



# BAKIKHANOV, ABBAS-KULI-AGA

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**BAKIKHANOV, ABBAS-KULI-AGA** (ʿAbbāsḡoli Āḡā Bākiḡānuf; b. Əmircan, Azarbaijan, 21 June 1794; d. Wādi Fāḡema, in Arabia, 31 May 1847), 19th-century Azarbaijani polymath who composed works in Arabic, Persian, Russian, and Azeri Turkish ([Figure 1](#)).

Abbas-Kuli-Aga Bakikhanov, also known by the pen-name Qodsi, was born on 21 June 1794 in the village of Amir Ḥajan (present-day Əmircan/Amiradzhan) near Baku. Bakikhanov's father Mirzā Moḡammad Khan II (1770-1836) was the ninth khan of Baku, who was dethroned by his uncle Moḡammadḡoli Khan, the penultimate khan of Baku. At the age of seven, Bakikhanov started the traditional education at home; he later moved to Qubā where he studied Persian and Arabic and other customary academic subjects of the time for ten years. He excelled in Persian and made a thorough study of the great poets of Persian literature. Later, he learned Russian and French. Bakikhanov's mother, Sofia, was Georgian and, when in 1818 he moved to Tbilisi, he lived there with his maternal uncle. In 1820, he was employed in the Russian army as an interpreter for general Aleksey Petrovich Yermolov (1777-1861), commander in chief of the Russian armies in the Caucasus (1817-27). Except for eight years (1834-42) when he lived on the estate of his father in Quba, Bakikhanov remained in the service of the Russian government until 1845.

Tbilisi at this period was the cultural center of the Caucasus. Mirzā Šafi' Wāḡeḡ



(1794-1852), the Azarbaijani poet whose *gāzals* (q.v.) became famous in the German adaptation of Friedrich von Bodenstedt (1819-92); Mirzā Faṭḥ-‘Ali Āḳundzāda (q.v.), the Azeri playwright and reformer; Alexander Sergeevich Griboedov (q.v.), the Russian playwright and ambassador to Iran, who was killed in Tehran; Khachatur Abovyan (1809-48), the Armenian writer; and the Georgian poets Alexander Chavchavadze (1786-1846), Nikoloz Baratashvili (1817-45), and Grigol Orbeliani (1804-83), were all residing around this time in Tbilisi. Mikhail Lermantov (1814-41), the Russian writer, poet, and painter, joined this group, when he was forced into exile for writing an elegy on the death of Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837).

While in Tbilisi, Bakikhanov frequented two literary societies: the house of Chavchavadze, the founder of modern Georgian literature, where Āḳundzāda, Baratashvili, and Lermantov would also come regularly, and the literary and philosophical coterie called *Divān-e ‘Aql* (lit., “The Office of Reason”), which was held at Mirzā Šafi’s house (*Ādamiyat*, p. 18). During his stay in Tbilisi (1843-46), Bodenstedt also frequented this literary circle and later, after Mirzā Šafi’s *gāzals* had become famous, decided to publish Bakikhanov’s *Divān* into German. He wrote in his notebook (24 November 1861): “A new book is planned. Here ‘Abbāsḳoli deserves, more than Mirzā Šafi’, to be a representative of Oriental poetry” (*Ra’is-Niā*, p. 193).

Bakikhanov’s government service began in 1820 under General Yermolov as a secretary and interpreter, but after eleven years of service he did not rise higher than the rank of captain. When, in 1827, General Ivan Paskevich (1782-1856) replaced Yermolov, Bakikhanov’s career improved. He actively participated in the Russo-Persian War (1826-28), and, on account of his valor in the battle of Yerevan (see [EREVAN](#)) and Nakhchivan (see [NAKĴAVĀN](#)), received a special medal and was promoted to the rank of major. Paskevich wrote in his memoirs: “After coming to Georgia I found him [Bakikhanov] very capable and with good qualities and benefited from him in political affairs with full confidence” (Habib Oghlu, p. 186).

During the Russo-Persian War, Bakikhanov served as an interpreter for Ambassador Griboedov in the negotiation of the Treaty of Torkmānčāy and remained in Dehk<sup>v</sup>ārḳān (Āḳaršahr) until the signing of the treaty on 22 February 1828 (Habib Oghlu, p. 214; Anšāri, p. 69; *Ra’is-Niā*, pp. 195-97).

In addition to his military services, Bakikhanov was always involved in literary and scholarly activities. In 1823, he participated in gathering



ethnographic information for a survey of the Karabagh province (Bournoutian, 2011). In the Persian expedition, Bakikhanov was one of the officials who selected 166 manuscripts from the library of the tomb of Shaikh Şafi-al-Din Eshāq Ardabili (d. 1334), which were sent under special guard to the Imperial Library at St. Petersburg (Habib Oghlu, p. 218; Heşāri, p. 4). While serving in the Russo-Ottoman War (1828-29), in which he was awarded a medal of St. Vladimir for his service to the Russian army during the siege of Kars, Bakikhanov was also entrusted with the task of selecting books from the mosque library of Akhalkalaki (now in Georgia). He also purchased manuscripts for the Imperial Library in St. Petersburg. Throughout his life, Bakikhanov gathered a valuable collection of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish manuscripts, of which the Russian Orientalist Il'ya Nikolaevich Berezin (q.v.) speaks with admiration (p. 142). After Bakikhanov's death, his wife, Sakina, made a gift of these manuscripts to the Imperial Library (Ra'is-Niā, p. 203). In April 1829, Bakikhanov was promoted to the rank of colonel, and apparently it was during this campaign that he came to know Alexander Pushkin, who was visiting Erzurum.

After the replacement of Paskevich with Baron Roman Romanovich Rosen (1847-1921), whose policies were not in accord with Bakikhanov's ideas, he requested a two years' leave of absence; he traveled in the countries of North Caucasia, the Don, Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, where he met intellectuals and scholars. He stayed seven months in Warsaw, where he was honored by Paskevich, who was now the governor of Poland. It was there that Bakikhanov met Ismayil Bek Kutkashensky (1806-61), an Azarbaijani novelist and writer who was a high-ranking officer in the Russian army. After a short stay in St. Petersburg, Bakikhanov returned to Tbilisi, where he met Faṭḥ-ʿAli Ākūndzāda, and took him under his wing (Ādamiyat, p. 14). Their friendship continued for many years, but Bakikhanov, at this time, did not have an official position to help his young friend in his career. In fact, Ākūndzāda was appointed as the Oriental Interpreter of the governor of the Caucasus, the same job that Bakikhanov had some years earlier.

In 1836, Bakikhanov returned to the village of Amşar in Quba where he began the writing of his historical chronicle, *Golestān-e Erām*, and some of his other works. He also established a literary circle called Golestān. Several eminent scholars and writers, including the French traveler Constant-Louis-Alexandre Comte de Suzannet (1814-62), the German botanist Karl Heinrich Emil Koch (1809-79), and I. N. Berezin visited him.



A year later, the peaceful and quiet life in the village of Amṣār was broken by a major peasant revolt against the Tsar’s government, and, though ruthlessly suppressed, it put an end to the governorship of Baron Rosen. Given the relationship between Rosen and Bakikhanov, the latter was summoned to Tbilisi and was not allowed to go back until the rebellion had been put down. Bakikhanov had no dealings with the rebels, but he opposed the harsh autocratic rule of Baron Rosen. He wrote a report in Russian (19 October 1837) for the committee that was investigating the causes of uprising, recorded as “the manifesto of Colonel Abbaskuli against Baron Rosen” (Əliyarlı, pp. 306-9).

It seems that Bakikhanov was also contemplating writing a history of Šervān and Darband (q.v.), for which he had gathered materials. In 1829, the weekly *Tiflisskii vedomosty* published an article about Bakikhanov’s forthcoming translation of *Darband-nāma* and printed some passages from it. It seems that a few months after the Golestān Treaty (q.v.), signed by Russian and Iran in 1813, Bakikhanov had begun working on a Russian translation of the *Darband-nāma* (Ra’is-Niā, p. 213). He often refers to this work in *Golestān-e Erām*, but it was never published. Furthermore, from 1829 Bakikhanov was a member of the research committee on Trans-Caucasia and had easy access to government documents and related historical works. He presumably wrote at least four articles or reports on the history of the Caucasus: “The Origin of the Caucasian Tribes”; “A Look at the History of the Lands Acquired by Russia”; “Notes on the Administration of the Moslem Lands of Caucasia”; and “The History of the Baku Khanate,” although none of them have survived (Habib Oghlu, pp. 264-65, 77).

It was the military commander of Dāğestān (q.v.), Moisey Zakharovich Argutinsky-Dolgorukov (1797-1855), who urged Bakikhanov to write a comprehensive history of Šervān, Dāğestān, and Darband, from ancient times up to the Treaty of Golestān (1813), the work that later on was printed as *Golestān-e Erām*. The title is a reference to a verse in the Qur’an about the Garden of Eram (89:6-8) and an allusion to the Qarabāğ village where the treaty was signed (Ra’is-Niā, p. 213; Gould, p. 291). It took him just over a year to finish the work.

In 1838, General Evgeny Aleksandrovich Golovin (1782-1858) replaced Baron Rosen, and Bakikhanov was recalled to service. While living in Tbilisi, in 1843, Bakikhanov translated *Golestān-e Erām* into Russian with the help of a Polish officer and friend, Tadeusz Lada Zablotski (1813-47), as *Istoriya Vostochnoy Chasti Kavkaz* (History of the eastern part of the Caucasus). This



translation was submitted for publication to the Russian government. The Minister of Defense recommended it to the Secretariat of Tsar Nicolas I in March 1845. The book was well received and Bakikhanov was awarded a diamond ring worth 800 *manats*. However, the royal favor did not result in its publication. Johannes Albrecht Bernhard Dorn (1805-81) and Marie-Félicité Brosset (1802-80), experts on the history and affairs of the Caucasus, who had been assigned by the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences to review Bakikhanov's Russian text, advised against the work's publication (Habib Oghlu, p. 77).

In 1845, Bakikhanov took a year leave of absence from the Office of the Military Commander of the Caucasus. In the following year, in the company of a few of his literary friends, he decided to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca. They traveled via Ardabil, Tabriz, and Tehran, where, in an audience, Moḥammad Shah Qājār (q.v.) awarded him with the Medallion of the Lion and Sun (*nešān-e šir o koršid*, see [DECORATIONS](#); Habib Oghlu, p. 344). From Tehran, he went to Istanbul, where he presented (September 1846) his cosmological treatise, *Asrār al-malakut* (Secrets of the immaterial realm), originally composed in Persian and subsequently translated by the author into Arabic, to the Ottoman Sultan Abdülmejid I (r. 1839-61), together with an introduction addressed to the sultan. Two years later, the translation of the text into Ottoman Turkish (as *Efkar ül-ceberut*), commissioned by Grand Vizier Reşid Pasha, was published (Tarbiyat, p. 442; İhsanoğlu, pp. 36-38).

After performing the pilgrimage, on his way back to the Caucasus, Bakikhanov died of the plague (31 May 1847) in Wādi Fāṭema, north of Mecca, and was buried there.

Bakikhanov and Āḳundzāda were the first two Azeri very pro-western intellectuals and writers in the 19th century. Though liberal-minded and opposed to the fanaticism of the religious masses as well as of the clergy, Bakikhanov was a religious man and especially fond of Sufism. On the contrary, Āḳundzāda gave a materialistic interpretation to the works of Jalāl-al-Din Rumi (q.v.). As Raḥim Ra'is-Niā (p. 208) puts it: "While 'Abbās-qoli Āqā like Āḳundzāda believes in the salvation of mankind from backwardness through science and learning, unlike him [Bakikhanov] believes in the harmony between science and faith. In other words, with a foot in the past he was facing the future." Although both were strongly influenced by Russian culture and the country itself, it seems to be less so in Bakikhanov's case. Āḳundzāda in his plays often propagates Russian rule,



while Bakikhanov criticizes the specific modalities and practices of Baron Rosen.

After his retirement from political and military life, Bakikhanov devoted himself to scholarship, which indicates a disillusion with the government, though he could not openly display it. In 1832, he proposed the establishment of a college for Muslims where modern subjects would be taught in Azeri, Persian, and Russian. But given Bakikhanov's relations with Baron Rosen it never materialized. He also translated several fables by Ivan Andreyevich Krylov (1769-1844) into Azeri, but only one, "The Donkey and the Nightingale," has been preserved (Ra'is-Niā, p. 212).

Bakikhanov tried to bring about reform through education. After submitting his proposal for schools in Baku and Tbilisi, he went further, and wrote a number of textbooks through which students were expected to learn Persian in a short amount of time (Yaqubi, pp. 249 ff.). Among his nine works that he enumerates at the end of the *Golestān-e Eram* is *Qānun-e qodsi* (The holy law), on teaching Persian grammar to the students, to be used both in Azeri and Russian schools. Published in 1831, it was the third Azeri book to be printed in Tbilisi (Javadi, p. 80). His other works include: *Asrār-e malakut*, originally written in Persian and later translated into Arabic (see above); *Kašf al-ġ arā'eb* (Discovery of wonders), about the discovery of America; and another book entitled *Tahdīb al-aqlāq* (The refinement of character), which discusses Islamic teachings and compares them with Greek philosophy and Western values (Hasanova, p. 21; Gould, p. 280). In most of these works, Bakikhanov tries to find a middle ground between Western and Eastern values and teachings.

However, Bakikhanov's major work is *Golestān-e Eram*, which constitutes a new beginning in Azarbaijani and perhaps in Persian historiography. Bakikhanov was very much influenced by European and Russian historiography, particularly by the Russian historian Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin (1766-1826; Ādamiyyat, p. 15). Bakikhanov quotes Karamzin repeatedly and follows his methodology concerning the Avars (see [DĀĠESTĀN](#)), Turks, Khazars (q.v.), and Russians. Like Karamzin, Bakikhanov made use of Classical sources, especially Plutarch and Strabo, in giving an account of the ancient Caucasus. He further made use of Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, Persian, Russian, and Turkish sources as well as numismatic evidence, architectural remains, and other documents. Obviously, since this period was prior to advancement in the study of ancient Iran such as



the decipherment of Old Persian cuneiform script (q.v.) and the publication of the Avesta (q.v.), Bakikhanov depended on the then available sources in these areas. His account of the Pishdadid (see [KAYĀNIĀN](#)) kings of Iran is mostly taken from the *Šāh-nāma* (q.v.), and his descriptions of the exploits of Alexander (q.v.) in the Caucasus is based on the Alexander romance by Neẓāmi Ganjavi and on Islamic traditions, which ultimately come from the Pseudo-Callisthenes (q.v.) tradition of the *Eskandar-nāmas* (q.v.). In the case of Bābak Korrāmi (q.v.), he follows the Islamic traditions and states that he was a follower of the Magi (q.v.). In short, in areas such as these, which constitute the very first part of the book, he follows the traditional historians, whereas in the remainder of the book he judiciously tries to put all available sources together.

In the preface to *Golestān-e Eram*, Bakikhanov describes his methodological reflections:

“From whatever was available I gathered different subjects, connected them and whatever was remaining compared it with oral history. When writing a book, it is necessary to present the subject in a simple and concise manner, give the events sequentially, and connect them properly and avoid national prejudice and siding with your own country. Also to provide references to every subject from trustworthy sources, as well as to correspondence and edicts of the kings, coins, remains of buildings, and different sayings of different people on related subjects I tried as much as possible to resolve the points of difference with conjectures and logical assumptions” (tr. Floor and Javadi, p. 2).

Of particular interest are “not siding with your own country” and “avoiding national prejudice” (*ejtenāb az ta’aṣṣob-e mellat*). The latter in reality means “religious prejudice” because “nation” in this period means *mellat-e Eslām*. It is to his credit that, as a historian, Bakikhanov tries to be above partisanship. Although B. A. Dorn and F. M. Brosset considered *Golestān-e Eram* to be of insufficient scholarly quality to be published by the Russian government, other scholars such as V.V. Barthold and V. F. Minorsky (qq.v.) were more positive about Bakikhanov’s work (Barthold, tr. Rubinšāh, p. 160; Minorsky, p. 9.)



The Persian text was published for the first time in Baku in 1970, edited by ‘Abd-al-Karim ‘Alizāda, followed by two reprints in Tehran. The Russian version had been published in 1926, on which the Azarbaijani scholar Ziya Musaevich Buniyatov (Ziya Musaoğlu Bünyadov; 1923-97) based his Russian edition (Baku, 1991). However, Buniyatov omitted many passages, especially those dealing with the poets of Šervān and their works. He also suppressed mention of territory inhabited by Armenians, thus not only falsifying history but also disrespecting Bakikhanov’s dictum that a historian should write without prejudice, whether religious, ethnic, political, or otherwise (Bournoutian, pp. 265-69).

The importance of Bakikhanov’s work is that for the first time a native from the Caucasus critically assessed and analyzed the history of this multi-ethnic region and did so in a remarkable manner. Furthermore, as Minorsky (p. 9) observed, Bakikhanov provided reliable information on the history of the Caucasus in the 18th-19th centuries not available elsewhere. He also showed that despite the differences in language, religion, and ethnicity all the peoples living in the Caucasus shared a common history and to a certain extent also an identity that was different from the populations of the adjacent larger states, such as that of the Ottoman Turks and the Persians, regardless of their shared religious and historical ties.

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