



# Iranian Education Center in Tbilisi (1907-1931)

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**Abstract:** For centuries, Tbilisi had played a significant role in the Georgian-Iranian relations and was an important political, commercial, and cultural centre in Transcaucasia. Historically, the Iranians were one of the most significant and influential segments of the Muslim community of Tbilisi. As the general census of 1897 of the Russian Empire suggest, there were 81.700 Muslims living in Georgia (the total population of the country was 1.867.000). This period was marked by an increasing number of the Iranians in Tbilisi amounting to 6,000 people. A Consulate-General of Persia acted in the capital and there were some charity, cultural, and educational centres operation in Tbilisi as well. In 1907, Persian school (madrassa) Ettefaq-e Iraniyan (“Iranian’s union”) was established in Tbilisi by Iranian charity organization Ettefaq with under the assistance of Iran’s Consulate-General in Tbilisi and ambassador of Iran in Russia Mirza Hasan Khan Moshir od-Dowleh. The pupils at the Persian school studied the Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Georgian, French and Russian languages, as well as Sharia, geography, music, and other subjects. The school had many problems and was closed in 1931. This work is based mainly on archival materials most of which are introduced into scientific circulation for the first time.

**Keywords:** Persian school, Georgia, Tbilisi, Iran, Muslims, Education.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the XIX century Tbilisi, the Persians were the most numerous Muslim community. In each district of Old Tbilisi lived predominantly a population of one nationality. Persians, Jews, Armenians and, to some extent, other nationalities also had such districts. The Persians lived in the old part of the city, predominantly on the right bank of the Mtkvari, at Vorontsov Street, near the fortress wall, and in Saidabad. The formation of the Persian community in the Caucasus in the XIX century was facilitated by the mass migration of the Iranian population. The total number of Persian subjects in the Caucasus was approximately 100,000 and consisted of various social strata, including merchants, small and middle bourgeoisie, intelligentsia, and tens of thousands of labour migrants. A significant number of Persians in Tbilisi were seasonal workers. Economic migration from Iran began after the end of the Russo-Iranian War of 1826-1828. In the 19th century, Tbilisi was one of the centers closest to Iran, where Iranians got acquainted with the culture of Modern Europe.

After the revolution of 1905 in Russia, the October government declaration followed, stimulating the expansion of cultural and educational work throughout the country. Issues of education and education took an important place on the pages of the press, including on the outskirts of the empire, where primary attention was paid to issues of education in the native language, improving the quality of the educational process. At the end of the 19th - beginning of the 20th century, with the strengthening of the movement for public education throughout the South Caucasus, in various cities and districts, on the initiative and with the

active participation of advanced, patriotic representatives of the national intelligentsia, charitable societies and schools began to be created.

The Iranian travelers showed a keen interest in teaching and educating the Muslims. Thus, the Persian Travelogues and Memoirs of the Qajar Period gives noteworthy data about the Persian school (Ettfaq-e Iraniyan) in Tbilisi, which are the subject of the scientific circulation. However, this issue has not become a subject of special study.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Based on the archive materials and scientific literature, the present work thoroughly considers and analyzes the history of Persian school in Tbilisi. Scientific research of this problem is of great importance in the context of interfaith and intercultural relations. We use documents kept in the Georgian archives (Archive of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia; National Archives of Georgia: Central Archive of Contemporary History and Central Historical Archive), which are inaccessible to many researchers, including Iranian ones.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The methodological basis of the research is historicism, scientific objectiveness and systemal attitude that will enable us to study complex problems after researching archival documents. Based on analysis of statistical, historical-comparative, problematic-chronological methods of historical materials will be made conclusions. These methods enable us to analyze the history of Persian school in Tbilisi on the basis of archival materials, historical sources and press materials.

### **FOUNDATION OF THE PERSIAN SCHOOL IN TBILISI – “ETTEFAQ-E IRANIYAN”**

As the archives suggest, the Persian school – Ettfaq-e Iraniyan – opened in Tbilisi in October of 1907 or on September 1, 1908 [1; 2].

As early as July 26, 1907, the Georgian newspaper [3] published information about the opening of a “school of Muslim subjects of Persia” in Tbilisi. On August 4, 1907, the Persian Consul-General in Tbilisi mediated before the Tbilisi Governor Chancelory to open a school for Persian children, and on August 18 of the same year, the school Charter was approved. On September 13, 1907, the Georgian newspaper *Chveni gza* (Our Way) wrote: “On September 11, a new school was opened in Tiflis (Georgia) for the children of Persian subjects and Azerbaijanis. The opening of the school was attended by representatives of various Muslim institutions, district judges, representatives of the Caucasus Education District together with many Georgians and Armenians. Many speeches were delivered. The school would be maintained by the “Muslim Charitable Society” [4]. The opening of the school during this period is also confirmed by the fact that on November 20, 1907, pupils of the Persian School attended the funeral of Sheikh-ul-Islam of Transcaucasia in Tbilisi, along with pupils from other schools.

The Persian school was located in the “Muslim district” of Tbilisi - Shaitan-bazaar (Persian: “devil's market”); The name of a small street located between Abanotuban and Tatar Square in 18th century Tbilisi), which is why it was also called Shaitan-bazar school.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE PERSIAN SCHOOL

The charter of the school is kept in the National Archives of Georgia [5]. Under the Charter, the goal of Persian school “Ittifaq” was to educate Persian subjects. It was the one-class school with three departments (Charter - Chapter I, article 1-3). The school had a supervisor - a Persian subordinate who had to know some Eastern and Western languages, sciences and had to have some experience concerning teaching and education. A person holding this title had to teach in the school, like other teachers. All staff at the school were accountable to the supervisor (Chapter I, article 4-7). The supervisor had to provide formal correspondence: at the end of each academic year, the supervisor submitted a report regarding the state of the school to the Director and Board of Trustees of the Public Schools of Tbilisi Province (Chapter I, article 9-10). Teaching had to be conducted employing new methods. All subjects taught in the school were compulsory for the students. The list of subjects included the following subjects: Languages : Tatar/Azebeijani, Persian, Russian; maths and copying (Chapter II, article 11-12,15). In the archival materials, the charter is accompanied by a scheme of distribution of subjects and the divine law, singing and drawing were added to the above-mentioned subjects. The weekly distribution of subjects was as follows: Department I – 26 Lessons: Tatar/Azebeijani language – 6, Persian language – 6, Islamic divine law – 4, maths – 6, copying – 2, singing – 2; Department II – 26 Lessons: Tatar/Azebeijani language – 2, Persian language – 5, Islamic divine law – 4, maths – 5, copying – 2, Russian language – 6, singing – 2; Department III – 26 Lessons: Persian language – 5, Islamic divine law – 4, maths – 4, Russian language – 6, singing – 2, drawing – 5.

The maximum allowed number of pupils in one department was 40. Only the children of Persian subjects could go to school to study. The children of Persian subjects were admitted to the school at the following age: Department I - from 7 to 9 years; Department II - up to 12 years and Department III - up to 14 years. However, the school had the right to accept the children of Russian subjects if it had vacant places (Chapter II, article 16-17). The teacher of theology was obliged to pray together with the students on a daily basis, and on Fridays, he took the students to the mosque to pray (Chapter II, article 14). The tuition fee at school was fixed by the Board of Trustees. The children of poor parents were allowed to school free of charge. Such children made 20% of the total number of school pupils (in exceptional cases, the Board of Trustees could increase this number). If the number of pupils from other cities was 10 or more and if the parents so desired, the Board of Trustees could open a dormitory for such pupils with a self-financing principle. The library reading room of the school was headed by one of the teachers selected by the pedagogical council (Chapter II, article 18-20). The pedagogical council, which included all teachers, was chaired by the school supervisor. The pedagogical council was authorized only if it was attended by at least two thirds of the members. Current issues were resolved by a simple majority vote. In the case of equal votes, the chairman had the casting vote. The duties of the pedagogical council were as follows: 1. To decide on and compile an annual distribution of lessons; 2. To record admission and dismissal of students; 3. To compile lists of accepted and expelled students and, in general, supervise the academic process at the school. The pedagogical council elected a secretary from among its members. Resolutions of the Board of Trustees were to be recorded in a special book, and copies of the resolutions were to be submitted to the Board of Trustees (Chapter III, article 23-29). The Board of Trustees consisted of: members of the governing body of the Iranian Charitable Society and the school managers. It also included one teacher on the recommendation of the pedagogical council and an

honorary supervisor. The responsibilities of the Board of Trustees included the appointment and dismissal of teachers, the control of school fees, etc. (Chapter IV, article 30-31). An honorary supervisor was chosen from among the subjects of Persia who enjoyed the respect of the community and declared consent to receive this title. The honorary supervisor was obliged to take care of the financial well-being of the school and to contribute at least 500 rubles annually in favor of the school. The honorary supervisor was appointed and dismissed by the decision of the Board of Trustees. He had a deliberative vote on the Board of Education (Chapter V, article 32-36).

According to the charter, 3,040 rubles per year were provided for the maintenance of a Persian school, which was distributed as follows: 1. A teacher-supervisor received 600 rubles (to pay for the apartment rent, heating, lighting, and a servant's fees); 2. Two teachers' salaries - 1,000 rubles; 3.

The Secretary of the Pedagogical Council - 50 rubles; 4. A librarian - 50 rubles; 5. Expenses for library and study materials were 100 rubles; 6. The building rent - 700 rubles; and 7. Additional expenses (heating, etc.) - 540 rubles.

It should be noted that in 1906-1907 years, under the leadership of the Consulates, the Russian-Persian schools opened in Baku, Vladikavkaz, Ashkhabad and Elizabethpol. For example, in 1906, the charitable society "Saadet" ("Welfare"), which was officially registered on June 7, 1907 (founded in 1906 in Baku) and focused on the development of religious education, opened a Russian-Persian 7th-grade boys' high school "Ittihad" was established, especially for "Iranian children who came to the city in search of work". Children from 8 to 17 years of age were admitted to the school and about 180 students studied there. Eastern and European languages were taught at the school. In the 3rd grade program, 6 hours per week were devoted to the study of the Russian language, 4 hours to the French language, 3 hours each to Arabic and German languages, and 2 hours to the divine law, as well as arithmetic, algebra, geography, history and natural science [6]. According to the materials preserved in the fund of documentary sources of the National History Museum of Azerbaijan, the Tbilisi school "Ittifak" was also supervised by the charitable society "Saadet".

A significant part of school pupils were children of poor families, whose school fees were paid by the society. In the first academic year, 1907/1908, out of 126 students of the school, 46 students studied with public funding, in 1908/1909 academic year, 108 students out of 132; In 1909/1910 - from 300 to 200 students, etc. There is also information that as early as 1910, the leadership of the Saadet Society in Baku decided to build a separate building for the school. The well-known Azerbaijani architect Ziver-beg Ahmedbekov (1837-1925) was commissioned to draw up the project. When the builders finished the first floor of the building, the First World War broke out and it was turned into a military hospital by order of the government.

As a result, the madrasa remained in the old building [6]. According to the Orientalist Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi, the Persian schools of Tbilisi and Baku became centres of culture for Persian subjects and promoted education in the Persian community of the Caucasus. It was the prominent representatives of Iranian migrants united around these schools who played an important role in the spread of freedom, democracy and revolutionary ideas into Iranian society, especially during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911[7].

## THE PROBLEMS OF PERSIAN SCHOOL

In 1911, a financial report on the activities of the Persian Charitable Society and the school - "Ittifak" for 1910 was published. As it becomes clear, sometime later, the school faced severe problems regarding its status. In particular, only the person with the status of a Russian subject was entitled to open a private school. In addition, in order to open a third-rate, two-grade school, it was also necessary to present a certificate of the family teacher status. Consequently, in 1912, the school with 80 pupils was closed [8].

I. Alieva and I. Bagirova stated that in 1912, Hussein Rafizade, an Azerbaijani teacher at the Ittifak school, was accused of having links with Turkish pan-Islamists. It is also known that the important centre of pan-Turkic propaganda in Transcaucasia was the Turkish-Iranian Society established in Tbilisi, referred to as "Charitable Partnership" which had branches in Baku, Yerevan, Elisavetpol and Batumi. They paid great attention to the propagation of their ideas among the pupils. The community was led by Akhundi Hasan Mola-Zade, a member of the Transcaucasian Shiite clergy, who was also a caretaker and teacher at the "Ittifak" School. Teaching at the school was based on the "books of the pan-Turkic content" sent from Turkey. Consequently, we believe that one of the possible reasons for the closure of this school could have been a political factor [9; 10].

In 1912-1913, the Persian Consul-General in Tbilisi wrote letters to the director of public schools asking for the permission to reopen the school, but in vain. On March 26, 1913, the Consul-General applied directly to the Trustee of the Caucasus Educational District and asked to remodel the school into the 3rd-grade private school based on the primary school curriculum approved on January 10, 1881, but by adding the Persian language to the Russian and Azerbaijani languages envisaged by the curriculum [11]. In 1913, the new charter and programme of the Persian school "Ittifak" was published.

The certificate issued by the Tbilisi Persian School on May 30, 1914, belonging to Aliasker Seifullazade (born in 1893, Tbilisi Governorate, Borchalos Mazra) is preserved in the National Archives of Georgia. Certificates are drawn up in Russian and Persian languages. It is signed by the Consul General of Persia in the Caucasus and confirmed by seal [12].

The outbreak of World War I in 1914, followed by a severe social and political crisis, also led to the disruption of the activities of educational and charitable societies. However, in the post-war crisis years, the activities of the Iranian Charitable Association, in addition to education, were aimed at improving the living conditions of students and their parents [13].

As one can see from the "Memoirs" by 'Ali Javaher Kalam, a famous Iranian writer, translator and publicist of the XX century, that in 1921, it was him, who was sent by the Ministry of Education on mission to Tbilisi to run the Persian school. 'Ali Javaher Kalam wrote: Since 1917, after the state system in Russia changed and rich people were exiled from the country, the school's affairs went too unfavorably and the Iranian authority was forced to intervene with school management". As Ali Jawaher said, the first problem was the inability to speak Persian: "The Turks of the Caucasus used Latin alphabet. A 7-year-old boy living in Tbilisi and going to Shaitan Bazaar school, does not understand a single word in Persian and in line with the routine of the region, uses Latin alphabet to write Turkish. The pupils at the Persian school studied the Persian, Arabian, Turkish, Georgian, French and Russian languages, as well as Sharia, geography, music and other subjects. As Ali Jawaher said, the Iranians' elementary school was obliged to teach four languages to their pupils:

first - Turkish, which was the speaking language for the local Iranians; second - Georgian, as Tbilisi was the capital of the country and people had to speak state language; third - Russian, which was the language of science, literature and politics in the Soviet Union and it was possible for anyone to live in the USSR without speaking it, and fourth - the Persian. Believe me, our children mastered all four languages quite well and studied with amazing love and admiration.”. The second problem was the lack of teachers. “As Tehran could not send sufficient number of teachers, we were forced to employ local teachers, who spoke Persian poorly. They delivered one or two test lessons before me and one or two teachers from Tehran and then immediately went to classes” [14]. The third problem was the poor qualification of the Shaitan Bazaar graduates, who could go neither to Iran to perfect the Persian language there, nor to local higher institution as they could not speak Russian. The Embassy, Consulate and Representation of Iran discussed this matter intensely, but finally, the school was closed and Ali Jawaher returned to Iran.

As Ali Jawaher said, “I did not have to fight against these problems for long and the school closed in three years. First, I went to Iran and then, to Istanbul” (Alexidze 2016: 613). He meant three years from 1921, i.e. in 1924. A document kept in the archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia [15] reveals that the school existed until 1931.

On April 6, 1923, the newspaper “Tribune” wrote: “The Persian diplomatic representative filed a petition with the Department of Education to transfer the Persian school in Tiflis to the executive committee. Because of this, the praesidium of the city executive committee decided to accept the school at the disposal of the Department of Education. A petition was filed with the Ministry of Education to transfer the school staff to the state supply, and 354 million rubles necessary to cover education, heating, lighting and other expenses was included in the expenses of the Department of Education” [16].

The above-mentioned information is also confirmed by the archival materials and it turns out that the issue of transferring the Persian school to the Tbilisi People's Commissariat of Education had been considered for several years. The Commissariat of Education of the Georgian SSR instructed the instructor - Mirza Ali-Zade - to prepare a report describing the situation in the school. His report to the Commissariat of Education is dated November 4, 1926. The report states: “The Persian school “Ittifak” ... was established for Persian subjects living in the city of Tbilisi. However, it also receives subordinates from other countries. The studies last for 5 years. This year there are 137 (male) students and 8 teachers. The only means that would allow the community to keep this school, if small donations and tuition fees from wealthy parents were excluded, would be the fund consisting of an Inn and various accompanying buildings purchased by the community on January 25, 1916, for 150,000 rubles in a notarial deed. Expenditure estimates for this school year show that school maintenance cost 4,765 rubles and 40 copeks. It is believed that this is the minimum estimate of expenses. For the existence of this school, it was considered to be vital to return to the school the Inn with its buildings (hotel and workshops), as the income received from them would be sufficient to meet the needs of the school [17].

On November 5, 1926, a special report prepared by instructor Mirza Ali-Zade (in Russian) on the problems related to the learning process in the Persian school was sent to the People's Commissar of Education of the Georgian SSR M. P. Orakhelashvili. These problems are as follows: “This school is different from our labour schools, both in the nature of upbringing of students and the organizing principles of the educational institution. Here are the signs of religious principles while in the field of education there is an old scholastic

form of teaching. This is because the school has its own curriculum with a certain religious overtone and works based on old teaching methods. However, it follows a dry and unsystematic teaching of general education subjects. That is why the children of this school, who are mainly Persians, in terms of mechanical acquisition of habits and knowledge of general education subjects, stand higher than the students of the labour schools. Regarding the development of the Marxist worldview, on the contrary, the students of this school are very weak. The students are only boys, there are no pioneer and Young Communists (Komsomol) organizations in the school, except in a few cases where some pupils have joined the Komsomol. There is no self-government nor do any clubs function. The pedagogical staff is mainly educated and positively disposed towards the modern principles of upbringing and education. They maintain a good relationship with parents who are predominantly religious. Teachers were unable to establish proper discipline due to limited material resources. Therefore, the shoe workshop opened near the school was not functioning and physical education and music classes were not held. The curriculum was set by the teachers and presented to the Charity, which is the direct supervisor of this school, twice a year, that is in the middle and at the end of the school year. It includes the native language (Azerbaijani speech), arithmetic, algebra, physics, natural sciences, social sciences, drawing, grammar (as a special subject), geography, geometry, hygiene, History of Iran, Persian, Arabic, Georgian, Russian and French languages. These subjects are passed in the following order: I class: native language, arithmetic, science and drawing, II class - grammar and Persian language; III class - geography, Georgian, Russian and French languages; Class IV - geometry, hygiene, Arabic and Iranian history; Class V - social studies, algebra and physics. "The school staff consists of a supervisor, teachers, parent representatives, and representatives of the Persian Charity Organisation. The school has breaks and celebrated revolutionary holidays, with the difference that the staff and pupils also celebrated their religious holidays (Nowruz Bayram - the New Year according to the Persian calendar; Qurban Bayram - the Feast of Sacrifice; Day of Ashura - mourning for the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Muhammad ...). The textbooks in this school are the same as in the labour schools" [17].

In 1926, the People's Commissariat for Education studied the situation at school, and there are relevant materials preserved at the archives. Besides, among the archived documents, we find the data about the school pupils and teachers contingent and school problems. The number of school pupils was as many as 143, including 110 boys and 33 girls. "All pupils were of an Azerbaijani nation (from Azerbaijan of Iran), including 121 subordinates of Iran and 22 "Soviet subordinates." With their social background, 60% of the pupils came from poorest peasants' families and others belonged to different social layers of the society. As it becomes clear, the school strictly ignored the principles of so called Soviet School. The officials from the Ministry of Education deemed it necessary to cancel the teaching of the Arabian and French languages on the curriculum and replace the head of the school with a "Soviet person"[15].

The Persian school "Ettfaq-e Iraniyan"/ "Ittifaq" continued to function until 1931. Ahmad Chaychi Amirkhiz writes: "Material difficulties and pressure from the Stalinist authorities to establish a unified education system in the Soviet Union as well as ideological coercion ..., led to the closure of this school" [13]. The Russian-Persian school in Baku was closed the same year.

## CONCLUSION

The Persian school in Tbilisi, created during the rise of the democratic and enlightened movement, despite the problems, made its contribution to the spread of advanced education and the rise of culture among Persian children living in Tiflis. The existence of a Persian school in Tbilisi (1907-1931) confirms that the Persian influence on Tbilisi's Muslim community and city life was significant, as reflected in archival documents, traveler's records, and local press papers.

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