

# **THE NORTH CAUCASUS DURING THE RUSSIAN CONQUEST, 1600-1850s**

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## **Executive Summary**

This paper is an introduction to the history of the North Caucasus between 1600 and the 1850s, a period that encompasses Russia's growing presence and a military conquest and colonization of the region. At the present time, no comprehensive study of the region exists in any of the Western languages. This paper presents a broad historical picture of the North Caucasus and its peoples during the period of the Russian conquest, 1600-1850s.

## **Introduction**

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## **Russian Policies Toward the North Caucasus**

Given the audience for this paper, I will leave out the literary aspects of the book and will focus on the Russian policies and their implications for the North Caucasus region. The geographic boundaries of the North Caucasus encompass the lands north of the main Caucasus range, including the Nogay steppe in the west and the Kalmyk steppe in the east, and roughly bounded by the Kuban and Kuma rivers. Politically, it is important to note that these lands never produced a modern nation-state such as the ones south of the Caucasus range in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

As numerous and diverse as the peoples of the North Caucasus were, they had one thing in common--with very few exceptions, they were Muslim. Their adherence to Islam varied significantly--from the north-east Caucasus where Islam was deeply entrenched among the peoples of northern Dagestan and Chechnya, to the north-central Caucasus where Islam held a far more tenuous hold over Kabardinia (the eastern Adygeia) and Ossetia, and to the north-west Caucasus where Islam was often nominally accepted by the western Adyge peoples, more popularly known as the Circassians.

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 elites were interested in preserving and augmenting their power and wealth through a continued reliance on customary law (*adat*). On the other hand, the foremost concern of the Muslim clergy (*ulema*), which was an alternative locus of power, was to extend the rule of Islamic law (*sharia*) at the expense of customary law. While seemingly working at cross-purposes, the native elites and the *ulema* often collaborated and coexisted comfortably.

Neither group was interested in erecting ethno-cultural boundaries between different peoples. While a certain ruling elite belonged to a specific people, such as the Kabardin princes, for instance, they usually ruled over diverse ethnic groups collecting taxes from the Kabardins and neighboring groups of Chechens, Ossetins, Ingush, et al. Likewise, for the *ulema*, the Islamization of the society was not about particularities but about commonalities, about erasing differences through the Arabization of the language and culture and the Islamization of law and lifestyle.

Throughout history, the North Caucasus remained on the fringes of the Islamic world. The neighboring Ottoman and Persian empires had never succeeded in conquering and annexing the region and remained content with collecting payments in tribute, taxes, and slaves. Thus it was left to the Russians, who since the late eighteenth century had brought in the heavy colonial machinery—the military, bureaucracy, missionaries, settlers, courts, and schools--to begin altering the traditional geographical and social landscape.

Initially, Russia's relationship with the indigenous elites was similar to the experience of other colonial empires. The elites were to be co-opted and turned into loyal servants of the imperial government. Yet by the mid-eighteenth century, the Russian expansion in the North Caucasus turned into an aggressive expropriation of lands, with the deportation of local villagers,

harboring of native fugitives, and their conversion to Orthodox Christianity. Numerous petitions from indigenous elites for a redress of the above issues remained unanswered, and they chose the path of resistance against the Russian presence.

In contrast to the colonial experiences of other empires, the Russians began to support the local commoners in their grievances against their land-owning elites. The Russian policy of divide and rule along social lines continued throughout the second half of the eighteenth century until a series of large peasant uprisings against their elites jolted the entire region and compelled the Russian government to take sides. Shaken by its own experience of the Pugachev uprising and the French Revolution, the Russian government chose to side with the local elites. Once again, the cooptation of the elites, who were bestowed with high military ranks, large annuities, and military assistance against their rivals, had become the principal strategy of the Russian government.

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 acculturation of elites. This process gained particular importance in the nineteenth century and later formed a cornerstone of ethnopolitics in the region.

### **Acculturation of Elites**

Acculturation was not an entirely new process, of course. Throughout the Russian engagement with various indigenous peoples, the authorities invariably demanded hostages (*amanat*) from among the native elites to ensure their loyalty. In time, some of these hostages would be sent to the capital to be schooled at the imperial court and converted to Christianity (cf.

the fate of the Kalmyk noble, Petr Taishin, or the Kabardin dynasty of the Bekovich-Cherkasskiis), while others were dispatched to newly founded schools for hostages in Astrakhan, Kizliar, Nalchik, Vladikavkaz, and other places.

Yet before the nineteenth century, their numbers were few, and they rarely returned to their native societies. Instead, they stayed to serve in the Russian military as officers or translators. There was also another large group of natives who became exposed to the Russian way of life--the numerous fugitives from among the indigenous population. Their usual fate was conversion in the Russian Orthodox Church and resettlement far away from their original communities.

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. Assimilation was always a preferred outcome, but in the second half of the nineteenth century the Russian authorities became increasingly interested in a different type of acculturated native--one who could represent Russian interests and remained influential in his own society.

He might have worn a Russian military uniform or the 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 cultural interlocutors, who could serve as conduits for transferring Russian legal, political, and cultural idioms into the indigenous environment.

## **Russia's Imperial Successes and Failures**

For centuries the North Caucasus remained a quintessential frontier region, the periphery of several competing empires. In medieval times, it was the borderland of the Byzantine empire, the Sasanid Persia, and the Khazar kaganate. By the sixteenth century it continued to be the borderland of newly risen empires--the Ottoman, the Safavid Persia, and Russia. Its geography and the highly fragmented nature of the indigenous societies on the one hand, and the remoteness of the region from imperial centers on the other, allowed the region to retain political independence until its incremental conquest and colonization by Russia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The question is why did Russia become successful where others had failed? The principal answer is that by the eighteenth century, the newly modernized Russia brought to the region Western methods of empire-building and colonization, in contrast to the sporadic attempts at conquest by the Ottomans and Persians. The Russian government undertook a systematic colonization of the region by erecting numerous forts with garrisons, dispatching bureaucrats, merchants, and priests to newly-built towns, and encouraging newcomers to settle and farm the land. Yet the government policy of linking the process of the region's colonization with Christianity pushed the natives away from Russia's imperial bosom and into a deeper embrace of Islam. Thus the first dilemma of colonial policies was born.

In principle, the dilemma could have been easily solved. The pragmatic policy demanded abandoning efforts to convert the natives to Orthodox Christianity, emphasizing instead the cooptation of ruling elites who could faithfully represent Russian interests. These two approaches worked at cross-purposes: encouraging the natives' religious conversion antagonized not only the Islamic clergy (the *ulema*), but also the very ruling elites whose cooperation Russia



needed to win. Yet despite the seemingly obvious conclusion to desist from this policy of religious conversion, the Russian government continued to stay the course offering substantial material benefits to those who chose to become Christian.

Orthodox Christianity was at the core of the Russian imperial identity, and in the minds of the Russian policy-makers, Russia's civilizing role was inseparable from spreading the Gospels, making the natives speak Russian, abiding by Russian law, and becoming the tsar's faithful subjects. Conversion to Christianity was a crucial rite of passage and thus more than just a religious transformation. As far as the government was concerned, conversion was equal to assimilation and thus was the only way for the natives to eventually become Russian.

Closely linked with the first dilemma of whether and how to "secularize" the process of colonization was another colonial dilemma: was the North Caucasus to become a colony or a province of the Russian empire? How would Russia reconcile the eventual goal of integrating the North Caucasus into the Russian empire with the practical demands for colonial rule?

Russia's imperial ideology left no room for conceptualizing the newly conquered territories as colonies. The result was a certain rhetorical amalgam best exemplified by Russia's Finance Minister, Egor Kankrin, who in the 1830s famously insisted that the Caucasus be considered a colony of Russia.

However, Kankrin conceived of the Caucasus as a colony only in economic terms, while at the same time advocating the administrative and legal integration of the region into the Russian empire. But even that modest proposition of considering the newly-acquired territories as economic colonies was unacceptable and unbecoming to the imperial self-image. A similar suggestion to have newly-conquered Central Asia considered a Russian colony met the same opposition in the capital in the 1860s.

Torn between official ideology and pragmatic needs, Russian officials continued to search for a more efficient way to govern the North Caucasus. Law and legal issues were at the center of Russian administrative control. How were Russian authorities to deal with the legal issues involving the indigenous population and the Christian settlers? Were the natives to be subjected to Russian imperial laws or remain under their traditional ones? If it was the latter, were they to follow their customary law (*adat*) or religious law (*sharia*)?

There were no simple answers. At first the Russian military authorities resolved to create syncretic Frontier Courts that would include both Russian officials and local representatives. The idea was short-lived, as the natives soon realized that such courts served mainly Russian interests. Then there were various attempts to place the natives under Russian law; these backfired badly, pushing the natives into the arms of Imam Shamil and his deputies (*naibs*).

Finally, the government realized that there was little choice but to accept the fact that the natives relied on their own laws with the possibility of final appeals to Russian supervisory officials (*pristavi*) and military governors. In other words, the Russian authorities had to recognize the duality of legal and social structures, thus de facto accepting a typical colonial situation.

Even then the question remained--which law should be institutionalized by the Russians--the *adat* favored by the native noble and notables or the *sharia* used by the Muslim clergy (*ulema*)? The two local systems of law were at odds with each other. The *ulema* strove to replace customary laws with universal Islamic law, while the native nobles resisted the imposition of *sharia*, fearful that it would weaken their hold over their people.

For Russia, siding with one side meant antagonizing the other, but there was little room for compromise. Many native representatives loyal to Russia consistently advised authorities to

support the *ulema* and thus to defang the jihadist sentiments of holy war against Russia. Yet their advice was consistently ignored, as Russia preferred to stake its future on the cooperation and support of the local nobles.

Questionable as it was, such a policy, however, could be adopted only in relations with societies that had a hierarchy of nobility and possessed a degree of social stratification (e.g. the Kabardins, Kumyks, etc.). But how should one deal with societies that had no governing elites and instead were just egalitarian bands of free villages, such as some societies in Dagestan, and among the Chechens and western Adyges?

There were no easy answers. Patronage and cooptation did not work in these cases, and the influence of the Sufi orders made the locals even less amenable to Russian entreaties. Pacification of such free societies was left to the brute force of the Russian military.

### **Modern Challenges to Russian Control of the North Caucasus**

Throughout the centuries the main challenge remained: how to govern the local population without confirming the social and legal status quo and how to transform the local peoples into acceptable Russian subjects without further antagonizing them? The conflict between the imperial objectives and colonial practices was not easily reconciled. In post-Soviet times, after the first Chechen War, the Yeltsin government found itself in the same situation, best described by the famous Russian comedian Mikhail Zhvanetskii: how to give Chechnya independence and to keep it within Russia at the same time (“Kak dat’ svobodu i ostavit’ v sostave”). The result was an absurd situation in which Russia signed a formal peace treaty with Chechnya, one of its constituent parts.

Russian policies in the North Caucasus remained in flux throughout the centuries. They

reflected the changing concerns of the government in St. Petersburg and the geopolitical situation in the region inasmuch as they mirrored the personalities of different regional governors and viceroys. Some preferred the punishing application of Russian military power, defining pacification through the wholesale destruction of villages, slaughtering of the male population, enslaving of women and children, expulsion of local residents, and imposition of Russian law. While General Ermolov probably exemplified these policies best, it is apparent that the majority of Russian commanders shared his approach and views of the natives. Those who preferred winning the trust of the native population incrementally through trade, educational projects, and greater tolerance and understanding were in a minority. Among them were General Nikolai Raevsky and Viceroy Mikhail Vorontsov.

In the end, it was not surprising that over the course of several centuries, Russian policies changed, reversed, and were recalibrated, with different ministries arguing over different priorities. Tactical changes notwithstanding, the strategic goals of incorporating the region into the Russian empire and Russifying its population had always remained constant. Attaining strategic objectives might be considered a partial success because Russian policies resulted in the creation of pro-Russian elites and later intelligentsia that supported integration with Russia. For the native elites Russia represented modernity, and political and cultural integration was seen as the only way to shed their old rarified identities and to acquire new modern European ones.

At the same time, like most colonial empires, Russia's impact failed to involve the larger segments of the population that remained rural, isolated, and under the control of the Islamic clergy. In fact, the more native elites absorbed Russian education and manners, the more hostile was their reception among the common populace. In opposition to pro-Russian native elites, commoners defined themselves through their Islamic identity. Where the established *ulema*

chose to cooperate with Russian authorities, commoners often turned to Sufi teachings.

In short, Russian presence and administration of the region served to exacerbate the social tension between the elites and commoners, compelling the latter to associate Islam with the preservation of traditional values and to see Russia as an agent of unwelcome change. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some of the pro-Russian elites attracted by the language of ethnic identity and national sovereignty began to side with commoners, fusing the ideas of national liberation with Islamic identity.

### **Current Policy Considerations**

This is an exploratory paper, and I offer here only some preliminary thoughts. I believe that the Russian conquest, settlement, and administration of the North Caucasus are best understood in the colonial context of the past. While Russian authorities refused to apply the term colonial to their newly conquered territories, Russia relied on a typical set of colonial policies, blending the characteristics of direct and indirect rule.

Russia's strategic goals were to integrate the region and its peoples into the Russian empire. However, in practice, such integration meant a thorough transformation of local, tribal, and Islamic identities into modern, imperial, Russian, and Christian ones, and could not be easily achieved. The agents of such transformation were Slavic settlers from the interior, the Cossacks, and the Christians--Armenians and Georgians--brought in to found and run specific new industries.

Similar to the experience of other colonial powers, once the Russian authorities inserted themselves into local politics and feuds, they unwittingly disturbed the social and political structures that kept the native societies in a state of relative if fragile equilibrium. The Russian

presence and rule served as a catalyst in unpacking the ever-present tensions and hostilities—both horizontally, between different tribes and clans, and vertically, between elites and commoners.

From the mid-eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, Islam remained the most potent language of the opposition to Russian imperial domination. By the late nineteenth century, some of the newly-trained native elites increasingly combined the language of national liberation with Islamic identity.

What choices did the Russian authorities have in instituting efficient rule over the North Caucasus? The government could try to overcome resistance by the application of brute military force, which was the preferred method for most Russian military commanders and governors. Yet such an approach, in the view of its critics, generated more embittered recruits for the jihad. Another way of pacifying the population was to offer privileges, incentives, and educational opportunities. But such an approach required long-term vision and patience. Some critics argued that offering modern education to the natives would only undermine Russian rule over them. These arguments later proved to be not entirely without merit.

Similar to other colonial situations, there was no good single way to resolve the colonial dilemmas of ruling, administering, and integrating the region. The challenges of colonial rule are by definition intractable and present few good compromises. The long-term choices were stark--either Russia had to vacate the lands it was attempting to control, or the native peoples had to abandon their old places of residence. Thus, Russia could claim “success” in one of the first examples of modern ethnic cleansing when several hundred thousand Adyges (Circassians) were deported from the northwest Caucasus to the Ottoman empire. Today this area (the Krasnodar and Sochi regions) has an overwhelmingly Slavic population and is considered perfectly

“Russian”.

In 1943, Stalin undertook a similar if less “successful” attempt to cleanse the northeast Caucasus of selected native peoples. Many of them perished during deportations and later in exile. Yet most of them returned following Nikita Khrushchev’s amnesty in 1956. Their experience in exile and their struggle to reclaim their lands and lives bore the bitter fruit of everlasting resentment of all things Russian and Soviet.

Given the history of the North Caucasus, the recent Chechen Wars and present conflicts in the region should be considered wars of liberation from imperial domination and examined in a broader colonial context. That is until recently, when global jihadis began to hijack their cause and turn what was a war of liberation into another front in the war of global terrorism.