

Alchemy as a Mode of Colonial Governance

Dana Sherry, Stanford University

My talk today represents an effort to distill large portions of my dissertation into a short presentation. The larger project looks at mass population movements as a window into how Caucasus officials conceived of an ideal population in the mid-nineteenth century, and today will serve as an experiment in presenting some of my conclusions about the colonial period in the region, beginning in the 1840s. I hope you'll permit me to use this opportunity to talk about the big concepts in my project at the risk of neglecting some of the evidence that supports my analysis. Please feel free to ask for more detail on any points – I would be happy to provide it.

There is a tendency to assume that modern states hold onto an ideal of homogeneity – whether defined in terms of ethnicity, religion, civic virtues, what have you. In the mid-nineteenth century, conservative Russian polemicists and officials put forward the view that increasing the number of Russian/Slavic/Orthodox settlers in the Caucasus and decreasing the number of Muslims, either through conversion or through deportation, would provide the key to the region's development. When I began my research, I expected to find these opinions among Caucasus officials themselves. Yet to my surprise, a very different picture emerged from the Tbilisi administration's publications and from the internal correspondence surrounding the emigration of Muslims in the 1860s. Far from pursuing homogeneity of any kind, these "enlightened" officials (the term is problematic, and frankly I'd welcome suggestions for an alternate rubric, but I've chosen "enlightened" for reasons I will discuss in a moment) sought to harness heterogeneity to modernize the region in a process that much resembles the alchemy of medieval chemists. After going through a process of purification, each ethnic group would contribute to the region's development and the imperial officials would thus oversee the transformation of the Orient into a corner of Europe. Today I want to sketch the main components of this formula.

Why alchemy?

Alchemy is a useful metaphor for a variety of reasons. It combines a strong element of wishful thinking with scientific aspirations, promising that imperfect or crude materials may be transformed into an ideal substance by an adept of the art. Moreover, the term also suggests that the goals and/or methods of the project were quixotic at best – alchemy, from a modern perspective, is doomed to fail. Yet at the same time, the experiments of the alchemists were the forerunners of modern chemistry, and their efforts laid the foundation for today's practices.

In terms of the social alchemy practiced by Caucasus officials, the image suggested itself to me first because of their consistent reference to the need to recombine and transform the "elements" of the population. Officials recognized that the "Asiatic" groups residing in the Caucasus had many undesirable

habits and practices, yet at the same time, they argued that a skilled and knowledgeable administration could create a Western society out of this rough material. Each ethnic group had particular aptitudes that would fit it into a particular niche in the emerging order, after the negative features had been removed. The Caucasians could not, and emphatically should not, become Russians – difference must endure to ensure the project’s success – but harnessing that difference would drive the forces of modernity. In this case, a flourishing, westernized colony constituted the golden reward for their endeavors. Ethnography would lead the way, and officials endeavored to produce accurate information about the region’s diverse population.

Unsurprisingly, these plans did not achieve their desired result. In retrospect, and as a historian, it is easy to say that they could never have worked. However, I would suggest that this emphasis on retaining ethnic identity while pursuing the transformation of society reappeared in the more invasive social engineering of Soviet nationalities policy.

Enlightened colonialism in the Caucasus

The dominant mode of government in the Caucasus in the mid-nineteenth century continued the Catherinian tradition of tolerance, while adding an interest in ethnicity as a category of administration. The Catherinian model took its inspiration from the efforts of Catherine the Great (r. 1762-1796) to create a secular state that not only tolerated religious difference but coopted (and created, when necessary) religious institutions as a space for the state to connect with its non-Russian subjects.¹ Religious difference was something to be managed, not eradicated – or at least, not immediately. In the long run, Catherinian tolerance was intended to lead to the mitigation of difference, as public practices throughout the empire came in line with Russian – or, better, European – standards. Thus, the Catherinian approach to ethnic and religious difference called for a gradual rapprochement (*sblizhenie*) of non-Russians with Russians through state-sponsored institutions. Non-Russians would come to see the virtues of embracing Russian practices, and Russians would wait patiently for them to realize the self-evident superiority of western civilization.

I’ve used the imperfect term “enlightened” to describe this line of political thought, as it drew on the Enlightenment ideal of tolerance within a secular state that administered its inhabitants without discrimination. Moreover, it emphasized that colonized subjects could advance culturally under the state’s tutelage and, eventually, participate in imperial institutions. In this view, officials did not rely on Russians alone to meet the state’s needs, but rather saw the empire as something that must transcend ethnic and

¹ See Robert Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), chapter 1, for a more substantial treatment of this question.

religious difference. The rhetoric was universal and inclusive, not exclusive. The impediments to entrance into the empire lay in the realm of culture and could thus be mitigated.

At the same time, this enlightened view remained profoundly and unabashedly hierarchical. Inclusion remained theoretical for many in the periphery, and no one could say when Caucasian highlanders, nomads, Poles, Jews, or others would finally become full members of the polity.² Nationalist movements would begin to disturb their complacent confidence in rapprochement in the final decades of the empire, but until then enlightened officials could argue that cultural harmony would come in time.

Formations of colonial difference in the Caucasus

Enlightened administration became colonial administration in 1841, following the outbreak of widespread rebellions upon the introduction of Russian administrative structures and practices. Officials concluded that the uprisings revealed the true nature of their subjects, who were essentially different from Russians, and therefore required a different form of government. West European colonies, especially India and Algeria, provided inspiration for how to handle the situation.

Like its counterparts in western colonies, the administration relied on scientific knowledge to show the best ways to manage Caucasian subjects. Scientific knowledge generated about subject peoples, rather than the personal knowledge of their leaders that drove the traditional mode, would enable the state to assess its population, administer it appropriately, and determine how each group could contribute to the region's development. Viceroy M.S. Vorontsov (1845-1855) and his successors actively promoted the production of this knowledge through their sponsorship of periodical publications and institutions like the Caucasus Division of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society, and most of the contributors and editors of these publications held official positions within the civil or military administration. Knowledge remained the domain of the state, and the articles discussed here constitute statements about how local officials viewed the populations directly under their administration. The connections between knowledge and power in this case were manifest.

Moreover, these articles focused on communities defined not by religion, but by what approaches later definitions of ethnicity. Officials relied on language as a key marker of identity, and typical accounts in the *Notes* of the Geographical Society also provided information on religious practices, dress, physiognomy, places of residence, architecture, and class and gender relations within given communities. At the same time, Caucasus officials did not share their western counterparts' enthusiasm for biologically

² Many scholars have addressed this issue. See, for example, Virginia Martin, *Law and Custom in the Steppe*; Theodore Weeks, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863-1914* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996); Daniel Brower, *Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

defined racial identity. “Blood” did not explain local cultures for Russian officials, though it appeared prominently in British accounts of local inhabitants.³ A more Romantic view of ethnicity dominated, linked to geography rather than biology.

Spatial dimensions of ethnicity

Officials worked to balance the universal and the particular in their ethnographic writing, invoking, on one hand, knowledge of the universal laws that governed human development, and on the other, knowledge about the Caucasus and its inhabitants specifically. Caucasus officials echoed widespread European notions about the universal course of progress that culminated in European civilization, including its autocratic incarnation in Russia. In this vision, all communities eventually progressed through the same historical stages, and under Russian tutelage, the somnolent peoples of the Caucasus would awaken to modernity. On this point, Caucasus officials partook in typical nineteenth century expressions of a civilizing mission. They entered more unorthodox territory, however, when they joined these universal laws to a defense of ethnic distinctiveness.

Caucasus officials embraced a Romantic view of national uniqueness, and they linked that distinctiveness with geography. Montesquieu’s ideas about the fundamental impact of the climate on local customs formed a distant backdrop to the projects of Caucasus officials, but their views had much more in common with the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder argued that each ethnic group had its own particular qualities, and that ethnic identity stemmed directly from the physical environment.⁴ Unlike Hegel, who saw national distinctiveness as the unfolding of geist irrespective of physical conditions,⁵ Herder emphasized that human culture evolved out of a nation’s relationship to the surrounding world: “The constitution of their body, their way of life, the pleasures and occupations to which they have been accustomed from their infancy, and the whole circle of their ideas, are climatic.”⁶ Herder presented a complex view of climate that encompassed its physical aspects – temperature, elevation, and air “and its myriad component parts” as well as cultural features. The culture grew naturally out of its physical surroundings. Thus, a region’s “nature and products, the food and drink men enjoy in it, the mode of life they pursue, the labours in which they are employed, their clothing, even their ordinary attitudes, their arts

³ See James Stanislaus Bell, *Journal of a Residence in Circassia During the Years 1837, 1838, and 1839* (London, E. Moxon, 1840) for one example of this tendency.

⁴ Find reference to Herder’s influence in Russia – conventional wisdom holds it was widespread...

⁵ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction: Reason in History*. Trans. N.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.56.

⁶ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 10.

and pleasures, with a multitude of other circumstances, which considerably influence their lives, all belong to the picture of changeable climate.”⁷

The first issue of the *Notes* of the Caucasus Division of the Imperial Geographical Society laid out an explicitly Herderian argument about the nature of difference in the Caucasus. The editor’s preface is worth quoting at length:

The truth of the influence of the terrain on History is nowhere clearer than in the Caucasus. This truth underlies the difficulties the Administration has encountered and is the key to all the endless contradictions that are the distinctive attribute of the entire region. [...] Both the environment and the people far around [the Caucasus range] submit to its power, which impresses upon them its distinctive stamp. In the Caucasus everything acquires its origins and meaning from the mountains. The Caucasus can only be understood by the Caucasus. [...]

[From the diversity of the physical environment] arose the diversity of all the populations, distributed with their colorful ethnographic particularities around the entire region, and, more importantly, the level of their development (*obrazovanie*) stems from [the diverse environment]. The more the impact of the Caucasus ridge is felt, the more closed off its valleys become, the more its population is fragmented, and the more their life becomes savage, primordial and unenlightened (*neobuzdana*).⁸

This passage introduced several key points about how geography functions. First, geography caused Caucasian estrangement from capital-H History, resulting in backwardness. This backwardness grew more extreme depending on a community’s location, but it was characteristic of the entire region. Second, it explained diversity, yet simultaneously it put all Caucasians in one category. Caucasians were fragmented, colorful, yet they all fell into a single group that was clearly distinct from Russians. Third, geography made Caucasians irreducibly different from Russians. The civilizing mission would bring Caucasians into the modern world, but they would not cease to be Caucasian.

In short, geography functioned for Caucasus officials much as race functioned for British officials in India. Chatterjee has most famously argued for the centrality of race as a concept that “united the ruling bloc and separated it from those over whom it ruled.”⁹ During the colonial period, geography made Caucasians different from Russians, yet it also made Caucasians uniquely suited for developing the region. As one official put it, speaking specifically of the highlanders,

This [native] population has mastered the natural environment of the region; nature will only surrender itself to the natives. The highlander and the Caucasus form a single indivisible whole. Take the highlander out of the Caucasus, and he will die; bring in a foreigner, and he will die. Those who survive will need a great deal of time to adjust to the climate and the region.¹⁰

⁷ Herder, *Reflections*, p. 16.

⁸ “Predislovie,” in *Zapiski kavkazskogo otdela imperatorskogo russkogo geograficheskogo obschestva*, t. 1 (1852), p. i, ii, xii.

⁹ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, p. 19.

¹⁰ Zapiska voennogo sovetnika pri Rossiiskom posol’stve v Konstantinople V.A. Frankini voennomy mimistru D.A. Miliutinu,” in Tuganov, p. 100. Herder presents an almost identical argument on the inevitable decline of settlers in colonial holdings in *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 32.

The highlands were least susceptible to foreign colonization, yet the lowlands also would only flourish if worked by native hands. In this respect, Caucasus officials diverged from their western counterparts, who generally preferred to downplay intimate and productive connections between colonized territory and colonized subjects.

This particular understanding of difference gave rise to the elaboration of theories of social alchemy and informed the policy that guided the colonization of the eastern Black Sea coast. I'd like to talk first about how officials envisioned the differential integration of Caucasian groups into the emerging social order, then turn to the relevance of these ideals to resettlement.

Alchemy in practice 1: Using local elements

Caucasus officials dreamed of transforming the social and economic structures of the region, and they thought about their new subjects primarily in terms of the kinds of work they could perform. Once ethnic groups had found their way into the imperial order, their specific aptitudes could be put to good use. Officials speculated that groups who were perceived not to work, like the nomads, fell outside the universal laws of progress and even outside the realm of the human. Such groups seemed destined to die out as ignoble savages, but the remainder of the indigenous population worked, or theoretically could work, to build a stronger empire.

Officials assigned a role in this occupational hierarchy to each potentially productive ethnic group. Russians and European foreigners would remain a minority and help guide the region into the modern age. Aristocratic Georgians would become a managerial class, serving the state directly in civil or military positions,¹¹ while the Georgian peasantry, who were “not strangers to hard work,” could become good agricultural workers “under the direction of an intelligent landowner.”¹² “Tatars” naturally engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry and constituted “perhaps the most important productive working element of Transcaucasia,”¹³ though their work could be made more efficient if only the necessary shepherds stayed with their herds and the rest stayed home to work at unspecified sedentary tasks.¹⁴

Armenians proved a difficult group to categorize, as the national stereotype cast them in the role of merchants, and most Armenians in Tiflis did engage in trade. One scheme unambiguously called for them to be a merchant class, aiming towards the acquisition of wealth (though not capital – modern

¹¹ Zapiski t.1, 1852, xix. A similar picture of the ethnic composition of Tiflis itself appeared in “Pisma v SPb XXX,” *Kavkaz* 1861:59 (30 July).

¹² “Osnovnye promshlennye sily Zakavkaz’e,” *Kavkazskii kalendar’* 1846, p. 140.

¹³ Zapiski t.1, 1852, xix.

¹⁴ “Osnovnye promshlennye sily Zakavkaz’e,” *Kavkazskii kalendar’* 1846, p. 139.

industry belonged to Europeans).¹⁵ The merchants and tradesmen in many towns were predominantly Armenian, but the larger Armenian population in the countryside engaged in agriculture. That population made little impact on the imagination of officials, despite the substantial efforts the administration made to attract Armenian peasants from Persia a generation earlier. By mid-century, they had vanished into the landscape, either forgotten or invisible. While their “diligence” and “competence” in the countryside attracted some attention, in general the Armenian peasantry had become “almost indistinguishable from other natives and live[d] in equal poverty.”¹⁶

The highlanders also had a position awaiting them at the base of the imperial order. Caucasus officials viewed the highlanders, unlike the nomads, as peoples possessed of natural intelligence and well able to adapt to civilized life, once they accepted Russian rule. Once they entered the imperial family, Russia itself would take up the highlanders’ cause:

Through the establishment of civic virtues (*grazhdanstvennost’*), the spread of civility (*obrazovanie*) and the desire to master technical labor, the government will endow the highlanders with a most happy life... And the grandchildren of our grandchildren will record in the annals of Caucasian history the name of the great man who brought civilization to a wild country abandoned by God: Dagestan...¹⁷

The god-forsaken Dagestanis, like their fellow highlanders throughout the region, would need to master the ways of technical labor, for the highlanders would fill a similar function to that allocated to all Tatars in the general plans for the region and become laborers, whether working their own land, for wages on imperial projects (roads, wood felling), or on lowland plantations.¹⁸

Alchemy in practice 2: Russians as unsuitable settlers

Debates over how to repopulate the Black Sea coast in 1864¹⁹ reveal the steadfast application of alchemical principles. The Cossacks first came to mind, but officials argued that they were ill-suited to fill this role on the coast. The Cossacks came primarily from the steppe, and thus had little experience with life at sea or in the mountains. In the highlands, the terrain favored agriculture practiced by small farms, as the western Circassians had maintained, not by communities with shared land as in Russia proper. The coast, on the other hand, required a population that could engage in trade and maritime industry.

¹⁵ “Predislovie,” in *Zapiski kavkazskogo otdela imperatorskogo russkogo geograficheskogo obschestva*, t. 1 (1852), xix.

¹⁶ “Osnovnye promshlennye sily Zakavkaz’e,” *Kavkazskii kalendar’* 1846, pp. 140-141.

¹⁷ “Petrovsk,” *Kavkaz* 1863:97 (12 December).

¹⁸ This transition from martial activities to wage labor mirrors the fate of the highland Chotanagpur peoples in British India, as described by Kaushik Ghosh in “A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labor Market of Colonial India” (in *Subaltern Studies X*, Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash, and Susie Tharu, eds. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 8-48).

¹⁹ The western Circassians were forced out of the region in 1864-65 with great violence and loss of life, the majority emigrating to the Ottoman Empire and a minority accepting resettlement into the lowlands among Cossack villages.

The governor-general of Kutaisi, D. I. Sviatopolk-Mirskii, invoked national and economic principles in his plan for colonization. He argued that while Russian settlers would serve to anchor Russia's claim to the territory, they alone could not create the kind of society that the administration needed. He acknowledged that Cossacks could be useful for strictly military purposes, but he maintained that they would inhibit economic and civil (*grazhdanskoe*) development and could serve as an unnecessary provocation to other powers. Finally, a military population could not achieve the true goal of rule on the coast: "the creation of a Russian population engaged in maritime industry and the development of a Russian commercial fleet." However, since Russians were not sailors and were unfamiliar with the type of agriculture suitable for this region, he found it necessary "to add a dash of another [population], which could serve as an example and an encouragement to the Russian population." Sviatopolk-Mirskii saw the Trapezond Greeks as the best group for this, as they were familiar with the region, had already expressed an interest in settling there, and engaged in the sorts of activities that the state should encourage. Russian consuls would evaluate potential immigrants to make sure that they were "distinguished by good mores (*nравstvennost'*) and industriousness." In his view, Russian civilians, with the addition of some Greeks, would best serve to develop the coast in the right direction.²⁰

This connection between nationality and economic activities stemmed directly from ideas about geography and its influence on national character, a point made more explicitly by Baron L. Nikolai, head of the civil administration. He argued against Cossacks as an unnecessary defensive element now that the land had "returned to its primeval (*pervobytnoe*) state of emptiness (*bezliudnost'*)." He echoed Sviatopolk-Mirskii's argument about the need for a civilian population, and then began a long discussion of historical geography and its impact on the development of national character. He reasoned that the coast should be inhabited by groups familiar with its topographical specificities and only in areas that had previously supported human habitation. Other communities would take generations to adapt to the new environment, with high mortality in the process, or simply leave. Nikolai then turned to the issue of who would be best suited to the task of colonization:

There is no doubt that state interests would be best served if the newly acquired country were settled exclusively by the Russian nation (*narodnost'*). The question is whether the Russian nation can settle there. The Russian people (*narod*) has its own specific economic character, stemming from the topography of Russia [...] From this it is clear that the Russian people cannot distill from itself any elements for a maritime or mountain population. To summon it to do so artificially would be to violate nature, which does not surrender itself to political considerations or regulations.²¹

Geography, economics, and laws of nature came together to determine the future of the region. Abstract goals of state took a secondary role to the demands of space and its impact on national identity. The space

²⁰ SSSA f.416 op.3 d.254 ll. 17-19.

²¹ SSSA f.416 op.3 d.254 l.23.

of the Black Sea coast fundamentally differed from Russian space, and required settlers fundamentally different from Russians, even though “state interests” would demand Russian colonists. The right colonists would come from a similar geographical region and therefore provide the necessary “elements for a maritime or mountain population.”

In December 1864, Petersburg issued its decisions about how the region should be populated. Although “regarding nationality (*natsional’nost’*), it would be most desirable to see a purely Russian population here,” Petersburg recognized that Russians alone could not be responsible for colonizing the region.²² All Christian settlers, except those who were “hostile to Orthodoxy” (presumably this meant Catholic Poles), could be allowed to enter. While Russian immigration would be encouraged, foreign colonists would be needed, “predominantly from those parts of Germany where residents predominantly are engaged in horticulture and viticulture.” The long-standing faith in the German colonist endured in Petersburg, even if it did not seem a practical option in the region. However, Germans were not the only alternative, and geography paired with religion to determine the range of other possible colonists. Georgians from the neighboring provinces of Imeretia and Mingrelia were the second choice, on the basis of geographical similarities (and implicitly religious ones as well). Finally, Greeks could settle in the region, but Petersburg viewed them with some suspicion. They could settle only in areas set aside for the development of trade, in known and limited quantities, and each settler needed to have a recommendation from the Russian consul in his area. The Greek presence would encourage the development of maritime trade, as “they present a ready-made element which can be used to create, so to speak, a cadre of future mariners and on the part of the Government it is necessary to take all measure to ensure that that cadre be filled with Russians.” The Greeks were thus viewed as a volatile element requiring additional supervision as they acted as a positive catalyst upon the surrounding Russian population.²³

Conclusions

Social alchemy failed to deliver on its promises, and the colonial era came to a close when officials turned to homogeneity as a panacea for social ills in the final decades of the empire. The potential reasons for the failure of schemes based on heterogeneity are legion, yet the turn to nationalism did not prove any more successful in binding the region into the empire. *Mutatis mutandis*, the colonial faith in the power of universal ideas to provide unity through diversity would re-emerge in new forms in Soviet nationalities policy. Dreams of alchemy died hard, though the social bodies they produced remained stubbornly imperfect.

²² SSSA f.416 op.3 d.254 l.41.

²³ SSSA f.416 op.3 d.254 ll.40-42.