

Imagining Circassia: David Urquhart and the Making of North Caucasus Nationalism

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Peripheral nations attract committed intercessors. Over the last two centuries, the cause of almost every sizeable cultural group from Central Europe to the Arabian Peninsula and beyond has been taken up by one or another traveler, journalist, adventurer, or ne'er-do-well intent on finding in the often disorganized resistance to imperial rule a germ of national sentiment that might be put to some political use. T. E. Lawrence is the most famous of these, but there were many others: the eccentric painter Edith Durham, the chief spokeswoman of the Albanian national cause; her rival, the historian R. W. Seton-Watson, the champion of several European nationalities, from Romanians to Slovaks; the amateur linguist Oliver Wardrop, who became an advocate for Georgian independence from both Russians and Bolsheviks; and a bevy of archaeologists, Orientalists, and simple plunderers such as Sven Hedin and Aurel Stein, who helped focus European attention on the lost cultures and strategic significance of the “silk road.”

At once observers and advocates, these activist intellectuals were critical in providing information on otherwise unknown groups on the fringes of European and Eurasian empires. But they also brought with them a clear and often inflated sense of their own importance on the ground. Many considered themselves to be both interpreters of dispossessed nationalities for the outside world as well as the agents of these nationalities’ cultural enlightenment. They looked on their adopted peoples with a double gaze: a romantic attachment to the simplicity and purity of the “East” and a sense of frustration when romance and reality collided. Some ascribed to themselves the role of nation-maker. They imagined themselves as not only advocates for dispossessed nationalities but also as the midwives of national rebirth, calling inchoate nations into existence. Some of these outsiders—such as Durham

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or Seton-Watson—are today lauded in the national narratives of those groups whom they aimed to serve, while others are remembered only dimly if at all, forgotten foreigners living out their own quixotic national fantasies on the borderlands of Europe and Asia.¹

In the Caucasus, the earliest and most important of these intercessors was the peevish diplomat and publicist David Urquhart, a figure sometimes celebrated, sometimes derided, in Russian and local histories of north Caucasus nations.² Soviet historians tended to see Urquhart as no more than a reactionary agent of British imperialism, seeking to alienate Caucasus highlanders from the progressive influence of the Russian empire. As one standard Soviet history remarked:

In 1834 the russophobe David Urquhart even attempted to fashion several [highland] princes, whom he had bribed, into a “government” under the protection of England. ... Foreign emissaries [such as Urquhart] were concerned not for political unity, but rather for the organization in the northwest Caucasus of an anti-Russian union, which they could use for their selfish aims of bringing about a conflict with Russia.³

Post-Soviet authors have been more even-handed but have still found it difficult to square Urquhart's pro-highlander views with his avowed russophobia; in the recent indigenous historiography of the northwest Caucasus, local nationalism and Russian patriotism are not incompatible.⁴ But for the middle decades of the nineteenth century, Urquhart was the supreme international supporter of north Caucasus highlanders, particularly the Circassians of the northwest but also of communities that would come to be labeled Chechens, Dagestanis, and others.

David Urquhart did not invent the idea of north Caucasus nationalism, of course. Local writers, émigrés, Russian imperial authorities, and Soviet ethnofederalism all played

¹On Durham see Charles King, “Queen of the Highlanders,” *Times Literary Supplement*, August 4, 2000. On Seton-Watson see Hugh and Christopher Seton-Watson, *The Making of a New Europe: R. W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria-Hungary* (Seattle, 1981). On Wardrop see David Marshall Lang, “Georgian Studies in Oxford,” *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 6 (1955): 115–43. On Hedin and Stein see George Kish, *To the Heart of Asia: The Life of Sven Hedin* (Ann Arbor, 1984); and Annabel Walker, *Aurel Stein: Pioneer of the Silk Road* (London, 1995).

²For general studies of Urquhart's diplomatic and political career see G. H. Bolsover, “David Urquhart and the Eastern Question, 1833–37: A Study in Publicity and Diplomacy,” *Journal of Modern History* 8 (December 1936): 444–67; Peter Brock, “The Fall of Circassia: A Study in Private Diplomacy,” *English Historical Review* 71 (July 1956): 401–27; Charles Webster, “Urquhart, Ponsonby, and Palmerston,” *English Historical Review* 62 (July 1947): 327–51; Richard Shannon, “David Urquhart and the Foreign Affairs Committees,” in *Pressure from Without in Early Victorian England*, ed. Patricia Hollis (New York, 1974), 239–61; and Margaret H. Jenks, “The Activities and Influence of David Urquhart, 1833–56, with Special Reference to the Affairs of the Near East” (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1964).

³A. L. Narochnitskii, ed., *Istoriia narodov severnogo Kavkaza (konets XVIII v.–1917 g.)* (Moscow, 1988), 117.

⁴For generally negative assessments of Urquhart see A. Kh. Bizhev, *Adygi severo-zapadnogo Kavkaza i krizis vostochnogo voprosa v kontse 20-kh–nachale 30-kh gg. XIX veka* (Maikop, 1994); and M. M. Bliev and V. V. Degoev, *Kavkazskaiia voina* (Moscow, 1994). For work that largely ignores the role of British agents see S. Kh. Khotko, *Ocherki istorii cherkesov ot epokhi kimmeritsev do Kavkazskoi voiny* (St. Petersburg, 2001). For an insightful and unconventional Russian treatment of diplomacy and espionage in the nineteenth century see Vladimir Degoev, *Bol'shaia igra na Kavkaze: Istoriia i sovremennost'* (Moscow, 2001).

a role in the making of modern forms of identity.⁵ But Urquhart was perhaps the earliest writer and activist to give it a distinctly modern, ethno-territorial, and anti-Russian form. He was the first major exponent of the idea that the often fratricidal and anti-imperial struggle in the mountains, which had been a feature of highland life since the beginning of Russian expansion, was in fact a movement of national liberation. Indigenous writers of the early nineteenth century, such as Shora Nogma and Khan-Girei, had begun the task of assembling folk histories, codifying speech forms, and creating the other rudiments of a Circassian national culture.⁶ Later, in the early 1860s, the defeat of the northwest Caucasus resistance and the exile of hundreds of thousands of highlanders to the Ottoman Empire provided a common traumatic experience around which a united Circassian identity would eventually coalesce. But it was the public activity of Urquhart and his British associates, both in the mountains and abroad, that helped cement the idea of the Circassians as an embryonic nation fighting for survival against the tsar. Tellingly, the green-and-gold Circassian national flag, which is now routinely flown at public rallies across the northwest Caucasus, was Urquhart's design. And in 2006 a group of north Caucasus businessmen were working toward producing a Hollywood-style film on the highland wars of the nineteenth century, with Urquhart or one of his allies as the lead role.⁷

Eastern Europe and Eurasia have never been short of causes, nor have people outside the region been reluctant to take them up. Both the United States and Western Europe still have their share of philes and phobes, who eagerly campaign for the rights of a nation not their own—and for reasons that usually reveal more about the would-be intercessors than the causes they espouse. Yet as in Urquhart's time, debates over the plight of far-away nations raise serious questions about activist intellectuals and the objects of their passions. What does it mean to intercede on behalf of an entire people or country, especially if one knows them only imperfectly or has visited only rarely? Can such activities be genuinely moral? What happens when the downtrodden in one season become the oppressors in the next? The strange life of "Davud Bey"—a man who worked to invent a nationalism that is still in the process of becoming—suggests that these questions are even more complicated than they might appear.

This article begins with an overview of the place of the Circassians in Western strategy and cultural imagery in the early decades of the nineteenth century. It then considers Urquhart himself, a man who, by the time he retired from public life in the 1860s, had spent the better part of his adulthood engaged in political pursuits that few would have regarded as successes.

⁵See Austin Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845–1917* (Toronto, 2003); Georgi Derluguiyan, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography* (Chicago, 2005); Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (New York, 2001); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001); Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History* (London, 2001); and Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005).

⁶Shora Nogmov [Shora Nogma], *Istoriia adykeiskogo naroda* (Nal'chik, 1994); Khan-Girei, *Zapiski o Cherkesii* (Nal'chik, 1978). On the importance of Nogma, Khan-Girei, and others see R. Kh. Khashkhozheva, *Adygskie prosvetiteli XIX–nachala XX veka* (Nal'chik, 1993); Sufian Zhemukhov, *Mirovozzreniya Khan-Gireia* (Nal'chik, 1997); and idem, *Zhizn' Shory Nogma* (Nal'chik, 2002).

⁷Author's interviews in Nal'chik, August 2006.

A genuine Circassian nationalism did emerge, although too late for Urquhart to witness—and with only a questionable connection to his earlier efforts. This newfound sense of national purpose was one of the central forces in the short-lived North Caucasus Mountain Republic declared at the end of the First World War. It informed the decisions of individual Circassian leaders to join the German army against the Soviets in the Second World War. And it may yet reemerge in the Russian republics of Adygeia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria, the modern political forms of the region that Urquhart and his contemporaries knew simply as Circassia.

THE IMAGINARY CIRCASSIAN

The origin of the word “Circassian” is a matter of some dispute. It is based on the Russian and Turkish terms *cherkez* and *Çerkes*, but it is unrelated to indigenous usage among the Circassians themselves, for whom the self-designation is *Adyga*. There have been attempts at rather outlandish etymologies, such as from allegedly Turkic roots meaning “those who cut the roads,” that is, highwaymen—a reference to persistent raiding practices in the highlands.⁸ But the term probably derives from a Tatar word for a local tribal group in the northwest Caucasus, which was picked up by both Ottomans and Russians, later adopted by Italian merchants on the Black Sea, and then absorbed into other Western languages as a term for all Adyga-speaking peoples. As with the Russian term *gorets* (“highlander”), it was used in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—in English and other European languages—as a general term for many Caucasus peoples, including those who would now be called everything from Chechens to Avars. Britons, French, Russians, and even Americans used the term indiscriminately, at times to refer to any highlander in the north or south Caucasus, at times to refer only to speakers of Adyga languages in the mountains and lowlands of the northwest.

Today, it is tempting to think of the Chechens and Dagestanis—symbolized by the life and career of the legendary leader Shamil—as the main source of foreigners’ conceptions of the perennial resistance of Caucasus mountaineers to Russian rule. But it was the Circassians, more than any other indigenous group in the Caucasus, who most preoccupied foreign observers and activists. For most of the first half of the nineteenth century the Circassians of the northwest Caucasus largely eclipsed any interest that outsiders might have had in Shamil’s religiously inspired movement in the northeast.⁹ The reasons for foreigners’ fascination with this group are not hard to discern. In the first place, it was rather simpler to get to Circassia than to other remote parts of Eurasia: One simply needed

⁸W. E. D. Allen, *Béled-es-Siba: Sketches and Essays of Travel and History* (London, 1925), 206. This trope seems to have originated with the traveler and ethnographer Julius von Klaproth. See his *Reise in den Kaukasus und nach Georgien unternommen in den Jahren 1807 und 1808*, 2 vols. (Halle, 1812–14).

⁹The debate on the religious dimensions of Shamil’s movement is intense and of long duration, but for various views see Moshe Gammer, *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Dagestan* (London, 1994); Anna Zelkina, *In Quest of God and Freedom: Sufi Responses to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus* (New York, 2000); and Alexander Knysh, “Sufism as an Explanatory Paradigm: The Issue of the Motivations of Sufi Resistance Movements in Western and Russian Scholarship,” *Die Welt des Islams* 42:2 (2002): 139–73.

to cross to the eastern side of the Black Sea. The journey could be accomplished with relative ease after the opening of the sea to Russian-flagged commercial vessels in 1774; within a few decades, the journey could be made in a comfortable steamer. By the 1830s one had to dodge Russian patrols in the coastal waters and perhaps slip onto the beaches by cover of night, but there nevertheless remained a regular stream of merchants, spies, and travelers willing to make the journey for profit, politics, or simple pleasure.

There was also a long tradition, going back to before the arrival of Victorian-era visitors, of romanticizing the Circassians. They were, as any educated European believed, the Asiatic counterpart of European aristocrats. Their society was said to be hierarchically organized, with a strong princely caste ruling over nobles, commoners, and slaves. Even more appealingly, Circassian warriors were known to go into battle clad in chain mail, which gave rise to visions of the Circassians as perhaps lost Crusaders and lapsed Christians. The London-based *Penny Magazine*, the early Victorian era's popular compendium of useful knowledge, ran a front-page series on the Circassians already in 1838, featuring illustrations of mounted fighters reminiscent of medieval knights.¹⁰

In English the first reference to Circassians dates to 1555, and the term was used thereafter as a blanket label for virtually any exotic Caucasus highlander: dark or fair, caftaned or trousered, noble or not. But regardless of the romantic images that would eventually cloak them, the real Circassians proved to be a persistent problem for Russian officialdom. They attacked Russian forts along the Black Sea coast. They raided settlements north of the Kuban River. They repeatedly affirmed that their region had long been independent, not a part of the Ottoman Empire, and that the sultan therefore had no right to cede their territory to the tsar, as he seemed to have done under the terms of the Treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardji, which ended the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–74.

The earliest formal contacts between Russia and Circassian communities date to the sixteenth century; the Kabardians of the northwest Caucasus lowlands were important allies of the Muscovites in their effort to counter the depredations of the Crimean Tatars, and in the 1560s the deal was sealed when Ivan IV took a Kabardian princess, Maria, as his wife. Yet the Circassians present an unusual case of the dynamics of conquest. Under this broad umbrella term were groups that were among the earliest to pledge their allegiance to the tsar and remained the most loyal throughout the period of Russian conquest. There were also those who consistently resisted Russian rule, continuing the fight even after the capitulation of Shamil, in the northeast Caucasus, in 1859. Indeed, in many ways the Circassians were both the first and the last of the Caucasus peoples to be fully incorporated into the Russian state.

Throughout the nineteenth century the Circassians were of considerable interest to strategists in Western Europe. In the early part of the century the French worked to obtain preferential trading rights with them. Later, the Circassian cause came to play a particular role in the overall strategy of Russia's main rival in the Near East, Britain. Just as the Afghans were meant to provide a brake on Russian expansion toward British interests in India, the Circassians represented a similar bulwark against a Russian push to the south,

¹⁰"Circassia and the Circassians," *Penny Magazine*, April 14, 1838.

toward British interests in Persia. It was in fact through the Circassians' place in the grand strategic gambits of the "Great Game" that their reputation as noble freedom-fighters became fixed in Western imagination.

The Circassians also fit into yet another well-worn cultural groove: the equation of exotic highlanders with eroticism and the sublime.¹¹ As more Europeans became familiar with the Caucasus, they became fascinated by the physical appearance of Circassians, both men and women. The men were invariably described as tall, dark, and lithe; their long mustaches, silver-studded weaponry, and close-fitting clothing—especially their long eponymous tunic, the *cherkeska*—highlighted their noble, warlike mien. "In the first appearance of a Circassian, there is something extremely martial and commanding: his majestic look, elevated brow, dark moustachio and flowing beard, his erect position, and free unconstrained action, are all calculated to interest the stranger in his favour," wrote Edmund Spencer, one of the major pro-Circassian publicists of the mid-nineteenth century. "No half-civilised people in the world display so pleasing an exterior."¹²

For all the breathless descriptions of the men—and there are plenty like this in nineteenth-century sources—it was the women who remained the most intriguing, to both West European writers and to their Russian counterparts. If the men were warlike and brave, the women were comely and sensual, the soft companion to the hardened man of the mountains. Plays, novellas, and poems, in most European languages, celebrated the Circassian as the ideal of mystical feminine beauty. As Byron wrote in his poem "The Giaour," describing the character Leila, a Circassian slave relegated to splendid captivity in an Oriental harem:

On her might Muftis gaze, and own
That through her eye the Immortal shone;
On her fair cheek's unfading hue
The young pomegranate's blossoms strew
Their bloom in blushes ever new; . . .
The cygnet nobly walks the water;
So moved on earth Circassia's daughter, . . .¹³

Semen Bronevskii, an important Russian popularizer of Caucasus ethnography in the 1820s, claimed that the Circassian woman was renowned from the earliest times and that such praise was fully deserved. Her dark eyes and dark-brown hair, elongated but not aquiline nose, and small mouth combined to give her "the lineaments of the face of the ancient Greek, mixed with the light shade of the Roman." If added to this were "a full, high bosom, a graceful figure, and slender legs, then you will have a general picture of the dimensions of the face and physique of the Circassian beauty."¹⁴ Other writers turned the very notion of

¹¹See Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge, England, 1994); and Harsha Ram, *The Imperial Sublime: A Russian Poetics of Empire* (Madison, 2003).

¹²Edmund Spencer, *Travels in Circassia, Krim-Tartary, &c., Including a Steam Voyage Down the Danube, from Vienna to Constantinople, and Round the Black Sea*, 3rd ed. (London, 1839), 2:267.

¹³"The Giaour," in *The Poetical Works of Byron* (Oxford, 1945), 257.

¹⁴Semen Bronevskii, *Noveishia geograficheskia i istoricheskia izvestiia o Kavkaze, sobrannyyia i popolnennyia Semenom Bronevskim* (Moscow, 1823), 2:101–2.

Circassian beauty back on its creators, seeing it not as a reflection of reality but as a ridiculously romantic projection of over-eager and undersexed young men. Tolstoy, in *The Cossacks*, has a Moscow playboy, Olenin, rhapsodize his imagined encounter with a highland girl on his way to serve in a Cossack regiment of the line:

She stood there in the mountains, a Circassian slave girl, slender, with a long braid and deep, docile eyes. He imagined a solitary hut high in the mountains, with her waiting by the door as he came home tired and covered with dirt, blood, and glory. He imagined her kisses, her shoulders, her sweet voice, her docility. She was beautiful but uneducated, wild, and rough. During the long winter nights he would begin to educate her. ... She would also have a knack for languages, read French novels, and even understand them—she would surely love *Notre-Dame de Paris*. And she would be able to speak French. In a drawing room she would have more poise than a lady of the highest society. And she could sing—simply, with strength and passion.¹⁵

Tolstoy captured the essential attributes of the imaginary Circassian female: simple, wild, rough, unformed but naturally intelligent, docile, and welcoming—a sexualized *idiot savant*.

Tolstoy's Olenin had only vague ideas about who the Circassians were; for him, the term was simply a synonym for any Caucasus mountaineer. But the trope of Circassian desirability, associated specifically with Muslim women from the northwest Caucasus, probably had a great deal to do with the circumstances in which travelers—almost invariably men—encountered them. Circassian women were generally more accessible to visitors than those in other parts of the Muslim world. As a rule, they were not secluded from guests in private homes. The custom of veiling was not widely practiced in the Caucasus highlands; indeed, the Christian women of Georgia were more likely to go veiled in public than were the Muslim Circassians.¹⁶ The women could also be found far from the Caucasus, in the slave markets of Constantinople, whence they had been trafficked for service in the empire's harems.¹⁷ It may well have been the case that visitors found Circassians so desirable simply because these were the “Eastern” women whom they had the most opportunity to see.

For all of these reasons—strategic, exotic, and erotic—“Circassia” was something of a household word in many parts of Europe and even North America in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Hair oils, soaps, skin creams, and other cosmetic and hygienic products were marketed in Europe and America under the “Circassian” label.¹⁸ Correspondents from major newspapers found their way to Circassia or gleaned information from foreign consuls and merchants in Trebizond and Constantinople. The “Circassian question,” the political status of the northwestern highlands of the Caucasus, was debated

¹⁵Leo Tolstoy, *The Cossacks*, trans. Peter Constantine (New York, 2004), 12.

¹⁶For a full discussion of Circassian social mores see B. Kh. Bgazhnokov, *Adygskaia etika* (Nal'chik, 1999).

¹⁷Ehud R. Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression, 1840–1890* (Princeton, 1982); Liubov Derluguiyan, “The Unlikely Abolitionists: The Russian Struggle Against the Slave Trade in the Caucasus, 1800–1864” (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York, Binghamton, 1997).

¹⁸On the imaginary Circassians see Irvin Cemil Schick, *Çerkes gü zeli: Bir şarkiyatçı imgenin serüveni* (Istanbul, 2004); and Linda Frost, *Never One Nation: Freaks, Savages, and Whiteness in U.S. Popular Culture, 1850–1877* (Minneapolis, 2005).

in parliaments and gentlemen's clubs. It was in this environment that a British diplomat encountered the Circassians in the 1830s.

BATHS AND OATHS

David Urquhart was an enthusiast of hygiene. Like many well-bred Victorian men, he had visited Turkish bathhouses on the Grand Tour and had endured the sloshings and tuggings of assisted bathing. But Urquhart drew deeper lessons from the ordeal. For the first time in his life, he realized what it actually meant to be clean: to have an entire layer of filthy skin scraped off by the coarse rubbings of an attendant, to be doused with water and soap, scrubbed and lathered, so that one's entire body tingled when once again exposed to the fresh air of the street.

Such an experience could not help but have effects beyond the purely physical, Urquhart believed. It would stimulate thought and creativity, and promote health, productive living, and social equality. "A nation without the bath," he declared in a pamphlet on the subject, "is deprived of a large portion of the health and inoffensive enjoyment within man's reach: a habit which increases the value of a people to itself [and] augments its power over other people."¹⁹ Great empires of the past, from the Romans to the Saracens, were known for public bathing, and it was a great anomaly that the empire of Victoria had not yet acquired a similar habit.

When he returned home after many years as a diplomat, Urquhart launched a campaign to bring the bathing experience to Britain.²⁰ Through his leadership, and often with his own cash, some three dozen baths were constructed across the United Kingdom, six of them in London alone. The most famous, the Jermyn Street Hammam, run by Urquhart's London & Provincial Turkish Bath Company, remained open until 1941, when it was destroyed in the Blitz. The claims that were made on behalf of the baths—that they could cure diseases, improve health in all respects, even reinvigorate civilization itself—were exaggerated, of course. But they were sometimes borne out by the effusive letters of grateful bathers. "Now, Sir, I am happy to inform you," wrote a leper, "that I am free from any scurf on my body. I have [taken] a total of 207 baths. All who saw me before say they never saw such a sight."²¹

By the time Urquhart retired to Switzerland in 1864 he could look out on a virtual bathing empire stretching all across Britain and Ireland. On his death in 1877 the *Times* noted with grudging appreciation that, "whatever may be thought of his political *idées fixes*, he has, at least conferred one great boon upon England in the introduction among us

¹⁹David Urquhart, *The Turkish Bath, with a View to Its Introduction into the British Dominions* (London, 1856), 6. This publication is a reprint of selections from Urquhart's travelogue *The Pillars of Hercules, or A Narrative of Travels in Spain and Morocco in 1848* (London, 1850), where his views on bathing first appeared.

²⁰I am indebted to Malcolm Shifrin's website for information on Urquhart's career as a promoter of the bathhouse. As Shifrin points out, the Victorian version of the "Turkish bath" was in fact closer to the ancient Roman one. It provided dry heat rather than the steamy atmosphere found in Ottoman bathhouses (www.victorianturkishbath.org).

²¹David Urquhart Papers, Balliol College, Oxford University (Urquhart Papers), Box 11, File IG24:5.

of the Turkish bath, the one Turkish institution which it is certainly desirable to adopt.”²² Far more than his enthusiasm for bathing, it was these fixations—about Russia, the Caucasus, and geopolitics—that kept Urquhart in the news for most of his life.

As a young man in the 1830s, Urquhart was attached to the British mission in Constantinople; he later served a term in parliament, in the 1840s and early 1850s. For most of his later years he stood at the head of what would now be called a political action committee. Convinced that an expansionist Russia represented a profound threat to European security, Urquhart established a series of “foreign affairs committees” across Britain. The committees were public forums, usually aimed at working-class audiences, which provided information on current events and international relations. At the height of his activities there were over a hundred of them, usually concentrated in industrial areas of the North and the Midlands.

Urquhart mobilized the committees for letter-writing campaigns and other pressure tactics to convince the British government to counter the Russian onslaught. (On the side, he also used the committees to pressure local authorities to build more Turkish baths.) He even launched an effort to have the prime minister, Palmerston, impeached as a traitor, largely because of what Urquhart perceived to be Palmerston’s accommodationist line on Russia. Other political radicals such as Karl Marx wrote approvingly of Urquhart’s efforts and carried on a direct correspondence with him—even if his prickly personality sometimes made relations difficult. “I have come to the same conclusion as that monomaniac Urquhart,” wrote Marx to Engels in November 1853, “namely that for several decades Palmerston has been in the pay of Russia.”²³ All of this, says Urquhart’s biographer, made him “a man who set himself consciously and diametrically against the opinion of his time.”²⁴

Urquhart was born in 1805 into the minor Scottish aristocracy, with a strong Protestant upbringing. He was educated by his mother at home and with tutors in France, Switzerland, and Spain. By the time he returned to Britain at the age of sixteen, he had spent most of his life abroad. After matriculating at St. John’s College, Oxford, Urquhart again departed to France and Greece, the first of repeated convalescences seeking relief from his acute neuralgia. His arrival in Greece coincided with the outbreak of the revolution against the Ottomans, and as with other British young men—Byron, most famously—the Greek revolutionaries were eager to make use of his skills. He was offered a position as a provincial administrator in the provisional Greek government, but declined in favor of further travel. In Constantinople, Urquhart met the sultan, Mahmud II, who was eager to take advantage of his special knowledge of mineralogy, gained from one of his Oxford tutors, but Urquhart again moved on, making a tour through Albania, Greece, and Rumelia on his way back to Britain.²⁵ After his return the young man, now with a particular knowledge of the politics of the Near East, gained the favor of William IV, who had long known of his talents through

²²*Times*, May 28, 1877.

²³Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, November 2, 1853, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* (New York, 1975), 39:395. See also Karl Marx, “David Urquhart,” in *ibid.*, 12:477–78; and a letter from Marx to Urquhart in Urquhart Papers, Box 12, File IJ1:1c.

²⁴Gertrude Robinson, *David Urquhart: Some Chapters in the Life of a Victorian Knight-Errant of Justice and Liberty* (1920; reprint ed. New York, 1970), 1.

²⁵David Urquhart, *The Spirit of the East* (London, 1838), 1:47–53.

the recommendation of his private secretary, a close friend of Urquhart's mother. In fact, his supremely well-connected mother was able to introduce him to many of the leading intellectuals and political figures of the day. (Urquhart's papers, at Balliol College, Oxford, contain a lock of Jeremy Bentham's hair, probably acquired by Urquhart's mother toward the end of the philosopher's life.²⁶) Within a year the twenty-five-year-old Urquhart, with little effort of his own, had thus gained the favor of the foremost public figures in Greece, the Ottoman Empire, and Britain.

His connections, as well as his particular knowledge of the Near East, recommended Urquhart to Sir Stratford Canning, the British ambassador to the Sublime Porte. With Canning's help, Urquhart returned to Albania in 1831 with the goal of persuading the Ottomans not to use Albanian troops against the nascent Greek state. The mission was a success, and Urquhart's star rose even further within British diplomacy. He soon settled in Constantinople, where the style of life seemed particularly suited to his tastes. He learned the language, developed close relationships with Muslim friends, and kept his house in the Turkish style. Because of his knowledge of Eastern affairs, in 1835 he was given the formal position of first secretary of the embassy, now under the direction of Lord Ponsonby.

His career as a diplomat was an unmitigated failure. Not only did Urquhart seem to spend all his time with Turks rather than performing the duties of a first secretary, his detractors alleged, but his growing anti-Russian views were often an embarrassment to London. A confessed Turkophile in matters of style and dress, he was also becoming an outspoken critic of Russian policies toward the Ottoman Empire and, by extension, toward British interests—so much of a critic, in fact, that his presence in the Ottoman capital began to strain good relations with the Russian envoy. In March 1837 he was recalled to London and his diplomatic papers canceled. Palmerston gave no reason for his termination other than the by now open conflict between Ponsonby and his first secretary.²⁷ Urquhart was convinced that sinister motives were at work: in particular, what he perceived to be Palmerston's traitorous position in favor of Russian interests. It was not simply that Palmerston was soft on the expansionist policies of Nicholas I around the Black Sea, Urquhart felt. Rather, he alleged that the prime minister was an open supporter of Russian policies—even when those policies were plainly at odds with those of the government that he was supposed to be serving.

Urquhart soon launched an all-out campaign against Palmerston, one that lasted for nearly the entirety of that politician's long career. He published tracts denouncing the policies of the Palmerston government. He successfully ran for Parliament and, in an impassioned speech, publicly called for Palmerston's impeachment. He continued to write books and articles decrying British policy toward Russia and warning of the tsar's nefarious intentions in the Caucasus, Asia Minor, and Central Asia. The foreign affairs committees, which he inaugurated in the 1850s, were meant to provide a means for mobilizing public support for these causes. These were the origins of the *idées fixes* noted in his *Times* obituary: the treason of Palmerston, the evil of the Russians, and the superior civilization

²⁶Urquhart Papers, Box 1, File IA6.

²⁷Palmerston to Urquhart, March 10, 1837, Urquhart Papers, Box 6, File IC8. In other letters, Palmerston also mentioned certain high-placed "Franks and Turks" who had spoken against Urquhart's conduct.

of the Ottomans. He spent the rest of his life trumpeting these themes, even after his retirement to a chalet on Mont Blanc in 1864, where his ailments seemed to ease. The chalet became a place of pilgrimage for a host of admirers, from political radicals to agitators for public sanitation and public baths, until his death in May 1877—ironically, right at the beginning of the final Russo-Turkish War of the nineteenth century, a war that further solidified Russian control of the Caucasus and nearly ended the Ottoman presence in Europe.

Urquhart believed in the superiority of Muslim civilization. The concern for cleanliness, the simplicity of the faith, and the glories of its art and architecture eclipsed the values and practices of the Christian West, he felt. Islam's concern for social equality and the unimportance of rank, at least theoretically, could make it a useful antidote to the class-bound paralysis of British society. "If London were Mussulman," Urquhart wrote, "the population, would bathe regularly, have a better-dressed dinner for his [sic] money, and prefer water to wine or brandy, gin or beer."²⁸ These views were born of Urquhart's deep romance with the East, but they were also the product of a genuine concern for the future of Muslim civilization, especially in the face of what he believed to be the Russians' ultimate goal: the annihilation of all Muslims, beginning with the highlanders of the Caucasus.

Among Urquhart's other distinctions, he was one of the first Europeans to develop close and lasting relations with the mountaineers of the northwest. He seems to have been credited by the highlanders themselves with being the first Briton to set foot in the region (probably an inaccurate claim but one that illustrates the high regard in which he came to be held). In the summer of 1834 he made a trip to the northwest Caucasus, mainly in the lands along the Black Sea. Urquhart was technically acting on his own; he was not yet employed by the Foreign Office, and his only official connection was a nominal tie to the British Board of Trade. But that short trip—no more than a few days, in fact—would remain the most famous encounter between highlanders and their Western supporters throughout the entire period of the Caucasus wars.

At the time, traveling to Circassia was a supremely secret affair, since there is no doubt that he would have been arrested, perhaps killed, were he to have been found out by Russian authorities. To get to Circassia, Urquhart would have had to outrun Russian patrol ships in a vessel commanded by an Ottoman smuggler, the normal route via which Europeans managed to visit the region during that period. The pretext for the Russian blockade was the necessity to restrict trade to ports that had quarantine facilities, a reasonable requirement, given the prevalence of plague in the Ottoman lands. But it also served a more strategic purpose: restricting trade of any sort, but especially in food, weapons, and salt, to the highland groups that had not yet fully recognized the suzerainty of the Russian Empire.

From the accounts of later travelers (although mainly those whose political sympathies were in line with those of Urquhart) we can glean a sense of his impact on the ground, in two senses. First, he opened a channel of communication between the leaders of the highland resistance and the West. The bonds forged between Urquhart and various highland leaders would remain in place for decades to come. Other Britons sympathetic to the highlanders' cause followed in Urquhart's footsteps, providing moral and political support—as well as weapons—throughout the north Caucasus. Urquhart never managed to get the British

²⁸Urquhart, *Turkish Bath*, 62.

government to take an official position in support of the highlanders' claims to independence; indeed, the British government refused to deal directly with any highland representative, even those who managed to contact British legates in Constantinople or, in the early 1860s, to visit London. But there was, throughout the middle of the nineteenth century, a consistent and vocal public support for the Circassians among the British public, channeled through Urquhart's foreign affairs committees, sympathetic colleagues in parliament, and other bathing enthusiasts. "It was on the shores of Circassia," Urquhart wrote, "that I first learned to appreciate the strength of England, in the union of the interests of mankind with her prosperity."²⁹ For Urquhart and his associates, Circassia was to be a test case not only for Britain's resolve in countering Russian aggression but also for Britain's commitment to defending the rights of oppressed nations everywhere.

Second, Urquhart helped pave the way for the consolidation of political and military forces in the region, an achievement which may have delayed the Russian conquest of the northwest Caucasus until after the Crimean War. The great bane of the highland resistance was disunity, sometimes along lines of language and ethnicity, but more often along what might be called lines of clan or "tribe." In the early nineteenth century the various labels that were often used by outsiders to describe one or another group in the northwest Caucasus—Shapsug, Natukhai, Ubykh, and many others—were really no more than descriptions of which particular clan or tribal group was said to lay claim to which particular piece of territory. Beyond these divisions, extended families claimed leadership rights over distinct populations, and their practices of raiding and counter-raiding produced a situation of near-constant warfare in some districts.³⁰ One of Urquhart's goals in his short trip, extended by the efforts of later British travelers such as James Stanislaus Bell and J. A. Longworth, was to persuade the highlanders to take an oath of allegiance to a common cause.

The idea of an oath against Russia originated at the beginning of the nineteenth century among the Circassians themselves, first among several clans in the region of Gagra, on the Black Sea, and then including others as well. But in time its power weakened, so that when Urquhart arrived in 1834 few people could remember exactly what had been promised long ago. During his short stay Urquhart put forward the idea of reviving the oath and extending it along the coast and into the highlands. The essence of the commitment, recorded by Bell a few years after Urquhart's journey, was essentially this:

The jurant undertakes to remain true to his country, to hold no communication by trade, or in any other manner, with its enemies the Russians; and to denounce those who do, and assist in their condemnation and punishment; to abandon entirely the habit of stealing from his countrymen, and to inform against those who continue to do so, and to assist in their condemnation and punishment. He binds himself, further, to make unreserved confession in regard to all acts at variance with these engagements in which he has participated, or which have come to his knowledge in time past.³¹

²⁹An Old British Servant [David Urquhart], *British Diplomacy Illustrated in the Affair of the "Vixen,"* 3rd ed. (Newcastle, 1839), vi.

³⁰J. A. Longworth, *A Year Among the Circassians* (London, 1840), 1:52–53.

³¹James Stanislaus Bell, *Journal of a Residence in Circassia During the Years 1837, 1838, and 1839* (London, 1840), 1:333–35.

Visitors reported that the oath did seem to have some practical impact. There was a noticeable difference between “sworn” and “non-sworn” districts in the incidence of revenge killings, for example.³² But taking the oath was as much about extending the influence of one group over others as it was about coming together into an egalitarian band. Sometimes, great congresses would be held in upland glens, at which chiefs would solemnly declare an end to blood feuds among themselves and pledge their cooperation against the Russian invader. More often, the oath was enforced house to house, with groups of armed men cajoling the head of the household into joining their side, often “not without bloodshed,” as Bell noted.³³ In this regard, oath-swearers in the northwest Caucasus bore a striking resemblance to the enforcement of Islamic *sharia* law in the northeast, one of the goals of Shamil’s movement at roughly the same time, or indeed to the enforcement of Russian positive law later on. All were often accomplished with force of arms rather than force of argument.

What might have looked to romantic outsiders such as Urquhart and his associates like an inchoate nationalism—the coalescence of a solid national identity in the face of an external threat—was sometimes little more than extortion. From the perspective of the Circassians themselves, even of those most desirous of presenting a united front against the Russians, the task of pulling together the clans’ disparate interests could sometimes seem insurmountable. When asked to draw a map of the region, illustrating which “tribes” controlled which lands, Circassian leaders could come up with only a vague spatial representation, with overlapping areas of control and uncertain borders; Urquhart’s private papers, for example, contain two sketch maps of the northwest Caucasus, apparently drawn with the help of Circassian representatives in London, perhaps in the very early 1860s. (They were drawn on the back of London & Provincial Bath Company stationery—a union of Urquhart’s twin passions.³⁴) For all the desire of outsiders to present the Circassians as a nation-in-the-making, boundaries and territorial control remained blurry at best.

Over the next thirty years, Urquhart became something of a legend, not only among anti-Russian circles in Britain but also, apparently, in Circassia itself. “The devotion of the people I have seen to Mr. Urquhart … exceeds anything I could have imagined,” wrote James Bell in the late 1830s. “They all wish not merely the friendship and aid of England, but that she should adopt the country as one of her dependencies.”³⁵ Russian officials were certainly worried about the activities of Urquhart and other British agents, and the imperial viceroy’s archive contains considerable internal correspondence concerning the degree of resonance that Urquhart’s ideas were having in the mountains. “Among the highlanders there are people who know very well that they are being tricked by the English emissaries,” noted one report in 1837, “but unfortunately their number is still very small and their word even less respected.”³⁶ Later travelers and Russian officials heard local leaders speak with

³²Longworth, *A Year Among the Circassians* 2:253–54. Longworth, a *Times* correspondent and British spy, had reason to extol the power of the oath: along with Urquhart and James Bell, he was an important spokesman for the Circassian cause in Britain.

³³Bell, *Journal* 1:335.

³⁴Urquhart Papers, Box 15, File IJ9:Circassia.

³⁵Bell, *Journal* 1:101.

³⁶“Raport gen.-l. Vel’iaminova gr. Chernyshevu, ot 21-go avgusta 1837 goda, No. 120,” in *Akty sobrannye Kavkazskoi arkheograficheskoi kommissiei (AKAK)* (Tiflis, 1881), 8:767; and “Raport gen. Raevskago ot

reverence of “Davud Bey” and his efforts to secure foreign help, even if the tribal chieftains also expressed disappointment at how little aid really seemed to be forthcoming.³⁷ His fame spread farther eastward, so that well into the 1860s he was receiving letters from indigenous leaders in Dagestan urging him to secure British recognition of Dagestani independence, in the same way that he had worked to make the Circassian cause known abroad.³⁸

Urquhart never returned to Circassia. His sole first-hand experience in the region remained his short tour in 1834, when he revived the Circassian oath and mingled with highland leaders chiefs along the coast. He would eventually turn his full attention to the bathing movement. Neither Britain nor France, nor indeed the Ottomans, ever seriously came to the aid of the Circassians. Any residual commitment that might have existed evaporated after the Crimean War, when Russia, despite being the military loser, was given a free hand in the Caucasus. The very year Urquhart retired to Switzerland was the same year in which the Russian Empire launched its last great military sweep against the Circassians, torching villages and pushing hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children onto ships bound for the Ottoman lands. Not even Urquhart could have imagined the searing brutality that would accompany the empire’s consolidation of its control in the northwestern uplands and along the Circassian coast.

Urquhart did achieve some success in uniting Circassian leaders, at least in so far as they were able to launch direct appeals to Western Europe for assistance, much as they had been doing for decades with the Ottomans. In 1862 sixteen of the highland chiefs, styling themselves the “Council of the Nation of Circassia,” submitted a petition to the British parliament calling for support in their struggle against Russia and the promotion of “civilization” in the mountains:

We have written this appeal, trusting in the mercy and justice of the people of these independent realms that the government of England may graciously assist us by enlightening us by the science of chemistry in producing the metals and other commodities and by promoting trade in them, and by encouraging the merchants of England to trade with us, and by appointing and sending, as with all other independent nations according to international law, consuls to us to promote civilisation and facilitate commerce.³⁹

Urquhart’s hand was clear in this and other petitions. He had long advocated direct trade with Circassia—and had gone so far as to engineer the Russian seizure of a British ship, the *Vixen*, on the Black Sea to test British policy—and had assisted in the delivery of weapons.⁴⁰

³⁷“Otnoshenie graf. Chernysheva k baronu Rozenu, ot 26-go maia 1837 goda, No. 206,” *AKAK* 8:896–97.

³⁸Urquhart Papers, Box 15, File IJ9:Circassia:11.

³⁹“Appeal to the Parliament of England,” 15 Ramazan 1279 [1862], *ibid.*

⁴⁰On the *Vixen* affair see London *Times*, December 22, 1836; January 28 and 31, February 3, March 18, 1837; and May 31, June 23, 1838; David Urquhart, *The Secret of Russia in the Caspian and Euxine: The Circassian War as Affecting the Insurrection in Poland* (London, 1863); and Karl Marx, “Lord Palmerston,” in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* 12:345–406. On weapons deliveries see Hasan Effendi to Urquhart, received October 31, 1863, Urquhart Papers, Box 15, File IJ9:Circassia.

Adding the imprimatur of parliament to activities that were already under way was the main goal of these direct appeals.

Was Urquhart working alone in his activities in Circassia, or was he part of a larger British conspiracy to spark a rising among the highland peoples? It is difficult to know. Supporters of Urquhart and the Circassian cause sometimes alleged that the British crown had a direct interest in stoking anti-Russian sentiment in the mountains.⁴¹ The circumstantial evidence seems to point in the opposite direction, toward Urquhart as a freelancer who became ever more insistent that he was the sole spokesman for the highland cause. He had long been adamant that any contacts between the Circassians and Europeans go through him, and that no Westerner be allowed to travel in Circassia without his own express permission.⁴² British diplomats were usually quick to distance themselves from his more outlandish activities. Early in Urquhart's career, Palmerston warned him against arrogating to himself more power than he actually enjoyed as junior secretary in the British legation in Constantinople. The Caucasus chieftains who addressed him as "Noble Emir of Exalted Qualities Your Highness Davud Bey" clearly thought of him as wielding great influence—a view which Urquhart apparently did little to discourage.⁴³

NATION, EXILE, AND INTERCESSION

Urquhart knew better than most observers how difficult it was for the highlanders to stand together against Russian imperialism. Internal divisions were rife. Some factions had already made their peace with the Russians, others had consistently resisted, and still others tacked between these poles from circumstance to circumstance and from season to season. Circassian social structure—a complicated array of vertically structured castes, which intersected with ties of clan and geographical origin—often worked against broader political or military cooperation. Still, Urquhart could not abandon the idea of unity. He described his own epiphany in this regard some years after visiting Circassia. He recalled standing on the banks of the Kuban, looking out on an assemblage of warriors, clad in their chain-mail tunics and preparing for a raid on Russian positions on the other side of the river. Here, he said, he found the only people in the whole of Europe and the Near East, from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, who were prepared to resist tsarist expansion. "Then it was that an involuntary oracle burst from my lips, 'You are no longer tribes but a people; you are Circassians, and this is Circassia.'"⁴⁴

For the rest of his life he believed that he had literally called the Circassian nation into being. "There is a stage in the history of nations," he wrote, "when they become dependent

⁴¹Steward E. Rolland, *Circassia: Speech of Stewart E. Rolland, at a Public Meeting Held at the Corn Exchange, Preston, October 1, 1862, to Receive the Deputies from Circassia* (London, 1862), 15. Rolland was a close associate of Urquhart's and one of the co-principals of the Turkish bath operation in Jermyn Street.

⁴²Urquhart to Circassian Commission in Constantinople, n.d. [1863?], Urquhart Papers, Box 15, file IJ9:Circassia.

⁴³See the letters from Dagestani leaders in *ibid.*

⁴⁴"The Flag of Circassia," Urquhart's reply to a toast at a dinner in his honor hosted by the Commercial Community of Glasgow, May 23, 1838, Urquhart Papers, Box 35, later published as David Urquhart, *The Flag of Circassia: Speech of Mr. Urquhart, Glasgow, May 23, 1838* (London, 1863).

upon the dispositions of individual men.”⁴⁵ In all of this there was more than a hint of the surreal: a failed Scottish diplomat, political campaigner, and bathing aficionado traveling to the remoter bits of Eurasia and attempting to build a nation that showed only inconstant signs of wishing to exist—a Caledonian clansman who condemned the clannishness of the Caucasus. But he did leave his mark. His son, the Oxford don Francis “Sligger” Urquhart, was reportedly offered the presidency of the North Caucasus Mountain Republic in 1919—a turn of events that would have created a fittingly bizarre link to the early days of north Caucasus nationalism.⁴⁶ And it was Urquhart himself who invented the enduring visual symbol of the Circassian cause: the national flag, a stars-and-arrows design on a green background. He presented it, through other British agents, to the Circassians in the late 1830s, calling it the “banner (*sancak*) of freedom.”⁴⁷ Since 1992 a version of Urquhart’s flag has been the official emblem of the Adygei Republic in the Russian Federation and is widely used among Circassians around the world as their national standard. During the Abkhaz War in Georgia in 1993, north Caucasus militiamen carried it into battle during the storming of the regional capital, Sukhumi.⁴⁸

A real Circassian national movement did eventually come into being, and it can be found today not only in the northwest Caucasus but also among the Circassian diaspora, which reaches from Amman to Istanbul to Paterson, New Jersey. But that was as much a result of historical circumstance as of the cheerleading of Urquhart and his associates. While the old Scot was convalescing in the Alps, continuing to appeal for British vigilance against Russian machinations, the Caucasus wars were coming to an end in the river valleys and upland glens on the other side of Europe. By the time of Urquhart’s death it was not only the Circassian cause that had been lost. The Circassians as a people had very nearly been lost as well: killed, resettled in the lowlands along the Kuban River, or forced to emigrate to a precarious new existence in the Ottoman Balkans, Anatolia, and the Levant.

A systematic Russian campaign of what would now be called ethnic cleansing produced the emigration of somewhere between 300,000 and 500,000 highlanders, mainly Muslims, between the late 1850s and the late 1860s.⁴⁹ At the time of the 1897 census, there were about 60,000 people living on the coasts of Circassia, but of those, only 15,000 had been

⁴⁵David Urquhart, *The Rebellion in India* (London, 1857), 3.

⁴⁶Harry Luke, *Cities and Men: An Autobiography* (London, 1953), 2:198. It was through “Sligger,” a fellow of Balliol College, that David Urquhart’s old retirement chateau in Switzerland became part of the Oxford experience: It is now the venue for popular “reading vacations” taken by the university’s undergraduates.

⁴⁷“Zapiska o merakh po usmireniyu Kavkazskikh gortsev,” AKAK 8:361.

⁴⁸See the photograph in *Abkhazskaia tragediia: Sbornik* (n.p., 1994), between pages 96 and 97.

⁴⁹The lower figure is given by a British Foreign Office report of May 1864, cited in “Memorandum Respecting Circassian Emigrants in Turkey,” British National Archives, FO 881/3065, f. 6. Mark Pinson estimated the figure at 500,000; see his “Demographic Warfare: An Aspect of Ottoman and Russian Policy, 1854–1866” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1970), 99. The half-million figure is now the standard number used among Circassian historians. Total Muslim emigration from Russia, including Crimean Tatars and Caucasus Muslims, has been estimated at between 700,000 and 900,000 from 1856 to 1864, perhaps as many as 2 million for the period up to 1878. See Alan W. Fisher, “Emigration of Muslims from the Russian Empire in the Years After the Crimean War,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 35:3 (1987): 356–71. For a careful discussion of sources and numbers see A. V. Kushkhabiev, *Cherkesskaia diaspora v arabskikh stranakh (XIX–XX vv.)* (Nal’chik, 1997), 42–44. The most thorough recent treatment of the deportations and the Ottoman response is David Cameron Cuthell, Jr., “The Muhacirin Komisiyonu: An Agent in the Transformation of Ottoman Anatolia, 1860–1866” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2005).

born there.⁵⁰ Among them were the last remnants of the populations now exiled across the sea, as well as the offspring of the first generation of Russian settlers who had moved in to take their place. As a local saying had it, even a woman could now travel easily between the harbor cities of Sudzhuk Kale and Anapa, since she could be assured of never meeting a single person on the way.⁵¹ “In the mountains of the Kuban district one can now find bears and wolves,” wrote one observer in the late 1870s, “but no highlanders.”⁵² In the end, the experience of expulsion from their ancestral homelands to new lives in exile, far more than the oath-making and flag-waving of David Urquhart, would become the defining element of modern Circassian nationalism.

How are we to interpret his real influence? Urquhart was clearly not the father of the Circassian nation, although that is how he was wont to portray himself, especially in his dotage. Indigenous thinkers such as Shora Nogma and Khan-Girei are today regarded as the progenitors of Circassian identity, even if—or perhaps especially because—they defined Circassian nationhood within a solidly *rossiskii* vision of empire. Nor did his lobbying efforts in Britain ever inspire widespread engagement. Apart from occasional freelance shipments of arms to the mountains and the British government’s tentative exploration of ties with the Circassians during the Crimean War, the highlanders were left largely to their own devices.

But to dismiss Urquhart as a simple eccentric overlooks the central feature of his story: the way in which Western involvement with the Caucasus “East” has always involved the reshaping of political and cultural realities in response to multivocal forms of appropriation, resistance, and influence. Urquhart believed in a cultural economy of exchange: taking from the Muslim world those elements of civilization which could enlighten and edify Victorian Britain, and exporting in turn the sense of common purpose characteristic of the modern nation—the bath, in other words, for the oath.⁵³ Yet exchange was never a simple thing. Urquhart’s efforts were bound up not only with his own visions of Russia’s imperial designs but also with a particular reading of what was happening on the ground in the north Caucasus. He and his associates consistently romanticized local struggles as preformed nationalist ones, clan chieftains as natural prime ministers, and traditional social systems as the germ of liberal egalitarianism. Rather than lying deep inside an unfathomable Orient, Urquhart’s Caucasus was one that, with proper oversight and guidance, could be made into a fully modern, fully national space. The project to modernize—and, in a sense, “nationalize”—the north Caucasus would only be realized under the Soviets, but in ways very different from those envisaged by the earliest Victorian visitors.

Urquhart was also active in a period in which the Caucasus was not on the geopolitical edge of Europe but in fact central to strategic debates about the relationships among Britain, continental Europe, Russia, and the Muslim world. In fact, he and his associates were in large part responsible for making it such, not only in the halls of state but also among the

⁵⁰Calculated from N. A. Troinitskii, ed., *Obshchii svod po imperii rezul'tatov razrabotki dannykh Pervoi vseobshchei perepisi naseleniiia, proizvedennoi 28 Ianvaria 1897 goda*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1905).

⁵¹Consul Dickson (Soukoum-Kalé) to Earl Russell, February 22, 1864, BNA, FO 881/1259, f. 2.

⁵²I. Drozdov, “Posledniaia bor'ba s gortsami na Zapadnom Kavkaze,” *Kavkazskii sbornik* 2 (1877): 456–57, quoted in Kushkhabiev, *Cherkesskaia diaspora*, 39.

⁵³I thank one of my anonymous referees for suggesting this juxtaposition.

British public at large. Although the term “Circassian” has disappeared from the lexicon of most Westerners, Urquhart was active at a time when the borderlands of the Russian Empire were as much a part of Western discourse and political activism as Kosovo and Bosnia became in our own time. Through Urquhart, it is thus possible to recall an age when the Caucasus was not as inevitably foreign as it might appear to many Americans and Europeans today and when the lines of nations and states were yet to be clearly drawn.