



## TABRIZ V. THE CITY IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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By the beginning of the Qajar era (1785-1925), Tabriz, the capital of the province of Azarbaijan, had lost much of the importance it had in earlier eras. That was recouped, however, soon after its incorporation into the new empire, and in the course of the 19th century it became the most important city in the country in numerous respects. In political significance, it was second only to Tehran, since it was governed by the heir apparent and many of the leading Qajar officials either were originally from Tabriz or were serving there. It was also the most populous city in the country over the last three-quarters of the century and was commercially important throughout the century, especially during the middle decades. What is more, as the closest Iranian province to Europe and the Ottoman empire, many aspects of modernization first appeared in Tabriz.

Early in his reign, [Fath-ʿAli Shāh](#) (r. 1796-1834) designated his fourth son [ʿAbbās Mirzā](#) (d. 1833) as both the heir apparent and the governor of Azarbaijan. That precedent endured until the [Constitutional Revolution](#) (1905-11). ʿAbbās Mirzā was followed by Moḥammad Mirzā (1832-34), Nāṣer-al-Din Mirzā (1848), Moḥaffar-al-Din Mirzā (1859-96), and finally Moḥammad-



‘Ali Mirzā (1896-1907). The provincial government in Tabriz was the first to possess the new office of *piškār-e koll*, or chief assistant to the governor (Mostawfi, I, pp. 209-10).

The two wars that Iran fought with Russia during the first three decades of the 19th century (1804-12 and 1826-28) also served to enhance Tabriz’s political stature, primarily because the provincial government bore the burden of conducting those wars. The second Russo-Iranian war (1826-28) proved especially disastrous for Tabriz. The cleric Mīr Fattāḥ led inhabitants of the city in welcoming the Russians when the latter occupied the city in October 1827, and governance of the city was turned over to him (Baddeley, p. 174). The Russians evacuated the city after signing the Treaty of Torkamančāy in February 1828 (Fasā’i, I, pp. 733-34; tr., p. 185; Baddeley, p. 182). George Curzon referred to the Russian taking of Tabriz as the “most notable experience” in the history of Iran during the nineteenth century (Curzon, I, pp. 520-21).

Despite the loss of the Caucasus, redeeming trends did emerge from the wars. Repeated setbacks at the hands of the Russians compelled the government in Tabriz to seek a means to improve their military performance, which led to some of the first examples of the adoption of European technology and methods in Iran. In 1807-08 ‘Abbās Mirzā set about training the first military force in Iran based upon the European model. Called the *neẓām-e jadid* or “new army,” it was formed in cooperation with French officers (Nāder Mirzā, p. 241; Sepehr, I, pp. 168-69). With the transfer of authority, Tabriz in many ways replaced Tehran as the seat of the central government.

‘Abbās Mirzā and Tabriz also supplanted the shah and Tehran in the conduct of military affairs (Curzon, I, p. 576). In 1810, Fath-‘Ali Shah transferred responsibility for foreign affairs to ‘Abbās Mirzā. The following year, the shah assigned the Ottoman ambassador to Iran to Tabriz (Fasā’i, tr., p. 136). In time, the Ottoman, Russian, British, and French consulates all were relocated to Tabriz, where they were situated in the wealthy Armenian quarter of the city (Nāder Mirzā, pp. 88, 90; E’temād-al-Saltāna, p. 413). Though responsibility for relations with foreign nations shifted back to Tehran following ‘Abbās Mirzā’s abrupt death in 1833, the consulates remained, thus reflecting Tabriz’s established political and commercial importance.

Some of the first industries to employ European technology appeared in Tabriz. The British constructed a foundry outside the city “where guns and



shot of every description were cast, gun-carriages built, and very tolerable powder manufactured” (Curzon, I, p. 578). The mechanical manufacture of cloth was begun around 1830 by an Englishman, who installed spinning, carding, and weaving machines in the city (Curzon, I, p. 525). ‘Abbās Mirzā dispatched the first group of Iranian students to Europe. He also introduced the first printing press into Iran around 1816, thereby facilitating the “wider diffusion of literature” within the country (Browne, 1959, p. 155). That development gained Tabriz the appellation of *bāsmā-kāna* “the printing house.” Mirzā Asad-Allāh set up a lithograph machine, and the first book to come off the new device was the Qur’ān (Browne, 1914, p. 8). In 1824-25, ‘Abbās Mirzā sent Mirzā Ja’far to Moscow to learn lithography (q.v.). He returned to Tabriz with a lithograph machine, which he set up and began operating. The *Ma’āter-e solṭāniya* by ‘Abd-al-Razzāq Beg Donboli was one of the first books printed in Iran at Tabriz in 1825-26. The “Treatise on the Inoculation for Small-pox” (*Resāla-ye ābela-kubī*) was printed as well. The first newspaper in Tabriz appeared in 1879 and bore the name of the city itself (Browne, 1914, pp. 7-8, 12-13).

Tabriz surpassed Isfahan in population early in the nineteenth century to become the most populous city in Iran. Its population rose from 30,000-50,000 in 1800 to 100,000 in 1850 and 170,000-200,000 in 1890 (Issawi, p. 27; E’temād-al-Saltāna, p. 411; Harris, p. 98). The circumference of the city and its environs in the 1870s was approximately six *farsang* or eighteen miles. The area within the walls was sectioned into a series of quarters (*maḥallāt*), connected to which were the sub-quarters or “dependencies” (*tawābe’*). Beyond those and lying outside the environs of the city were the “fields” or locales (E’temād-al-Saltāna, p. 411). The city was centrally situated relative to the three neighboring regions with which most of its trade was conducted and to which people from the province traveled: the Caucasus, eastern Anatolia, and central Iran.

Tabriz was distinguished by its Turkish character, as was Azarbaijan. Mary Sheil remarked that “It surprises one to find oneself in almost the chief city of Persia, and yet not hear a word of Persian spoken. In the streets and bazaars Turkish is the only language which strikes the ear” (Sheil, p. 93). Arabs and Persians were rarely seen, at least in the teeming bazaar, and it “may be said to be a Turki city” (Harris, pp. 98, 112).

Those long and labyrinthine bazaars occupied a prominent place amid the quarters. The expanse of the bazaars’ shops and markets composed a large



portion of the city's space and constituted the vibrant center of its commercial and social life (Figure 1). "Certainly," Harris remarked, "they are a sight to be seen." The bazaars began in the Armenian quarter "and spread out in almost every direction." Their length was perhaps twenty-five miles, "and often," Harris said, "as I wandered about their shady ways I was continually finding myself in parts I had never seen before" (Harris, pp. 111-12).

The commercial importance of Tabriz waxed when 'Abbās Mirzā cooperated with the British in establishing the Tabriz-Trabzon trade route in the 1830s. British trading firms began transporting goods by steamer to the Ottoman Black Sea port of Trabzon and thence overland to Tabriz. Soon goods with an annual value of £1,000,000 were being transported along the route (Curzon, I, pp. 524-25). The British consul K. E. Abbott commented around 1850 that the city had become "the principal seat of Commerce in all Persia and is the [point] from which nearly all the Northern and Midland Countries are supplied with the produce and manufactures of Europe" (Amanat, p. 218). Approximately two-thirds of the goods imported to Tabriz were transported on to central Iran, and one-third remained inside Azarbaijan (E'temād-al-Saltāna, p. 418). The annual amount of trade passing through Tabriz around 1880 was valued at ten million tumans, and, in the words of E'temād-al-Saltāna, "goods from every nation and government are abundant in this city from Russia, Georgia, Moscow, Baku, Hāji Tarkān, Erzerum, Trabzon, Istanbul, London, Manchester, Marseille, Italy, and some other places in Europe" (E'temād-al-Saltāna, p. 416). The Russo-Ottoman War of 1875, however, disrupted trade along the Trabzon-Tabriz route and prompted many firms to switch to that passing through the Suez Canal to the Persian Gulf and the Iranian port of Bushehr [see BUŠEHR] (*British Documents*, p. 345; Issawi, p. 74). Among the foreign companies with branches in the city were five Russian firms around 1870, all of which carried on trade directly with Britain, France, Austria, and Turkey (Bakulin, p. 208).

Though much of the trade entailed the import of goods from Europe, carpets, from Tabriz itself and other parts of Iran constituted an important export commodity. In 1872 the value of carpets exported from Tabriz through Trabzon reached £28,000 (Issawi, p. 302). By 1879 exports had risen to £65,000, and the trade in Iranian carpets was considered of sufficient value that a French agent was dispatched annually from the Maison de Louvre to make purchases. European demand remained "fair" at that time, but a large percentage of the carpets were re-exported to the United States for sale (Issawi, p. 302). The market for carpets was considered lucrative enough for



Messrs. Ziegler of Manchester to station representatives in Tabriz and other major Iranian cities in the mid 1870s (“Report on Isfahan,” in Issawi, p. 304). By 1900, the value of all of the carpets exported from Iran blossomed to £500,000, with Tabriz being the point from which they were conveyed to Trabzon and Yerevan (see EREVAN) and thence on to Europe and Russia, respectively. H. W. MacLean, special commissioner of the Commercial Intelligence Committee for the Board of Trade in Iran, noted that the carpets produced in Tabriz had “attained a reputation for good workmanship” (MacLean, “Report,” in Issawi, pp. 302-3).

Tabriz flourished with the greatly increased flow of European goods passing through its bazaars. The change in the city’s status was impressive when compared with its condition in the first half of the century; a significant shift described by Keith Abbot: “In its commerce Tabreez has made great advances since 1830 in traffic having sprung up with Europe which had attained in 1860 to an amount eight times greater than in the former year” (Amanat, p. 223). Abbott considered it “in every respect the most important City of the Empire.” In terms of size, it was “probably more superior to Isfahan” and was “considerably larger than Tehran” the capital of the country. He estimated that the city’s population at the time to be about 150,000 (Amanat, p. 216). Williams Jackson (q.v.) considered it to be the “commercial centre of Azarbaijan,” while George Curzon referred to it as the “commercial capital” of the country as a whole (Jackson, p. 39; Curzon, I, p. 515; Harris, p. 98).

Regardless of its size and importance, Tabriz’s appearance was less than imposing. In the view of Walter Harris: “If it presents little or no feature of beauty or wealth” it “must at least attract the attention of the traveler to its commercial vitality and its great size” (Harris, p. 100). In 1896, Williams Jackson described it as “a monotonous expanse of flat-roofed, single-storied houses broken only by the domed arches of the bazaar and the high wall of the ancient citadel.” Most of the buildings were made out of “clay and mud plaster,” which leant “a dull appearance to the unimposing architecture” (Jackson, p. 40). On a similar note, G. N. Curzon (q.v.) explained that the interior of the city was without distinction; “the houses are low, the lanes narrow and dirty; and size and business alone demonstrate the existence of a capital.” He expressed surprise that more had not been done to embellish the city, given “that it is the second city in the kingdom, the residence of the heir to the throne, and the seat of great wealth, and that there are in the neighborhood abundance of the most beautiful marbles and building



materials” (Curzon, I, p. 522).

Mahdiqoli Khan Hedāyat (q.v.) was unimpressed as well when he visited the city in 1879 on his way from Europe to Tehran. “Entering Tabriz does not seem at all as if one is entering a large city,” he said. “Narrow alleyways, twisting. One must pass between two mud walls until one reaches the center” of the city. ... There is no sight worth seeing except the bazaar and the *bāḡ-e šomal*.” The latter, “except for extent, has nothing to recommend it” (Hedāyat, pp. 30-31). Like other visitors, he noted the absence of any outstanding landmarks. Those that were extant were only so in the form of dilapidated or partial remains. “The only old monument is the Blue Mosque [see TABRIZ x(1)], of which [only] ruins remain....” There was also “a wall of ‘Ali Šāh’s citadel (*arg*, q.v.),” while “no sign remains of the dome of Ġāzān (Šanb-e Ġāzān; Hedāyat, p. 31).

By the turn of the twentieth century Tabriz had lost some of its earlier prominence. Having relinquished its commercial salience earlier, Tehran finally surpassed it in population. However, its political importance was to wax considerably with the Constitutional Revolution.

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