Muslim Ottoman Empire against their Christian Russian rulers. By the middle of the 19th century, it became clear that the Ottomans had achieved this goal as far as the Muslims of Northern Caucasus were concerned, the majority of whom were Sunni Muslims. The resistance of those Muslims to the Russian rule, who were led by Imam Shamil, and their joining in the Crimean War (1853–1856) on the Ottoman side and against Russia was an expression of this Ottoman achievement. This success encouraged the Ottomans to try to win to their own side also the Muslims of Southern Caucasus. They first tried to do this via the use of Pan-Islamic propaganda, namely by stressing the fact that the Ottoman Sultan—a Sunni—was the leader (*khalifa*) of the entire Muslim world. This propaganda tactic, however, proved unsuccessful as the absolute majority of the Muslims of Southern Caucasus are Shi'a (Louër 2020, pp. 37–38; Yemelianova 2002, p. 70; Shahvar and Mishaev 2023, p. 59). Following the failure of the Pan-Islamic propaganda tactic, the Ottomans moved to adopt the Pan-Turkish propaganda tactic, which slightly helped to change the situation in Ottoman favor due to the linguistic identity of Turkish and Azeri, as well as the power of its influence on individual perceptions during the consolidation of the Azerbaijani

nationalism in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries (Shahvar 2023a, pp. 5–6).

These Ottoman attempts made Russia and its Caucasian administration take the necessary measures not only to prevent the violation of the existing geopolitical balance in Southern Caucasus by the Ottomans but even try to tilt it to the Russian side. Indeed, a number of steps in this direction were taken. These included creating a relationship of “dependence and patronage” between the local Russian administration in Southern Caucasus and the local Orthodox Muslim religious leadership, such as discovering and punishing the various Sufi preachers, whom the Orthodox Muslim leadership regarded as “charlatans” who wished to squint their main resource, namely the Muslim believers (Shahvar 2023b, pp. 2, 16–18).

In addition, encouraging non-Muslim religious minority settlements in Southern Caucasus, such as the Subbotniks and other Raskol’niks, formed as a means that Russia used in its geopolitical rivalry against the Ottomans. Thus, indeed, the Russian government approved expanding the Subbotnik communities of Lankaran by creating two more Subbotnik communities in Petrovka apart from that of Privol’noe. However, before discussing that issue in detail, it is necessary to mention another factor that was at play, which was the result of Russia’s social and political needs.

Although such needs are not the subject of our discussion, they are mentioned due to their creating pressures on the Russian government, pressures that, on 17 April 1905, brought Emperor Nicholas II (r. 1894–1917) to issue a decree ordering “to strengthen the beginning of religious tolerance.” The decree stipulated that those who abandoned the Orthodox Christian faith in favor of another Christian faith should not be persecuted, and their civil rights should not be violated. About a year-and-a-half later this procedure matured into another royal order by Nicholas II, granting the right to establish sects, introducing freedom of religion and conscience. As a result, a law was enacted on 17 October 1906, titled “the Freedom of Religion and Worship Law,” which, among others, became the founding law of the freedom of worship and authorized the establishment of sects (Waldron 1998; Ascher 2001; Borodin 2004; Werth 2014; Anonymous 1906, p. 1).

At the same time, it should be noted that with regard to the above-mentioned benefits, which the Subbotniks also enjoyed them, there was also a geopolitical Russian interest of great weight. Later, it will be seen how the said Russian interest was first allowed to meet the wishes of the Subbotniks and why the changing geopolitical circumstances later made Russian interests forsake them, this being in spite of the fact that the above-mentioned law from 1906 was not canceled.

### 3. The Establishment and Development of the Subbotnik Settlements in the Lankaran District

According to a report that the local authorities of the Lankaran district sent to the governor of Baku province in 1863 (which covered the events of the year 1862), Privol’noe was the earliest among the Subbotnik settlements of Lankaran. The above report, as well as reports from other districts of Baku province, included detailed evidence and statistics on the extent of not only the Subbotnik but also other Raskol’nik settlements—such as Molokans, Voskresniks, Dukhobors, and many more—in all the districts of Baku province.<sup>2</sup> This article deals with the case of the Subbotnik communities of Petrovka as a case study representing a larger and wider Russian program to separate them, as well as the other Raskol’niks, from the Orthodox population. Thus, they were exiled from the heart of the Russian empire to its periphery. This exile was not only carried out as an act of punishment for their decision to leave Orthodox Christianity but also in order to prevent them from converting more Orthodox to their new faiths. This also concerned those who were settled in Southern Caucasus, an act which, apart from its punitive dimension, also had the geopolitical dimension (and interest) of settling non-Muslims in a region that is populated by majority Muslims near the borders of both the Ottoman Empire and Iran. It should be

remembered that the Subbotnik communities discussed in the present article form as a touchstone to a wider phenomenon.

Returning to discussing the Subbotniks of Lankaran, we can say that apart from the above-mentioned report and testimonies on the Subbotnik communities of 1862, there is also important evidence from 1881, in the form of a report which appeared in the newspaper *Kavkaz*. The report revolved around an interesting decision by the Lankaran authorities to allow a group of 22 Jewish families to come to that district in order to marry their daughters to local Subbotniks (T. B. 1881, pp. 2–3). This approval is of great importance since it was given long before the Freedom of Religion and Worship Law of 1906. It raises the question of what Russian interest such an approval served, especially in light of the fact that the Lankaran district, only some 20 km from the Irano-Russian border along Southern Caucasus, is heavily populated by Shi‘a Muslims, who were religiously and culturally different from the Subbotniks? Contrary to the persecution of Subbotniks in the heart of the Russian Empire, the local Russian authorities in the Lankaran district not only refrained from oppressing or persecuting the local Subbotniks but by allowing those 22 families to move there actually helped to increase the number of their community and even provided them with land and exemption from lease fees and taxes (Dymshitz 2000, pp. 37, 39; Zhuk 2004). Thus, by the end of 1862, most of the Subbotniks of Baku province were residing in the Lankaran district, totaling some 2573, while just over 100 in Baku and Shamakha, and almost none or very few Subbotniks resided in most of Baku province’s other districts.<sup>3</sup>

Another point that needs to be emphasized is that the official permission from 1881 to allow the above-mentioned 22 families to move and settle in the Lankaran district was actually an exception to the rule which forbade Jews to leave the “Pale of Settlement” (where most of the Jews of the Russian Empire were concentrated) and settle in other places of the Russian empire. Such relocations were also forbidden from other places in Russia (i.e., out of the “Pale of Settlement”), and securing permission for such relocations was only in very exceptional cases (Zelenina and Mamedov 2018). Thus, both the initial settlement of Subbotniks in Lankaran, the privileges provided to them for settling there, and the permission granted to the above-mentioned group of the 22 families to move to Lankaran in 1881 all seem to indicate the importance that the Russian authorities attached to their settlement therein, which seems to have been part of a wider policy of settling non-Muslims in Southern Caucasus.

During the period under discussion, we find that in the Lankaran district alone, there was a Karaite Jewish Subbotnik community in Privol’noe and two communities in Petrovka: one slightly different than the one in Privol’noe and also an Orthodox Jewish community. In 1909, the Subbotnik community of Privol’noe was composed of 160 members aged 21 and over.<sup>4</sup> The governor of Baku province, Vladimir Alshevsky (1905–1915), wrote that these were Subbotniks who had adapted to Judaism according to the Jewish-Karaite stream, and thus called them “Subbotnik-Karaites”, as stated in one of his appeals to the Lankaran district branch of the Interior Ministry.<sup>5</sup>

It can be speculated that the communities of Petrovka were mostly composed of those who had left the Privol’noe community because Karaite Judaism did not fit their beliefs. The Petrovka communities may also have absorbed new settlers; but a comparison between the estimated numbers of Privol’noe community members in early 1863 (adding to it the natural growth of over one-and-a-half percent)<sup>6</sup> with those of 1909 shows a decline. Although this decline could be explained by immigration to the Holy Land, which was then still under Ottoman rule—a process that had already been in existence at the time for a number of decades—yet, given the fact that the number of immigrants was still very small and also not frequent (Dymshitz 2000, p. 45), requires an alternative explanation for the decline in the number of the Privol’noe’s community. Therefore, it seems more reasonable that the decline was more due to the splitting of the Privol’noe community into three separate communities, namely that of Privol’noe and the two new Petrovka communities, each based on its own specific belief and their particular affiliation to a different stream in Judaism. For example, Subbotniks who belonged to the Orthodox

stream split themselves from Privol'noe, which was conducted according to the Karaite stream. After all, the Karaite stream does not recognize the *Halacha* (Jewish religious law), which the members of the Orthodox stream live by. This means that as long as they lived together in the Privol'noe community, the Orthodox Jews were forced to maintain their religious life via various compromises.

The differences between the various streams of the Subbotniks of Privol'noe and Petrovka were reflected in a report (which will be discussed later in detail) prepared by A. Dunayev, the official of the Georgian Eparchy, who mentioned them while detailing the religious life in the three communities discussed here. Thus, the establishment of a purely Orthodox community in Petrovka, completely separate from Privol'noe's Karaites, could have had more chances of attracting other Orthodox members to it compared to the original mixed community with the Karaites of Privol'noe. In turn, the development of each of those particular communities resulted in the expansion of the entire Jewish settlement in the Lankaran district. By 1915, which marks the end of the period under study in this article and the dissolution of the Petrovka communities by the orders of the Russian government, we will see the return of those numbers of community members back to Privol'noe.

The relative freedom with which the Russian government allowed the Subbotniks (and also the other Raskol'niks) to open prayer houses contributed to their development as well, and by 1909, there were quite a few such prayer houses in Lankaran alone.<sup>7</sup> In comparison, the Bahá'ís of Baku, who already in 1901 began to seek permission to open their own house of prayer (a permission which was granted by the Russian government),<sup>8</sup> was finally opened eight years later, in 1909, due to intentional bureaucratic delays,<sup>9</sup> and even then, under the guise of an organization for the promotion of education ([Shahvar 2023a](#); interview with S. Ayyubov 2023). This is because the authorities of Baku province, at least until 1909, considered the Bahá'ís to be a Shi'i Muslim sect.<sup>10</sup> This is where the contradiction between the Jewish/Subbotnik and Bahá'í cases could be explained in relation to the geopolitical goals of the Russian government: on one hand, they encouraged the development and expansion of the non-Muslim settlements, such as the Subbotniks and other Raskol'niks, in order to interrupt the Muslim territorial continuum and the logistics of the Ottoman agents' activity in Southern Caucasus, while at the same time to create a buffer between local Shi'a Muslims and Iran; on the other hand, the establishment of a prayer house for the Bahá'ís was delayed since the Baku authorities considered them as a Muslim sect and had no interest in the development and expansion of Muslims, but rather of non-Muslims.

In September 1909, a request was submitted to the Russian local authorities in the Lankaran district to establish a Subbotnik community in Petrovka. This request was submitted by a group of 50 adult members of a Subbotnik sect who called themselves "Subbotniki-Yehudistvuiushie", namely "Subbotniks who lead the way of the Jewish religion" (and this is, of course, in the eyes of the sect's members).<sup>11</sup> The request was positively discussed by the Russian authorities.<sup>12</sup> The official establishment of the community was approved on 12 February 1910, and in a letter to the authorities, the members of this sect announced that they had elected one of their own members, a man named Danila [Danieil or Daniel] Ponomariov, as the head of their community.<sup>13</sup>

Ponomariov's community is also mentioned in Dunayev's report. In that report, which Dunayev prepared for the Russian Ministry of Religions, he stated that the vast majority of the Subbotniks in Baku province lived in the Lankaran district and that beyond the Subbotnik community in the village of Privol'noe, there were Subbotniks in Petrovka who lived in two separate and distinct communities that were shut off from each other. This, according to Dunayev, was despite the fact that the two communities in Petrovka had many common characteristics; their members were of Russian origin and lived according to following (see below) principles of Judaism. Among these, Dunayev emphasized that both communities gave supreme status to the Torah (the Pentateuch), which they both placed above all other holy books and which guided their lives in a rather dominant way.

He added that these two Subbotnik communities observed the Jewish Sabbath and that circumcision was mandatory in both communities.<sup>14</sup>

All the characteristics that Dunayev mentioned in his report regarding the two distinct Subbotnik sects in Petrovka characterized them even in the period before their arrival in Southern Caucasus. It is possible that the members of these two communities had once been part of one unified sect, which later split into two groups when they began to isolate themselves from each other. Dunayev emphasized that, with the exception of the above-mentioned common characteristics, the two Subbotnik communities of Petrovka differed from each other in almost everything else. He defined one of those communities as “Jewish-Talmudists” (the Subbotnik communities which are defined as such are sometimes referred to in the existing research as *Gers*) (L’vov 2002, pp. 300–12; Dror 1979). Dunayev reported that “Jewish-Talmudists” have an ark and mezuzahs, they put on tassel (*tefillin*) and a *kippah* on their heads, pray with a tassel, and celebrate “all the Jewish holidays”; they learn Hebrew; live in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah (*Mashiah*); and believe that he would be the material king who would resurrect the Kingdom of Israel.<sup>15</sup>

Dunayev distinguished the other Subbotnik community of Petrovka from the “Jewish-Talmudists” by noting some characteristics that were unique only to them, whom he called “Subbotniks-Biblicists”. As he explained, this was because, apart from circumcision, the other Jewish ceremonies did not take place among them. He noted that, with few exceptions, the “Subbotniks-Biblicists” did not learn Hebrew, despised the Talmud and the Kabbalah, and recognized only the Pentateuch. Dunayev concluded that the religious life of the “Subbotniks-Biblicists” is reminiscent of that of the Karaites, adding that some of them indeed do respect and perform Karaite rituals.<sup>16</sup> Apparently, the members of the community in question (the Subbotnik-Biblicists) acted as Karaites even when they were members of the Privol’noe community, which developed as a Karaite community; and from Dunayev’s descriptions, it is possible to understand that after becoming an independent community, the members of the Subbotnik-Biblicists community began to develop differently from their neighbors in Petrovka and in Privol’noe communities.

According to Dunayev, in the context of the religious and social life of both communities of Petrovka, the “Subbotnik-Talmudic” community had a butcher (*shochet*) who worked according to the laws of Jewish kosher laws (*kashrut*), while the “Biblicists” had no butchers at all and the cattle breeders in this community used to slaughter animals themselves. He noted that this was one of the main reasons that the “Subbotniks-Talmudists” could not dine at the table of the “Biblicists”, did not marry their daughters, and even rejected them.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the above information, Dunayev’s report highlights Russia’s change in interest in the Subbotniks, which was mentioned earlier, namely from any lack of interest in them to showing an interest to the extent of sending Dunayev to prepare a report on them. Furthermore, the Subbotniks of Lankaran (whose ancestors were previously persecuted by the Russian authorities) not only updated the Russian representative about their communities, but they also harnessed the authorities to their own ends, which was also the indicator of their social evolution. These mutually beneficial interests could be seen, for example, in the case of the estate left by the Klishin family who lived in the Privol’noe community. The deceased parents left behind two minors, as well as a number of adults who, according to Russian law, were not qualified to act as guardians for their minor brothers. Thus, the community leadership in Privol’noe hurried to appoint a guardian from the community, this being out of their financial interest to benefit from the minors’ share of the estate, but formally explaining their appointment on the grounds that it was necessary to meet the expenses of the minors till their reaching adulthood, namely the age of 21. One of the two minors was 18 years old, and he was the one who harnessed the Russian local authorities to help him on the grounds that guardianship over minors applied only to their education and not to their property. He therefore warned against the aforementioned intent of the estate’s realization by the guardianship appointed by the local community leadership. The Russian local government intervened in favor of the minor, and thus, the community leadership had therefore to withdraw from the estate’s realization.<sup>18</sup>

The above-mentioned change in Russia's attitude toward the Subbotniks supplied the push to the Subbotniks in Lankaran in the context of their evolving religion and social life. Already before the end of 1910, they had communities with social hierarchy—from ordinary peasants to the religious leader (which was usually the *rabbi* of Jewish origin) and community leadership (as, for example, the above-mentioned Ponamariov). In 1912, the Privol'noe community came to the stage of unification between the community's leadership and its high religious position and appointed Iliya Kalinin to this unified position. Kalinin, who was 55 years old, was born in Privol'noe,<sup>19</sup> and this fact is an indicator of a new step in the evolving religious and social life. If, as stated above, throughout the 19th century, the Subbotniks sought to have their spiritual guiding authority to be Jewish by birth, the election of a community member Kalinin—who was a Russian and not Jewish by birth—indicates a change in the perception of the Privol'noe community members, and this relates to their social and religious development. This could be further strengthened by stating the following: if in 1881, the Subbotniks in Privol'noe desired the arrival of a group of Jews by birth in order to marry their daughters and thus create a Jewish generation, by choosing Kalinin—who was a Russian, born before 1881 and was not Jewish by birth—indicates a new stage of their social and religious development, namely a stage in which it is no longer important for the spiritual guide of their community to be Jewish by birth, and it is ok to be not Jewish by birth but who believes in the principles of the Karaite stream of Judaism.

#### 4. The Dissolution of Petrovka's Community in Light of Russia's Changing Geopolitical Needs

Russia's geopolitical interests in checking Ottoman attempts to win over the Muslims of Southern Caucasus have already been discussed. However, by 1912, it already became clear that a clear danger to Russia was also looming beyond the border with Iran. We learn about this danger from correspondence that began in 1912 between Alshevskii, the governor of Baku province, and Baron Tiesenhausen, the head of the Lankaran district. One of the specific manifestations of the danger in question was the smuggling of Russian weapons and ammunition to Iran, which during 1912 had already taken on monstrous proportions.<sup>20</sup> Correspondence between Alshevskii with the authorities above (i.e., the Governor-General of the Caucasus) and below him (head of Larnakan district) reveal that the Shahsevan—a Shi'i tribal group settled in various parts of North-Western Iran—were the main clients of Russian-made weapons and ammunition that were being smuggled to Iran, mainly for the purpose of attacking Russian forces stationed along the Irano-Russian border in conjunction with the impending Ottoman attack on Russia (which finally took place at the outbreak of WWI). Evidence shows that as early as 1912, and probably as part of a rehearsal, the Shahsevan carried out a heavy attack on the Russian border guards with Iran in the form of a continued non-stop attack which continued for ten hours, using smuggled Russian-made weapons and bullets against those Russian border guards.<sup>21</sup>

Concurrent with the clashes between Russian forces and the Shahsevan, Russian intelligence reported on the activities of Ottoman agents in Southern Caucasus, whose aim was to entice the local Muslim population against Russia and prepare them for an active resistance against Russia once the Ottomans start a war against it. The reports not only talked about Ottoman agents dressed as dervishes, as it was their usual practice,<sup>22</sup> but now also about two Ottoman agents dressed in luxurious clothing, creating an image of belonging to a higher status. With such an appearance, the locals (among whom there was also a Russian intelligence agent) received them with great respect and honor. The main message of all these agents was that the confrontation between Russia and the Ottoman Empire was inevitable and near, with Germany being on the Ottoman side.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, as is well known, the ties between the Ottomans and the Germans grew stronger to the point that in May 1913, the Germans even sent military advisers to upgrade the Ottomans militarily (Reynolds 2011, p. 40).

The message that the two above-mentioned Ottoman agents delivered to their Muslim audience was drained into a request from their listeners to steal or buy as many Russian

weapons and ammunition as possible. The Ottoman agents emphasized the existing difficulty of transferring the weapons and ammunition in large quantities to Ottoman hands.<sup>24</sup> This was because the vast majority of the Muslim population of Southern Caucasus live in the eastern part of Southern Caucasus, very distant from the Russo-Ottoman border, located in the western parts of Southern Caucasus. Thus, smuggling the Russian-made weapons and ammunition to the Ottoman territories via the Muslim-populated region of Southern Caucasus was logistically difficult and risky, and not only due to the existence of the many Raskol'nik communities which the Russian government had settled among the Muslim population of South-Eastern Caucasus (in accordance with its geopolitical needs), but also due to the pro-Russian Armenian and Georgian populations that populate the South-Western section, near the border with the Ottoman Empire. The Russians also encouraged the artificial increase in the Christianity population in the borderland via massive resettlements of Christian groups to Southern Caucasus. This was part of Russian policy to shift the demographic balance toward a non-Muslim population in Southern Caucasus (Shafiyev 2018, p. 9).

It was due to such difficulties that the Ottoman agents requested the Muslims of Southern Caucasus to smuggle the weapons and ammunition via the more feasible route, namely via the Muslim-populated part of Southern Caucasus and via the more accessible Irano-Russian border, into the hands of the Shahsevan tribe in North-Western Iran. The latter's attack on the Russian border outposts was designed to lead to initial success in the confrontation with the Russians and was supposed, according to the two aforementioned agents, to also cause Iran to join the war alongside the Ottomans and the Germans. Furthermore, the two Ottoman agents stated that the Ottoman government expected the Muslims of Southern Caucasus to actively participate in the Ottoman war effort against Russia.<sup>25</sup>

By 1915, the Russian government believed that the above-mentioned dangers and threats were not anymore relevant. First, the fear that Iran would join the Ottomans in the war against Russia did not materialize after Iran declared its strict neutrality in the war (1 November 1914). Secondly, according to the annual report of Colonel Leontiev, the head of the Gendarmerie of Baku province, covering the year 1915, beyond showing sympathy toward the Ottomans during WWI, the Muslims of Southern Caucasus did not actively join the Ottomans. In his report, Leontiev even stated that the Muslims in question "accept the war in a calm manner,"<sup>26</sup> probably meaning that they did not riot or join the Ottomans, adding that few of them even joined the Russian army in spite of the fact that the Russian law exempted them from military service.<sup>27</sup> However, as far as the Jews (including the Subbotniks) were concerned, Leontiev's report concluded the opposite. Apart from mentioning the ban against Jewish settlement in the Caucasus (which was imposed in October 1915 by Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolayevich, the Governor-General of the Caucasus, upon assuming this position), Leontiev's report also expressed the attitude of the high command of the Russian military, and especially that of the royal family, that the Jews constitute the political left in Russia, namely the supporters of progressive political forces that seek to undermine the Russian-monarchist rule.<sup>28</sup> (Shahvar and Mishaev 2023, pp. 57, 62–66). Thirdly, even the danger of the Shahsevan—whose attacks on the Russian border forces were supposed to encourage other militant tribes in Iran to join the war on the Ottoman side and share in the spoils—did not materialize. This was because such danger had already been eliminated on the eve of WWI, and more precisely, toward the end of 1913. This was due to the capture and interrogation of senior figures of the Shahsevan tribe, such as Samed Bek of the Khalfali clan<sup>29</sup> and Nuruz Khan of the Qoja-Beyli clan. These developments changed the motivations of the Shahsevan to continue fighting against the Russians.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the end of the Russian government's interest in the Subbotniks of Petrovka (and the expansion of the Subbotnik or Raskol'nik settlements in Southern Caucasus) took place shortly after the outbreak of WWI. Records from the Russian administration in Southern Caucasus for 1914–1915 indicate that the cause for this was connected to Russia's changing geopolitical circumstances. Indeed, we see that the Subbotnik settlements discussed here



not only did not expand but that the Russian local government in Baku even informed (30 December 1914) the Subbotniks of Ponomariov's community about the liquidation of their community.<sup>31</sup>

Delving deeper into the above decision further highlights the geopolitical game in which the Subbotniks played a role. When the Orthodox Subbotniks in Petrovka asked the Russian authorities to establish their separate community, they were given a positive response (in February 1910), and in the same year, they submitted another request, this time for permission to appoint D. Ponomariov as the head of their community. From the document dated 30 December 1914, it becomes clear that this latter request of the Orthodox Subbotniks of Petrovka was not discussed at all by the Russian authorities and was therefore not approved; however, as could be understood from what is said throughout this article, the local Russian authorities understood the geopolitical need in the community in question, and therefore chose not to inform the Orthodox Subbotniks that Ponomariov's appointment was not discussed at all (and therefore not approved). It was only at the dispersal of that community that the government resorted to explaining the reason why Ponomariov's candidacy was not considered. This was because there was no point in discussing such an issue if the establishment of the community did not meet the necessary standards without explaining what those standards were.<sup>32</sup> One should not expect the local Russian authorities to have detailed the standards upon which it first approved the establishment of the Orthodox community in February 1910 and later, in September 1910, to have ruled that that community did not meet the required standards. From the analysis of its 30 December 1914 decision, it appears that already in the fall of 1910, the local Russian authorities knew that the appointment of Ponomariov by the said Orthodox community was null and void since the community itself did not meet the required standards. However, the Russian local authorities did not disperse the said Orthodox community, and this means that there was an interest not to disperse it. A look at the documents that are related to the establishment of the Petrovka communities and later their dissolution highlights that the interest in those communities was of a geopolitical nature. After all, the geopolitical situation in Southern Caucasus actually changed with the outbreak of WWI, and in accordance with this change and the reasons that have already been specified, the geopolitical importance given to the settlement of the Subbotniks in question did not exist anymore.

Moreover, Jews were now being growingly regarded and identified by the Russian authorities as the progressive forces that could endanger the monarchic regime in Russia, which was in a sensitive state of war. Thus, Russia's interest was to reduce the number of Jewish communities in Southern Caucasus for a better and more efficient control of the region, and definitely not by increasing their numbers. Thus, the standards in question are none other than Russia's changing geopolitical interests. It was this interest that first led to the approval for the establishment of the Petrovka settlement in February 1910, for not dispersing it (as Russian standards required) already in the fall of the same year, and finally to dissolve it at the end of 1914.

In Petrovka, there was another community of Subbotniks, one that reminded the Karaite stream that was the dominant stream in the neighboring community of Privol'noe. Like the Orthodox Subbotnik community headed by Ponomariov, the Karaite community is also discussed a lot in the documents of the Russian local administration during the years when the Russian government had an interest in their settlement in Southern Caucasus. However, two out of the three Subbotnik communities in the district of Lankaran (namely the two Petrovka communities) disappear from the documents of the Russian administration after 1914. We do not find them in the Soviet documents either, but we do find Ponomariov and his many family members (a fact that actually was the main cause of him being chosen head of his community) in the list of members of the Privol'noe community, which by 1927 had increased to 530 adults over the age of 21.<sup>33</sup> This increase was despite the spiritual crisis that befell the Karaite communities in WWI (Grishchenko and Shapira 2021, pp. 110–13; Shapira 2005; Volkov 2020) and in comparison to 1909 when the Privol'noe community only numbered 160 adults (as reflected in their above-mentioned request to

establish their community). Even if we disregard the losses of life, especially during the war or due to plagues and diseases, multiply the number from 1909 and consider the addition of natural increase, which was mentioned before, there is no way to arrive at the number of 530 adults without considering the return or addition of the Petrovka communities' members back to the Privol'noe community.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, when it served the strategic interests of Russia, she allowed the establishment of Subbotnik communities in Petrovka so that they could live their religious life according to their conscience (what they could not have carried out in the framework of the Privol'noe community) and even to attract Jews from other places. The independent Orthodox community in Petrovka, totally separate from Privol'noe, could attract other Orthodox Jews to grow in number and develop, thus serving Russian geopolitical interests in Southern Caucasus. However, by late 1914, when this Russian interest was no longer relevant, and by the time that Jews were being identified as progressive forces that might endanger the monarchist regime in Russia, the Petrovka communities were dispersed, and their members were forced to go back into the Privol'noe community. So, if members of the Orthodox community (whose names we saw among the members of the Privol'noe community in 1927<sup>35</sup>) returned to the Privol'noe Karaite community, surely it was also carried out by the second community of Petrovka, whose beliefs resembled those of the Karaite community, as Dunayev had stated in his report. It should be mentioned that on the graves of some of the members of the Karaite community of Petrovka, the writing "Karaite" is engraved (Dymshitz 2000, p. 41).

Hence, based on the geopolitical interests of Russia during the years 1909–1910, much weight was given to the Subbotnik settlements, like those of Petrovka; but later, at the end of 1914, due to the changing circumstances, Russian interests no more supported the continued existence of those settlements, thus leading to the dissolution of the Subbotnik communities of Petrovka. Thus, the fate of the members of the Orthodox community deteriorated after being forced to gather back into the Karaite community of Privol'noe, but this deterioration dwarfed compared to what awaited them in the Soviet regime, which, as we know, did not encourage the development of religious life. It is not for nothing that we see in the documents from 1927 that the Soviet authorities requested the leaders of the Privol'noe community to submit a list of the members of their community, stating full details of their occupation, including the providers of religious services. Accordingly, the desired list was supplied with "farmer" being mentioned as the profession next to each name on the list, without exception.<sup>36</sup> If so, the bitter fate of the three united communities in Privol'noe, which were once separate from each other and prosperous from the religious and social point of view, began to deteriorate already at the end of the monarchical rule and intensified during the Soviet period. Thus, while at the end of the monarchical rule, the forced reunion of the three Subbotnik communities of Privol'noe and Petrovka damaged the process of their separate religious development, the Soviet period damaged not only the religious development of the united community but also its social development. As a result, within the reunited community, the members were forced to play down their unique religious life and their religious-social activity while outwardly appearing as a collective, in which all its members are farmers engaged in agricultural work, devoid of any religious tendencies.

## 5. Conclusions

At the center of our discussion here stand the three Subbotnik communities of the Lankaran district. This article not only updates the existing research about the Privol'noe community, but it also presents—via the review of correspondences between the representatives of the Imperial Russian administration in Baku province from the early 1860s—an explanation as to the relatively large number of Subbotnik settlements in the Lankaran district, and later—the establishment of the Subbotnik communities of Petrovka. These settlements of various Subbotnik communities corresponded to Imperial Russia's domestic and strategic objectives: domestically, to expel the Subbotniks, as well as other Raskol'niks,

from the heart of Imperial Russia to its periphery; and strategically, to settle non-Muslims among the majority Shi'i Muslim population of Southern Caucasus, near the Iranian border, a policy that also sought to place more obstacles in front of the logistics of the Ottoman agents' activity in that region during the Russo-Ottoman conflict therein.

These objectives settled with those of the Subbotniks who wished to escape the persecutions they experienced in their original locations. They took the opportunity presented to them by the Russian government with both hands, settled on the tracts of lands that the Russian government provided them in Southern Caucasus free of charge, worked those lands, and later also knew how to make the best of Imperial Russian government's decision to grant freedom of religion and worship at the end of 1906. Such benefits and conditions could have attracted additional Subbotniks (as well as other Jews and Raskol'niks) to establish their own community based on their own specific stream of Judaism and thus increase the number of Subbotnik communities of various streams, introducing more fragmentations in the Muslim territorial continuity than that which existed before. The creation of such varied communities was in contrast to the previous situation where all the Subbotniks of Petrovka were part of the Privol'noe community, which was Karaite in character and therefore did not particularly encourage members of other sects to come *en masse* and settle among them.

The reason for the appearance of the Subbotnik communities of Petrovka in the documents of the Russian administration in the Lankaran district of Baku province at the beginning of the discussed period and its disappearance at the end of that period corresponds to the geopolitical rivalry in Southern Caucasus between Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and Iran. Petrovka's communities appeared and then disappeared according to the changing geopolitical circumstances and interests of the Russian government. Thus, first they were established due to geopolitical risks and dangers identified by the Russian government, but later dissolved when those risks and dangers did not materialize.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Orthodox Christian Russians who deviated from Orthodox Christianity but were still living among the Orthodox population. The Czarist regime wished to keep them away from the Russian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Christian population after the seventeenth-century Church reforms.
- <sup>2</sup> Information about Raskol'nik Sects in the districts of Baku Gubernia, 1862. The Sects' Lists. In Head of Lankaran district to Baku province administration (report). 11 March 1863. No. 1064 in a file titled *From the Office of the Head of Baku Province (2 January–21 May 1863)*. National Historical Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan (hereafter: NHARA) (Baku). NAHARA/44/2/354.
- <sup>3</sup> Information about Raskol'nik Sects. In Head of Lankaran district to Baku province administration (report). 11 March 1863. NAHARA/44/2/354.
- <sup>4</sup> Privol'noe people's application [Zaiavlenie] to the institution of the district government. 9 July 1909. NHARA/44/2/1050.
- <sup>5</sup> Vladimir Alshevsky (Governor of Baku province) to the section of religion questions in the Lankaran district branch of the Interior Ministry. 18 April 1911. No. 8585 in NHARA/44/2/1084.
- <sup>6</sup> See note 3 above.
- <sup>7</sup> The information [Svedeniia]. NHARA/44/2/1063, pp. 23–24.

- 8 Dmitry Sipyagin (Russian Internal Minister) to Rosen General Mikhail Golitsyn (Head of the Caucasian's Civil Authority). 21 November 1901. No. 4124 in Russian State Historical Archive 821/8/845, p. 5.
- 9 Official [clerk] in the Office of Vice-Roy of His Emperor's Majesty in the Caucasus [signature is unclear] to the Head of the Office of the Vice-Roy of His Emperor's Majesty in the Caucasus. 22 December 1908. Georgian National Historical Archive (GNHA) GNHA/12/7/2608, pp. 36–37. Nikolai Peterson (Director of the Department of Instructions of the Office of the Vice-Roy of His Emperor's Majesty in the Caucasus) to General Mikhail Folbaum Sokolov-Sokolinskii (mayor of Baku city). 23 December 1908. No. 26506 in GNHA/12/7/2608, p. 38. While the former document attests to the bureaucratic dragging of the subject, the latter document indicates that the approval had already been given in 1901 and again in 1908.
- 10 Cover page of the file titled "About the request... to approve the statute of 'Ruhanie'—the Baha'i Muslim organization of Baku." 27 October 1909. NHARA/45/2/127.
- 11 Request of members from the Subbotniks-Yeudeistvuiushie community of Petrovka to the governor of Baku province. September 1909 (the day of the month is not mentioned). NHARA/44/2/1050.
- 12 Baku city branch of the Ministry of Interior to head of the Lankaran district. 17 October 1909. No. 17188 in NHARA/44/2/1050.
- 13 Request of members from the Subbotniks-Yeudeistvuiushie community of Petrovka to the office of the governor of Baku. September 1910 (the day of the month is not mentioned). NHARA/44/2/1050.
- 14 Dunayev's report, in Alshevsky to Section of Religious Questions in the Ministry of Interior. 12 November 1910. NHARA/44/2/1084.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 A. Klishin's complaint to the office of Baku province's governor. 14 December 1912. NHARA 44/2/1154.
- 19 The Protocol about Appointment of the Head of the Jewish Community of Privol'noe. 29 May 1912. NHARA/44/2/1151.
- 20 Report (secret). 21 June 1912. No. 3584 in NHARA/45/1/130.
- 21 Commissar Ziss (Commander of the 29th Border Brigade) to Vladimir Alshevskii (governor of Baku province). 7 June 1912. No. 750 in NHARA/46/1/222.
- 22 Colonel Leontiev (head of the Gendarmerie of Baku province) to Colonel Martynov (Mayor of Baku city). 27 October 1912. No. 5590 in NHARA/46/1/222.
- 23 Colonel Shiotkin (Head of the Special Section of the Royal Commissioner's Office in Tiflis/Tbilisi) to Mrtynov. 28 February 1912. No. 475 in NHARA/46/1/222.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Leontiev to Senator [Stepan Petrovitch] Beletsky. 24 October 1915 (secret). No. 6122 in NHARA/524/1/5.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Ibid; Leontiev to Beletsky. 31 October 1915 (secret). No. 6404 in NHARA/524/1/5.
- 29 Ziss to Alshevskii. 7 June 1912; Special Section, Caucasian Viceroyalty to Martynov. 20 June 1912. No. 1327 in NHARA/46/1/222.
- 30 Commander of the Elizabetopol' Brigade to Commander of the 29th Brigade. 27 May 1913. No. 20 in NHARA/46/1/222.
- 31 Reference [spravka]. 30 December 1914. No. 1482 in NHARA/44/2/1050.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 The protocols and lists of religious community members and religious clerics in Lankaran district. 5 October 1927. State Archive of Azerbaijani Republic/27/1/233.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid.

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