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Research paper

Elmira M. Dalgat Dr. Sci. (History), Head of Dep. of Modern and Contemporary History of Dagestan Institute of History, Archeology and Ethnography Dagestan Federal Research Center of the RAS, Makhachkala, Russia elmira.dalgat@yandex.ru

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF THE NORTH-EAST CAUCASUS IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE XIX CENTURY

Abstract: The article examines the socio-economic development of the peoples of the North-East Caucasus in the first half of the 19th century. The purpose of the article is to show the general and specific in the development of their economy and social stratification. For this purpose, we used the comparative historical method of research – the levels of economic and social development of the peoples of the North-East Caucasus were compiled and analyzed. It is noted that all of them had agriculture as the basis of their economy. Livestock farming developed in the mountainous areas, and agriculture in the plains. Handicrafts and crafts developed to varying degrees, the population processed wool, making cloth, carpets, rugs, felts, saddle bags, and burkas from it. Metalworking occupied a significant place, the tors produced cold arms and firearms. Trade was more developed, it was of an exchange nature, agricultural products were exchanged for handicrafts. The Tersky town was a large trading center, for the Ingush - Vladikavkaz. In Dagestan, the development of trade was facilitated by the construction of roads and the opening of exchange yards. Derbent, connected by sea with Astrakhan, played a major role in trade. The article shows the social structure of the peoples of the North-East Caucasus. It is concluded that it differed among different ethnic groups. Thus, feudal relations developed in Dagestan, there were feudal rulers: shamkhals, khans, etc., there were free uzdens and dependent space, as well as slaves. The Chechens and Ingush experienced the disintegration of the clan system, the population was free community members, there was a small number of slaves. It is noted that with the arrival of the tsarist troops, the population began to experience additional oppression: the troops seized their lands, burned or destroyed villages, trampled crops, cut down gardens, carried out an economic blockade of the mountains, which negatively affected the development of the economy of the peoples of the North-East Caucasus and caused their armed resistance. It was concluded that the development of the economy of the peoples of the North-East Caucasus had much in common; they were engaged in agriculture and handicrafts. Social stratification was different: feudal relations developed in Dagestan, while the Chechens and Ingush experienced the disintegration of the clan system.

Keywords: economy; social stratification; feudal oppression; arrival of tsarist troops; punitive expeditions

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Исследовательская статья

Далгат Эльмира Муртузалиевна д.и.н., зав. отделом новой и новейшей истории Дагестана Институт истории, археологии и этнографии Дагестанский федеральный исследовательский центр РАН, Махачкала, Россия elmira.dalgat@yandex.ru

## СОЦИАЛЬНО-ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКОЕ ПОЛОЖЕНИЕ СЕВЕРО-ВОСТОЧНОГО КАВКАЗА В ПЕРВОЙ ПОЛОВИНЕ XIX в.

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается социально-экономическое развитие народов Северо-Восточного Кавказа в первой половине XIX в. Цель статьи – показать общее и особенное в развитии их экономики и социальной стратификации. Для этого нами использовался сравнительно исторический метод исследования, анализировался уровень экономического и социального развития народов Северо-Восточного Кавказа. Отмечается, что основой экономики у всех указанных народов было сельское хозяйство. В горных районах развивалось животноводство, на равнине – земледелие. В разной степени получили развитие кустарные промыслы и ремесло, население обрабатывало шерсть, изготавливая из нее сукно, ковры, паласы, войлоки, переметные сумы, бурки. Заметное место занимала металлообработка, горцы производили холодное и огнестрельное оружие. Развитие получила торговля, она носила меновой характер, продукцию сельского хозяйства меняли на ремесленные изделия. Крупным торговым центром для дагестанцев был Терский городок, для ингушей – Владикавказ. В Дагестане развитию торговли способствовало строительство дорог, открытие меновых дворов. Большую роль в торговле играл Дербент, морским сообщением связанный с Астраханью. В статье показана социальная структура народов Северо-Восточного Кавказа. Сделан вывод о том, что она отличалась у разных этносов. Так, в Дагестане развивались феодальные отношения, были феодальные правители: шамхалы, ханы и т.д., были свободные уздени и зависимое крестьянство, а также рабы. У чеченцев и ингушей шло разложение родового строя, население представляло собой свободных общинников, было небольшое количество рабов. Отмечается, что с приходом царских войск, население стало испытывать на себе дополнительный гнет: войска захватывали их земли, сжигали или разрушали аулы, вытаптывали посевы, вырубали сады, осуществляли экономическую блокаду гор, что отрицательно сказывалось на развитии экономики народов Северо-Восточного Кавказа и вызывало их вооруженное сопротивление. Сделан вывод о том, что в развитии экономики народов Северо-Восточного Кавказа много общего: они занимались сельским хозяйством и кустарными промыслами. Социальная стратификация была разной: в Дагестане развивались феодальные отношения, у чеченцев и ингушей шло разложение родового строя.

*Ключевые слова*: экономика; социальная стратификация; феодальный гнет; приход царских войск; карательные экспедиции

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The first half of the nineteenth century was a pivotal period in the history of the peoples of the Northeast Caucasus. Under the Treaty of Gulistan (1813), Dagestan and Transcaucasia were formally annexed to the Russian Empire. In practice, however, effective control was established only later, after Russia's victory in the protracted and costly Caucasian War.

The Northeast Caucasus had long drawn the interest of Russian and European travelers. One early visitor was J. G. Herber, who toured the Eastern Caucasus in the first third of the eighteenth century.

Sources produced during the first half of the nineteenth century are of particular value. As Russia prepared to annex the Northeast Caucasus, systematic study of the region and its inhabitants became a priority. Before launching military operations, the imperial command required detailed intelligence on local routes, their suitability for troop movements, and the potential scale of armed resistance from the male population. Such information was gathered primarily by Russian officers [1, p. 5].

Data gathered during the first half of the nineteenth century on the peoples of the Northeast Caucasus remain an essential source for studying their economic and social development. Among the early nineteenth-century authors who provided valuable evidence are A. M. Butskovsky [2], N. F. Rtishchev [3], S. Bronevsky [4], N. F. Grabovsky [5], and U. Laudaev [6].

These works contain detailed information on the natural, climatic, and geographical conditions of the Northeast Caucasus and their influence on economic activities and social relations.

Later historians and ethnographers relied heavily on these contemporary accounts when examining nineteenth-century socio-economic change in the region. Notable examples include studies by Kh.-M. O. Khashaev [7; 8], I. R. Nakhshunov [9], R. M. Magomedov [10], B. G. Alieva [11, p. 182], M. Z. O. Osmanov [12, p. 59], and A. I. Khasbulatova [13]. The socio-economic development of the Northeast Caucasus in the first half of the nineteenth century has also been addressed in several works [14; 15; 16].

Natural, climatic, and geographical conditions profoundly shape the character and tempo of a people's development, affecting economic activities, political organization, cultural practices, social structure, and demographic patterns. The Northeast Caucasus is a region of sharp environmental contrasts, dominated by mountainous terrain, with many peaks permanently covered by snow and glaciers.

Along the Caspian coast of Dagestan stretches a narrow lowland, in places only 2–3 km wide (e.g., near Derbent). This narrow corridor was blocked in the sixth century by the Sasanian ruler Khosrow I Anushirvan, who built a major defensive complex; its walls extended from the Naryn-Kala fortress on the hillside down to the sea.

Much of Dagestan lies on the northeastern slopes and spurs of the Greater Caucasus range. The territory can be divided into four main zones: the coastal lowland; the foothill zone; Inner Mountain Dagestan; and High Mountain Dagestan. The principal rivers – the Sulak in the north and the Samur in the south – played a crucial role in the economic life of the local population.

During the period under review, the Chechens, like the peoples of Dagestan, inhabited both mountainous and plain areas. In the mountains, Chechen territory occupied the eastern sector of the North Caucasus.

Chechnya, too, can be divided into four zones: plain, foothill, mountain, and high-mountain.

The Chechens bordered the Kabardians, Ossetians, various Dagestani peoples, and Georgians. Conditions were most severe in the high mountains, where rocky peaks remained snow-covered for much of the year.

The Ingush faced similarly difficult circumstances. As N. F. Grabovsky observed, the Ingush possessed less arable land than other peoples of the Terek region, their territory consisting largely of barren rocky ridges [5, p. 35].

These harsh mountain conditions and acute shortage of cultivable land prompted large-scale out-migration beginning in the eighteenth century. Both Ingush and Chechens moved downhill to the more fertile lowlands and plains, a process that significantly altered their way of life and socio-economic organization.

Conditions in Dagestan differed in some way. Its peoples had long adapted to difficult environmental constraints by constructing terraced fields and practicing transhumant pastoralism. Highland communities also exploited the terrain for defense: auls were typically sited on steep cliffs or narrow ridges, rendering them natural fortresses largely inaccessible to outsiders.

Natural and climatic conditions likewise influenced the character and outlook of the region's inhabitants, producing distinct traits among highlanders and plains-dwellers alike.

Centuries of rigorous mountain life fostered qualities of diligence, endurance, and patience among highland populations. Survival in such an environment demanded exceptional physical and psychological resilience.

In addition to natural and climatic conditions, geographical location strongly influenced the socio-economic development of the Northeast Caucasus peoples. The region, including Dagestan, lies along the Caspian Corridor – a narrow coastal route on the western shore of the Caspian Sea. This corridor, used by early human migrations from Western Asia into southeastern Europe, later served as a major transit artery and attracted successive waves of conquerors, among them Roman legions, Sasanian Persia, Arab armies, Mongol-Tatar forces, and the troops of Nadir Shah.

Thus, environmental conditions and strategic geography profoundly shaped the historical trajectory and economic systems of the Northeast Caucasus over centuries.

The foundation of economic life was agriculture, comprising two primary branches: crop cultivation and animal husbandry.

Dagestan ethnographers note that nineteenth-century farming practices in the region, especially in the mountains, retained techniques developed in antiquity. In highland Dagestan, animal husbandry – mainly sheep breeding – was dominant, though small-scale crop cultivation persisted. In the lowlands, by contrast, arable farming predominated, together with the raising of draft cattle [12, p. 59].

Even in mountainous areas where livestock rearing prevailed, households sought to maintain at least a modest plot of arable land; its possession remained a marker of family prosperity [17, p. 234].

Thus, both crop cultivation and animal husbandry were practiced throughout Dagestan, though in varying proportions.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the area devoted to grain production in the Dagestan plains and foothills expanded steadily through forest clearance and the construction of irrigation systems. The principal crops were winter wheat, barley, millet, maize, and rice.

In southern Dagestan, the Shamkhalate of Tarki, and Zasulak Kumykia, madder was also cultivated. Its roots yielded a red dye used for cotton textiles and wool yarn in carpet production.

Rising demand from Russia's expanding cotton industry increased the market for natural dyes, and Dagestani madder successfully competed with the traditional Dutch product. Russian manufacturers prized its quality. Because madder was highly profitable, it progressively displaced grain crops, orchards, and vineyards. Its cultivation generated substantial income for landowners and seasonal employment for labourers from mountain villages, who worked here from spring until autumn harvest.

The tsarist administration promoted horticulture and viticulture in Dagestan. In the southern coastal zone, grapevines of Crimean and French varieties were introduced. In the mountainous interior, fruit growing expanded along river valleys.

Major centers of mountain-valley horticulture included the Lezgin villages of Akhty and Kasumkent; the Dargin villages of Khadzhalmakhi, Kuppa, and other settlements of the Tsudakhar Union; the village of Kaitag; the Avar villages of Igali, Gidatl, Arakani, Botlikh, and Agvali; as well as numerous Tabasaran and Kumyk communities.

Residents of foothill and valley villages exchanged fruit for grain produced in the lowlands. Fruit was transported by donkeys to regional markets such as Karabudakhkent, Gubden, Nizhny Dzhengutai, and Kakashura. During the first half of the nineteenth century, fruit trade remained confined to the internal Dagestan market.

Vegetable gardening also developed during this period, though primarily for household consumption.

Dagestan's distinctive natural and climatic conditions gave rise to a characteristic form of transhumant pastoralism. In summer, sheep were grazed on highland pastures; in winter, they were driven to the plains. This long-established practice required coordinated effort. Owners of small herds therefore formed collective units known as *kosh*. Members jointly constructed sheep pens, paid rental fees for pasture and sheds, and stockpiled fodder against severe weather. Shepherds, whose work was both arduous and vital, enjoyed high social esteem.

The Chechens, like other Northeast Caucasian peoples, practiced agriculture despite limited arable land. To expand cultivable area, they cleared the abundant forests covering their territory – a labour-intensive process that preceded plowing and sowing.

In the mountainous parts of Dagestan, highlanders traditionally constructed terraces on steep slopes. Soil was carried up from river valleys and spread in thin layers over prepared surfaces. These terraces, built and maintained across generations, were carefully cleared of stones and reinforced with stone retaining walls to prevent erosion by rainwater.

Horticulture was a significant traditional occupation among the Chechens, with fruit sales providing an important source of cash income. Recognizing this, Russian commanders deliberately targeted orchards during military campaigns, destroying them alongside settlements in order to undermine Chechen economic resilience [16, p. 395].

Animal husbandry also played a central role in the Chechen economy. Cattle supplied milk, oxen served as draft animals for transport and ploughing, and sheep were raised both in the mountains and on the plains. Horse breeding existed but remained limited; the forested Chechen lowlands offered little open pasture suitable for large herds. Consequently, most horses were purchased from Kabarda [18, p. 43].

In the nineteenth century, economic specialization emerged in Chechnya: sheep herding predominated in the mountains, while the plains combined arable farming, horticulture, and sheep raising.

Throughout the Northeast Caucasus, handicrafts and cottage industries were well developed to varying degrees during this period. The Ingush specialized in woollen textiles, the Chechens in metalworking. Some products met household needs; others were sold at local markets. The relocation of Chechen and Ingush populations to the plains increased agricultural productivity and stimulated craft production, which in turn promoted trade. As N. F. Grabovsky observed, "the principal trading centre for the Ingush was Vladikavkaz" [19, p. 32]. Other important markets included the settlement of Terek, the fortresses of Kizlyar and Mozdok, and large Chechen villages such as Gudermes, Dargo, and Chechen-Aul, as well as nearby Cossack settlements. Commerce between highlanders and the Russian population along the Terek grew steadily and proved mutually beneficial. This trade, however, was repeatedly disrupted by restrictive Russian policies. Traders were required to obtain special permits, without which commerce was forbidden. From the late eighteenth century onward, such controls tightened, especially for the Chechens. Both highlanders and Russian settlers suffered economic losses as a result. Repeated Chechen petitions to the Caucasian administration for unrestricted duty-free trade with Russians went unheeded [16, p. 400].

Despite these restrictions, signs of rapprochement between Russians and Chechens became evident from the early nineteenth century [20, p. 93].

In Dagestan, trade expanded with the construction of roads and the establishment of designated exchange (barter) yards. The Amiradzhiyurt yard was especially significant for highlanders, attracting around 3,000 Dagestan and Jewish traders annually. They brought agricultural produce and handicrafts and purchased manufactured goods such as cotton textiles, mirrors, glassware, paper, soap, and tea.

Derbent, with its maritime links to Astrakhan, served as a major commercial hub. Its importance grew further after 1848, when the "Kavkaz i Merkuryi" company began regular steamship services along the Caspian and Volga. Large quantities of madder were shipped from Derbent to Astrakhan and onward to the Makaryev Fair in Nizhny Novgorod for purchase by Russian cotton-mill owners. Other exports included wine, nuts, and handicrafts. In return, factory-made goods – glassware, porcelain, metal products, tea, sugar, and more – flowed from Astrakhan to Derbent.

In the mountainous and foothill zones, trade centred on weekly bazaars in major villages such as Akhty, Kumukh, and Khunzakh. Highlanders exchanged agricultural produce and handicrafts for Russian manufactured goods, timber, and other commodities. Dargin districts hosted the greatest number of such bazaars. Precise figures for the total number of bazaars in Dagestan during the first half of the nineteenth century are unavailable.

In Dagestan during this period, society was divided into two main classes: feudal lords and peasants. The feudal class comprised titled rulers – the Shamkhal of Tarki, the princes of Zasulak Kumykia, the khans of Avar,

Kazikumukh, Mekhtuli, and Kyura, the utsmiy of Kaitag, the rulers of Tabasaran, the sultans of Tsakhur and Utamysh, the ruler of the Derbent domain – and the independent Kumyk *biys* who headed separate *biyliks*. Within the broader feudal estate were ranked groups such as *beks*, *chanka-beks*, *karachi-beks*, *chanka*, *sala-uzdens* (or high-ranking uzdens), and the Muslim clergy [21].

The peasant class was stratified into free uzdens, dependent *uzdens*, *rayats*, *chagars*, and patriarchal slaves. In highland Dagestan, the most numerous peasant group consisted of uzdens. Unlike in the lowlands, mountain uzdens were not subdivided into ranked categories; they were formally equal and personally free [14, p. 61].

In the lowland and foothill zones, the peasantry exhibited greater differentiation and varying degrees of dependence on feudal lords. Categories included *dogherek-uzdeni* (ordinary uzdens), *azat-uzdens* (freedmen), and *chagars* (serfs). At the bottom of the social hierarchy stood a small number of slaves captured during raids on neighbouring territories. Slave trading persisted in Dagestan at the beginning of the nineteenth century but declined sharply after Russian annexation in the first quarter of the century.

The social structures of other Northeast Caucasian peoples differed from that of Dagestan, and nineteenthand twentieth-century scholars have offered divergent interpretations.

Many contemporary sources describe Chechen society as stratified into free uzdens, dependent *lai* and *yasirs*, and clergy, with the uzdens occupying the dominant position. A. P. Berger, however, maintained that the Chechens constituted a single class of free persons – uzdens – among whom neither feudal privileges nor relations of dependence existed [22, p. 71].

E. A. Borchashvili offered a contrasting interpretation. He argued that feudal forms of exploitation had already emerged in Chechen society by the early nineteenth century, subjecting formerly free peasants to new dependencies. Although these peasants continued to call themselves uzdens, they were only partially free members of their communities [20, p. 157].

During the period under review, the Muslim clergy exercised noticeable influence over many aspects of social life among both Chechens and Ingush, though this influence remained weaker than in Dagestan or Kabarda.

This relative weakness can be attributed to the late adoption of Islam in Chechnya (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) compared with Dagestan and to the still-limited degree of social stratification. The breakdown of the tribal system remained incomplete.

At the bottom of the Chechen social hierarchy, as in Dagestan, stood slaves. These were typically foreigners captured during raids on neighbouring territories and regarded as the most valuable form of war booty. Slaves were divided into two categories: long-term captives (lais), over whom owners exercised full control, and recent captives (yasirs), who were treated better because they or their families might still pay ransom.

Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century sources indicate that the Ingush had no hereditary princes. Instead, they elected elders from prominent families to govern their societies. As I. A. Gildenshtedt observed during his visit to the Northeast Caucasus in the 1770s, the Ingush possessed no formal nobility, yet they typically chose elders and judges from a few wealthy and respected families. Governance and adjudication followed ancient customary law [25, p. 83].

Thus, when Russia began its rapid advance into the North Caucasus from the second half of the eighteenth century with the aim of conquest, it encountered peoples whose economies centered on agriculture and animal husbandry and who stood at different stages of social development. Some were evolving feudal relations; others were still undergoing the dissolution of the tribal system.

In Dagestan at this time, uzden and rayat communities were actively resisting feudal obligations. Under these conditions, Russian imperial policy consistently supported the feudal lords, viewing them as essential social allies. By upholding their privileges, the tsarist administration strengthened feudal authority and intensified peasant exploitation. This pattern extended across Dagestan, including highland areas where social stratification had previously been less marked. There, feudal lords increasingly encroached upon the rights of free community members.

Russian expansion in the North Caucasus thus reinforced the position of the feudal class. As I. I. Pokrovsky has shown, tsarist policy deliberately instrumentalised Dagestani feudal lords. It preserved the peasantry's

economic dependence while stripping the lords themselves of political autonomy. Unlike certain other Caucasian elites, Dagestani feudal rulers were not granted equivalence with the Russian nobility. The sole exception was the pro-Russian Shamkhal of Tarki, whose house had maintained long-standing ties with the empire and who received noble status for services rendered during the establishment of Russian rule [26, p. 201].

Before the arrival of Russian forces, highlanders had already resisted exploitation by local feudal lords. Russian conquest made their situation markedly worse. Crops and orchards were destroyed, homes demolished, and land confiscated. Communities were compelled to supply transport and labour for the tsarist army and to construct roads that facilitated deeper military penetration into the mountains. Under A. P. Ermolov, a comprehensive trade and economic blockade was imposed on highland territories: livestock could no longer be driven to kutans, seasonal labour migration was prohibited, and the sale of local products was banned. These measures aimed to force submission but failed to achieve it.

The peasantry therefore suffered simultaneous feudal oppression from local lords and national-colonial oppression from the Russian regime.

Having examined the socio-economic conditions in the Northeast Caucasus during the first half of the nineteenth century, the following conclusions may be drawn:

- 1. The principal occupations of all peoples in the region Dagestanis, Chechens, and Ingush were agriculture, animal husbandry, and handicrafts. Harsh natural and climatic conditions prompted large-scale Chechen and Ingush migration from the mountains to the lowlands beginning in the early eighteenth century.
- 2. Levels of social stratification varied significantly across the region. Dagestan exhibited well-developed feudal relations, with a ruling stratum of shamkhals, khans, beks, and other lords, and a peasantry divided into free uzdens and dependent rayats. Among Chechens and Ingush, by contrast, the tribal system was still in the process of dissolution; the majority of the population consisted of free community members, with only incipient signs of class differentiation. This, then, was the socio-economic landscape that Russia encountered upon its advance into the Northeast Caucasus.
- 3. To compel submission, tsarist authorities confiscated land, destroyed crops and orchards, demolished homes, and imposed a stringent trade and economic blockade on highland areas. These measures severely affected the population yet failed to break resistance; the highlanders continued their struggle for independence.

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