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Circassian Day in European Parliament: “*A Day With Circassians. Federation of European Circassians & Cem Özdemir*“

paper by Irma Kreiten (University of Southampton):

The Russian *final subjugation* of Northwestern Caucasus: Colonial Atrocities and European Responsibilities

Why should someone who is not a Circassian himself be interested in Circassian history? Isn't the study of Circassian history and culture something quite exotic? Should – or could – such a field of knowledge not be left to specialists? I want to seize the opportunity of the Circassian Day in European Parliament in order to argue that, whether we are Circassians or not, Circassian history, and especially 19th century colonization, is something that should concern us all. As our historical pasts are intertwined¹, this means that, by learning about each other, we also learn something about ourselves.

In the case of the 19th-century atrocities committed against the Circassians, this learning may be rather disconcerting and painful. But, as I see it, this pain is both necessary and beneficial. It may help people in Europe to understand better the pain Circassians and other victims of colonization have felt and feel. We finally have to come to terms with the dark sides of our past.

I will start with the so-called „final subjugation“ of Northwestern Caucasus by the Russian Empire in mid-19th century. I will demonstrate how certain European ways of seeing the world, thinking about it and acting upon it, inspired Russian colonialists in their proceedings and furnished them with justifications and rationalizations.

The second part of my presentation will be dedicated to the role of the international system in the subjugation of Circassia. I want to show how geopolitics fuelled the Russian-Caucasian conflict, further polarized the two parties and, last but not least, contributed to the escalation of colonial atrocities.

I

¹ For a theoretical background of the postcolonial concept of “entangled histories” see Conrad, Sebastian/Randeria, Shalini (ed.): *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*. Frankfurt/ New York 2002.

In 1864 Russian officials proudly stated that not one unsubjected tribe or community had remained in Western Caucasus, and that the end of the “Caucasian war” had been achieved victoriously.²

Russian military historian Fadeev boasted:

*“This country, which for thousand years has been an unassailable fortress, a vast hideaway for brigands, [and] which not one conqueror could approach with impunity, turned instantly, as if through waving with a magic wand, into an uninhabited land, [that was] rightfully belonging to every hard-working Russian person.”*³

This triumphalist stance went hand in hand with an equally optimistic view of the new colony’s future. In their first cataloguing of the region Russian colonial authorities praised its manifold natural treasures, which, in Russian view, still lay untouched.⁴ The country was said to be “ready to enter the beneficial path of all-enlivening civilization”⁵, but its potentials still needed to be developed. Nature had to be improved by human planning and intervention. Roads had to be constructed and harbors built, so that the goods produced could be exported. Marshes had to be drained in order to improve the climate and make the land more suitable for human settlement. Factories could be built alongside the fast-flowing mountain streams. The “new country” thus would be “new” not only in the sense of constituting Russia’s most recent territorial acquisition. It would also be “new” in the sense that the landscape itself was to be re-modelled according to colonial needs.⁶

The aim was to be the improvement, welfare and “flourishing” of the whole region. Russian transformative zeal was also extended to include the reformation of human nature. A civic spirit had to be developed in the region, the cultural, moral and mental condition of the population had to be improved. As a contemporary stated, peace had to be brought to the fighting, education to the analphabets, faith to those who had forgotten how to pray, the fine arts to those who only knew the skillful command of weapons.⁷ In short: a new, progressive society was to be built up.

Russian military historian Fadeev stated enthusiastically:

² See for example the article “*Izvestija s Kavkaza*” in *Voennyi sbornik* 1864, t. 38, No. 7, otd. 3, p. 62.

³ Fadeev, Rostislav: *Kavkazskaia voina*. Moskva 2005 (first published as *Pisma s Kavkaza* in 1864-1865), p. 199.

⁴ Pasyнкиn, Inzh.-Polk.: *Posledstvia okonchania voiny na Zapadnom Kavkaze*. In: *Voennyi sbornik* 1865, t. 42, No. 4, otd. 2, p. 309-319, here p. 309.

⁵ *Po povodu okonchaniia kavkazskoi voiny*. In: *Voennyi sbornik* 1864, t. 38, No. 8, otd. 3, p. 136-148, citation p. 137.

⁶ Pasyнкиn (article cited); *Po povodu* (article cited); see also *Kavkazskii vecher*. In: *Voennyi sbornik* 1866, t. 48, No. 8, otd. III, p. 182-186; *Pokorenie vostochnago Kavkaza i dalneishaia perspektiva deiatelnosti*. In: *Otechestvennye zapiski* 1859, No. 10, p. 100-103; the expression “new country” is used by Pasyнкиn, p.317.

⁷ *Kavkazskii vecher* (article cited), p. 184.

*“Everywhere man will have free rein; in a warm and healthy climate ploughed fields, pastures, woods and water everywhere, all will be at his hand. [...]. And this sumptuous, one can say, newly discovered land lies not in the Pacific Ocean, but on the shore of the Black Sea. [...] The Kuban province will grow a breed of people we have not heard of even in fairytales. We see Russian mountaineers. A round-faced, fair-haired Russian boy conveys the visiting [female!] tourist on his horses on steep mountain paths [in order] to watch from the neighboring valley how the sun rises from out of the snows and [how] the shadow of the mountains suddenly reaches out over the whole region.”*⁸

What is especially striking about this romantic depiction is that the Caucasian “mountaineers”, as Circassians are called in Russian sources, have been replaced by fair-haired “Russian mountaineers”.

In this regard, reality had indeed come frightfully close to the utopian scenery evoked by Fadeev: in 1864 the so-called “hostile population”, the people said to know nothing than to command weapons, were no longer there. The land was, as Russian officials had stated quite correctly, empty.

Nothing could be further removed from the truth however than Fadeev’s claim that the Circassians had disappeared “as if though waving with a magic wand”. The Russian state had been conducting a war of attrition for decades. Bit by bit, Russian troops had forced the Circassians off their fertile lands and driven them further up into the mountains. They had systematically devastated the Circassians’ basis of subsistence by stealing their livestock, burning crops, destroying villages and felling fruit groves and forests. This policy was complemented by the installment of a coastal blockade, so that Circassians could no longer trade with the outside world. Hunger and cold were the instruments that should force Circassians into submission.

The last phase of the war was characterized by a further radicalization. Military terror and burnt-earth-tactics were employed in order to make the Circassians leave altogether. A large-scale “cleansing” operation was conducted, in the course of which Russian divisions systematically combed through the mountains. Those that surrendered, women, men, children, were marched off to the coast. From there, a smaller part was sent further north into Russian territory for relocation, and the larger part forcefully exiled to the Ottoman Empire.

At the same time then that Russian officials were congratulating each other on victory, lauding the glory of the Russian troops and the greatness of the Russian nation⁹, large masses of refugees were still camping on the Black Sea coast under the open sky, waiting for ships to

⁸ Fadeev (work cited), p. 210-211

⁹ For a description of the festivities organized to celebrate the end of the war, see *Po povodu* (article cited).

take them to the Ottoman Empire. Eyewitnesses described the shores as strewn with dead bodies. Shiploads upon shiploads of starving, half-naked Circassians, further weakened by infectious diseases, were reaching Ottoman territory. Even after their arrival in the Ottoman Empire, Circassians there were still in the hundreds each day.

Both Russian and foreign reports on the refugee drama leave no doubt that Russian authorities were well-informed about what was going on.¹⁰ Thus, at the same time that they were drawing up grand schemes for the benefit of humankind, Russian colonial officials conducted an entirely conscious policy of ethnic cleansing. How then did Russian authorities accommodate this contradiction within their worldview? And what does this have to do with European responsibility?

The Russian colonial government tried to exculpate itself by pointing out the deficits in Circassian character and way of life. Russian military and administrative sources produced an image of Circassians as uneducated and uncivilized never-do-good population of brigands. Circassians were characterized as lazy and unproductive. One author thus stated that “*In relation to the production of national wealth, 10 Russian peasants produce more than 100 mountaineers [...].*”¹¹

Colonial officials repeated over and over again that it would be impossible to make Circassians fit into the new colonial order. The Russian aim thus was “*to get rid of the irredeemably restless and obstinate population*”.¹² Even though Russian officials now and then did express some kind of regret as to the terrible fate of the Circassians, they stressed that ultimately there was nothing they could do about it. In their view, what was happening was maybe not a nice thing, but surely something necessary and unavoidable.¹³

It would be convenient at this point to state that behind this kind of reasoning there was nothing than hot air, nothing than the wish to dissimulate the crimes being committed. However, I want to go one step further and ask if there were not some deeper convictions behind this kind of argument, some kind of more profound ideology that offered itself to be believed in.

¹⁰ *Tragicheskie posledstviia Kavkazskoi voiny dlja Adygov. Vtoraia polovina XIX – nachalo XX veka*. Nalchik 2000, see for example the documents on pp. 75-80. Of special interest in this regard is also the memorandum by V. A. Frankini from the Russian embassy at Constantinople, who took up a stance rather critical of the imperial government and who argued against the “re-settlement“ of the Circassians, see *ibid.*, p. 93-120.

¹¹ Fadeev (work cited), p. 196.

¹² *Tragicheskie* (work cited), p. 28.

¹³ Fadeev (work cited), p. 187.

Interestingly, exactly the same kind of reasoning is to be found with European colonialists: they also saw the necessity of getting rid of the so-called “lazy natives”.¹⁴ And they expressed the same kind of dim regret and melancholy as to the passing of cultures that, in their eyes, were not only inferior, but historically outdated. The similarities are sometimes striking. Fadeev had depicted a romantic mountain scenery in which the Caucasians had been replaced by “Russian mountaineers” and which was now safe to travel even for female tourists. British author William Reade evoked a similar image of a colonized Africa. He described a scene at the banks of the river Niger, which had been turned into a romantic river like the Rhine. Young girls are sitting and are reading, with tears in their eyes, a short story named “The Last of the Negroes”.¹⁵

In 19th century imperial Europe there existed a widespread belief in so-called “dying races”. This belief consisted in the notion that certain populations which had failed to evolve along the general lines of human development, were doomed to die out when coming into contact with superior civilizations. This theory allowed to rationalize colonial genocide by pointing to the unalterable laws of history.¹⁶

The end which made any means look right, was - progress. The prospects of a bright future with flowering landscapes, with hunger, need, pain, illness and ignorance banned from the face of the earth once and for all, seemed to justify any sacrifice. It was this sort of utopian expectations that, in the history of modern Europe, was invoked again and again in order to make acceptable the use of extreme violence. It can be traced back to the transformation and secularization of Christian doctrine at the end of the Middle Ages. Then, salvation ceased to be seen as something that occurred only after death. A worldly paradise now seemed possible with the help of modern science and the principles of reason.¹⁷ The world would be transformed not by god, but by men themselves, albeit as if they were gods.¹⁸

¹⁴ For an in-depth study on the notion of the “lazy native” see Alatas, Syed Hussein: *The Myth of the lazy native*. London 1977.

¹⁵ Cited according to Traverso, Enzo: *Moderne und Gewalt. Eine europäische Genealogie des Nazi-Terrors*. Köln 2003, p. 66.

¹⁶ Brantlinger, Patrick: ‘Dying races’: *rationalizing genocide in the nineteenth century*. In: Pieterse, Jan Nederveen/ Bhiku Parekh (ed.): *The decolonization of imagination. Culture, knowledge and power*. London/ New Jersey 1995, p. 42-56. Traverso (work cited), p. 57-67.

¹⁷ Rotermundt, Rainer: *Jedes Ende ist ein Anfang. Auffassungen vom Ende der Geschichte*. Darmstadt 1994, chapters 3 and 4 (pp. 33-66); Bauman, Said, Edward W.: *Orientalism. Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London 1995 (1978), p. 114-138; Raeff, Marc: *The Well-Ordered Police State. Social and institutional change through law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800*, New Haven/London 1983, p. 29; Bauman, Zygmunt: *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Oxford 1989.

¹⁸ This formulation is taken from Levene, Mark: *Genocide in the Age of the Nation-State. Vol. 1: The Meaning of Genocide*. London/New York 2005, p. 107.

Colonies were especially vulnerable to this transformative zeal, as social restrictions present at home were not effective here.¹⁹ The colonies could be used as laboratory in which to try out new techniques of forming the world. And this was also what Russian Enlightenment-inspired officials had had in mind. They treated Circassian lands as a *tabula rasa*, a landscape from which all traces of prior human existence could be wiped out in order to build up a “new country”.

II

Could philosophy kill then? Was the schizophrenia that came along with European transformative zeal indeed responsible for what happened to the Circassians? To some, the connections I established here between European Enlightenment thinking and Russian colonial atrocities may seem too subtle, mirky and far-fetched. Yet, Western Europe did not solely exert its influence on the Caucasus by ways of a philosophy it had passed on to the Russians. Western European powers also interfered directly through the workings of international geopolitics, which is surely something much more tangible.

What I want to show in the following is, how changes in the international system and changes in worldview were related to and conditioned each other, and which effects this had on Russian-Caucasian relations.

Towards the beginning of the 18th century, Russia had come to be perceived as “backward” in comparison with Western European societies. European observers disdainfully described what they thought to be Russia’s “Asiatic” and “barbarian” traits. What is more, Russia risked to succumb to the superior military power of its Western neighbors in a potential war.

It was Peter the Great who set out to amend this deplorable state by initiating thoroughgoing reforms. Peter’s role models were the enlightened sovereigns of Western Europe. From them he adopted the belief that in order to increase a state’s tax base and in order to field better armies, it had to improve its population’s skills, vigor, civic morals, and work habits.²⁰ Thus, the Russian reform process touched on practically all aspects of public life and, last but not least, made a European-style colonialism seem desirable.

¹⁹ Weiner, Amir: *Introduction: Landscaping the Human Garden*. In: Weiner, Amir (ed.): *Landscaping the Human Garden. Twentieth-Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework*. Stanford 2003, p. 1-18, here p. 10-11; Scott, James C.: *Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven/London 1998, p. 97.

²⁰ This formulation has been adopted from Scott (work cited), p. 91.

Russia tried to counter the allegation of “Asiatic barbarism” and to demonstrate its own “Europeanness” by taking up the antagonism between Islam and Christianity, East and West.²¹ Russia stylized itself as defender of Christians from eastern depravity. The Caucasus seemed to fit the category of Asiatic Other, and, additionally, was also valuable due to its geographical location at the crossing of important trade routes. In the course of the 19th century, this gave rise to geopolitical speculations. The Caucasus seemed the ideal point of depart for settling the Great Game in the East. A Russian contemporary stated:

*“The establishment of Russian rule in the Caucasus should exert a decisive influence on the whole of Asian affairs [...]. [...] Due to its central position the Caucasian isthmus commands Muslim Asia [...].”*²²

Circassia, located at the Black Sea coast, was perceived as especially important in this regard. The orientation on Western patterns of expansion went hand in hand with the adoption of a colonial ideology of inferiority. In earlier centuries, Caucasian nobles had still been treated more or less as equals of Russian nobility. Now, Caucasians were described as semi-wild tribes in need of the civilizing efforts of the colonial state. Social, political and cultural differences were now thought of in terms of superiority and inferiority. A culture of disregard for the rights and lives of those being colonialized arose. In a modernizing state bent upon administrative unification and sociocultural homogenization, cultural difference became something undesirable.

In contrast to Russian negative representations, European powers like England produced a romantic image of Circassians as noble knights, heroically fighting barbarian Russia.²³ Yet, European actors had their own interests at stake too. In the context of the “Eastern Question”, outside support for Circassian anticolonial resistance seemed a probate way for curbing Russian influence in the region. British considerations included setting up a Circassian protectorate in order to gain a foothold in the region.²⁴ For the Polish individuals active in the Caucasus, the Russo-Circassian war served to distract Russian forces from the Polish independence movement on the Western fringes of the empire. In international negotiations and treaties proving crucial for the further fate of the Circassians, little consideration was

²¹ See the discussions on “Russian Orientalism” in Ab Imperio 2002, No. 1, Kritika 2000, No. 4, and Becker, Seymour: *Russia between East and West: the Intelligentsia, Russian National Identity and the Asian Borderlands*. In: *Central Asian Survey* 1991 (10), No. 4, p. 42-64.

²² Fadeev (work cited), p. 241

²³ See for example Bell, James: *Journal of a Residence in Circassia During the Years 1837, 1838, and 1839*, London 1840; Lapinski, Theophil: *Die Bergvölker des Kaukasus und ihr Freiheitskampf gegen die Russen*. Hamburg 1863.

²⁴ On the involvement of Western European powers in Caucasian affairs see for example Brock, Peter: *The Fall of Circassia: A Study in Private Diplomacy*. In: *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 71, No. 280 (july 1956), p. 401-427; King, Charles: *Imagining Circassia: David Urquhart and the Making of North Caucasus Nationalism*. In: *The Russian Review* 66 (April 2007), p. 238-255.

given to their needs and demands. Circassian diplomatic initiatives were either turned down or outright ignored.

The foreign individuals of various national backgrounds which got involved in Caucasian affairs did so secretly for the most part. It was difficult to establish their exact relation to their own national governments, which, happily, took all responsibility away from the latter. This heightened fear and suspicion on the Russian side.

The outcome of war proved outside efforts at intervention to have been more or less ineffective and of little significance – that is, in a narrow military sense. What these interventions did effect is help to create an international climate of mutual distrust, fear and aggression. By acting as advocates of minority rights and by promising outside assistance, rival imperial powers had sought to destabilize the Russian empire from within. The Circassians had thus been turned into an object of Great Game politics, a pawn that could be moved around at will. For Russian colonial authorities, the efforts at foreign intervention proved a welcome pretext for getting rid of the “Trojan horse” endangering Russian territorial integrity. When they finally decided upon their policy of “cleansing”, they justified their actions also by pointing to the threat of a possible European military invasion.

Therefore, to sum up, European pressure had not only made colonialism seem desirable to Russia in the first place and had contributed to forming its shape in the Caucasus, but had also worked towards the radicalization and escalation of the means employed against the Circassians.

Unfortunately however, the role of European imperial involvement in the Caucasus has not been duly acknowledged yet. As much as I would like to conclude with a more optimistic outlook: it can neither be truly said that the Christian-Muslim antagonism has been finally overcome, be it in its original form or secularized as a West-East dichotomy. Nor did we let go of our sense of transformative mission. We still cling to a modernization paradigm that does not pay sufficient heed to the requirements of both local populations and the natural environment. And, as the events in the past weeks have shown, the international system again abides by the rules and rationalizations of geopolitics.

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