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- 1 It is commonly assumed that the growth, development and prosperity of foreign trade in the Safavid state is connected with the Turko-Iranian Zuhab (Qasr-e-Shirin) treaty concluded in 1639 (Petrushevskiy, 1949, 83. Hovhannisian, 1959, 120. Baibourtian, 1969, 66). This is quite correct, because the treaty resulted in the establishment of comparatively safe and secure conditions for caravans passing through the trade routes of northern Iran, Armenia, Asia Minor and Mesopotamia. It is also accepted that this new situation in the Safavid state was of great benefit to the Armenian merchants dealing with foreign trade, because they were especially engaged in the trade on Tabriz-Smyrna and Tabriz-Aleppo routes passing through the above mentioned regions (Papazian, 1985, 65-70). However, the development of foreign trade was connected not only with the favourable conditions established after the Turko-Iranian treaty, but also with the economic and trade policies pursued earlier by the Safavid Emperor, Shah Abbas I. Erection of new caravanserais and building of new roads, ruthless fight against the highway robbery had also their positive impact on the development of foreign trade in the Safavid state (Farmayan, 1969, 25). Within these measures, the creation of the roads protection system, which is one of the lesser investigated problems of the Safavid economic and trade history, played quite an important role. We shall try to present here the essence of these economic and tax institutions (systems), and examine the concrete results of the above measures undertaken by the Safavid state as revealed from historical sources.
- 2 The sources (narrative and quantitative, accounts of European travellers, merchants and missionaries, accounts and despatches of the employees of the western European trading companies, trade diaries of Armenian merchants, etc.) almost unanimously testify that the maintenance and safety of the inland caravan routes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Safavid state had been on a rather high level, particularly if compared with that in the Ottoman Empire. Beginning with the reign of Shah Abbas I and throughout the whole of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, travellers and traders spoke of the satisfactory conditions in the Iranian caravan

routes. For example, Carmelite missionaries, Redempt and Beninus, passing through Iranian border with a Turkish trade caravan in 1609, stated that the Muslim guides accompanying them expressed their satisfaction with the conditions in the caravan routes after their arrival in the Persian territory, where thieves were prosecuted ( *Carmelites*, 1939, I, 174). In 1612 an English traveller, Robert Coverte, wrote that one could travel in Iran without the fear of robber) and that to hear about a thief there would seem very unusual (Penrose, 1931, 84). The famous French traveller and merchant, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, who undoubtedly knew the caravan routes of the Near East much better than any other European traveller or merchant, after having travelled in the East for long years, noted that throughout the whole of Persia, caravan routes were kept in perfect order and quite secured (Tavernier, 1692, II, 683).

- 3 However, based merely on the reports of European travellers and missionaries, one may arrive at the conclusion that caravan routes in the Safavid state had really been absolutely safe and secure. But in reality it was certainly not so and could really not be like that. We have already mentioned about the high level of caravan trade organization in Iran, particularly as compared with the Ottoman Empire. As a matter of fact, what the European travellers meant, was the safety and security of the Safavid caravan routes, as compared with the Ottoman Empire. European sources, as well as other contemporary narratives contain various facts of the level of risk and danger on the international transit caravan routes passing through Ottoman Turkey. The same Tavernier wrote in this connection that the whole of Turkey was full of robbers, roaming in large bands and laying ambush on the roads, and who often plundered or killed the merchants and travellers (Tavernier, *ibid.*, II, 2). At the same time the extreme extortionist attitude of the local authorities towards the merchanttraders was no less a hindrance in the caravan routes passing through the Ottoman Turkey. In most cases it was often difficult to discern which one of them represented a greater threat—the robbers or minor local authorities. It often happened that a few hundred men of some *bey* or *agha* climbed the mountains or hid in forest wherefrom they attacked the travellers' and merchants' caravans (Rycaut, 1670, 219. Cited in Anasian, 1961, 69). Arakel Davrizhetsi (1896 [1669], 573) reports how Abaza Pasha of Erzurum robbed a number of caravans brought to the town by deception. Grigor Daranaghtsi in his turn adds that after having robbed seven hundred merchants from Julfa on their way back from Istanbul in 1624, the Pasha said: "I am in more need than you, go and earn anew" (Nshanian, 1915, 223).
- 4 Instead of providing security to the caravans of the merchants on transit, the governors of the *vilayets*<sup>1</sup> were in league with the robbers, and allowed them to plunder caravans on the roads on condition of sharing the booty, and even levied some tribute from the minor plunderers (Febvre, 1675, 159-160). The Christian and Jewish merchants were made to pay *kharaj* (head tax) everywhere, although according to law, it should be paid only once a year and only in one place (*ibid.*, 154). As witnessed by the French traveller, Pouillet (1667-1668, II, 56), non-Muslim merchants paid the *kharaj* in each province. The governors of the *vilayets* changed, often at their own will, the standards of weights and measures, and extorted large sums under this pretext (Febvre, 1675,161).
- 5 Particularly dangerous were the roads passing through the Kurdish regions of the Ottoman Empire. It is assumed that Kurdish *derebeyees* or local chiefs, in various places of Asia Minor, especially in western Armenian provinces, had been obstructing free flow of trade. The state of chaos and anarchy created by them led not only to a loss of commercial traffic for a number of trade centres, but, also to their utter decay (Zulalian,

1980, 243). The Kurdish bands were so numerous and their assaults on caravans so frequent, that many of the travellers named the regions inhabited by the Kurds as “a country of thieves” (Ross, 1933, 155). Interesting information about the Kurdish bands is given by Grigor Daranaghtsi. Speaking about the band of robbers active in the vicinity of his home town of Kamakh, situated on Aleppo-Tabriz highway, and generalizing the information he wrote: “All of them are thieves and robbers” (Nshanian, 1915, 32). Again, describing the plunder and destruction caused by them in 1595, he further added: “[...] and they caused damage to travellers” (*ibid.*, 33). Yet again, talking about another Kurdish band active in the vicinity of Kamakh in 1608, he noted: “[...] and for the beginning he killed the *bek* of the Kamakh *ala* [...] and the horror of him seized the whole province and the travellers” (*ibid.*, 34). However, it is rather difficult to find out for certain whether this or that Kurdish *bey* had been a robber or a tax collector, e.g., the *bey* of Nushtar to whom the respective section of Aleppo-Tabriz road was subordinated, demanded a personal gift given besides the established duty. And if the merchants refused to satisfy his demand, he took away some of their valuables. In this way Tavernier lost a camel load of English textiles and two camel loads of food-stuff (Tavernier, 1692, I, 308).

- 6 Sometime it also happened that all important roads were subjected to and controlled by some tribes, or there were periods of total anarchy, when rival tribes fought with each other and each tried in turn to extort as much as possible from the merchants (Steensgaard, 1974, 62). Under such conditions, if merchant caravans met a tribe leader with his robber bands, the encounter might end dramatically. But in some cases it was also possible to avoid them even without paying any duty. All this compelled the merchants to seek for safe and secure passage for their caravans. As such, on many occasions they made preliminary agreements with the representatives of the tribes, through the territory of which the caravan had to proceed, paying them rather large amount of money (*ibid.*, 62-63). Reports and data of similar nature referring to trade routes passing through the territory of the Ottoman Turkey are rather abundant (*Diary*, 1938, 35, 45, 47, 71-72). Anyway, it appears from what we have mentioned above that in comparison with these highly risky conditions in the Ottoman Empire, caravan routes controlled by the Safavid state seem to be quite safe and secure for merchants and travellers.
- 7 The security of trade routes in the Safavid state was the responsibility of the *rahdars*, officials in charge of the roads (Papazian, 1985, *passim*; 1990, 144). Road-posts (*rahdarkhane*) were put at certain points of the roads, in both small and large administrative centres, bridges, dangerous mountain passes and other important points. Usually these posts were located at such a distance from each other as to enable them to follow the caravans on their way or urgently inform the other posts if needed (Tavernier, 1692, II, 679-685). The merchants and travellers were obliged to pay the *rahdars* a special charge (*vjuh*), at rates fixed for each kind of pack-animal load and type of goods. Up to the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the rates were rather low, but towards the end of the century they were significantly higher, as the road taxes became an important component of the Safavid state budget (Minorsky, 1943, 180). If the travellers or merchants were still robbed by any chance, the local authorities were liable either to find and return the plundered goods, or to pay their price in conformity with their book value (Tavernier, *ibid.* Crooke, 1967, II, 205). It may be noted that the English and Dutch East India Companies were exempt from this duty (Tavernier, *ibid.*).

- 8 It cannot be denied that the institution of *rabdars*, established by Shah Abbas I, resulted in the creation of comparatively safe conditions for travelling caravans. Of course, the total eradication of plunder and highway robbery was not an easy task (*Diary*, 1938, 72). But the merchants in the Safavid territory were rather concerned with wilful *rabdars* than plunder on the roads. The system of contract for buying *rabdars*' offices, which existed in Safavid Iran, created a situation in which *rahdar* contractors could actually greatly profit, by levying on the merchants as much as they desired, without taking into consideration the official rates. In many cases the *rabdars* also levied a fee from the persons who were exempt from paying road taxes. Such was the case with the Echmiatzin officials, who were exempt from this charge by the edict of Shah Abbas II (Simeon Erevantsi,<sup>2</sup> 1873, 214). It is interesting to note that the local authorities could raise or even reduce the amount of taxes. Talking about Khosrov Khan of Erevan, Zakaria Kanakertsi (1870, II, 39) informs us that he had even removed the taxes levied by the *rahdars*, and his successor Mohammed had to impose it anew (*ibid.*, 44). In this connection the information given by Zakaria Aguletsi (*Diary*, 1938, 81) about his brother, Shmavon, should also be mentioned: "Both *zarafkhane* and *rahdarkhane* (of Erevan) were in his hands, which was exceptionally profitable for a merchant in his commerce."
- 9 Under the circumstances, the merchants had either to adapt themselves to the prevailing conditions, or apply to higher officials pleading for justice against the *rahdars*. In this context, a number of the Shahs' edicts kept in the archives of the All Saviour Monastery in New Julfa, issued in response to the applications of Armenian merchants, complaining of the *rahdars*' arbitrariness, deserve particular attention. There are more than ten edicts of this nature, issued by Shah Safi and Shah Abbas II.<sup>3</sup> As they were of the same prototype and were rather duplicates of each other, only one of them shall be mentioned here as a sample. This edict,<sup>4</sup> issued by Shah Safi in 1046 H (= 1636), contains interesting details that may help to ascertain the prevalent rates of taxes (*vjuh-e rahdar*). The edict lists the amount which is to be levied by the *rahdars* for each type of load name by *name—vajh-e shotor* (camel load), *vajh-e astar* (mule load) and *vajh-e kbaraki* (donkey load), i.e. respectively 100, 50 and 25 dinars for textiles (*akmishe*), and 50, 25 and 10 dinars for retail trade artifacts (*saghat-bar*).

"This edict, subjugating the world is pronounced in connection with khoja Safar from Julfa, who reported that the *rahdar* taxes (*vjuh-e rahdari*) for the silk, textiles and [other goods], are, in conformity with the *Diwan* as follows:

Textiles and silk	Camel load	100 dinars
	Mule load	50 dinars
	Donkey load	25 dinars
Retail trade artifacts	Camel load	50 dinars
	Mule load	25 dinars
	Donkey load	10 dinars.

In this respect he pleaded a holy edict addressed to the said tax contractors, so that the *rahdar* tax for the textiles and silk be levied by the *rahdars* in accordance with the instruction issued by the *Diwan*, and no more than that be demanded. Following

it we ordered that the road guardians [inspectors] shall levy the above mentioned *rahdar* taxes in conformity with the *Diwan's* instructions and shall not trouble [the merchants] with excessive demands. Any *vazir* or *hakim* of any place is obliged to provide necessary assistance and taking this as a strict order, regard it as his own duty.

Written on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Safar of 1046 [August 2, 1636] and completed with success.”

- 10 The large number of documents of this nature is in itself indicative of the fact that the Shahs' edicts were not particularly taken into account by the *rahdars* and the latter continued to treat the merchants as they deemed expedient. From this point of view there was no difference between the Safavid state and the Ottoman Empire, where tax collectors also did not pay any deference towards the Istanbul instructions relating to the levy of road taxes at the rates fixed by the authorities (Steensgaard, 1967, 22. Káldi-Nagy, 1969, 329). The reason here also was the same: persons who had acquired by contract the right for collecting duties for a three year term, and who paid large sums to the state treasury, tried to extract as much profit of their office as possible (Káldi-Nagy, 1964, 77).
- 11 However, despite all its drawbacks and daily abuses of the *rahdars* within the borders of the Safavid state, the institution of the *rahdars*, provided personal safety to merchants and travellers, though not fully (Bakhutova, Nosovich, 1902, 77 [Chardin])—something that did not exist in Ottoman Turkey. Considering the role of the *rahdars*, American orientalist, Roger Savory (1980, 192), concluded that this system evidently protected both the merchants' property and life to a great extent. However, as we have pointed out earlier, merchants' property was not always quite safe. The institution of the *rahdars* and the contractor system for levying taxes had such deep roots that they survived even after the decay of the Safavid state, and up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Goroyants, 1968, 134).

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## NOTES

1. Provinces of the Ottoman Empire.
2. Catholicos Simeon I of Erevan, 1763-1780.
3. New Julfa, Archives of the All Saviour Monastery (ASS), Non-Armenian documents, series 6 (cupboard 6, bundle 41), n° 23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 34, 57, 109, 120, 121.
4. *Ibid.*, n° 24.

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