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*The indigenous elites and the construction of ethnic identities in the North Caucasus*

Practically every word in the title of this essay could be a subject of arguments, discussions, and qualifications. What is the indigenous? How indigenous, for instance, were those members of a local society who had been brought to Russia at an early age, educated in Russian schools, and then returned to the native regions to serve in some official capacity? And who are the elites? Are we to include only the local landed aristocracy, i.e. the nobles, or the elected notables as well? What about those societies, like the Chechens, who did not have the traditional elites? And of course, terms like ‘ethnicity’, ‘identity’ and their construction are heavily burdened with semantic and ideological presumptions. I do not use the term ‘construction’ in order to take sides in the hollow debate about how primordial verses were constructed. Instead, I am using it merely to indicate the process and the extent to which the existing identities were both preserved and transformed.

Perhaps we can reasonably agree on the geographic boundaries of the North Caucasus as the lands north of the main Caucasus range which also include the Nogay steppe in the west and the Kalmyk steppe in the east roughly bounded by the Kuban and Kuma rivers. Politically, it is important to note, these lands never produced a modern nation-state like the those south of the Caucasus range: Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

As numerous and diverse as the peoples of the North Caucasus were, they had one thing in common – they were Muslim. Their adherence to Islam varied significantly – from the north-east Caucasus where Islam was deeply entrenched among the peoples of northern Daghestan and Chechens, to the Central-North Caucasus where Islam held a far more tenuous hold over the Kabardins and Ossetins, and to the north-west Caucasus where Islam was often nominally accepted by the various Adyg peoples, more popularly known as the Circassians.

The peoples of the North Caucasus represented a highly fragmented aggregation of Islamic societies organized on the basis of kinship, language, and common territory. Their elites were interested in preserving and augmenting their power and wealth through a continued reliance on the customary law (adat). On the other hand, the foremost concern of the local ulema, which was an alternative locus of power, was to extend the rule of Islamic law (sharia) at the expense of the customary law. While seemingly working at cross-purposes, the native elites and the ulema often collaborated and coexisted comfortably. Neither group was interested in erecting ethno-cultural boundaries between different peoples. While a certain ruling elite belonged to a specific people, such as the Kabardin princes, for instance, they usually ruled over diverse ethnic groups collecting taxes from the Kabardins and the neighboring groups of the Chechens, Ossetins, Ingush, et al. Likewise, for the ulema, the Islamization

of society was not about particularities but about commonalities, about erasing the differences through the Arabization of the language and culture and the Islamization of the law and lifestyle.

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

Initially, Russia's relationship with the indigenous elites was similar to the experience of other colonial empires. The elites were to be co-opted and turned into the loyal servants of the imperial government. Yet by the mid-eighteenth century, the Russian expansion in the North Caucasus turned to an aggressive expropriation of lands, deportation of local villagers, and harboring of the native fugitives. Numerous petitions from the indigenous elites for a redress of the above issues remained unanswered, and they chose the path of resistance against the Russian presence. In contrast to the colonial experiences of other empires, the Russians began to support the local commoners in their grievances against their land-owning elites. The Russian policy of divide and rule along the social lines continued throughout the second half of the eighteenth century until a series of large peasant uprising against their elites jolted the entire region and compelled the Russian government to take sides. Shaken by its own experience of the Pugachev uprising and the French revolution, the Russian government chose to side with the local elites. Once again the co-optation of the elites, who were bestowed with high military ranks, large annuities, and military assistance against their rivals, had become the principal strategy of the Russian government.

The rewards, tangible or symbolic, could at best secure the co-operation of the native elites and their peoples. But a more substantial change of transforming the region and its peoples into an integral part of the Russian empire could be affected only by a long-term process of the acculturation or Russification of the elites. I suggest that the process of acculturation of the native elites that gained particular importance in the nineteenth century had formed the cornerstone of ethnopolitics in the region.

Acculturation was not an entirely new process, of course. Throughout the Russian engagement with the various indigenous peoples, the authorities invariably demanded hostages (*amanat*) from among the native elites to ensure their loyalty. In time, some of these hostages would be sent to the capital to be schooled at the imperial court and converted to Christianity (cf. a fate of the Kalmyk noble, Petr Taishin or the Kabardin dynasty of the Bekovich-Cherkasskiis), while others were dispatched to the newly founded schools for hostages in Astrakhan, Kizliar, Nalchik, Vladikavkaz, and other places. Yet before the nineteenth century, their numbers were few and they rarely returned to their native societies. Instead, they stayed to serve in the Russian military as officers or translators. There was also another large group of natives who became exposed to Russian way of life – the numerous fugitives from among the indigenous population. Their usual fate was a conversion into a Russian Orthodox Church and resettlement far away from their original communities.

Throughout the 1770s and 1780s the increasing calls from the Russian administrators for founding schools for the sons of the local elites remained unanswered. The Astrakhan governor Krechetnikov suggested that this was the best way to introduce the natives to the Russian way of life and ‘then no longer there will be a need to take hostages and the natives will convert to Christianity.’<sup>1</sup> In 1838, the commander of the Special Caucasus Corps, Golovin, recommended the War Minister Chernyshev ‘to create as many Muslim schools as possible to be able to influence the [native] people,’ and thus to weaken the hold of Islam.<sup>2</sup>

But the opening of the regional schools was painfully slow. The first secular school for hostages opened at Fort Nalchik in 1820 but lasted only a few years. In the wake of the 1836 Decree concerning the Military Schools of the Caucasus Army, several schools for natives had been founded at the Russian military regiments to train the sons of the indigenous officers and officials in the Russian service. The curriculum included math, Russian language, elementary history, geography, singing, and various trades. In 1837, the Stavropol gymnasium and the Derbent secondary school (uchilische) opened their doors to students. Yet the number of children of the local elite admitted into these and other institutions remained small.

In 1841 Shora Nogmov, a Kabardin scholar and, at the time, the secretary of the Kabardin Provisional Court, petitioned the Russian military authorities in the Caucasus to open a school for children of the Kabardin nobles in Nalchik. The petition was circulated, and except the recommendation to exclude the teaching of Turkish and Arabic languages from the curriculum, had been quickly approved by various relevant military authorities including the War Minister Chernyshev. The petition only needed the approval of Nicholas I, but when it reached his desk, the emperor chose to kill the project. His argument was simple: the assimilation of the native youth is best achieved by placing them among Russian school children and not by creating a special school for the natives. The native youth, Nicholas pointed out, should be recruited into the Russian military and educated there just as the cantonists were, or sent to the schools founded at the Cossack regiments along the frontier. Thus, the project for the native school at Nalchik desisted.<sup>3</sup>

A major change in the government’s effort to shape the regional elites through Russian education began in 1846 with the arrival in the region of a newly appointed Viceroy, Prince M. S. Vorontsov. Two years later, Vorontsov founded the Transcaucasian educational district. The curriculum was adjusted to local needs, and the school officials at the Stavropol and Ekaterinodar gymnasiums replaced the study of Latin and Greek with instruction in local languages (Adyg and Turkish) and Russian laws and court system. In 1849, a new school for Muslims opened its doors in Derbent to admit sixty children of the local elite.<sup>4</sup>

The pace of educational activity was slow, hampered by the usual lack of resources and shortage of teachers. In 1848 Vorontsov permitted the opening of a school at the Cossack settlement of Ekaterinograd; it was finally opened in 1851. The slowest to grow were the schools in local villages and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Khodarkovsky, Russia’s Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> S. Sh. Gadzhieva, Kumyki (Moscow, 1961), p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> Sufian Zhemukhov, Zhizn Shory Nogma (Nalchik, 2002), pp. 137-143.

<sup>4</sup> M. Polievktov, Nikolai I: Biografiia i obzor tsarstvovaniia, (Moscow, 1918), p. 346.

towns. Here unenthusiastic support of the local population which was expected to foot the bill for a school, resistance of the ulema, and competition from the Islamic mektebs served as a powerful barrier to the spread of Russian education. By 1891, there were only five elementary schools in the Adyg lands. These schools taught writing, reading, arithmetic, singing, and, as a nod to the local conditions, offered a course in Islamic theology.

Yet the number of the natives' children enrolled in the Russian schools continued to grow steadily. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Stavropol and Ekaterinodar gymnasiums remained the main educational centers for the indigenous population of the North Caucasus. In 1843, special boarding schools were founded at these gymnasiums for the sons of the native nobles. By 1850, the first group of eleven native students was accepted into the Stavropol gymnasium. Between 1850 and 1887, nearly a quarter of 7,181 graduates of the Stavropol gimnasium were from among the indigenous population.<sup>5</sup>

Somewhat apart stood the Ossetin Seminary opened at Vladikavkaz in 1836. Theoretically, its thirty-four students were to become Orthodox priests, but many, in fact, became teachers in public schools. Among the Seminary's graduates were the Ossetin scholars B. Tsoraev – the first collector of the Ossetin folklore, and S. Zhuskaev, the first Ossetin ethnographer. It is important to note that throughout the nineteenth century, the schools for the sons of the native elite remained under the auspices of the military and ecclesiastical ministries, and not the newly formed the Caucasus educational administration.<sup>6</sup>

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the regional schools will be producing the new educated class from among the natives. But in the early nineteenth century, the pro-Russian educated elite was forged in the imperial capital. Let us consider the paths traveled by three individuals whose life and work were among the first to exemplify the role that Russian influence played in the emergence of the ethnic and historic consciousness among the Adygs – Shora Nogma (Russified Nogmov), Khan-Giray, and less known Aleksandr Misostov. They were to become the founding fathers of the modern Adyg historical and literary tradition.

Shora Bek-Mirza Nogma was born in 1794 at a small Kabardin aul near Piatigorsk (Beshtau). Shora was trained to be a mullah, and after studying at a local mekteb (the Islamic elementary school), he was sent to pursue religious studies at the prestigious medrese in a town of Enderi in Central Daghestan. After graduating from the medrese in 1812, he returned to his native aul to work as a mullah. After a few years he was chosen to become a defterdar (secretary) at the one of the two Kabardin princely courts (mekhkeme), which later, in 1822, the Russian general Ermolov would merge into one Kabardin Provisional Court based at Fort Nalchik. The position implied a knowledge of Russian, which Nogma began to study with great enthusiasm. Nogma's linguistic talents caught the attention of the Russian authorities, and after having served as an unofficial interpreter in the Russian army, in 1825 he became the official scribe and interpreter of the First Volga Cossack regiment. At this time, he already had a good command of five languages apart from his native Kabardin: Arabic, Kumyk, Abaza, Persian and Russian, and was working to create an alphabet for the Kabardin language.

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<sup>5</sup> I. Kh. Kalmykov, *Cherkesy* (Cherkessk, 1974), pp. 243-48.

<sup>6</sup> *Istoriia Narodov Severnogo Kavkaza: konets 18 veka-1917* (Moscow, 1988), pp. 247-8.

Eager to reach the imperial capital where he could expand his interests in languages and history, in 1828 Nogma petitioned to join the newly formed the Circassian Guard. His plans were thwarted by the deportation of his village further south to make room for Russian towns and spas in the present region of the Mineral Waters. After setting up a household at a new place on the Malka river, in 1829 Nogma was appointed a teacher at a school for native hostages at Fort Nalchik. In 1830, a new opportunity came along when several members of the Circassian Guard returned to the region to recruit young local nobles. Nogmov received an invitation from the commander of the Circassian Guard, S. A. Mukhanov, to come to teach the members of the unit to read and write in several languages. The Russian authorities, however, preferred chivalrous Circassian horsemen excelling in marshal arts to someone with the literary pursuits like Nogma. He was allowed to leave but given no travel money. Determined to come to the imperial capital, in April 1830 Shora Nogma departed for St Petersburg at his own expense to become the arms bearer (the rank-and-file among the nobles) in the Circassian Guard.

As a new member of the Circassian Guard, Shora Nogma found himself under the command of a prominent Adyg prince, Khan-Giray. He was a descendant of an illustrious lineage, the Giray ruling house of the Crimean khans, as was well attested by his full name, Krym-Giray-Muhammed Giray Khan-Giray. Throughout the centuries, the Crimean khans sent their princes to collect the slave tribute and to rule the Adygs of the north-west Caucasus. Some of these princes settled there, assimilated, and became a part of the Adyg clan structure. Indeed, Khan-Giray's father was one of the chiefs of the Khamysh (Khmish) clan of the Bzhedug tribe, a subdivision of the Adyg people residing on the left bank of the Kuban river east of the newly founded Russian fort of Ekaterinodar (presently Krasnodar). Some time in the early 1800s, Khan-Giray's father, Muhammed-Giray, attracted by the offers of the Russian authorities, decided to cross the Kuban river, which separated the Ottoman from the Russian borderlands, and settle on the Russian side. In 1816, Muhammed-Giray was rewarded for his loyalty to Russia: he was formally enlisted into the Black Sea Cossack Host and given one of the highest ranks, the Host Captain (*voiskovoi starshina*). Following the established practice among the native peoples of the North Caucasus, Khan-Giray was sent away to spend his adolescent years in the family of his atalyk, an old and distinguished notable of the Shapsug tribe of the Adygs. There, in a mountain aul, Khan-Giray was groomed to be a leader, studied Arabic, the Quran and Islamic laws, and imbibed the martial spirit of his people. In January 1830, Khan-Giray joined the Circassian Guard as a highly decorated lieutenant of the Russian army who had already distinguished himself in Russia's wars against the Persians and Ottomans between 1826-1829.<sup>7</sup> An impeccable officer and well-educated charming socialite, Khan-Giray was welcomed in the literary salons of the capital where he became personally acquainted with many Russian men of letters, including Alexander Pushkin.

Shora Nogma too had vigorously pursued his intellectual interests: establishing close ties with several university professors, studying languages, and devoting much of his time to the writing of the first Kabardin grammar. Upon his return to Kabarda in 1838, he was appointed Secretary of the Kabardin Provisional Court and was in a position to choose the native candidates for studies at the St Petersburg military institutions, the Stavropol gymnasium, and the Circassian Guards. Throughout this time Nogmov continued to work on the Kabardin grammar and alphabet based on the Cyrillic as well as collecting and translating Adyg legends and tales. Five years later Nogmov died during his visit to St

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<sup>7</sup> Sh. B. Nogmov, *Istoriia Adygeiskogo naroda*, (Nalchik, 1958), pp. 5-11; Sh. B. Nogmov, *Istoriia Adygeiskogo naroda*, introduction by T. KH. Kумыков, (Nalchik, 1994), pp. 16-20; Khan-Girei (Nalchik, 1989), pp. 8-11.

Petersburg. While his grammar remained incomplete, his collection of Adyg tales was published in Russian in 1861 under the title 'A History of the Adyg People.'

In the late 1830s Khan-Giray completed his treatise 'Notes on the Circassia', compiled the Circassian alphabet on the basis of the Cyrillic script, and began to write down the Adyg folklore, stories, and history. Nicholas I called Khan-Giray 'the Karamzin of Circassia' which later did not prevent him from banning the manuscript 'Notes on the Circassia' from publication – Khan-Giray's recommendations proved to be critical of Russia's contemporary policies. Shortly after Khan-Giray's premature death at the age of thirty-four, his collection of historical tales were published under the title 'The Circassian Legends and Tales.'

The life story of Aleksandr Misostov, the descendant of one of the three princely families of the Greater Kabarda, followed a somewhat different trajectory. His father, Muhammed, served for several years as a member of the Mozdok Frontier Court, when in 1793 he was promoted and transferred to Astrakhan. There he and his four sons were converted to the Orthodox Christian faith and received Christian names. Aleksandr was sent to study at the Stavropol secondary school. In 1828 he joined the Circassian Guard in St Petersburg serving together with Shora Nogma and Khan-Giray. Two years later, he was dismissed from the Guard for indecent behavior and sent back to Kabarda. Throughout the 1830s and early 1840s Misostov worked as a scribe at the Kabardin Provisional Court. In 1841 Misostov wrote his treatise 'A History of the Unfortunate Circassians'. Three years later, the manuscript found its way to the Imperial Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg. There it continued to collect dust for over a hundred years until it was discovered by a Soviet scholar of the Caucasus M.O. Kosven.<sup>8</sup>

Misostov's short manuscript is almost entirely devoted to the amateurish discussion of the eponymous and apocryphal historical genealogy of the Adygs and is certainly no match for a more sophisticated literary heritage of Shora Nogma and Khan-Giray. Yet all three were in agreement that the Adygs had been the descendants of the Arabs from Egypt, who at one point migrated to the Caucasus. Of course, the opposite was true, and it was the Adygs who had been brought to Egypt as slaves, in time to found the Mamluk dynasty of Egypt.

It is worth noting that there were plenty of other contemporary theories relating the origins of the Adygs to the Kurds, Persians, or Hungarians. Not least of all, one Russian theory suggested that the Adygs were descendants of the Ukrainian Cossacks who had been seized by the Crimean Tatars, brought to the Caucasus, and forced to convert to Islam. The theory became particularly popular among Russian officials in the eighteenth century, for it allowed them to link the Adygs to Russian Orthodox Christianity, to extend the claim of Russia's suzerainty over them, and to legitimize the efforts of 're-Christianizing' the Adygs.<sup>9</sup>

The authors' adherence to the Egyptian Arab theory of the Adygs' origins indicates unmistakably that their strong ties to the Russian culture notwithstanding, they intended to carve out their cultural space within the empire. Their Russification was not synonymous with abandoning the

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<sup>8</sup> A. M. Misostov, *Istoriia neschastnykh cherkesov*, compiled and edited by S. N. Zhemukhov (Nal'chik, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier*, pp. 199-200.

Adyg language, customary law, traditions, or even religion. Each of them intended to preserve and construct the Adyg identity, albeit in different ways.

Thus, Shora Nogma believed that the Adygs' path toward civility and enlightenment lies through the cultural Russification but without abandoning the Islamic faith.<sup>10</sup> Khan-Giray advocated a peaceful approach in order to win over both the clergy and the nobles and submitted a very detailed proposal to this effect. Co-optation could be achieved through the founding of schools where the native children would study Islam and learn to translate from Russian into Arabic and Turkish. This would allow the education of a new generation of imams and mullah loyal to the Russian government. He further suggested the creation of the Adyg alphabet and the translating of the Quran into the Adyg language, thus undermining the power of the Muslim clergy and of the Turkish language, which it used. Khan-Giray proposed to support the creation of the Islamic court (makhkeme), to make the clergy the instrument of the government, so that 'the people could see clearly that the government's actions did not intend to eradicate their faith, but on the contrary, by helping to spread the religion, it wished to bring peace, this sacred source of the people's well-being.'

Yet these policies were to be applied only during the present initial stage of the Russian colonization. In the long run, Khan-Giray advocated incremental and secret conversion of the Adygs to Christianity by the missionaries disguised as merchants. Such missionaries could explain the virtues of Christ and convince the natives to move and settle in Russia where they would forget their tongue and become Christians.<sup>11</sup>

Nicholas I read Khan-Giray's recommendations but flatly rejected them. To encourage and support the Islamic clergy and its institutions, even in the short run, during Shamil's jihad against Russia, was simply out of question for the Emperor. Khan-Giray's manuscript containing his detailed exposition on the situation in the region and recommendation on Russian policies continued to remain unknown and unpublished until the early 1990s.

In the late nineteenth century and particularly in the early Soviet period, Khan-Giray was construed as a founder of the historical and literary tradition of the Western Adygs, the Circassians, while Shora Nogmov of that of the Eastern Adygs, the Kabardins. It is not as if other options in constructing local traditions and identities did not exist. For instance, the first attempts to compile the Adyg alphabet and to translate the Quran into the Adyg were made in the early 1820s by the Efendi Muhammed Shapsugov and Notauk Sheretluk. But any such efforts were firmly opposed by the ulema for whom the only written language was Arabic – the sacred language of the sacred book.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, several prominent Muslim jurists in Northern Daghestan made important contributions to the study of the Sharia, but made no attempt to create alphabets for local languages or to consider the issues of local history and culture.<sup>13</sup>

The task of constructing ethnic identities fell on the Russified local elites and Russian government officials. After all, ethnicity was a western concept brought through and from Russia.

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<sup>10</sup> Sufian Zhemukhov, Mirovozzrenie Khan-Gereia (Nalchik, 1997), p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 79, 81, 96, 111.

<sup>12</sup> Istoriia Narodov Severnogo Kavkaza, pp. 236-7; Sufian Zhemukhov, Zhizn Shory Nogma, pp. 33-37.

<sup>13</sup> V. S. Bobrovnikov, Musulmane Severnogo Kavkaza, (Moscow, 2002), p. 111.

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

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

The most potent force which worked against the emergence of the ethnic identities in the North Caucasus was a religion of Islam, which attempted to unify the peoples of the region on the basis of an Islamic identity against its main antagonist, the Russian empire. With the collapse of the Russian empire, the Soviet anti-religious and ethnicity-building or nation-building policies were part of the same dual process. The real construction of ethnic identities took place in the early Soviet times, which is a different story, that has been the focus of several recent excellent studies.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Michael Khodarkovsky, Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> S. Sh. Gadzhieva, Kumyki (Moscow, 1961), p. 142.

<sup>3</sup> Sufian Zhemukhov, Zhizn Shory Nogma (Nalchik, 2002), pp. 137-143.

<sup>4</sup> M. Polievktov, Nikolai I: Biografiia i obzor tsarstvovaniia, (Moscow, 1918), p. 346.

<sup>5</sup> I. Kh. Kalmykov, Cherkesy (Cherkessk, 1974), pp. 243-48.

<sup>6</sup> Istoriia Narodov Severnogo Kavkaza: konets 18 veka-1917 (Moscow, 1988), pp. 247-8.

<sup>7</sup> Sh. B. Nogmov, Istoriia Adygeiskogo naroda, (Nalchik, 1958), pp. 5-11; Sh. B. Nogmov, Istoriia Adygeiskogo naroda, introduction by T. KH. Kumykov, (Nalchik, 1994), pp. 16-20; Khan-Girei (Nalchik, 1989), pp. 8-11.

<sup>8</sup> A. M. Misostov, Istoriia neschastnykh cherkesov, compiled and edited by S. N. Zhemukhov (Nal'chik, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Khodarkovsky, Russia's Steppe Frontier, pp. 199-200.

<sup>10</sup> Sufian Zhemukhov, Mirovozzrenie Khan-Gereia (Nalchik, 1997), p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79, 81, 96, 111.

<sup>12</sup> Istoriia Narodov Severnogo Kavkaza, pp. 236-7; Sufian Zhemukhov, Zhizn Shory Nogma, pp. 33-37.

<sup>13</sup> V. S. Bobrovnikov, Musulmane Severnogo Kavkaza, (Moscow, 2002), p. 111.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Terry Martin, The Affirmative Action Empire (Cornell University Press, 2001) and Francine Hirsch, The Empire of Nations (Cornell University Press, 2005).

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