DRAFT COPY: NOT FOR CITATION/DISTRIBUTION

Michael Khodarkovsky

The Ottoman and Russian Empires in the North Caucasus: Why the Latter Succeeded Where the Former Did Not?”

In August of 1995, shortly after the inconclusive end of the first Chechen War, a certain Russian official in his interview with the German magazine Der Spiegel, stated unambiguously: “History wanted it so that the Caucasus became part of Russia.” Whether it was ignorance or a lack of sensitivity, such historical fatalism would have been less surprising, had it not come from Russia's Minister of the Nationalities at the time, Viacheslav Mikhailov, whose very job was to protect the rights of the numerous non-Russian peoples of the Russian Federation. He was later replaced by a more conservative colleague.

This attitude, of course, is symptomatic of a larger problem--a continuous unwillingness and fear of revisiting certain pages from Russia’s imperial past, dismantling the old Soviet myths, and launching an earnest public debate about how Russia became a multiethnic and society and how it can continue to be so in the modern world. If these topics were too sensitive to deal with in the 1990s, they simply became a tabu in Putin’s Russia, where the post-World War II Soviet myths have been forcefully resurrected, and where no doubts about the unequivocally beneficial nature of Russia’s conquests, annexation and rule are allowed to surface.

In some sense, the focus of this essay is a response to Viacheslav Mikhailov’s remark--how indeed had the North Caucasus become a part of Russia? Beyond the obvious answer of Russia’s superior arms and a series of consistent military victories won throughout the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries, it might also help to consider the North Caucasus in several historical contexts.

Frontier

Until the mid-nineteenth century, when the Russian conquest placed the entire Caucasus mountain range within the Russian empire, the North Caucasus remained a quintessential, classic frontier. Considered to be a conventional boundary which separated Europe from Asia, the Caucasus also separated different lifestyles and civilizations. The steppe and the lowlands of the North Caucasus were a traditional habitat for the pastoral nomadic societies, while the South Caucasus gave rise to the agricultural settled societies and eventually contemporary states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The vast and open spaces north of the Caucasus were sparsely populated, and its inhabitants were frequently vanquished by yet another powerful wave of nomadic newcomers disgorged from the depth of Inner Asia. In the first centuries BCE the North Caucasus steppe was occupied by various nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples--the Scythians, Sarmatians, Meots who were later replaced by the Huns, Alans, Avars and other nomadic confederations. From the seventh until the seventeenth centuries, the North Caucasus was subjected to the repeated invasions of various Turkic and Mongol peoples who left their indelible mark on the region's human and geographical landscape. The Bulgars, Khazars, Kypchaks, Turko-Mongol tribes of the Chinggis khan's empire, Nogays and Kalmyks--all came and most vanished before Russia's final colonization of the region. It was this millennium of unavoidable contact with various Turkic peoples that contributed to a thorough Turkification of the North Caucasus so obvious in the geographic and family names as well as local customs and traditions.

Throughout its history, the North Caucasus remained a distant borderland and a periphery to which the neighboring civilization and empires laid claims but which in the end they were unable to control. In antiquity, a sporadic colonization of the Black Sea coast by the Greeks introduced the local peoples to the aspects of the Greek civilization in the northwest Caucasus, while the Persians exerted their cultural influence over the mortheast Caucasus. With the rise of the neighboring empires, the Caucasus remained a contested area between Byzantium and the Sassanid Persia.

In the early modern times the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian empires tried to project their influence. The Ottomans were able to control parts of the northwest Caucasus, largely through their ally, the Crimean khan, and the Persians at various times were in control of Daghestan in the northeast Caucasus. It was the Russians, however, who by the mid-nineteenth century succeeded in turning the Caucasus from the contested frontier zone into the borderland of the Russian empire. Yet even the Russian military conquest had little initial impact on the deeply entrenched traditional identities and economies. The North Caucasus remained a classic periphery on the outskirts of both European and Asian civilizations.

Periphery

Until the imposition of the Pax Russica in the nineteenth century, the Caucasus had never been colonized by one single empire. It remained a low-priority periphery far away from the imperial centers in Istanbul, Isfahan, and Moscow and a distant frontier separating the nomadic and agricultural societies as well as the Christian and Islamic worlds. A single land route connected the lands south of the Caucasus with the north. The advancing armies and the peaceful trade caravans had to use the same passage--a narrow piece of land stretching along the shores of the Caspian Sea. It was not accidental that Derbend, the only significant city to emerge in the North Caucasus before the nineteenth century, owed its strategic and commercial importance to the only land passage through the Caucasus.

Built in the narrowest place between the mountains and the sea, Derbend was sitting astride the only land passage connecting Asian lands in the south with the territories north of the Caucasus. The Caspian coastal plain was an ancient route serving both the trade caravans and the invading armies, and the fortifications of Derbend could stop either one dead in its tracks. It was for a good reason that the Persians named the city Derbend, the "Gates" that controlled the narrow passage critical to both war and peace.[1]

Until Russia's expansion into the North Caucasus, several factors helped to prevent the region's annexation by the more powerful states. The traditional primitive economies primarily based on animal husbandry and raiding, inaccessible geography, and little strategic value with the exception of the Derbend passage, offered little incentive for the neighboring empires to commit large resources for the full-scale invasion, conquest and annexation of the region. Throughout the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the Ottomans made a few and futile attempts to establish a direct control of the North Caucasus.

---

[1] Derbent: Putevoditel po gorodu i okrestnostiam,(Makhachkala: Dagknigoizdat, 1976); V. V. Bartol'd, "Mesto prikaspiiskikh oblastei v istorii musulmanskogo mira," in Sochineniia, vol. 2, pt. 1 (Moscow 1963), pp. 670-72, 786-96.

Distracted by more urgent affairs in the west, the Ottomans were content to rely on the Crimean khans to exercise some control in the northwest Caucasus and provide the Porte with the prized Circassian (Adyge) slaves. Likewise, the sporadic invasions of the northeast Caucasus by the Safavid Persia were only intended to enforce the collection of taxes and tributes from the local population. Thus, it was not until Russia’s full-scale colonization and military conquests of the early nineteenth century that the North Caucasus acquired a strategic importance as a barrier against the Russian designs and became one of the battle fields in the notorious “Great Game.”

The local economies remained completely peripheral to the markets of the neighboring empires, with the major exception of the lively slave trade. The North Caucasus remained both a source and a transit point of the large numbers of slaves until Russia finally succeeded in stopping the slave trade by the mid-nineteenth century. Before the Russian annexation of the Crimea in the 1780s, the large numbers of slaves came from among the Adyge peoples of the northwest Caucasus. Either captured by the Crimeans or delivered to them as tribute payments, they were sold in the Crimean market at Kaffa. In the northeast Caucasus, the largest slave market was located at Enderi in northern Daghestan. Thousands of Slavic, Georgian, and local captives were sold at

Enderi to the slave traders from Persia and Central Asia. The collapse of the slave economy and the simultaneous expansion of the Russian towns and industries led to a growing number of native migrants in search of new opportunities. In the northeast Caucasus, some chose to leave for the neighboring Azeri cities of the northern Persia, but most left for the Russian ones where many would be converted to Christianity and settled in Russian towns and villages. The northwest Caucasus was essentially emptied of the indigenous population when in the 1860s the Russian authorities conducted their own version of ethnic cleansing by forcing several hundred thousand of the Adyge and other native peoples to immigrate to the Ottoman empire.

Religion

The North Caucasus witnessed a few feeble attempts to introduce the monotheistic religions into the region. Most notably, the efforts by the Byzantines to spread the Christianity and later by the Ottomans to extend the World of Islam yielded few results. It was not until the nineteenth century that the two religions became deeply entrenched in the North Caucasus: one was the religion of the colonizers and recently arrived settlers—the Orthodox Christianity, the other was the Sunni Islam adopted by the indigenous population. It was not surprising that the native peoples would perceive Christianity as the religion of the imperial authority, while Islam, naturally, was construed as a religion of resistance.

The influence of Islam remained uneven throughout the North Caucasus. The northeastern corner of the Caucasus, Daghestan, came under Islamic influence during the initial Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries and thus became the earliest and most thoroughly Islamisized part of the region. The Sunni Islam prevailed on the coastal plains of northern Daghestan, while the Shia’s Islam took hold in parts of the southern Daghestan.

No doubt, it was the early presence of Islam at the location of the important trade route that accounted for the rise of the sophisticated state-organized society, the principality ruled by a shamkhal from his residence at Tarki. For centuries, the shamkhals were taking advantage of their geographic location, which placed them at the northern periphery of the Persian influence and the eastern edge of the Crimean-Ottoman influence. Skillful playing on the conflicting interests of the two empires and exercising control of the strategic route along the narrow plain of the Caspian Sea allowed the shamkhals to maintain their relative independence and accumulate sizable fortunes. The arrival of the Muscovites in the late sixteenth century threatened to disturb this equilibrium.

In 1589, alarmed by Moscow’s rapid expansion in the region, shamkhal Surkhai wrote to the Protector of all Muslims, the

Ottoman sultan. In his dramatic appeal Surkhai described how the Muscovites had seized his river, built a fort, and prepared to send a large army against him. He warned that they would soon take his land and convert his people to Christianity, and "then the cities that you took from Persia--Derbend, Shemakha, Shirvan, and Gianzha, will not be able to defend themselves; and the Muscovites will unite with the shah of Persia and the king of Georgia, and then they would march on Istanbul from here and the French and Spanish kings from the other side and you, yourself, will not survive in Istanbul, and you will be captured and the Muslims will become Christians, and our faith will come to an end, if you do not intercede."[2]

However, at the time the Ottoman empire was entering its slow and irreversible decline. The sultan had other priorities and could not effectively sustain control of the distant regions in the northeast Caucasus. It took two hundred years for some of Surkhai's prophesies to come true. By the early nineteenth century Russia was in indisputable control of the region, and the shamkhals were put on the Russian payroll and turned into the loyal servants of the empire. Yet contrary to his apocalyptic predictions, few Muslims became Christians, Islam did not come to an end, and it continued to be the center of a religious and social life in the Russian-controlled Daghestan.

---

[2] Snosheniia Rossii s Kavkazom. Materialy izvlechennye iz Moskovskogo Ministerstva Inostrannykh del, 1578-1613, comp. by S. L. Belokurov [Moscow: Univ. Tip., 1889], no. 12, p. 203).

Apart from the coastal Daghestan, however, the influence of Islam among the highlanders of the North Caucasus was very limited. While the Avar auls in the mountains and the Kabardin *kabak*s (village) in the foothills could claim some Islamic presence, Islam was virtually absent among the Chechens or the Adyge peoples of the northwestern Caucasus (present Karachay-Cherkes Autonomous Republic and the Krasnodar province). One example from the early eighteenth century may illustrate the presence and the politics of the Islamic identity in the region. In 1708, the newly-enthroned Crimean khan, Kaplan Giray, demanded that three thousand Kabardin slaves should be sent to his court in order to mark his accession to the throne. The Kabardins tried to explain that most Kabardins had now accepted Islam, their children studied in the village medreses and mosques, and "how can we send these youth as slaves, as if they were some infidels?" Whether Kaplan Giray was more concerned with having slaves than with an argument of common Islamic identity or simply did not consider Kabardins to be good Muslims, the appeal to Muslim sensibility did not work. Shortly thereafter, the army of Kaplan Giray entered Kabarda demanding the slave tribute.[3]

It was not until the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the North Caucasus experienced nothing short of an

---

[3] Silahtar Mehmet Aga Findiklili, Nusretname, 2 vols. ed. by Ismet Parmaksizoglu [Istanbul, 1962-66], vol. 2, p. 247. In 1755, once again the Crimeans demanded and the Kabardins refused to provide slaves to the Crimea

Islamic revival. One source of this revival was fueled by the arrival of the mystical Sufi orders, in particular the Naqshbandiya. Founded in the Central Asian khanate of Bukhara in the fourteenth century, the Naqshbandis had reached the Caucasus via Iran. By the eighteenth century, Shirvan, the region lying along the Caspian coast in the northern Azerbajan, became the epicenter of the Naqshbandi activity.

By the early ninetenth century, both secular and religious elites in the region found themselves on defensive against the rapidly growing ranks of the Naqshbandiya’s followers. The Sufi orders were quite different from each other and followed their own path (tarikat). The Naqshbandiya distinguished itself by an iron discipline, unquestioned obedience of the disciples to the teachers (sheikhs), social egalitarianism, and the duty of the faithful to take part in the Holy War (Ghazavat). It is this austere and simple version of Islam that found a fertile ground among the many highlanders in the northeast Caucasus.[4]

Russia’s stubborn expansion and the brutal war against the indigenous population provided another potent impetus for the revival of Islam. By the time the Russian government began to realize that General Ermolov’s policies of the “iron fist” produced the opposite effect and only further antagonized and

---

(Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi istorychnyi arkhiv Ukrainy v misti Kyivi, F. 59, op. 1, d. 2668, l. 6).

drove the native population towards resistance, it was too late. The teachings of Naqshbandis spread through the villages of Daghestan and Chechnya like a wild fire. Previously disparate uprisings and revolts against the Russian rule had now become coordinated and organized into a large war against the Russians and those who chose to collaborate with them. By 1829 the internal disputes within the Nakshbandi were resolved, and the idea of Ghazawat or the Holy War became inseparable from the Naqshbandi teachings. Ghazi Muhammad, the influential Naqshbandi sheikh was declared to be the first imam and the leader of the Ghazavat aimed at establishing the Islamic state (the Imamat) in the Caucasus.[5]

For the next thirty years, Ghazi Muhammad and his successor, Imam Shamil continued to resist the Russian expansion in the North Caucasus. The idea of establishing the Imamat, the Islamic state guided by the shari'a and ruled by the Muslim religious authorities, became inseparable from the idea of Ghazavat against the Russians. It was not accidental that the Russians used the

---

[4] For a critical overview of the Sufi sects in the Caucasus, see Alexander Knysh, Islamic Mysticism. A Short History (Leiden-Boston-Köln: Brill, 2000), pp. 289-300.

[5] N. I. Pokrovskii, Kavkazskie voiny i imamat Shamilia, (Moscow, Rosspen, 2000), pp. 165-94 and Michael Kemper, Herrschaft, Recht und Islam in Daghestan: von den Khanaten und Gemeindebunden zum jihad-Staat (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2005).

word “murid,” which meant a disciple of the Sufi sheikh, interchangeably with a rebel.[6]

A major attempt to unify all the peoples of the North Caucasus into a single, albeit theocratic, state took place in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was as much about instilling the true Islam and turning the population into true Muslims as it was about resistance to the Russian invasion. For Shamil and his followers, Islam and shari’a were supposed to separate the Muslims from Christians, believers from infidels, victims from oppressors, indigenous peoples from the newcomers.

Expansion

Until Russia’s military conquest of the North Caucasus in the middle of the nineteenth century, the region remained a frontier and a distant imperial periphery. For the Ottoman empire, which was fundamentally a military-fiscal state, the North Caucasus was a low priority region given its relative economic insignificance, challenging geography, remoteness, and a lack of immediate security concerns. Most of the time, the Porte was content to rely on the Crimean control of the northwest Caucasus which supplied the prized Circassian slaves and concubines. A few attempts to establish the Ottoman control in the northeast Caucasus ended in failure.

---

[6] For the Russian conquest and Shamil’s resistance, see Moshe Gammer, Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Checnia and Daghestan (London: Frank Cass, 1994).

It was until the 1560s when Moscow’s relentless expansion reached the northern bank of the Terek river where it proceeded to build a fort that the alarm sounded in Istanbul. In a bold move, the Porte resolved to send an expeditionary force to construct a canal connecting the Don and the Volga rivers. If successfully completed, the canal would have allowed Istanbul to conquer Astrakhan, to establish the Ottoman control over the North Caucasus and to secure trade with the Central Asian khanates. Together with the recent victories against the Persians in the southern Caucasus, this would have given the Ottomans a control of the entire Transcaucasia.

Digging a canal between the Don and the Volga proved to be too formidable an undertaking, and the work was soon abandoned. The Ottoman-Crimean expeditionary force approached Astrakhan in September of 1569. Instead of continuing the campaign so late in the season, the decision was made not to storm the city. The lack of supplies, diseases, and the rumor of the large reinforcements from Moscow forced the Ottomans to return to Azov. The campaign, however, was not a total failure. Understanding the seriousness of the Ottoman and Crimean concerns, Ivan IV informed the sultan Selim II that Fort Tersk had been demolished and the route from Central Asia via Astrakhan reopened.

By the 1570s a string of victories over the the Safavid Persia put Armenia, Georgia and much of today’s Azerbaijan under the Ottoman control. With the Safavids in retreat and the Muscovites preoccupied with the Livonian war, the Porte attempted to gain a foothold in the northeast Caucasus once again. In 1578, the Ottoman force crossed the North Caucasus from the Black Sea to the Caspian shore, and after a successful conquest of Derbend, had installed its proteges in several of Daghestan’s principalities. The Ottoman control of the northeast Caucasus lasted for two decades until a series of rebellions, often engineered by the Safavid Persia, put and end to a direct Ottoman rule of the region.[7]

From this time on, the Ottomans were no longer in a position to attempt a direct control of the region. Instead they preferred to rely on the local client-chiefs to project their interests. The Ottomans’ interest in the North Caucasus were secondary, however, to their concern over the khanates of Azerbaijan. The latter, with their fertile soil and rich revenue base were far more attractive than the pastoral economy of the North Caucasus’ barren highlands. Throughout the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century, the Ottoman interests were in retreat in Azerbaijan and Daghestan which came largely under Persian control. Only in 1750s, taking advantage of the Persian decline after the Shah Nadir’s death in 1747 and increasingly concerned with the new Russian push south, the Ottomans began a more active involvement in the region.

---

[7] Osmanli Devleti ile Azerbaycan Türk Hanliklari Arasindaki Münasabetlere dair Arshiv Belgeleri, vol. 1 (1578-1914), (Ankara, 1992), pp. 41-42; Istoriia Dagestana, vol. 1 (Mahachkala, 1968), pp, 270-72.

But the renewed Ottoman engagement with the North Caucasus was short-lived. By the late eighteenth century, the Porte was no longer a military match for the Russian empire. The treaty of Kuchuk Kaynarji and the subsequent Russian annexation of the Crimea had greatly reduced the Ottoman leverage in the North Caucasus. In the late 1780s the Porte actively encouraged the uprising led by the Chechen sheikh Mansur against the Russians. The Ottoman letters appealed to disparate native chiefs to unite in the Holy War against the Russians. However, without any substantive help which the Ottomans were unable to provide, the appeals to Islamic solidarity could do little in challenging Russia’s corrosive influences over the natives and its military superiority. The uprising run out of steam, and Mansur was captured in 1791 after Anapa, the formidable Ottoman fort on the Black Sea coast, had fallen into the Russian hands.[8]

By the early nineteenth century, the Russians moved beyond the recently established frontier along the Kuban and Terek rivers stretching between the Caspian and the Black Seas. With the annexation of the parts of Georgia in 1801, the capture of

---

[8] In 1790 the Ottoman army dispatched to help Mansur suffered a crushing defeat. Mansur’s subsequent requests for troops armed with guns and ammunition were denied (Osmanli Devleti ile Kafkasya Iliskeleri (Ankara,

Derbend and Baku in 1806, and the final capture of Anapa in 1828, the Russian troops and forts had now enveloped the entire Caucasus range. It was not until the 1860s, however, when the defeat of Shamil and his followers in the north-east Caucasus and the expulsion of the Circassian (Adyge) in the northwest Caucasus would put the region firmly under Russia's military rule.

The Ottoman efforts to stop the Russian advance proved to be grossly inadequate. The Porte tried to build an anti-Russian coalition by supporting certain local rulers and chiefs in their bid for power. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the main purveyors of the Ottoman interests in the east Caucasus were: Surhay-khan of Kazi Kumukh in Daghestan, Shih Ali-khan of Derbend and Selim khan of Sheki and Shirvan.[9]

However, uniting the disparate peoples and clans of the region in one great cause proved an exceedingly difficult task. Occasionally, when the alliances were built, they brought a short-lived success. For example, Shamil was able to form an Imamat in the northeast Caucasus and unite a number of local chiefs in the Ghazavat against Russia. Likewise when the British entered the frame in the 1830s to begin the Great Game, they too succeeded in forming an alliance among the Adyge peoples in the northwest Caucasus. These two developments were indeed responsible for slowing down the Russian advance in the North

---

1992), no. 10, pp. 71-72; M Sadik Bilge, Osmanli Devleti ve Kafkasya (Istanbul: Eren, 2005), pp. 149-51.

[9] Osmanli Devleti ile Azerbaycan Türk Hanliklari, pp. 191-200.

Caucasus in the 1830s-40s. In the end, such alliances were fragile and prone to fall apart because of the narrow and different concerns of the various local warlords. Most of the time, the call for the Holy War was not enough to override the traditional rivalries and hostilities.

Forms of Alliances

By the nineteenth century, the numerous and diverse peoples of the North Caucasus had one thing in common--with very few exceptions, they were Muslim. But their adherence to Islam varied significantly-- from the northeast Caucasus where Islam was deeply entrenched among the peoples of the northern Daghestan and Chechens, to the central North Caucasus with a far more tenuous hold of Islam over the Kabardins (the eastern Adyges) and Ossetins, to the northwest Caucasus where Islam was only nominally accepted by the western Adyge peoples, and to the Ingush who largely remained animist until the 1860s.

The peoples of the North Caucasus represented a highly fragmented aggregation of Islamic societies organized on the basis of kinship, language, and common territory. Their social organization varied dramatically. There were fairly complex political entities and social hierarchies, such as in northern Daghestan or among the Kabardins. Their elites were interested in preserving and augmenting their power through a continued reliance on the customary law (*adat*) and thus were often locked into a struggle with the local *ulema*, an alternative locus of power, who wanted to extend the rule of the Islamic law (*sharia*) at the expense of the customary law. Other peoples such as the eastern Adyges and the Chechens exhibited little social stratification and were referred to as the “democratic” societies.

Like the Swiss institution of Eidgenossenschaft--an alliance of communities bound by mutual oath, or a confederation, the Adyges of the northeast Caucasus and the Chechens possessed a similarly ancient tradition, which in Russian translation was known as “soprisiazhnichestvo,” literally, the mutual oath. From what we know about this institution, it seemed to function as a way to include a fugitive individual into the local clan through adoption and artificial kinship. But it was also used to cement the ties between different clans and to form complex co-fraternities.[10]

One significant attempt to organize a confederation among the eastern Adyge was undertaken in the 1790s when the commoners of the three Adyge tribes--Shapsug, Abadzekh, and Natukhai, united against their ruling elites with the initial encouragement of the Russian authorities. Later, chastened by the experience of the French revolution, Catherine the Great decided to switch the sides. In 1796, in the major battle at Bziuko-zau, not far from today's Krasnodar, a detachment of Russian troops armed with cannon and shrapnel played a critical role in saving the native elites from a complete debacle. If this was an opportunity to form a lasting Adyge confederation, it was cut short by Petersburg's support of the local elites.[11]

---

[10] Gardanov, V. K. Obshchestvennyi stroi adygskikh narodov: XVIII-pervaia polovina XIX v. (Moscow: Nauka, 1967), pp. 254-61.

The fortunes of the peoples of the North Caucasus continued to be in flux periodically affected by the new conquerors but most of all by incessant local rivalries and traditional brigandage. From the late eighteenth century the local politics had become intimately connected to the last and lasting conquering power, the Russian empire. But it was not until the 1860s that the Russians were able to provide the sort of the Pax Russica that could ensure the relative stability and development of the region.

Yet Christian and colonial power that sought to graft itself upon the people of the region through the usual combination of carrots and sticks was seen as alien and unwelcome by the Muslim population. Not surprisingly, Islam became a rallying force for all those who chose to resist the invaders and rallied under the green banners of sheikhs Mansur in the 1780s or Shamil from 1824-1859. Following the failures to create the long lasting confederations or Islamic states in the region, modern ideas of ethnic and national identities began to reach the North Caucasus as it became increasingly drawn into the Russian imperial orbit.

---

[11] Ibid.,pp. 249-50.

Ethnic Identities

Following the initial conquest, the Russian authorities preferred a strategy of dividing the commoners and the local elites in hope of weakening the resistance against Russian rule. By the 1790s, the support and co-optation of the elites, who were bestowed with the high military ranks, large annuities, and military assistance against their rivals, had become the principal strategy of the Russian government. The rewards, tangible or symbolic, could at best secure the cooperation of the native elites and their peoples. But a more substantial change in transforming the region into an integral part of the Russian empire could be affected only by a long-term process of the acculturation of the elites. This process gained particular importance in the nineteenth century and later formed a cornerstone of the ethnopolitics in the region.

While constituting different degrees of Russification, acculturation was not always synonymous with assimilation. After all, a fully assimilated native--typically a young convert to Christianity, educated in Russian who also looked and acted like one--could have commanded little authority in his native society.

While the assimilation was always preferred, in the second half of the nineteenth century the Russian authorities became increasingly interested in a different type of an acculturated native--the one who could represent Russian interests and remained influential in his own society. He might have worn a Russian military uniform or a civilian dress of a Russian administrator but he would remain a part of his native society, speaking the local language and practicing Islam. In other words, the Russian empire needed a greater number of the cultural interlocutors, who could serve as the conduit for transferring the Russian legal, political, and cultural idioms into the indigenous environment.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the regional schools will be producing the new educated class from among the natives. But in the early nineteenth century, the pro-Russian educated elite was forged in the imperial capital. For instance, two Adyge individuals, Shora Nogma (Russified Nogmov) and Khan-Giray, were among the first ones to exemplify the role that the Russian influence played in the emergence of the ethnic and historic consciousness among the Adyges. There were to become the founding fathers of the modern Adyge historical and literary tradition.

The task of constructing ethnic identities fell on the Russified local elites and Russian scholarly and government officials. After all, ethnicity was a western concept brought through and from Russia. The ironies of the empire were often inescapable, as in a case of Shora Nogma, who was greatly influenced by A. J. Sjögren--an ethnic Finn educated at a Swedish gymnasium at the time when his homeland was part of Sweden and who later continued to write in Swedish. Shortly after Finland became annexed to the Russian empire in 1809, Sjögren became a conduit of the Western ideas in the Russian imperial periphery and was bestowed with the membership in the Russian Academy of Sciences. It was a Russified Swedish Finn who brought the modern ideas of ethnicity, philology, and historiography to the North Caucasus!

Constructing ethnicity was a multifaceted project requiring first of all a consolidation of cultural and historical identity, but also defining the communal boundaries based on their socio-economic activity and political affiliations. It was a colonial project to an extent that ethnicity meant an overcoming of the tribal differences in order in respond to the outside demands and expectations, in this case those of the Russian empire.

Ethnic identities were primordial in a sense that the specific and different group identities existed before the modern age and Russian invasions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They were also constructed in a sense that they had become institutionalized and transformed by modernity introduced through the contact with the Russian imperial structures.

The most potent force in the North Caucasus that worked against the emergence of the ethnic identities was Islam, which attempted to unify the peoples of the region on the basis of an Islamic identity against its main antagonist, the Russian empire. With the collapse of the Russian empire, the Soviet anti-religious and ethnicity-building or nation-building policies were part of the same dual process. The real construction of ethnic identities took place in the early Soviet times, and had been the focus of several excellent studies.[12]

Conclusions

In the end, the Russian success and Ottoman failure to establish their respective rule in the North Caucasus were a function of the structural differences between the two empires, their different strategic choices, and different modes of conquest and colonization. For the Ottomans with their fiscal focus, the North Caucasus was a land of little promise and few revenues. The Porte was content with letting the Crimean khans to control the northwestern and central parts of the North Caucasus as long as they continued to supply valuable slaves to Istanbul. The Ottoman direct intervention was prompted only when the Persians became engaged in the military conquests in the northeast Caucasus in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and when the Russians began to do the same in the eighteenth century. The Ottoman military expeditions to the region prior to the eighteenth century never attempted to establish a permanent Ottoman presence. Their goals were simply seizing a few strategic places and collecting taxes from the local population. If anything, the Ottomans relied on the informal rule, the one usually attributed to the British empire.

---

[12] Terry Martin, The Affirmative Action Empire (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) and Francine Hirsch, The Empire of Nations (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

By the late eighteenth century, when the Russians forcefully moved into the North Caucasus, the Ottoman empire was hopelessly overstretched and its military no longer a match for the Russians. There is no small irony in the fact that the Ottomans devoted more resources and energy to ruling over their Christian subjects in the Balkans than to saving their coreligionists from the infidel rule in the Caucasus.

Thus, the conquest of the Caucasus was left to the Russians, and they did it in a way that was in stark contrast to the Porte’s feeble efforts. Russia’s immediate concerns were primarily geopolitical and military, and least of all economic. It was only in the early nineteenth century that the issue of land, taken away from the natives and redistributed among the colonists, would become of paramount importance.

In contrast to the Ottoman sporadic and brief military campaigns, the heavy machine of Russian conquest and colonization included a military bristling with the firepower; a bureaucracy armed with the scribes, interpreters, and customs officials; colonists vying for land; church clerics intent on saving the natives’ souls; and, not least, a corrosive lure of opportunities attracting the growing number of the native runaways.

The Russian government spared no efforts in establishing control over the native societies. However, its never-ending search for the optimal policies was riddled with mistakes and contradictions. The government efforts to support the local secular elites antagonized the Islamic clergy (the ulema and qadis). The cooptation of the native commoners was in direct conflict with the interests of the native elites and undermined the policy of projecting the Russian interests through these elites. A policy of promoting the conversion to the Christianity antagonized both the secular and religious elites. Russia’s attempts to ban a profitable slave trade were ruining the traditional economies, just as the increasing pool of the Russian markets led to a social and political polarization within the native societies. Finally, expropriating the land, bringing the colonists from Russia, and expelling the native population drove the entire clans and peoples toward resistance.

In short, Russia was no accidental empire. While its policies continued to evolve, Russia’s expansion in the North Caucasus was deliberate, gradual, and systematic. Yet a military conquest and a degree of administrative and economic integration were not synonymous with the successful rule over the native peoples or with the latter’s loyalty to the empire-state. Long after the initial conquest and colonization, these challenges eluded the Soviet authorities throughout the twentieth century, as they continue to elude their successors in the present-day Kremlin.