

Chapter Three

HISTORICAL FORMATION

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In the following three chapters let us attempt a historical-sociological synopsis of three formative periods in succession: from the medieval origins of the North Caucasus peoples to the Russian imperial conquest of the region in the nineteenth century; the Russian Civil war of 1917-1921 in which exploded all sorts of tensions accumulated over the previous five decades of colonial incorporation of the Caucasus; and, finally, the Soviet industrial transformation of the region during the 1921-1950 period. The specific purpose is to obtain in first approximation the large-scale analytical map on which we shall later continue to trace the trajectory of Shanibov's post-1945 generation and his individual biography. More generally, our objective is to situate the North Caucasus region in the larger world-systemic patterns. We do it along the vector of region's historical change starting with the nature and distribution of societies that generated the enduring ethnic traditions.

In this chapter the central themes are the highlanders' democratic revolutions of eighteenth century and the subsequent Islamic-inspired attempt to build a state against the Russian imperial advance. Bypassing these formative experiences would perhaps amount to not mentioning the Jacobins and Napoleon in explaining the modern France. Of course, the Caucasus history is immensely less studied than the French history. The topic remains obscure or misconcieved not only to the majority of Russians but the contemporary North Caucasians themselves. We have to perform a theoretically-informed untangling of this history.

Past Matters

There are many questions and still many more unquestioned assumptions that must be addressed if we are to gain a clearer and theoretically useful understanding of contemporary ethnic conflicts. Many anthropologists and historians of non-Western countries argued, with a good reason, that the 'traditional' societies have not been at all static prior to the arrival of European modernizers. This argument would have no substance without showing the actual dynamics of change in what is summarily called the traditional societies.

At stake here is not only the analytical accuracy or the acknowledgement of other

cultures. A widespread misconception is that the incorporation into modern world-system abruptly ended the local histories by subordinating all processes to the dictates of European powers. Quite to the contrary, most of the time the European imperialism and capitalism had to operate through the twisted chains of institutions and practices that were found in the newly incorporated peripheries.

This was always a contentious and complex process. I would like to stress its dynamic and relational character: one day's local adaptation and collaboration could become next day's resistance — and vice versa. The social structures forged in the North Caucasians' Islamic rebellion of the 1830s-1850s, as we are going to see in this chapter, were later incorporated into a colonial scheme of indirect rule. After functioning for a couple generations as conservative supports of Russian imperial order, the same social structures radicalized once again at another historical juncture in 1917-1920. The effects of past periods of rebelliousness and cooptation then continue to play a role in our days — both through the institutions and the political construction of historical memories.

Additionally, in the North Caucasus we obtain a rich and unexplored terrain to test and expand the propositions of Barrington Moore's classical theory.¹ The discovery of additional empirical instances directly relevant to a major theoretical formulation by itself would be a valuable and fairly rare occurrence in historical sociology. Here we could not subject the historical patterns of the North Caucasus to a detailed analysis for their sheer empirical diversity and complexity. This task remains for the future research. Nonetheless Moore's central thesis that the outcomes of agrarian class conflicts in pre-modern times bear relevance to explaining the contemporary sociopolitical configurations should empower us in discovering the true historical continuities between the past and present of the region. Here we may obtain the explanation of what makes the Chechens different from the Kabardins without falling into the psychologizing ethnic stereotypes. Furthermore we shall draw on the geopolitical theory of ethnic change proposed by Randall Collins, because in the North Caucasus we can see with rare clarity how the patterns of ethnic formation meshed with the patterns of ecology, social domination, political conflict, and warfare.²

The historical continuities may indeed appear striking. Yet, as the sociologists John Padgett and Christopher Ansell point out, “establishing the existence of historical continuities, however important, is not the same thing as establishing the mechanisms

¹ Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966. For the extension of Moore's theory to the geographic region closer to our concerns, see Gale Stokes, "The Social Origins of East European Politics," in: Daniel Chirot (ed.) *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe: Economics & Politics from the Middle Ages until the Early Twentieth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, pp. 210-251.

² Randall Collins, "Balkanization" or "Americanization": A Geopolitical Theory of Ethnic Change," in idem *Macrohistory*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 70-109.

through which such continuity was created".³ Thus at every stage of the following historical summary we have to maintain a dual focus. The first task is to determine what we can know about the logics of past events and their structural contexts. At the same time we must pay attention to the social mechanisms through which the effects of the past are reaching into the present, or how a particular history is remembered or forgotten.

There are historical continues to be discovered and then, there are the false continuities to be discounted in a serious analytical fashion. In the Caucasus like in the Balkans and, for that matter, in Ireland, Israel and Palestine, Cyprus, Rwanda, Kashmir, or any other place where the patterns of social stratification and conflict have been running for generations along the ethnic lines, the familiar common refrain is that the contemporary nationalist struggles cannot be comprehended without the appreciation of the powers of history and culture. How much truth is in this statement?

In studying ethnic conflicts we cannot escape confronting the psychological-historicizing explanations. It is a very familiar claim according to which what was, shall be. In other words, fateful continuities determine today's conflicts because their roots reach deeply in the ethnic cultures or even grander, in the history of civilizations. And we can do nothing about it because the civilizations are presumably the eternal bedrock of all human existence. This rather pessimistic view is commonly held by the nationalist intellectuals and politicians. It also appeals to quite many Western journalists, experts, and policy-makers who, being steeped in their own nationalist myths, find themselves intuitively tempted by the backwards teleological extrapolations of the kind that Samuel Huntington masterfully articulated in his *"Clash of Civilizations"*. The historical-cultural continuities offer a deceptively simple rationalization for the confusing spectacle of bloodshed waged by exotic peoples. It is therefore necessary to do some excavations in order to recover the missing connections as well as identify the false assumptions. In the North Caucasus the ethnic legacies, including the 'deep-seated hatreds', might appear as strong as it ever gets. The question is, by what social mechanisms the legacies matter — or when and how might they not.

Mountains and Peoples

The dazzling ethnic diversity in the Caucasus is the function of primarily two historical factors: mountain environment and geopolitics.

³ John Padgett and Christopher Ansell, "Robust Action and the Rise of the Medici, 1400-1434", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 38, n. 6 (May 1993), p. 1293.

The Caucasus ridge is flanked on two sides by the Caspian and Black seas whose narrow and rocky beaches offered neither good anchorage nor passable roads. Several mountain ridges running in parallel form the imposing natural wall with just a single narrow passage in the area of North Ossetia into the lands of Georgia (hence the strategic importance of Ossetian lands for the Russian commanders who built there the fortified town characteristically named Vladikavkaz — *i.e.*, 'Possess the Caucasus'). The tallest peaks like Mount Elbrus, the highest elevation of European continent, remain under the perennial snowcaps. The mountains are crisscrossed by deep canyons and at the lower ranges covered by temperate forests with tenacious and almost impenetrable underbrush. Such geography rendered the region an unassailable rock squeezed between the grinding wheels of the ancient Near Eastern empires and the nomadic-dominated Great Steppe.

Mountains offer a relatively safe refuge but they are also poor in resources. This is why the indigenous populations tended to be small and often extremely small. For instance, the Balkarians traditionally inhabited five villages, and there exist several languages that are spoken in just one valley. For the same reason of mountains poverty the agrarian colonization of fertile but militarily exposed lands in the foothills remained the dream and the biggest dilemma of the Caucasian peoples.

Since before the Bronze age the Caucasus sheltered the remnants of the peoples overrun and assimilated elsewhere. The mountain environment offered to them many separate micro-spaces which reproduced the ethnic fragmentation. The majority of indigenous peoples belong to the endemic North Caucasian linguistic family. These are the nearly thirty ethnic groups of Daghestan, the Chechens and Ingushes, the Kabardins and other Adyghe peoples otherwise called Circassians, and the closely related Abkhazes. Like the linguistically exceptional Basques of the Pyrenees, these peoples speak the languages that have no living relatives anywhere in the world and are totally unrelated to either the Indo-European, Afrasian (formerly called Semitic), Turkic, or Kartvelian (Georgian) families.⁴

And then in the middle of the Caucasus, we encounter several no less wonderful relics: the Indo-European Ossets whose language is today the sole survivor on the historical branch to which once belonged the ancient Scythian, Sarmatian, and the medieval Alan; and the Turkic-speaking Karachais, Kumyks, and Balkars whose closely related tongues descend from the medieval Polovetsian (otherwise known as Cuman or Qypchak) if not the ancient Hunnish. But, as already mentioned, the Balkars just like the Ossets in physical and cultural terms appear not at all like their putative nomadic ancestors but almost exactly like

⁴ Igor M. Diakonoff & S.A. Starostin, *Hurro-Urartian as an Eastern Caucasian Language*. Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft, Beiheft n.F., 12. München: R.Kitzinger, 1986.

other Caucasian highlanders — that is, fair skinned and often blue-eyed Europeoids, *i.e.* indeed the 'Caucasians'.⁵ Jointly these peoples comprise what the physical anthropologists currently call the 'Pontus-Caucasian sub-group' of the Mediterranean somatic type.⁶

The data of physical anthropology possibly indicate that some time ago the Caucasian highlanders have absorbed the small relics of the Steppe peoples who have been destroyed and displaced by the newer powerful waves of invaders from Inner Asia. The older nomadic populations, pushed into the mountains, left to their descendants the languages but not much else. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the Turkic Balkars and the Indo-European Ossetians traditionally occupied some of the least privileged positions in the hierarchy of highlander peoples. Geographically, they were located in the zone of Alpine meadows, high at the edges of glaciers, which is a very beautiful but agriculturally unproductive space.⁷

The distribution of ecological-economic niches in the mountains was a matter of relative power. The Daghestani Kumyks, the Kabardins and several other Circassian tribes were traditionally the strongest peoples whose military strength traditionally relied on the possession of very expensive battle horses and armor. They came to control the best lands in the foothills. The less powerful groups were forced into the less productive environments, like the Balkars dwelling high in the mountains or the ancestors of the Chechens driven deep in their forests. In order to survive, they leased the productive lands from the more powerful neighbors down the slope. This arrangement created multiple unequal dependencies running across the ecological and ethnic lines.⁸

During the four centuries between the final smashing of the Golden Horde in the 1390s by the armies of Tamerlane and the arrival of Russian colonialism in the 1770s – 1800s, the North Caucasus existed in a contested geopolitical vacuum. It was only tenuously filled with the stateless autonomous groups of heavily-armed warriors on horseback. The concentration of expensive and highly specialized means of violence in a small mobile elite

⁵ The nineteenth-century German anthropologists adopted the label "Caucasians" in racial classification because the measurements of skull series (a scholarly obsession of the time) supposedly showed that the paragon of European physique was found in the natives of the North Caucasus. Later in the twentieth century the term "Caucasians" became the common American euphemism that, for the obviously political reasons, superseded the erstwhile hierarchization of Whites into such "races" as Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic, Celtic, Slavic, and Mediterranean.

⁶ See Abdushelishvili M.G., "Fizicheskaia antropologia narodov Kavkaza" [The Physical Anthropology of the Peoples of the Caucasus], in: Abdushelishvili M.G., Arutyunov S.A., Kaloyev B.A. *Narody Kavkaza: antropologiya, lingvistika, hozyaistvo*. [The Peoples of Caucasia: Anthropology, Linguistics, Subsistence Economy.] Moscow: Institut antropologii i etnologii RAN, 1994, pp. 27-34.

⁷ Abdushelishvili M.G., Arutyunov S.A., Kaloyev B.A. *Narody Kavkaza*. Moscow: Institut antropologii i etnologii RAN, 1994.

⁸ Anatoly M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

created a familiar feudal pattern. The autonomous specialists of violence, whom we can compare to knights, derived their elite position from the racketeering military protection offered and imposed on the peasant communities. The lords and peasants quite often were of a different ethnic stock, like the Kabardin noblemen who once dominated over the various Chechen, Ingush, Ossetian, and Balkar communities. The peasants generally could not escape the aristocratic protection and the demands of tribute. On the one hand, the destruction of nomadic domination over the fertile foothills offered to peasants the vital opportunity to grow more food. Yet the foothills were still being raided by the Tatar nomadic rovers and the same knights of local extraction who commonly hunted for booty and slaves to sell them at the Ottoman markets.⁹

The earliest Kabardins were not an ethnic 'people' but rather a professional caste of knights organized within their group into an elaborate hierarchy of aristocratic ranks. They extended coercive patronage and protection to various dependent estates, from the nominally free commoner peasants to the theoretically temporary debtors, more permanent serfs and down to the household slaves.¹⁰ To the extent that we can extrapolate from the analogous historical experiences elsewhere in the world and try to match the propositions to the details scattered in the local epic songs and sagas, originally the Kabardin cavalry might have served the Mongols as a form of auxiliary forces. Just like with the Tatars, whose ethnonym comes from the personal appellation of Mongol warlord Kara-Tatar, the legendary Circassian chieftain Kabardey gave his name to the new occupational-ethnic group emerging from the mass of Circassian tribes, hence the Kabardins.¹¹

With generations passing they evolved into the diffuse 'nation' of mobile professional warriors and their household members and clients (akin to the Indo-Aryan charioteers in ancient India, the Normans, the Bedouins, and the Moors of medieval Pyrenees). In the absence of any form of state, the Kabardin occupational-ethnic network drew distinction and held itself together by the codified rules of mutual loyalty, individual and family honor, combat valor, and the lordly conspicuous consumption.¹² In a stateless society where social power depended on naked violence, the 'fragile guarantee of chieftain's life rested on his personal reputation as a fearsome warrior and valued friend'.¹³

⁹ The pioneering analysis of this little-known slave market, though perhaps the longest running ever in history, is provided by Liubov G. Kurtynova-Derluguian, *Tsar's Abolitionists: The Russian Suppression of Slave Trade in the Caucasus*. Ph.D. dissertation, Binghamton University, Department of History, 1995.

¹⁰ See A. V. Gadlo, *Etnicheskaia istoriya Severnogo Kavkaza X – XIII vv.* [The Ethnic History of North Caucasus, 10th-13th centuries], St.Petersburg: St.Petersburg University Press, 1994.

¹¹ Boris Malbakhov and Alaudin Elmesov, *Srednevekovaia Kabarda* [The Medieval Kabarda], Nalchik: Elbrus, 1994.

¹² Barasbi Bgazhnokov, *Adygaskaia etika*. [Adyghe Ethics] Nalchik: El-Fa, 1999.

¹³ Timothy Earle, *How Chiefs Come to Power. The Political Economy in Prehistory*. Stanford: Stanford

The diffuse traces of traditional warrior code, called *hábze*, to this day survive across the entire North Caucasus despite the leveling effects of Soviet-era urbanization and modern culture. Indicatively, the defining adjective has changed from the medieval *uork hábze*, or 'nobleman's etiquette', to *Adyghe hábze*, i.e. the 'Circassian etiquette'— the aristocratic code became national. Today in the Caucasus the relics of *hábze* are neither a sign of barbarism nor special veneration of traditions. In the modern society the elements of *hábze* function just like the cultural vestiges of *Ancien Régime* in France perpetuated in bourgeois consumption patterns and attitudes.¹⁴ The traditional norms provide an ennobling veneer to various social rituals occurring in the modern settings like, for instance, the mutual toasting at banquets, or in the 'sporting' competitive bellicosity of adolescent males. Moreover within a provincial post-Soviet society these norms strengthen the ethnic and inter-family solidarities that coalesce and ritualize in the networks of clientilism and mutual favors. The local Russians, who lack this cultural advantage, angrily call it the 'native corruption'.

Rifles and the Birth of Caucasian Democracy

The gunpowder revolution arrived in the Caucasus some time in the seventeenth century and, after the time lag of several generations, it enabled a series of social revolutions. In the Caucasus the effect of gunpowder was nearly the opposite to what was the Western experience.¹⁵ Instead of empowering bigger states capable of supporting standing armies and large bureaucracies, in the Caucasus guns led to the fragmentation of aristocratic hierarchies and a peasant democratization.

The guns were imported in large quantities from the manufacturing centers of northern Italy, Germany, and Ottoman empire via the Crimean Tatar khanate and the trade fairs on the Black sea coast. Fairly soon, however, the local smiths learned to imitate the imported weapons, and in this they achieved a great success. In Daghestan, where the arable land was always very scarce and whole villages derived income from skilled metalworks and other crafts, there emerged a cottage industry of gun manufacturing based on an intricate division of labor between the differently specialized villages.¹⁶ It is estimated that in the mid-nineteenth century, at the peak of this early industrialization, Daghestan alone

University Press, 1997, p. 123.

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

¹⁵ William McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society Since A.D. 1000*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

¹⁶ See L.I. Astvatsaturyan, *Oruzhie narodov Kavkaza* [Weapons of the Caucasus peoples]. Nalchik: El-Fa, 1994.

produced up to twenty thousand rifles a year.

The majority were indeed the grooved-barrel rifles of remarkable quality and shooting precision. Rifles have been known in Europe since the sixteenth century but they were rarely used except for hunting mainly because reloading a rifle from the muzzle side took seven to ten minutes. The relative speed of reloading favored the smooth-barrelled muskets, and thus the armies of imperial states substituted for precision with the sheer mass of fire on the battlefield. In an indicative episode, the Russian commander tried to reason before the battle to his Circassian adversary: *Your lads are probably ten times better shots than my soldiers, but I have a hundred times more soldiers.*¹⁷

A major obstacle to state-making in the Caucasus was and, to some extent, still today remains the mountainous terrain. It favored sniping from behind the trees and rocks — essentially a hunting skill — over marching in formation and hauling cannons into the battlefield. Since the eighteenth century the Caucasian warriors relied on the muzzle-loading rifles and pistols in combination with the newly-invented lighter and less curved version of sabre, the famous Caucasian *shashka*, used in upright position to support the rifle while aiming and, after the shot, for slashing in close combat. It was not only a very deadly combination but, as it turns out, it was remarkably cheaper compared to the battle gear of earstwhile knights. The full combat attire of a Kabardin aristocrat plus the pure-bred battle horse in the mid-eighteenth century was estimated to cost, depending on the quality and the amount of artistic embellishments, from several hundred up to two thousand Russian rubles. By comparison, a good locally-manufactured rifle cost five to eight rubles.¹⁸ This was still a hefty cost equivalent to several cows. But it was no longer outside the range of a well-to-do farmer or a lucky peasant lad who ambushed his clan's enemy on a mountain pathway and took his horse and weapons.

The effect of guns on social structure was probably not immediate. The ages-old cultural traditions derived from aristocratic warfare continued to exercise a strong influence well into the nineteenth century when the mountain princes were still observed proudly wearing their splendid chainmails. But here is the folkloric anecdote from the 1760s that captured the moment of historical change. To protest the exactions of noblemen, the Kabardin commoners gathered by the thousand at the extraordinary convention held at the meadow that apparently possessed a sacred status. This event is known as the rebellion of Domalei by the nickname of its leader that translates as "too much shoulders" indicating Domalei's extraordinary physical strength. A Kabardin aristocrat, returning from a

¹⁷ Cited in Yakov Gordin, *Kavkazskaya voina. Prilozhenie k zhurnalu "Zvezda"*, St.Petersburg, 1998, p. 16.

¹⁸ See L.I. Astvatsaturyan, *Oruzhie narodov Kavkaza* [Weapons of the Caucasus peoples]. Nalchik: El-Fa, 1994.

successful raid and leading several recently captured horses, met the crowd of peasants walking to join Domalei. When the aristocrat learned their purpose, he laughed disparagingly: *What can you, the naked rabble, do with your stinking guns against the noble steel of my saber and chainmail?* To this, a grim-looking peasant took his rifle from the back and uttered: *That we shall see now*. The grave of self-assured aristocrat stood by the roadside until the 1960s when it was paved over during the extension of mountain highway.¹⁹

The dispersion of affordable and well-crafted rifles allowed the Caucasus communal small-holders to resist the tribute-collecting horseback noblemen. Bluntly said, there was now a good chance that a daring or desperate commoner might put a bullet through the wonderful and wonderfully expensive chainmail of Kabardin or whatever native nobleman who came in a village to demand his customary annual offerings of sheep, the couple sacks of grain, and perhaps the hide of wild fox from each household, if not attempted under the cover of night an altogether bandit attack in the hope of seizing a horse or, still better, a Circassian girl, traditionally famed for their beauty, who then might be sold to the Turkish harems. At least a quarter of all reports by the eighteenth-century Russian officials stationed along the North Caucasus frontier mention exactly this sort of micro-rebellions by the newly empowered peasants. The enraged and humiliated noblemen rushed to the imperial fortresses, claiming that they were Russian allies and asking for soldiers to discipline the unruly subjects.²⁰ These archives are awaiting their Charles Tilly.

Cumulatively, the proliferation of privately-owned guns and the concomitant democratization of warfare led to the self-emancipation of North Caucasian farmers. It also created an anarchic and inherently dangerous social environment. Many villages get fortified in this period, their size grows bigger as people sought mutual protection, and the clan structures seem to get more pronounced as the people reasserted group solidarities. The new 'democratic' villages and the self-governing leagues of villages acquired the semi-permanent militias, and in such communities the traditional rituals of young male initiation were reconfigured to center on the explicitly military function of defense and raiding against the enemies.²¹ There emerged the new category of the champion warriors of relatively humble origin whose reputations allowed them to bargain for their mercenary services with many villages at a time. There also appear the popular Islamic preachers who

¹⁹ I thank Dr. Barasbi Bgazhnokov for sharing this story.

²⁰ See Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500-1800*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

²¹ See Emma Panesh, "Bifurkatsiya v protsesse sotsializatsii: na materialakh traditsionnogo vospitania adygov, XVIII – nachala XX v." [Bifurcation in the Processes of Socialization: The Traditional Upbringing of the Adyghes in the 18th – early 20th centuries.] *Problemy arheologii i etnografii Severnogo Kavkaza*. Krasnodar: Kubanskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1988.

propagated, to use Michael Mann's term, the doctrine of 'normative pacification'.²²

The impact of new gunpowder technology on social organization looked like the gross violation of unilinear evolutionary schemes upheld by the Soviet Marxist orthodoxy. Instead of 'mountain feudalism' progressing toward absolutist monarchy and then perhaps bourgeois revolution, the social organization of North Caucasian peoples seemed to have undergone in the eighteenth century a marked 'regression' to the archaic forms of clan and tribe. This anomaly led the Soviet historians into the clumsy attempts to explain away the observed historical phenomena. The theories of Soviet-era Caucasian anthropologists predicted that the archaic traits should be more pronounced among the 'backward' populations of the upper mountain ranges. Yet the strength and extensiveness of clan organization was the highest among those peoples of the North Caucasus, mainly the Chechens, whose not too distant ancestors actively colonized the foothills and in the process overthrew the aristocratic rule. If anything, their clans were not ancient and 'traditional'.

The rebellious farmers forged their solidarities by reinventing and reinforcing kinship networks, the village neighbor communities, and the leagues of villages. Previously, these served mostly the circles of matrimonial and economic-ecological exchanges. In the new historical situation, the traditional horizontal networks became primarily the repositories of collective legal-ethical and military powers. The goal was the collective appropriation and protection of earthly assets. These communities, many of them newly founded, developed elaborate and strict ethical codes and in some instances (mainly in Daghestan) even the formal written law that prescribed as major civic obligation the possession of weapons and participation in common defense. But let us not idealize the peasant self-liberation out of its historical context, as do today the romantic advocates of Caucasian democratic traditions. The new community norms unambiguously sanctioned the exclusion of women from civic life and also the possession of slaves by free commoners although we have little systematic data regarding how widespread was the slave labor in the democratic communities of the North Caucasus.²³

The historical transition to the regime of private land property collectively secured by the armed citizens did not mean an archaization. It was democratization conducted largely for the same reasons and through the similar social mechanisms that two and half thousand years earlier drove the democratization in the early Greek and Roman poleis.²⁴

²² Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*. Vol 1: *A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

²³ Due to the proximity of Middle Eastern markets and the huge price differentials, it was far more profitable to immediately sell the captives to the merchant intermediaries. Only the less desirable slaves stayed as the dependent members of their master's household. (Kurtynova-Derluguian, *Tsar's Abolitionists*.)

²⁴ See Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*. London: Verso, 1974. The first Soviet scholar

The hypothesis of warrior-peasant democratization in the Caucasus during the 1760s-1850s seems to find theoretical support in its consistency with Max Weber's discussion of city-states.²⁵ This seems so despite the fact that there were few real towns in the North Caucasus — most villages consisted of semi-permanent structures that could be moved or abandoned if the enemy threatened or the surrounding fields got exhausted. Nevertheless the village communities, leagues of villages, and tribes just as well could serve an analogous function of democratic organization for the purposes of collective military protection of private land property and trading rights.

In Daghestan, however, many villages grew into the sizable fortified towns with substantial trade fairs, artisanal manufacturing, and elaborate civic institutions.²⁶ Such villages emerged mostly in the zone of mountain terrace agriculture where the tremendous investment of communal effort in building and maintaining the fields, canals, and aqueducts created what Michael Mann calls the 'caging' effect — a labor investment so big that it trapped its creators into the permanent occupation of the same spot and thus led to the development of a civilization.²⁷ The example of Daghestani villages presents another piece of evidence against Karl Wittfogel's notorious 'hydraulic' theory of Oriental despotism²⁸. Evidently, the management of quite complex irrigation systems could be done through the democratic reglementation of land and water rights in an egalitarian community and without the imposition of an imperial bureaucracy. But we ought to leave here these fascinating aspects of North Caucasian history because arguably they would require a separate treatment.

We only need to take note of one feature that infamously resurfaced in our days: the dependence of warrior's prestige expressed through communal acts of generosity and the ability to procure the more upscale weapons on the profits from raiding for human captives. The agrarian economy of the mountains could not conceivably generate enough surplus to purchase but the simplest weaponry and horses. Therefore raiding for booty and especially the slaves to be sold at the export markets remained a major if not the sole alternative. This practice has been pervasive before the closure of Russian colonial frontiers.

to draw analogies between the patterns of Daghestani democratic community and Greek polis was M. A. Aglarov, *Selskaia obschina v Nagornom Daghestane, XVII – nachalo XIX vv.* [Rural Community in the Mountainous Daghestan in the 17th-early 19th centuries.] Moscow: Nauka, 1988.

²⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*. 2 Vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, pp. 1301-1372.

²⁶ A detailed description is provided by M. A. Aglarov, *Selskaia obschina v Nagornom Daghestane, XVII – nachalo XIX vv.* [Rural Community in the Mountainous Daghestan in the 17th-early 19th centuries.] Moscow: Nauka, 1988.

²⁷ Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, Vol. I, Cambridge, 1986.

²⁸ Karl August Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.

In fact, the abolition of slave trade was Russia's major legitimation for the conquest of the Caucasus in the nineteenth century. In the latter 1990s the practice of seizing and trading hostages emerged once again as a major component of ongoing wars, especially in Chechnya. Today this practice gets reported as an endemic form of terrorism. Its function remains largely the same — to finance the weapons procurement and the lifestyle of professionalized warriors.

The Geopolitical and Social Patterns of Belated Islamization

The commoner social revolution of eighteenth century was accompanied by the popular radical Islamization that replaced the erstwhile multiplicity of pagan cults and the typical religious syncretism of frontier zones. There seems to exist a strong causal association between the peasant democratization, the subsequent resistance to Russian conquest, and the particular brand of Sufi Islamic mysticism that came to be practiced in the North Caucasus fairly recently.

Scholars find few indications of Islamic practices across the North Caucasus prior to the eighteenth century. The exception was Daghestan that has long possessed old towns on the Caspian coast and continuously remained in the orbit of central Islamic societies since the times of Arab caliphate. Even a brief look at the map suggests a clearly geopolitical explanation, namely the importance of Daghestan's littoral zone that offered the only narrow passage between the nomadic world of Great Steppe in northern Eurasia and the world of Middle Eastern agrarian states located to the south. A mere hundred miles away (but those were mountain distances), in the more insular Chechnya, the local pagan beliefs could endure almost to the modern age.²⁹

In the mountains of Ingushetia and Ossetia the relic Christianity lingered after the medieval Byzantine and Georgian missionary efforts. But there were neither priests nor functioning churches. In a consequential divergence, since the 1770s the Ossetians have essentially re-Christianized.³⁰ Evidently the reason is that they happened to inhabit the strategically important valley around the new colonial town of Vladikavkaz. The re-invention of common religious ties to the newly arriving power secured the preferential treatment of Ossetians by Russian authorities.

The neighboring Ingushes were in the beginning only slightly more peripheral in relation to the town but their loyalty was suspect because of cultural-linguistic proximity to the rebellious Chechens. The Ingushes were progressively alienated by the Russian

²⁹ See Anna Zelkina, *In Quest for God and Freedom: The Sufi Response to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus*. London: Hurst & Co., 2000.

³⁰ But roughly a fifth of all Ossetians still became Muslim. Curiously, this causes no tension, and Muslims are found in the same family circles with the Christian Ossetians.

administrators and their Ossetian allies and driven toward a radical Islamization in as late as in the mid-nineteenth century.³¹ In 1992 the tension between the Ossetians and Ingushes erupted in a fierce territorial dispute with nasty religious and racist undertones.

The geopolitical determinant of religious conversion — that, in turn, operated through the networks of trade, diplomacy, and military alliance/confrontation between the centers of agrarian civilizations and frontier peripheries — becomes still a more robust theoretical explanation as we add more empirical instances from across the Caucasus.³² In the realm of the aristocratic Kabardins and other Circassian peoples we observe the inchoate co-existence of superficial Islam, a tenuous individual Christianity, and relic paganism. There the religious choices shifted back and forth in consonance with the political opportunism of warring princely alliances that intermittently sought patronage by the Ottoman, Persian, and since the mid-sixteenth century, Russian empires (and before that, the Tatar overlords, the Genoese traders, and Byzantine emperors.)

The majority of Abkhazes in fact remain pagan to this day. They worship sacred trees and ancestral graves, which I had a chance to witness as recently as in 2002. The paganism persists despite Abkhazia being situated only a few days of sailing away from Constantinople/Istanbul. Here paganism could endure despite the centuries of superficial Christianization during the Byzantine epoch followed by an equally nominal Islamization when the Turks came to rule the Black sea. The two related reasons for the survival of paganism in Abkhazia are the resource poverty and geopolitics. Only as recently as in the twentieth century, and then mainly in the result of Soviet industrialization, did Abkhazia acquire its exceptionally lucrative monopoly in the internal exports of citrines and the sub-tropical seaside resorts (which subsequently played a major aggravating role in causing the war of 1992-93). Before that, Abkhazia for many centuries has been isolated from the outside world by the inhospitable coastline devoid of harbors and full of malarial swamps, the thorny forests further up the mountain slopes, and the impassable glacier-covered ridges glimmering in the backdrop. In this environment the small indigenous population could produce barely enough to feed themselves. Since the Greek trade colonization in the 6th century B.C.E. and until the Russian naval blockade imposed in the 1830s the region's main export have been slaves. But capturing the humans could be left to the local warring factions. Abkhazia was simply not the kind of land over which the great empires would compete.

³¹ An excellent analysis of this divergence is provided by Artur Tsutsiyev, *Osetino-ingushskii konflikt, 1992 - ...: ego predystoria i factory razvitiya* [The Ossetino-Ingush Conflict, 1992 - ...: Its Antecedents and Development Factors], Moscow: ROSSPEN, 1998.

³² Randall Collins, "Balkanization" or "Americanization": A Geopolitical Theory of Ethnic Change," in his collection *Macrohistory*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

A powerful dynamic of conflict was introduced into this religious scene during the social upheavals of the eighteenth century that were followed by nearly five decades of guerrilla war against the advancing Russian empire. The varying strength of Islamic religiosity across the region today largely correlates with the outcomes of the social struggles of two centuries ago which confirms the theories of Barrington Moore and Randall Collins. It does matter in explaining today's political configurations in the North Caucasus where in the past the peasants won their freedom and where the lords prevailed. In turn, explaining these outcomes requires us to take the geopolitics into account.

Presently the Islamic religiosity by any measure is the highest in Chechnya (apparently more so in the mountainous part than in the Russian-influenced and relatively peaceful lowlands) and also in the mountainous zone of Daghestan. It is somewhat lower in Ingushetia, and substantially lower in Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Circassia (despite a few small enclaves of renewed Islamic religiosity since 1999 driven in underground). The Islamic presence is almost negligible in today's Adygheia. From Kabardino-Balkaria to Adygheia, these are the areas where historically the process of popular Islamization was checked either by the early imposition of Russian control, or the victory of native aristocratic ranks, or the combination of both factors.

In the eighteenth century the fervent Islamic conversion at the popular level (as opposed to the princely politico-ritual religiosity) spread from Daghestan to Chechnya and then further westward across the whole region. The original source was located in the Sufi religious schools of Daghestan. Indicatively, these religious centers were found outside the old coastal towns that traditionally remained under the domination of rich Muslim merchants, landowners, and the orthodox clerics based in the officially-patronized mosques. (In the Islamic societies, however, Sufism was not regarded a heresy and it usually co-existed with the mosque-based hierarchies in a complex compromise). The most active circles of Sufi instruction emerged in the democratic semi-urban villages in the mountainous zone of Daghestan. In a pattern perhaps not dissimilar from the symbolic races among the Mediterranean city-states in arts, public architecture, and philosophy, the large and well-established villages of Daghestan competed among themselves for attracting the prestigious teachers of religion or raised and endowed their own Koranic scholars.

The conversion spread through the networks of religious brotherhoods (*tariqat*, literally the 'way') loosely organized around the overlapping circles of Sufi teachers (*murshids*) and disciples (*murids*). The numerous itinerant Sufi mystics preached the virtues of equality, moral order, self-discipline, charity, mutual help, and trans-ethnic solidarity among the faithful. They denounced the moral corruption, feuds, greed, selfishness, and

arrogance of princes. The most radical among the Sufi preachers also called for the resistance against the infidel powers which was a direct challenge to the early encroachments by the Russian imperial authorities.

Many Russians, back in the nineteenth century and today, blame the religiously-inspired resistance of North Caucasus Muslims on the instigation by Turkish agents or, lately, the Saudi-financed terrorists. This is nonsense like all conspiracy theories. By the late eighteenth century the exhausted and beleaguered Turks could no longer project the military, financial, and least of all ideological power to foster such a massive movement among the Caucasian highlanders. The leaders of the Daghestani and Chechen resistance were acutely aware of this fact and treated the Turkish emissaries often with barely concealed irony and disdain.³³

Instead of conspiracy theories, let us note the importance of world-historical context particularly because our textbooks almost entirely ignore this aspect by focusing on the contemporary religious wars in the Christian West.³⁴ In the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries the world of Islam was torn by the inward-oriented geopolitical and ideological confrontation between the two central empires of roughly equal strength, the Ottoman state espousing the majoritarian Sunni orthodoxy and its rival Persia under the Safavi dynasty whose ideological militancy was informed by the minoritarian Shiite orthodoxy. The juxtaposition of imperial geopolitics and theological divergence resulted in a series of truly world wars that involved the North Caucasus as the Turkish and Persian armies sought to outflank each other by marching over Daghestan, Chechnya, and the Circassian lands. The Turko-Persian wars produced a destructive stalemate that exhausted the major Islamic states of the period and, incidentally, greatly decreased the geopolitical pressure on Western Europe during the formative period of capitalism.

But from the latter eighteenth century and until the 1920s, the centers of Islamic ideological militancy shifted to the peripheral outliers, especially the tribal frontiers of Islamic world that now came under the Western pressure. The radical sermon of North Caucasian Sufis squarely belongs in a much wider historical pattern. As Persia entered another phase of imperial decline and Ottoman Turkey turned into the 'sick man of Europe', the broadly analogous movements of religious renovation engulfed the places as distant as the tribal frontiers of Afghanistan, inner Arabia, and the vast realm of Sahara from Sudan to Senegal and from the Hausa emirates of Nigeria to the oases of what today is

³³ This fact is unambiguously demonstrated by the massive documentation collected by Nikolai I. Pokrovsky, *Kavkazskaia voina i imamat Shamilya*. [The Caucasus War and Shamil's Imamate.] Moscow: POSSPEN, 2000.

³⁴ But see the chapters XI-D-1 and XII-C in William McNeill, *The Rise of the West*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963 — disregarding the title 'Moslem Catalepsy'.

Libya, the mountains of Atlas, and the French-occupied Algeria. (Incidentally, at the time the Russian imperial authorities were acutely aware of this fact and studied the French experiences in Algeria.) This vast topic, though theoretically very promising and arguably important, remains unexplored by the comparative-historical social scientists.

Our knowledge of religious movement in the North Caucasus is very patchy because the propagation proceeded predominantly in oral forms and only much later the most notable sermons were recorded in Arabic.³⁵ In fact, many popular preachers, especially in Chechnya, were illiterate. The contemporary Russian reports are confused and exceedingly biased for the evident reason that their authors were the colonial officers who knew little about Islam and generally regarded the subject matter a hateful and dangerous manifestation of Asiatic fanaticism. Nevertheless we can deduce that the movement increasingly addressed the aspirations of peasants who were already free from the lordly domination or hoped for the liberation in near future and still in this world. The propagation also carried a strong social-normative message expressed in the demand of installing the universalistic norms of *sharia* Islamic law. It was in direct criticism of the particularistic tribal codes, or *adat* that in many instances sanctioned the traditional rank inequality, tribute-taking, trial by princes, and the brutal institutions like blood revenge. The Russian sources registered numerous complaints by the native noblemen who were also warning of impending rebellion and calling for a swift suppression of 'troublemakers' and 'bandits'.

Of course, the actual historical picture was vastly more complicated. Not everywhere the peasants did rebel, and many rebellions were defeated. The Sufi-led struggle for the religious revival and conversion was surely not based exclusively in mountain peasants and tribesmen. At various stages quite many noblemen of different ranks and ethnic groups joined the movement, and subsequently many (though not all) defected from the religious militancy. The Kabardins experienced between the 1750s and the 1810s a series of acute and inchoate struggles around the Islamic project of reorganizing the realm on more centralized, the sharia law-based, and more egalitarian patterns. The aristocratic privileges eventually survived with the support of Russian command, the majority of peasants were forced back into dependency, but a substantial minority of petty noblemen, radical Islamic preachers, and rebellious commoners resettled into the western Circassian lands where the less accessible landscape offered to them a better protection against the Russian colonial armies.

The new 'tribal' democracies furthermore experienced the social dynamics of two

³⁵ For an overview of Arabic texts from the Caucasus, see Moshe Gammer, *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan*. London: F. Cass, 1994.

kinds: lateral expansion and the emergence of internal military hierarchy. The lateral expansion spreading wherever possible through the military-agrarian colonization and absorption of lesser ethnic groups, in a short period of historical time (say, a century) significantly increased the territories and the populations of lowlands Chechnya as well as the Circassian democratic tribes emerging in the wooded hills along the Black sea.³⁶

The second kind of dynamism was the internal social differentiation among the self-liberated peasants that resulted in the emergence of professional warriors and the charismatic warlords (who resembled in the beginning perhaps just lucky and experienced hunters). Their raiding for booty (mainly livestock) and the human captives for ransom or slave export soon developed into an independent prestigious and socioeconomic activity that in some instances rivaled the erstwhile predatory warfare of traditional noblemen. Of course, to the native noblemen and the Russian command it was banditry pure and simple, devoid of any traditional aura. Therefore the lucky peasant warlords also tended to become the staunchest supporters of Islamic conversion that provided to them the ideology of holy war against infidels and elevated their own status to that of religious paladin, or *ghazi*.³⁷

The Sufi leadership itself on numerous occasions split into the competing factions. And ultimately the movement settled down to create the new church-like orthodoxy, a hierarchy of power and privilege, and actually a theocratic state that will be briefly discussed in the following section. This sort of historical complexity, however, is to be expected in a religious movement that in important ways seems analogous to the popular

³⁶ The colonization movement conducted by the armed and democratically organized North Caucasian peasants seems to present a parallel to the Ancient Greek colonization in the early phases of polis democratization. The parallel becomes stronger considering the growing involvement of wealthier Circassian and Chechen peasants in taking the control of commercial routes leading to external markets, although surely we must not forget the difference between the Mediterranean sea-borne geography and the mountainous landscape of the Caucasus. The parallels with the Viking raiding/trade/colonization appear even stronger. See Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, 2nd. ed. London: Verso, 1994, pp. 29-50 and 154-181.

³⁷ Once again, this dynamic finds potentially illuminating parallels in the inherent bellicosity of classical Mediterranean polis and the Scandinavian societies in the age of Vikings. See Perry Anderson, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 45-50; and Randall Collins, "Market Dynamics as the Engine of Historical Change," in his: *Macrohistory*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, especially pp. 188-196. The prominent Soviet Ossetian historian Max Blijev (Bliev) sought to theorize the warfare dynamics of the North Caucasian democratic tribes using Engels's concept of 'warrior democracy'. It was sharpened by Bliev's own concept of 'raiding society' where the regular raids for booty and slaves constitute a major political economic structure on the road to feudal class society, see Max Bliev and Vladimir Degoev, *Kavkazskaia voina* [The Caucasus War], Moscow: "Roset", 1994. Bliev's work, dating back several decades ago but published in full only recently, was considered too provocative because it focused on the aspects of North Caucasian history that many Soviet scholars and party officials, both the North Caucasians and Russians, surely preferred not to notice. Unfortunately, Bliev's daring but rather crude brand of Marxism left him vulnerable to the accusations in both dogmatism and, much nastier, the Ossetian nationalism that traditionally took the Russian side against the rest of North Caucasian neighbors. The latter remains so emotional an issue that a leading Chechen intellectual once called me to warn that he would not be able to preserve our friendship if I cite Bliev's book again. I am truly sorry, but whatever our opinions, the 'raiding society' thesis of Max Bliev cannot be simply erased from the historiography of the region.

heresies of medieval Europe if not the Reformation itself. There should be enough to occupy the future generations of scholars from the North Caucasus, if only the socioeconomic conditions will allow for the emergence of next generation.

Ghazawat, the Peasant Holy War

The North Caucasus was incorporated into the modern world-system in the nineteenth century like most other peripheral zones: by European military conquest. It was a protracted and very bloody process because the technology, geography, and the social organization of Caucasian highlanders concatenated to create an incredibly strong armed resistance. The resistance movement culminated in the creation of centralized Islamic state with a standing army that lasted for twenty five years, until it was broken and partly incorporated into the Russian Empire.

Historians argue when to mark the date of the beginning of the Caucasus war.³⁸ Since the 1740s the Russian frontier garrisons engaged in the sporadic suppression of rebellions mostly on behalf of Kabardin and Daghestani noblemen who became the intermediaries in a colonial scheme of indirect rule. Thus the Russian state took side in the ongoing class conflict in the North Caucasus.

The Russian actions became more assertive after the 1770s, with the elimination of the Crimean Tatar khanate and the annexation of fertile lands along the northern shores of Black sea, in what was now called the 'New Russia' (*Novorossia*). Aside the geopolitical thrust to southern seas and the prestige considerations of imperial aggrandizement, the Russian absolutist state had a vested economic and class interest in these conquests. Two generations earlier the reforms of tsar Peter the Great achieved a rough equalization of military and taxation-administrative potential of Russia with the contemporary Western absolutism.³⁹ Now, in the 'Golden Age' of Catherine the Great, Russian absolutism was reaping the fruits of Petrine reforms. The acquisition of vast fertile lands in the south of Ukraine and Russia allowed the empire to lavishly reward and endow the expanded ranks of its newly Europeanized service nobility. The Catherinian distribution of lands and their settlement with serf peasants from the central provinces became perhaps the grandest feudal colonization ever.⁴⁰ The next step was to be the analogous feudal colonization of the North Caucasian steppe, recently cleared from the Turkic and Mongolian nomads, and the advance toward Persia and the riches of India.⁴¹ Thus Russia was to maintain its splendid

³⁸ Max Blied and Vladimir Degoev, *Kavkazskaia voina*. [The Caucasus war]. Moskva: "Roset", 1994.

³⁹ See Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 1990 –1992*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, chapters 5 and 6.

⁴⁰ Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. London: New Left Books, 1974.

⁴¹ Nikolai I. Pokrovsky, *Kavkazskaia voina i imamat Shamilya*. [The Caucasus War and Shamil's Imamate.]

parity with the West.

After the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815, Russian armies were redeployed to the Caucasus where in a series of victorious campaigns against Persia and the Turks they secured the lands of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. But unexpectedly the imperial advance ran into the stiff resistance by the mountain peoples. They were regarded in St. Petersburg a bunch of picturesque but ignorant savages who failed to appreciate the benefits of imperial peace and order let alone the sheer disparity in military might. This added an important ideological reason for the Russian engagement and entrapment in the Caucasus war: against the growing West European distaste for the despotic monarchy, it became necessary to demonstrate that Russia was bringing Enlightenment and progress to the unruly natives. It turned out, however, that it was the St. Petersburg strategists who failed to appreciate the determination and military capabilities of Caucasian highlanders, which finds a grim parallel in our times. What started for the Russian empire as a series of minor punitive operations along distant frontiers, unexpectedly grew into its costliest and most ferocious conquest ever.

After 1818 the Russian Vice-Roy of the Caucasus General Yermolov adopted the strategy of methodically strangling and starving the highlanders. This was likely the first articulated strategy of counter-insurgency in the modern era. Yermolov proceeded to build the lines of fortresses, one of which later became the modern capital of Chechnya Grozny (Fort Terrifying). This move denied to the highlanders access to the fields and winter pasturage in the foothills. Roads were cut through the forests into the interior of Chechnya and Circassia where the rebellious villages and their crops were regularly burnt as a matter of stated policy and the 'bandits' were publicly executed.

Yermolov's brutal 'pacification' was successful in the short run. At the time it was often admired by European commentators, including many progressive intellectuals in Russia, as the necessary means of delivering the 'drumbeat Enlightenment' to Asiatic peoples.⁴² But in the longer run this strategy produced the unintended effect of presenting the highlanders with the morally detestable common threat and thus a reason for coordinating and stepping up their resistances.

The military coordination and ideological program were provided by the same networks of Sufi mystics that spread the popular Islamization in previous generations. If Moscow: POSSPEN, 2000.

⁴² The expression *barabannoe Prosvetschenie* (the 'drumbeat Enlightenment') belongs to Griboyedov, the Russian poet and diplomat who is famous for his progressive projects, satirical gift, as well as his death along with the whole Russian embassy in Teheran at the hands of 'street crowds'. The ruthless side of Griboyedov's advocacy of progress is only now emerging in the Russian literary studies in relation to the war in Chechnya. See Yakov Gordin, *Kavkaz: zemlya i krov'* [The Caucasus: Land and Blood], St.Petersburg: "Zvezda", 2000, p. 121.

this seems an unlikely proposition, we should be reminded that in these democratic warrior societies the preachers were traditionally expected to be as good with their guns and sabers as with the Quran. The rebellions arose in waves between the 1780s and the 1820s until the threshold was passed in the mid-1830s and a tremendous peasant war took off in the mountains of Daghestan and Chechnya. An analogous rebellion spread in the western parts of the Caucasus, in the lands of democratic Circassian tribes. The movement was proclaimed a *ghazawat* — a form of Islamic holy war (*jiḥād*) that sanctifies the raiding of infidel territories by the Islamic warriors, or *ghazi*.

The concept of peasant war, used by Frederic Engels to describe the highest degree of class struggles in the feudal mode of production, recently came under the revisionist criticism by many historians of Europe who argued that peasants could never rise against the lords on their own, *i.e.* in the absence of leadership by a dissenting fraction of upper classes, clergy, or unemployed mercenaries, because peasants by themselves lacked organization, class consciousness, and military capability to do that. In the North Caucasus, however, the organizational, ideological, and logistical conditions were met in the absence of elite factions and therefore calling the *ghazawat* a peasant war seems eminently justified.⁴³

The standard histories reduce the Caucasus war to the confrontation of monolithic and unchanging actors: the Russian empire and the rebellious highlanders. This static generalization suggests more or less explicitly the choice of sides according to one's ideological sympathies. The special value of Pokrovsky's work is in showing the dynamics of North Caucasian *ghazawat* as it developed from the early popular rebellion into the sustained form of war-making and state-making. When in 1834 the Daghestani preacher called Shamil was proclaimed *imam* (leader of the faithful), the cause looked nearly lost. Imam Shamil, by all accounts a very able and highly charismatic popular leader, soon achieved the critical victories that proved his charisma to the highlander masses and showed the possibility of defeating the Russian armies. The movement grew explosively. By 1840, the highest point, it had engulfed almost the entire mountainous part of Daghestan and Chechnya. Thus Shamil managed to unite under his military-theocratic authority several hundred small political units that previously have existed in an anarchic balance.

But the mobilization remained limited to the original realm because Shamil's

⁴³ The peasant war argument regarding Shamil's imamate was first made in the early 1930s by the Soviet historian Nikolai Pokrovsky, *Kavkazskaia voina i imamat Shamilya*. [The Caucasus War and Shamil's Imamate.] Moscow: POSSPEN, 2000. Pokrovsky's sophisticated and excellently detailed study of peasant Islamic revolution and state-making in the North Caucasus was completed in 1934 but published only sixty six years later by his son. Despite Pokrovsky's argumentation being thoroughly Marxist, the Soviet academic publishers felt unnerved by the topic and kept on suggesting revisions or simply 'loosing' the manuscript. This monograph represents a major achievement in the study of region's history and has numerous theoretical implications for the world historical sociology.

expeditionary force failed to cross the Kabardin lands and link up with the Circassian rebels who operated in the western parts of North Caucasus. Further to the west from the Kabardin lands the mountain geography once again posed a formidable barrier to the Russian military control. This enabled the Circassian tribes to preserve their independence for another generation. Shamil was able to send to the western Caucasus his personal emissaries (*naibs*) if not whole armies. They organized the Circassian rebels and, to some extent, synchronized their actions with the war waged by the imamate state in Daghestan and Chechnya. But this remained only a tenuous linkage mainly because of the wedge between the two opposite sides of the North Caucasus created by the lands of Christian Ossetians and the Muslim Kabardins who remained controlled by their own nobility and generally loyal to Russian Empire.

The Kabardin non-participation in resistance to Russian conquest remains a matter of bitter incriminations among the contemporary scholars and nationalists. But the reason was not anyone's lack of character. It was a powerfully structural reason. Back in the 1840s, Gen. Yermolov, long retired by tsar Nicholas I for being dangerously ambitious, continued to comment on the Caucasus theater and correctly diagnosed Shamil's failure: "*Even if [the Kabardins] dare to rebel, suppressing them is always possible, for their wives and children have nowhere to hide, and already their famous rich flocks, grazing in the lowlands meadows, are our best hostage.*"⁴⁴ The Kabardins indeed fell hostages to their wealth and privileged position — having long enjoyed some of the best lands in the Caucasus foothills, they found themselves exposed geopolitically to the Russian military pressure.

This rule holds across the whole Caucasus: the imperial authorities encountered little resistance among the better-off, more 'cultured' peoples of valleys and foothills as opposed to the 'savage' populations of forests and highlands because the former had fewer possibilities to resist or flee compared to the latter. The culture differential did play a role in determining the patterns of resistance and collaboration. But to grasp correctly the meaning of much abused 'cultural factor', we need to look into its class content.⁴⁵

The relatively peaceful acceptance of imperial rule was based on two social mechanisms, both operating at the elite level and closely intertwined: the incorporation of native ruling classes into the Russian service nobility and the concomitant acceptance of the elite norms and dispositions of European absolutism.⁴⁶ The aristocratic assimilation has

⁴⁴ Gen. Yermolov to Vice-Roy Vorontsov, 13 May 1846, cit. in Pokrovsky, Op. cit., p. 413.

⁴⁵ Indicatively, the leading scholars of social movements and state-making recently came a full circle to bringing the class content back in their analyses. See Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; and Sidney Tarrow, "Confessions of a Recovering Structuralist", *Mobilization* (forthcoming).

⁴⁶ Liubov Kurtynova-Derluguian, *Tsar's Abolitionists*, 1995.

been on the housebooks of Russian tsardom since the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries when sizable cohorts of Muslim Tatar and Kabardin noblemen were incorporated in the tsar's service.

But the imperial authorities felt at a loss when confronted with the democratic peasant societies of Chechnya, Daghestan, and Circassia. The Russian aristocratic prejudice precluded treating as equals the people whose homologous position in the contemporaneous coordinates of Russian society should be that of enserfed mujiks or outlawed runaways. Hence we should not be surprised to discover that the areas of strongest armed resistance in the Caucasus almost perfectly corresponded to the communities that have undergone the democratic transformation in the eighteenth century. The determinant seems not so much the spirit of freedom, although we should not discount the factor of the popular ideology of resistance, as it was the absence of ruling elites who could assume the mediating function in the scheme of imperial domination. This was to change, ironically enough, in the result of the *ghazawat* rebellion led by imam Shamil. The rebellion created the state structures where none had existed before, and eventually the Russian conquerors could make use of those structures.

Islam really made a difference. Unlike Judaism and Christianity that emerged in Roman empire, the original Islam took shape in the fractured tribal frontiers of Arabia where the social structures were not dissimilar to the situation that existed in the North Caucasus toward the early nineteenth century. The scripture (al-Quran), the legendary stories about the Prophet's life (*haditha*), the practices of early Arab caliphs, and the Islamic canonical law (*sharia*) in sum made available to imam Shamil a robust template for his state-building project. The military victories and the famed personal piety gave to Shamil the authority while the disciplined trans-ethnic networks of Sufi teachers-disciples provided to him the tool that allowed to overcome the parochialism of independent clans and villages. The new state, Shamil's imamate, institutionalized in the religiously sanctioned forms the achievements of popular uprising against the Russian imperial rule. The imamate acquired a central government (*divan*) elected in the periodical conventions of village elders, clerics, and leading warriors; it conducted diplomacy; appointed regional administrators (*naibs*) and judges (*qadis*); collected taxes according to the norms of sharia law; created the centrally-disposed stocks of grain; built strategic roads, bridges, and fortifications; developed the armaments industry including the attempt to cast its own cannons. In emulation of the Russians and Turks, the North Caucasian imamate even awarded the medals. The central rod of the imamate's power was the elite permanent force of religious warriors, the *murtazeks*, who organized and led in battle the village militias.

The achievements of imam Shamil earned him a widespread admiration in the West. Even the Russian commanders could not help appreciating their adversary. Karl Marx himself called Shamil 'a spontaneous democrat' and enthusiastically discussed the news from the Caucasus in his correspondence with Engels. The achievements were indeed formidable but their romanticization was unwarranted. Shamil's efforts soon ran into the typical dilemmas of state-builders and the particular problems of successful revolutionaries: ensuring the central control and resource extraction while balancing the discipline with popular enthusiasm during war.

Since the mid-1840s Shamil faced the problems of separatism and corruption among his regional emissaries (*naibs*) and the insubordination of military commanders. As the imamate's warfare became professionalized, the operational control passed into the hands of mid-level commanders who favored the prestigious and lucrative raids into the Russian-controlled territories over the routine defense of villages and the large-scale coordinated operations. The peasants apparently grew disillusioned as their taxes, labors, and personal sacrifices in battles brought an endless cycle of Russian reprisals. The armed forces of the imamate very effectively harassed the Russian invaders in ambushes and counter-attacks but they could not prevent the destruction wrought by punitive expeditions.⁴⁷ Besides, Shamil's rigoristic and militant interpretation of Islam seems to become another popular grievance, as the different, more tolerant kinds of Sufi propagation began to spread in the 1850s.

In the late 1850s the Russian armies, rapidly reinforced and rearmed after the close call in the Crimean war against the British and the French, launched a vigorous offensive in the North Caucasus. Surprisingly, in 1859 Shamil surrendered along with his closest men. The imamate state has been in a deep ideological and organizational crisis before its sudden collapse. In the Russian captivity Shamil was treated with an astonishing magnanimity. He was taken to St. Petersburg and introduced to the tsar who gave him a generous pension and eventually allowed to leave on a pilgrimage to Mecca where Shamil died peacefully. Many of imamate's officials defected shortly before or after Shamil's surrender and entered the Russian service with equivalent ranks. In particular, the village administration was left to largely the same qadis and local elders. The native noblemen were not a major concern anymore in the mountainous parts of Daghestan or Chechnya because few have survived the century of upheavals. Thus the remnants of imamate's state-making finally allowed the Russian authorities to extend their rule over what once were the most problematic areas in the North Caucasus.

Nonetheless many stalwarts of *ghazawat*, especially in the lower ranks, either died in

⁴⁷ N.I. Pokrovsky, *Op. Cit.*, Ch. 7.

the last desperate battles or chose to emigrate to the Ottoman empire. In the wake of defeat many mountain villages were systematically burnt and their populations were forcibly resettled closer to colonial towns. The crashing of rebellion produced among the people the despair and panic of eschatological proportions. It led to the chaotic exodus across the Black sea into the Ottoman lands with a substantial loss of life due to epidemics, shipwrecks, famine, and severe psychological stress. No reliable numbers exist regarding this demographic catastrophe. But undoubtedly many areas lost between a third and a half of their population, and in some places no natives remained at all, which the Russian command apparently welcomed. The Caucasian refugees of the 1860s, the *muhajees*, started the sizable diaspora that endures in Turkey, Syria, and Jordan.

The Politics of Historical Memory

The treatment of Shamil in the Caucasus historiography fully reflects the political vicissitudes of the last century and half. Before 1917 the Russian memoirists and military historians portrayed him as noble savage whose ultimate submission symbolized the taming of wild nature and superstition in the face of European order and progress. After the Bolshevik revolution Shamil briefly entered the pantheon of pre-modern revolutionary heroes. But unlike Spartacus, Campanella, or Pugachev, the imam was not sufficiently removed in history, and in the 1920s his Islamic disciples were often regarded an active enemy. During the Stalinist purges Shamil was denounced as the agent of Turkish and British imperialism and a religious reactionary. In the late 1950s he underwent only a partial rehabilitation.

As proto-nationalisms began to coalesce in the sixties and seventies along with the maturation of new national intelligentsias and the ethno-bureaucratic networks within the Soviet autonomous republics of the North Caucasus, the local historians engaged in the inchoate intellectual struggles to present Shamil in correspondence to their national histories and ideologies. For the Daghestanis Shamil was unambiguously their biggest hero. Given a very different internal balance of power, the Chechen scholars faced severe reprimands from the local Russian officials and academic censors who saw the interest in Shamil 'undermining friendship among the peoples'. The Ossetian scholars, invoking the principles of historical objectivity, sought to 'balance' and overall dampen Shamil's image while presenting the alliance of their own ancestors with Russia as an act of patriotism and political wisdom. The Kabardin and Circassian authors remained ambiguous, preferring instead to focus on the life stories of their glorious princes.

Since the times of perestroika Shamil has been elevated to the pan-nationalist icon of

the whole region, in which our Musa Shanibov was a major driving force. The memory, or rather the selective reminding, of the events of Caucasus war became the central construct in the localized version of generic nationalist legend which, like nearly all such legends, dwells on ancestral heroism and sacrifice at the hands of foreign power.⁴⁸ The dichotomous imagery of freedom-loving highlanders united against the conquering empire, as indicated in the interviews and local publications in my collection, came to dominate the radical political discourse in the region only during the political crisis of 1989-91. Since this version of historical memory is so recent, it shows plenty of seams that betray the acutely political struggles involved in its construction. Shanibov himself would acknowledge this in the interviews, especially when reminded of Bourdieu's reflexive method.

The new mythology, however, is powerful because it corresponds to the most acute aspects of post-Soviet politics in the region. On the surface, it may seem that the rebellions and wars of our days resumed the struggle and the political cleavages of the times of imam Shamil. The Chechens are once again fighting a ferocious guerrilla war against the Russian armies just like a hundred and fifty years ago, presumably because rebelliousness runs in their blood. Meanwhile the majority of Kabardins stayed loyal to the Russian rule in what looks like a continuity with the political traditions of their prudent and far-sighted ancestors.

There are, of course, plenty of empirical incongruities in this picture. The Daghestani highlanders, whose ancestors have actually started the nineteenth-century *ghazawat*, remained neutral throughout the wars of the 1990s. They joined the fight in August 1999 only briefly, though very resolutely — and fought predominantly on the Russian side against the Chechen invaders and a tiny minority of fellow Daghestanis who attempted to export their Islamic revolution to Daghestan. Likewise after 1991 the desperate Abkhaz, confronted with the chauvinistic militancy of Georgian nationalists, found backing in the conservative elements of Russian military and political establishment. In effect this rendered the Abkhaz rebels, the Middle Eastern descendants of *muhajjeers*, and Shanibov's pan-nationalist volunteers the surrogate armies of the retreating Russian empire, all united by the circumstantial alliance against the emergent national state of Georgia. This looks no little irony given the fact that in the latter twentieth century the Abkhaz indigenous population found itself in Abkhazia a minority of just over 17 per cent mainly due to the effects of Russian rule: first, the catastrophic emigration of perhaps a half of Abkhaz to the Ottoman empire in the wake of Russian conquest back in the 1860s, and later the demographic policies of tsarist and the Soviet administrations that sought to populate the

⁴⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

'vacant and savage' Abkhazia with the more loyal and productive farmers of Georgian, Greek, Armenian, even Estonian descent.

But such twisted incongruities find no reflection in the straightforward nationalist epic of glories and depredations. Two things in particular look strikingly anachronistic in the current version of historical memory. First, the peasant democratization is completely omitted because today's North Caucasians became too far removed from the realities of old struggles for land and the freedom from rent-collecting noblemen. Secondly, the Islamic teaching of imam Shamil gets secularized into the call for pan-national unity and independence.⁴⁹ The historical past matters, but it neither fully determines nor explains what comes later.

⁴⁹ For the comparison of the ideological discourses of imam Shamil and the Chechen commander Shamil Basayev, see Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya, The Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, Ch. 9.