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## “THE NORTH CAUCASUS BARRIER”

*The Russian Advance towards the Muslim World*

St. Martin's Press, New York, 1992

### INTRODUCTION: RUSSIA AND THE NORTH CAUCASUS

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The Russian drive towards the warm seas began in the second half of the sixteenth century from the banks of the river Terek. Four centuries later the Russians had not moved further than the river Arax. The opening to the warm seas remains an unattainable goal. Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan still stand, and a count-down has begun for Russia's withdrawal from her colonies. External pressures from Great Britain, France, Germany, Turkey and the United States have often been advanced as an explanation for the lack of success of the Russian advance towards the Muslim world. Seldom have local resistance and opposition to the conquest been taken into account. However, the North Caucasus, which has been in a state of almost permanent warfare against Russia since the first *jihad* led by Sheikh Mansur in 1783 until the Chechen and Ingush uprising of 1943 has played a capital role in making any further Russian conquest southwards impossible. Today it remains the least sovietised and most staunchly Muslim of all the territories of the Soviet Union. This book focuses exclusively on the domestic factor.

#### *The historical setting*

We can identify roughly five different stages in the modern history of the North Caucasus:

1. Up till the middle of the sixteenth century the North Caucasus remained isolated from the international scene. It was inhabited by tribal clanic societies professing different religions — Christians in the west (Adyghes, some of the Kabardians and Ossetians), Muslims in the east (Daghestan), and pagans in the centre (Chechens and Ingush). There were no serious conflicts and no interest in this mountainous region from the main neighbouring states. Suddenly after 1556, with the conquest of Astrakhan by Ivan the Terrible, the North Caucasus became the object of a major international conflict and the centre of a 'great game' played by several powerful contestants: the Ottoman empire, the Crimean khanate and the Shaybanis of Turkestan in the east and west, Muscovy and the Great Nogay Horde in the north, and Iran in the south. The Caucasians were unwillingly drawn into the contest. The dispute was not political; nobody was interested *per se* in annexing a territory with no resources. However, the North Caucasus was strategically of vital importance for trade and military routes. For Moscow, control over the Caucasus meant access to the warm seas and the Iranian market, also the realisation of a century-old Indian dream which had caught the Russians' imagination since the journey southward of the first Russian traveller Afanasii Nikitin;<sup>1</sup> for the Ottomans and the Crimean Tatars it provided a military liaison with Derbent and the possibility to

outflank Iran through Shirvan; for the Shaybanis it opened the road to Haj from Bukhara and the last link between eastern and western Turks.

This first phase lasted approximately from 1556 to 1604. Moscow opened the game after the annexation of Astrakhan by trying to occupy first the western, then the central, and finally the eastern Caucasus. All cards were used: settlements, cooptation, christianisation and military conquest. The expansion, aimed at Kabarda and Daghestan, began with the occupation of the Lower Volga valley and the building of several fortresses. In 1587, the Russians had reached as far as the Terek in the Caucasian lowlands, and built the fortress of Terskii Gorodok which served as a springboard for further advance. In 1590, pushing further south, they built a fortress on the lower Sunja river and were thus ready for a major breakthrough into the Caucasus.

Realising the danger, the Ottomans and the Crimeans reacted vigorously by launching a major offensive against Kabarda, which was allied to Moscow, and razed it to the ground in 1587. The same year the *Shamkhal* of Tarku, the most powerful ruler in Daghestan, who had hesitated between Moscow and the Ottomans, finally sided with the Turks and became their staunchest ally in the Caucasus. In 1590 the Ottomans, in their campaign against Iran, occupied Shirvan and pushed northwards towards Derbent, and for a while a Turkish fleet roamed the Caspian sea. In 1591, after the Crimean Tatars had launched an unsuccessful expedition against Moscow, Russian troops reached the Sulak river where they built a fortress, only to be driven back three years later by a joint force of Ottomans and Daghestanis. In 1604, Tsar Boris Godunov undertook a major offensive aimed at breaking once and for all through Daghestan to link with his Iranian allies. It ended in a military disaster. The Muscovite army was routed by the Daghestanis, helped by the Ottomans. All Russian fortresses on the Sulak, Sunja and Terek rivers were destroyed, and the Russians forced to withdraw back to their frontline in Astrakhan.

2. The second phase lasted from 1604 to 1783, during which the North Caucasus disappeared from the arena of world politics. Russia turned towards Europe, Iran was not interested, the Ottomans and the Tatars defeated by Iran maintained a distant protectorate. There were no major conflicts during this period, except for the short and ill-fated expedition of Peter the Great against Iran and Derbent. However, three important changes occurred which were to have long-lasting effects. First, religion became a major factor in the competition between the Ottoman Empire and Russia for the soul and alliance of the North Caucasus. Christianity retreated while Islam made steady progress in the western and central North Caucasus, thus laying the foundation for the future religious wars; secondly, the advance of Islam was paralleled by the steady growth of Russian peasant settlements in the piedmont of the east Caucasus with the establishment of Terek and Greben Cossack colonies; and thirdly, the decline of the mightiest Muslim military organisation in the area, the Nogay Horde, which until the end of the sixteenth century gave a certain equilibrium to the division of power in the region, and her replacement by more reliable allies and auxiliaries of Russia, the Buddhist Kalmyks.

3. The third phase lasted from 1783 to 1824 and marked the beginning of Russia's systematic offensive against the North Caucasus. In 1783 Azaq fell and the Crimean khanate was eliminated. The road was open for a face-to-face confrontation between Russia and the North Caucasus. Totally disunited linguistically and socially, the North Caucasus seemed doomed. However there was a swift response, this time from the North Caucasians alone. Sheikh Mansur Ushurma, a Chechen Naqshbandi sheikh initiated by a Bukharan *haji*, managed for a brief period, from 1785 to 1791, to unite most of the North Caucasus, from Chechnia and north Daghestan to Kuban, in a holy war against the Russians. In 1785, Mansur's warriors encircled an important Russian force on the bank of the river Sunja and completely annihilated it — the worst-ever defeat inflicted on the armies of Catherine II. However, the Naqshbandiya Sufi order had no deep roots at the time and the Russians were able to crush the North Caucasians when the Ottoman fortress, Anapa, fell in 1791. Sheikh Mansur was

captured and confined in Schlüsselburg prison where he died in 1793. The Naqshbandiya disappeared from the North Caucasus for almost thirty years but the *jihād*, a foretaste of the future *Murid* movement, left the memory that resistance as well as unity around Islam were possible.

The offensive went on after 1791 with all the piedmont occupied and inroads made deep into the mountains. Resistance by feudal lords was weak. It was easily overcome by Russia's army freshly victorious from the Napoleonic wars and led by her best generals such as Ermolov. Russian action was ruthless and for the first time genocidal tactics were applied against the Caucasians. The Ottoman Empire did not intervene, and once again the North Caucasus seemed doomed.

4. The fourth phase, from 1824 to 1922 was that of the *ghazawat* — the holy wars. During this period the North Caucasus underwent a total change: the feudal system was replaced by clans and free peasant societies (*uzden*), and the *tariqat* (the Sufi orders) provided a new ideology and became deeply implanted among the population. Unity was formed around the *Shariat* law as opposed to the customary law of the *adat*. Arabic language and culture spread from Daghestan to the western Adyghe territories and the last heathen Ingush *auls* were converted to Islam in the 1860s.

The period of *Muridism* and Shamil's imamate, 1824-59, is well known in the West thanks to the remarkable chronicle of the Englishman John Baddeley (*The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, London, 1908) and the dispatches of Karl Marx.<sup>2</sup> An overview of the military strategies used by the Russian commanders against Shamil is given by Moshe Gammer in the chapter 'Russian Strategies in the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan, 1825-1859'. After the fiercest and longest-ever armed resistance by a Muslim country to a foreign Christian invader, the North Caucasus was defeated but undaunted. The same ideology of *Muridism* — *military jihād* inspired by the Sufi orders combined with the age-old traditions of freedom of a 'democratic' clanic mountain society — brought the North Caucasians again to the well-trodden battlefields of Sheikh Mansur and Imam Shamil in 1877-8, and once more in 1920-1. In 1922, after the last great uprising inspired by the militant *tariqat*, the North Caucasus was finally subjugated and seemingly pacified. In fact all the problems remained.

5. The fifth phase, from 1922 to the present, witnessed several sporadic rebellions on which little information is available so far. However, as an iron curtain was drawn across the region, there followed the most brutal attempt yet by Russia to impose a final solution on her unruly Caucasian dominion — genocide through deportation of entire North Caucasian nations.

### *Russian strategies*

Ever since the onset of the Russian advance towards the Muslim lands, from the conquest of Kazan in 1552 until the invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, the Russian rulers and their Soviet successors applied the same political methods to subdue, pacify or win over the populations of the neighbouring Muslim states and colonies. Much simplified, this strategy can be presented as follows.

### *Settlement of Russian peasant colonies*

Everywhere from the North Caucasus to the Volga region, Siberia, Kazakhstan and Central Asia, Russian military conquest was preceded, accompanied or followed by settlements of Cossacks (in particular in Terek, Greben, Kuban, Semirechie, Orenburg, and Yaik), and later, in the nineteenth century, by Russian peasants. Everywhere armed colonists provided dedicated militias who helped to expel the natives. Colonial settlement made the conquest final and irreversible. These lands became part of 'Russia'. This strategy was feasible only so

long as Russia had a surplus rural population. It was impossible to apply in Afghanistan in the 1980s because of the Russians' demographic decline after the Second World War.

### *Assimilation*

Under the tsars, two contradictory methods of assimilating the alien Muslim elements were used: conversion to Orthodox Christianity while retaining a national profile, without linguistic and cultural russification — a policy practiced with some success in the Volga region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; or conversion followed by full assimilation by the Russian milieu, never a very productive policy for winning the Muslim masses because the russified converts were cut from their roots and lost the confidence of their people. The Soviets tried to apply the former method, merely replacing Orthodoxy with Marxism, with the slogan of 'national in form and socialist in content' with even less success than the tsars.

### *Cooptation of the elites*

This was practiced from Kabarda in the North Caucasus in the sixteenth century to Afghanistan in the twentieth century. Cooptation of the feudal aristocracy proved only moderately successful if not counterproductive in the North Caucasus as argued by Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejey in the chapter on 'Cooptation of the Elites in the sixteenth Century in Kabarda and Daghestan'. Cooptation of the Muslim religious elites, inaugurated by Catherine II in 1783 with the creation of the *muftiat* of Orenburg, on the other hand enjoyed a spectacular success. It gained the Romanov dynasty the loyalty and cooperation of the Tatar elites for more than a century. Stalin was inspired by Catherine's example when he instituted the Muslim Religious Boards in 1945, and seemed equally successful in endowing Soviet Islam with a cooperative and pliable official Muslim administration. However, the dramatic expulsion in 1989, through popular demand, of Mufti Shamsuddin Babakhanov in Central Asia and Mufti Mahmud Gekkiev in the North Caucasus, both reputed to be particularly subservient to Moscow, proved the limitation of this policy in the long term.

In the North Caucasus, the men who retained religious authority were the Sufi sheikhs, and for a short time during the Civil War and the 1920-1 war the Bolsheviks were able to play the religious card, undoubtedly counselled by Caucasian communists, such as Najmuddin Samurskii. Indeed, between 1918 and 1926, the Bolsheviks succeeded in dividing the Naqshbandiya *tariqat* by opposing the influential Sheikh Ali of Akusha in the Darghin region of Daghestan to the leader of the uprising, Imam Najmuddin Gotsinskii. Similarly in the Chechen-Ingush country they attracted to their side Ali Mitaev, the head of the powerful Bammam Giray *tariqat* who in 1920 led the Chechen Revolutionary Committee. The cooperation was short-lived — Ali of Akusha, expounded by early communist authors as a model of a modern enlightened Muslim leader, was executed in 1926, and Ali Mitaev in 1925.<sup>3</sup> The 1920-1 uprising is described in this writer's chapter 'The Last *Ghazawat*'.

### *Destruction of Islam*

Serious efforts to destroy Islam as a religion under the old regime were only attempted under Tsar Feodor (the son of Ivan the Terrible), Peter the Great and Tsarina Anna (1738-55). In the Soviet period the anti-Islamic campaign in the North Caucasus was set in motion in 1924, earlier than in the rest of the Soviet Union where the full-scale attack on Islam was only launched in 1928. The reason for this was the predominant role of the Sufi orders in the political, military, cultural and social life of their country which set them up as competitors of the Communist Party. It was clearly explained by Najmuddin Samurskii, the leading communist in the North Caucasus in 1925, when he wrote that 'Revolution in Daghestan means above all a fight with the clergy'. He rationalised:

Basically there is no fight against Soviet power as the bearer of Communism on the part of the religious intelligentsia. On the contrary *Muridism*, which in recent years has noticeably spread in Daghestan, willingly adapts to Communism. Contemporary *murids* who call themselves communists have indeed reasons to do so. In their predication there are undoubtedly some communist characteristics, but of a religious ascetic Communism, similar to that of the early Christian communities in the first century of our era.

Opposition to Soviet power was not due to the fact that it was communist but because of its 'Godlessness', its 'foreign, *giaour* character' as the bearer of a 'sinful and accursed Western civilisation'. Samurskii further commented: 'Dislike of European civilisation, sanctified by religion is more difficult to fight than religiosity itself. It is essential to avoid intimidation which would only confirm the clergy's preaching that European civilisation was always a weapon of oppression and enslavement of the Eastern people.'<sup>4</sup> Samurskii himself, like most of the Muslim national communist leaders, was not in favour of the anti-Islamic campaign, at least not in the primitive and brutal manner in which it was implemented by the Russians. But in this he was overruled, as were his communist fellow-travellers in Tatarstan and Central Asia. Observing that in 1925 there were still 1,500 religious schools functioning with 45,000 students after four years of 'solid communist 'construction', as opposed to only 183 state schools, Samurskii prophetically forecast: 'To close the *madrassahs* is impossible. They will continue to exist whatever oppressive measures are taken against them. They will hide in the canyons, in the caves, and will then form a people who will be fanatical opponents of the Soviet power which persecutes religion.'<sup>5</sup>

After the deportation of the native Muslims in 1944, a unique experiment was tried in the Chechen-Ingush territory — the destruction of Islam through the total suppression of its official organisation. All mosques were closed until 1978. This radical experiment failed. The Sufi brotherhoods, which have been subjected to a ferocious persecution for over sixty years, continue to yield the same prestige today that they enjoyed before the Revolution, and Chechnia-Ingushetia remains one of the strongest bastions of Islam not only in the Soviet Union but in the whole Muslim world. In 1925, Samurskii wrote that the sheikhs and *ulema* of Daghestan and Chechnia belonged to the people and that their words were considered law. A modern-day believer gave a somewhat similar assessment of the religious leaders in an article comparing their activity to that of the Communist Party and government officials. The article was published by *Sovetskii Dagestan*, the journal of the Daghestani republican *obkom*, in 1989:

The people know that the leaders who preach atheism have an ingrained habit of profiteering, money-grabbing and corruption. Their words do not correspond with their deeds . . . The mullahs are closer to the people and the believers. They are on the same level as other people, be they scholars, rich or poor. They have a common language with everyone, they do not offend or frighten, they only teach and preach. This is why all believers are equal, nobody demonstrates their superiority, nobody ingratiates themselves or grovels. Almost all believers are open with each other, speak the truth whatever it is, and do not give bribes to the mullahs . . . That is why believers are attracted to the mullahs, not to the Party workers. That is why the mullahs have great authority.<sup>6</sup>

Another good indication of the enduring character of the *tariqat* is provided by two almost identical assessments made by Tsarist and Soviet officialdom a century apart. The first, written in 1868 by A. Ippolitov, captain of the *gendarmierie* in charge of the repression of the Kunta Haji (Qadiriya) movement in Chechnia, proclaimed the final and irrevocable disappearance of the Qadiris. Ten years later the *tariqat* led a major uprising, 'the Lesser *Ghazawat*', which embraced the North Caucasus for two years. The second, written in 1968 by the Soviet author Tutaev, commenting on a particularly radical branch of the Qadiriya,

similarly claimed: 'The sectarians now represent only an insignificant minority whose influence on the new Chechen generation is nil.'<sup>7</sup>

The chapter on 'Internationalism, Nationalism and Islam' by Fanny Bryan addresses the question of Islam in Chechnia and Daghestan before the failed *coup* in August 1991.

### *Expulsion, deportation and genocide*

To preserve and expand her colonies Russia experimented with several more or less effective methods of genocide in the Muslim territories: genocide through extinction of a population completely cut off from external contacts and condemned to disappear. This policy was applied with some success in the Volga-Ural region from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century and in the Kazakh steppes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: genocide through slaughter attempted unsuccessfully by General Skobelev, the hero of the Slavophile movement, against the Turkmen tribes at Gök Tepe in 1881; and genocide through forced exodus, a crude but efficient policy, applied consistently in the North Caucasus against the Cherkess (Circassians) and the Chechens.

In 1834, a Russian civil servant, Platon Zubov, published a book entitled *A Picture of the Caucasian Region and Neighbouring Lands Belonging to Russia*,<sup>8</sup> a general historical, geographical, economic and anthropological description of the North Caucasus, both of the lowlands already under Russian rule and of the still unconquered high mountains. Zubov made an enthusiastic eulogy of Transcaucasia — an authentic Eldorado — unfortunately spoiled by its 'excessively lazy' and 'intellectually limited' population.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this happy but underdeveloped land was constantly threatened by wild Mountaineers. It therefore fell to the Russians to conquer and pacify the Caucasus 'for the greater benefit of the Empire and of the Caucasians'. Zubov, obviously inspired by the French Encyclopaedists' vision of the 'noble savage', suggested a plan of pacification in several stages. During the first stage the Mountaineers had to be tempted through their women who would desire luxury goods not available in their own lands. These goods had to be offered to the Mountaineers by organised Christian missionary orders helped by the Russian government. They would turn the North Caucasus into an authentic dumping-ground in order to eliminate all foreign merchants from the area. Thus the missionaries would combine trade, proselytism and propaganda for the benefit of St Petersburg, which would become a friend of the natives. The Mountaineers would then 'look back in disgust at their wild and insecure life and beg to make their submission to the Emperor'.<sup>10</sup>

The second phase of the pacification plan would be the transfer of population. Natives from the lowlands which were easily controlled could remain in their villages where the Russian government would build them a 'superb church' which would be served by a missionary acting as a 'good father'. In order to develop their civic sense, children would be taken away from their parents -and sent to special schools in St Petersburg. Those Caucasians who lived in the far-off mountains or in strategically important areas would have to be moved to the provinces of inner Russia and replaced by Russian settlers. The nobility had to be co-opted to serve in the army and the administration. All would be taught Russian which would become the dominant language; native non-written languages would be easily forgotten. Finally, the Mountaineers would be converted to Christianity, but only superficially, because, wrote Zubov, 'It is useless to try to teach these savages all the subtleties of our Christian faith.'<sup>11</sup>

This neat plan, however, could fail because some of the Mountaineers were too wild and fanatical to appreciate the benefits of mass transfer to the provinces of the Empire. This was particularly true of the Chechens, whom Zubov described as a nation 'remarkable for her love of plunder, robbery and murder, for her spirit of deceit, her courage, recklessness, resolution, cruelty, fearlessness, her uncontrollable insolence and unlimited arrogance. . . . The Chechens spend their life plundering and raiding their neighbours who hate them for their ferocity . . .

Often punished by Russian arms, they are always ready to begin their crimes again.' Zubov therefore proposed: 'The only way to deal with this ill-intentioned people is to destroy it to the last . . . This', he added, 'would not be difficult because their total numbers have been greatly diminished. They cannot raise more than 4,000 warriors, their nation having been reduced to barely 15,000 souls.'<sup>12</sup>

Zubov's proposal regarding the first phase of the pacification programme was too naive in its arrogance and could never be implemented, although some efforts were made to revitalise Christianity among the Abkhaz and Ossetians. His advice regarding transfer of population, however, was followed, tragically, in the case of the Ubykhs and the Cherkess in the 1860s. After a Homeric struggle of thirty years, the Ubykhs left their ancestral lands in 1864 and sailed for Turkey, burning their villages behind them.<sup>13</sup> None remained in the Caucasus. The exodus of the Cherkess, the largest Muslim nation of the North Caucasus, had equally tragic consequences. Today they are dispersed in Turkey and the Middle East, where they have not assimilated entirely, and represent a weak minority in their national homeland in the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> In their case the genocide has been almost successful. The Chechens and Ingush, however, have proved remarkably resilient. They have survived the Second World War deportation during which half of their population died, and after Stalin's death they left their camps and returned to their homeland without waiting for the official permission to do so. Their will to survive is illustrated by their demographic progression immediately after their return — a 46.5 per cent increase between 1959 and 1970. One of the reasons for their extraordinary recovery and survival in the death camps, without any loss of national identity, was the strong organisational presence of the Sufi *tariqat* in their ranks. The chapters on 'Circassian Resistance to Russia' by Paul Henze and 'The Chechens and Ingush during the Soviet Periods' by Abdurahman Avtorkhanov give an in-depth analysis of these nations' struggle against Russia.

### *Implications for the future*

Today many Muslim countries are in the grip of wars, revolutions, and immeasurable suffering, often brought about by the arbitrary decisions taken at the time of decolonisation for the sake of short-term benefit and the convenience of *realpolitik*. One may wonder what interest, other than purely academic, a chronicle of obscure wars and repressions in distant lands may have for the modern reader immune to tales of war casualties and political terror. The answers are simple and are to be found, first, in the strategic position of the Caucasus, which remains as important today in the geo-politics of the region as it was in the past, and secondly, in the ambiguous attitude of the Russians towards the North Caucasians. Both factors may influence the course of events and the manner in which the Soviet empire is finally dismantled, whether peacefully or bloodily, and determine the future balance of power in the region.

For 200 years the North Caucasus has stood guard and protected the Muslim world, Turkey and Iran, from Russian designs. In the Soviet period alone, uprisings and wars in Daghestan and Chechnia-Ingushetia probably saved the territorial integrity of Iran by forcing Soviet Russia to abandon her plans for expansion and withdraw her armies from Ghilan in 1921 and South Azerbaijan in 1945. Today the Caucasus continues to provide the same defence. Furthermore the North Caucasus will play a decisive role in the political future of Transcaucasia as a whole. It is indeed difficult to imagine viable and effectively independent states in Georgia, Armenia or Azerbaijan without the active political cooperation of the North Caucasian autonomous republics, or at least their neutrality as buffer-states between Russia and Transcaucasia, and hence Turkey and Iran. Thus control over the North Caucasus remains strategically as important today as it was in the sixteenth century, not to mention its significance for Russia as a trade route to oil-rich Azerbaijan and Chechnia.

Compared to the political ferment in other regions of the Soviet Union and in the neighbouring Transcaucasian republics, the North Caucasus remains deceptively quiet, as if gathering strength before the storm ahead. But the nationalist issues which are heatedly debated at present are significant and all relate to the common struggle of the Mountaineers to reject Russian rule and preserve their original identity: the national liberation wars from 1783 to 1920, Shamil's *Muridism*, the role of Islam and Arabic culture, the deportations of the 1860s and 1944. Several pressing territorial disputes stemming from the 1944 deportations, still unresolved today, are of prime concern — between Chechnia and Daghestan in the Novo-Lakskii district and between the Ingush and the Ossetians over Vladikavkaz (Ordzhonikidze) among others. Unlike their neighbours in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, Ossetia and Georgia, the Daghestanis, Chechens and Ingush, true to their tradition of independence, have had the wisdom to avoid calling in Moscow to arbitrate over their internal problems. However, these questions need to be settled before any serious concerted political action towards the centre can be undertaken. Certain practical measures have already been taken to promote unity and reestablish 'horizontal' links which had been artificially abolished during sixty years of Soviet rule: on 20 February 1990, representatives of *Gosplan* in four North Caucasian Muslim autonomous republics — Daghestan, Chechnia-Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and North Ossetia — met in the Daghestani capital Makhachkala to draw up an agreement on long-term economic, scientific and cultural cooperation. The object of the agreement, which came into effect immediately, was to integrate the economies of the four republics into a 'common' market.

For the time being no strong national front movements and democratic political parties on the model of the Transcaucasian or Baltic republics have emerged, except in Chechnia where these groups have the implicit support of the Sufi *tariqat*. This is not the sign of a lack of desire for independence or political maturity, but on the contrary points to the fact that the North Caucasians remain faithful to a certain pan-Caucasian ideal of a 'mountain confederation' where the uniting factor was always Islam. You cannot have a 'national' front in Daghestan where there are some twenty different nations. The 'democratic' platform as interpreted in the European parts of the Soviet Union carries little credit in the eyes of the North Caucasians in view of its European or Russian centrism and because history has taught them that Russian democrats easily shed their liberal skin when confronted with the nationalities' aspirations for freedom. This explains in part the passive voting on the Union Treaty Referendum of 17 March 1991 in the North Caucasian republics. The future struggle, when it comes, will not be with an emasculated Soviet Union but with the RSFSR — the Russian Federation — the Russian Republic, in short with the former Russian conquerors, whatever they choose to call themselves.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, because of their geographical position between Europe and Asia on the marches of Christendom and Islam, because of the widespread use of Arabic, the omnipresence of Islam, the existence of large diaspora communities and the *jihad* tradition, the North Caucasians have always been responsive, often in a turbulent manner, to events elsewhere in the Muslim world, more so than the Muslims of Soviet Central Asia. Thus their ability to influence Russian foreign policy towards the Muslim world is much greater than their modest numbers may presume.

Two examples can be given to illustrate this. One was a mutiny which occurred in June 1985 in Astrakhan when army recruits called up for army service, mainly Chechens, clashed with the military authorities when told that they would be trained for Afghanistan. The Chechen youths categorically refused to go to Afghanistan explaining that they did not wish to kill their Muslim co-religionists. The report from Moscow stated: 'In the course of a fierce clash, whose outcome was decided by the troops, there were wounded and killed on both sides, although of course not in equal numbers. This was probably the first act of anti-war protest in the Soviet Union suppressed with firearms.'<sup>16</sup> The other example is the strong empathy shown by some North Caucasians with Iraq, a brother Muslim state, during the Allied forces'



bombardments in February 1991, after an initial strong condemnation of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.<sup>17</sup>

The Russians for their part have always despised their Muslim adversaries who were considered stupid, primitive, sly and treacherous, and were always treated as ‘rebels’ and ‘bandits’- This was true for Sheikh Mansur, who fought Russia in a fair war at a time when the North Caucasus could in no way be considered a Russian dominion. And it was true for every Muslim military and political opponent of Russia ever since, including the Afghan *mujahidin* in the 1980s. The only exception was Shamil whose world-wide fame protected him from sharing the fate of his predecessor Mansur and his followers, Kunta Haji and many others, either languishing in Russian jails and Siberian camps, killed in battle or executed. Nevertheless, one cannot describe the treatment of Shamil, condemned to long years of dreary exile in Kaluga and denied permission to migrate to Mecca until old age by the liberal Tsar Alexander II, as in any way elegant. (Another rare exception consisted of the Kabardian noblemen who provided the Russian aristocracy with a model of knightly virtues.) As a result of such high-handed contempt, the Russians were unable to understand their adversaries, their motivation, strategy and ideology. This explains the slow progress of the Russian conquest and the inability to pacify the territory and use imaginative thinking in articulating a colonial policy. One is struck by the repetition of the same recipes and mistakes in the military and political field for the last 200 years: in 1920 Todorskii, the general commanding the Red Army charged with quelling the Daghestani-Chechen rebellion, modelled his tactics on those of Prince Bariatinskii who accepted Shamil’s surrender in 1859; the anti-religious persecutions of the Soviet period were not much different in spirit from the tsarist harassment of the Sufis in the second half of the nineteenth century; and Stalin’s deportations, though on a wider scale, were inspired by the hounding of the Cherkess and Chechens forced to migrate to the Ottoman empire in the 1860s.

Important also is the psychological heritage of the Caucasian wars on the Russian mind. No other wars have left such a profound and long-lasting impression on Russian culture and folklore, not even the Napoleonic wars. The Romantic movement — the golden age of Russian literature and poetry — was imbued with the epic tales and pathos of the conquest. The most celebrated poems of Pushkin and Lermontov, and some of Tolstoy’s fiction, were set in the craggy landscape of the Caucasus. Every educated Russian knows them by heart from childhood, and their impact runs much deeper than any of Kipling’s tales of the North West Frontier for the British. Since 1783 Russian élites — grand-dukes, illustrious generals, famed poets and political exiles — have trodden the Caucasian mountain paths in battle or in search of poetic inspiration, both enthused and repelled by the Mountaineers’ uncompromising and wild love of freedom, a freedom totally alien to the Russian sense of order. It was almost as if the grandeur of Russia had to be built on the ruins of the Caucasus. A Russian lullaby — a poem by Lermontov — sung by mothers to their newborn sons, depicts a cruel Chechen creeping along the bank of the Terek river and sharpening his dagger to kill the child. Perhaps more famous still is Pushkin’s poem *The Caucasian Prisoner*, written in 1821 glorifying General Ermolov.<sup>18</sup> There he heralds the imminent downfall of the Caucasus and exhorts the Mountaineers to bow their heads in allegiance to Ermolov while shedding a sentimental tear for the doomed beauty of Circassian women. He predicts, mistakenly, that the sons of the Caucasus will betray the traditions of their ancestors and lay down their weapons without resisting, as nobody could doubt the power of the Russian sword. Four years later the North Caucasus was ablaze. He also proclaimed that shortly the Russian traveller would be able to explore the Caucasian mountains and canyons without danger. A century and a half later, from the 1970s onwards, thousands of Russians are emigrating from Daghestan and Chechnia unable to cope with the xenophobia of the local population. Pushkin had a magic tongue, his words flow with convincing ease, but he was not politically a discriminating judge, and one could well imagine him in other times writing eulogies of Stalin. To praise Ermolov to the Caucasians shows the same delicacy of feeling as some-one today commending the prowess of Saddam Hussein to the Kurds. On the other hand, Tolstoy’s novel *Haji Murat*, perhaps the bitterest judgment of Russian conduct during the

war, was banned for many years under the tsars' regime. In 1988 a production of it by the Avar National Theatre was forbidden by Soviet censorship, an unwitting tribute to Tolstoy's talent.<sup>19</sup>

The legacy of two centuries of warfare is heavy. The North Caucasus remains a symbol both of Russia's political failure and its moral failure, the latter factor perhaps more difficult to come to terms with. This is why many Soviet official historians, even today under *glasnost*, continue to pretend that the Caucasian wars, the expulsion of the Cherkess and the Stalin deportations were all due to the misdeeds and banditry of the Caucasians themselves.<sup>20</sup> What is more, they try to impose their ideas on the North Caucasians. After all, it was only in 1990 that the decision to dismantle the statue of Ermolov in Grozny was approved. It may therefore prove particularly difficult for the Russians to accept disengagement from the North Caucasus, more so than from the Baltic Republics, Transcaucasia and even Central Asia. Politically, the Mountaineers remained undaunted. In 1943, when the deportation of the North Caucasians was being planned by the Communist Party, the First Secretary of the Daghestani *obkom*, Danialov, felt confident enough to threaten Stalin with a general uprising in Daghestan if any attempts were made to banish his nation, a courageous action which probably saved the Daghestanis from the Siberian camps. The Chechens and Ingush have returned from exile, strengthened by their ordeal, many having shed all fear and shrugged off efforts to intimidate them. It is said that their vanguards, which left the camps immediately on Stalin's death to reclaim their villages, were preceded by a wind of panic among the Russian rural population. The Chechens proudly say that only in 1979 did the last *abrek*, bandit of honour, die in combat defending the freedom of his mountains with a rifle in his hand. This old man, Khazaki Magomedov, protected by the local population, had been fighting since the Second World War 'sowing death and terror' among Soviet officials. He was also a Sufi; when he was killed, a small Quran was found on his breast.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps this is the way others will fight and die before the Caucasus is free again.

## NOTES

1. Afanasii Nikitin (died in 1472) travelled to India and Persia through the Gulf straits and wrote *Khozkenii za tri moria* (Travels Beyond Three Seas), a classic of old Russian literature.
2. Karl Marx, *The Eastern Question: Letters written 1853-1856 dealing with the events of the Crimean War*, edited by Eleanor Marx Aveling and Edward Aveling, London, 1897.
3. The cooperation of Ali Mitaev with the Communist Party is particularly questionable. Recent information from private Chechen sources indicate that Ali Mitaev had a regular 'army' of some 5,000-10,000 men ready to join Gotsinskii's uprising in 1921. It is rumoured that even today the *utnqat of Ali Mitaev* could still call 5,000 men to arms. For the Chechens membership of the Communist Party, in the 1920s ever. It is possible to belong to the Party and be an active member of a Sufi *tariqat*. If a split in loyalty occurs, the *tariqat* always wins.
4. Najmuddin Samurskii, *Dagestan*, Moscow, Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1925, pp. 131-2.
5. Najmuddin Samurskii, *op. cit.*, p. 132.
6. Tazhuddin Aliev, 'Ispoved' veruiushchego', *Sovetskii Dagestan*, no. 3, 1989, pp. 26-27.
7. For A. Ippolitov's comments, see *Sbomik Svedenii o Kavkazskikh Gortsakh*, Tiflis, 1869, no. II, pp. 1-17, or the French translation provided by A. Bennigsen and C. Lemerrier-Quellejey in *Le soufi et le commissaire. Les confréries musulmanes en URSS*, Paris, Seuil, 1986, pp. 238-44. A.M. Tutayev was commenting on the Batal Haji *wird* of the Kunta Haji *tariqat* in *Reaktionnaia sekta Batal Khadzhi*, Grozny, 1968, p. 27.

8. Platon Zubov, *Kartina Kavkazskogo kraia prinadlezhashchego Rossii i sopredel'nykli emu zemel'*, St Petersburg, published by A. Vingeber, 1834, 2 vols.
9. Platon Zubov, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 12-13. Zubov explained the limitations of the native population of Transcaucasia, including the Armenians, by the fact that they had been submitted to Ottoman and Iranian despotism.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
12. *Op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 173-6.
13. On the Ubykhs, see George Dumezil's remarkable book, *Documents anatoliens sur les langues et les traditions du Caucase*, Paris, Institut d'Ethnologie, 1965, published for the centenary of the Ubykhs' exodus,
14. The Cherkess are divided between three national territories: the Adyghe Autonomous Oblast (AO), the Karachay-Cherkess AO, and the Kabardino-Balkar ASSR. For more information, see Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire*, London: C. Hurst, 1985.
15. This of course was already noted by Lenin who stated that the degree of Russian liberalism must be tested on the nationality question. With the exception of the North Caucasian Mountaineers the only other Muslim nation of the Soviet Union which has similar misgivings about the Russian democrats' ultimate national policy are the Volga Tatars.
16. Information provided in an article by Sergei Khovanski, 'Afghanistan: The Bleeding Wound', featured in *Detente*, Spring 1986 (published by Leeds and Birmingham Universities)
17. It should be remembered, however, that the coverage of the Gulf war in the Soviet press was extremely uneven and that the North Caucasians had no possibility of assessing the situation. Many articles and radio broadcasts dwelt at length on the supposed destruction of the holy places of Najaf and Kerbela by the Allied forces. While the central Moscow press carried fairly objective analysis from time to time, this was not so with the reports published in the republican press of the Soviet Muslim republics, all reproduced from TASS or other Soviet official agencies' sources. One could venture that Moscow deliberately manipulated public opinion in the Muslim republics to provoke a strong reaction in favour of Iraq in order to justify its post-war support of Saddam Hussein with the Allies as bowing to popular pressure.
18. Lermontov's lullaby is entitled *Kazach'ia kolybel'naia pesnia* (A Cossack Cradle Song), *Spi mladenets moi prekrasnyi . . .*; and Pushkin's *Kavkazskii pletmik*.
19. Mentioned by A. Khalilov in his article 'Shamil' v istorii i pamiati naroda'. *Sovetskii Dagestan*, 1988, no. 5. pp. 31-7.
20. Vinogradov, Blied and Bokov, to name only a few.
21. See Dimitri Bezuglyi, 'S pozitsii boitsa', *Zhurnalists*, (Moscow), no. 1, 1981, pp. 46-8; and Alexandre Bennigsen's comments in *Mystics and Commissars Sufism in the Soviet Union*, London: C. Hurst, 1985, pp. 101-2 (co-author S. Enders Wimbush). The pride in this event was conveyed to the author in private conversations with independent Chechen informants.

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Circassian World is an independent non-profit web site dedicated to create an informational resource for Circassians and non-Circassians who wish to learn more about the heritage, culture, and history of the Adyghe-Abkhaz people. For more information regarding Circassian World, please contact [info@circassianworld.com](mailto:info@circassianworld.com)

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