

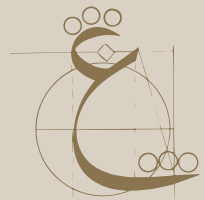


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06



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Kadim is that no one knows what came before.

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JOHN COLARUSSO*

ABSTRACT

Based on a comparative analysis of the Ottoman and Muscovite diplomatic correspondence, this book presents a historical account of the North Caucasus peoples from 1555 to 1605, when Russia expanded into the region. The North Caucasus becomes a contested borderland, with the Ottomans, Safavids, Crimean Khanate, and Muscovy competing for influence externally, and the Nogays, Cossacks, Dagestanis, and Circassians internally. This elaborate interplay of cooptation, persuasion, loyalty, and betrayal eventually led to the Ottomans and Dagestani allies expelling the Muscovites from the region.

Keywords: North Caucasus, Ottomans, Muscovy, Dagestan, Borderland.

ÖZ

Bu kitap, Kuzey Kafkasya haklarının Rusya'nın bölge içlerine yayılmaya başladığı 1555-1605 dönemindeki tarihini, Osmanlı ve Moskova arşivlerindeki diplomatik yazışmaları karşılaştırmalı perspektifle ele alarak ortaya koymaktadır. Kuzey Kafkasya, dış aktörler olarak resme dahil olan Osmanlılar, Safeviler, Kırım Hanlığı ve Moskova'nın politik ihtirasları arasında bir sınır bölgesiydi ve Nogaylar, Kazaklar (Kosak), Dağıstanlılar ve Çerkesler de bu çatışmanın dahili unsurlarıydı. İşbirliği ve çatışma, boyun eğdirme ve isyan, sadakat ve ihanet temalı bu girift statüko, Osmanlıların, Dağıstanlı müttelikleriyle birlikte Rusları bölgeden çıkarmasıyla nihayet bulmuştu.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kuzey Kafkasya, Osmanlılar, Moskova, Dağıstan, Sınır Bölgesi.



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EDINBURGH STUDIES ON THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE



THE NORTH CAUCASUS BORDERLAND

Between Muscovy and the Ottoman Empire, 1555–1605

MURAT YAŞAR

One difficulty confronting a scholar (of whatever discipline) in dealing with the Caucasus is the absence of any significant history. History begins with the Russian onslaught of the late 18th to early 19th centuries. As crucial as this generations-long war was for the fate of the various peoples involved, it fails to offer any substantial sense of the sources of these peoples and their habits, customs, and hopes that must have formed them over the centuries. The early 19th-century mercantile account of Taitbout de Marigny, offers some sense of the lives of Circassians who dwelt along the eastern shore of the Black Sea, but it is concerned as much with navigation as it is with the Circassians.¹ Mayor, Colarusso, and Saunders have established that Circassians and other Caucasians had dealings with Classical Greece but offers no details about the nature of the “states” from which these contacts arose.² Following the example

of Herodotus writing about the Scythians, one might hope for an account from a literate and attested nation that had dealings with the various Caucasian peoples, even if these dealings were colored by the values of the attesting source. Ideally, one might seek to balance such inherent bias by the attestation from a second source. This is precisely what Dr. Yaşar has done in this ground-breaking book. Having acquired a command of Russian sufficient to read the 16th century archives along with the skills to wade through the Ottoman archives from this period, he has provided us with a detailed and balanced account of a history of the North Caucasus from the mid 16th century to the early 17th. The picture that emerges is startling in its complexity and violence at the same time that it is sadly familiar given the current war in Ukraine and Russia’s history of expansion.

The book begins with a list of illustrations, acknowledgements, and notes on transliteration and spelling. This is followed by an introduction that sets out sources, methodology, terminology, and an overview of the structure of the book. Noteworthy is the use of ‘Muscovy’

- 1 Taitbout de Marigny - Jacques Victor Edouard, *Three Voyages in the Black Sea to the Coast of Circassia, etc.* (London: John Murray, 1837).
- 2 Adrienne Mayor et al., “Making Sense of Nonsense Inscriptions Associated with Amazons and Scythians on Athenian Vases”, *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 83/3 (2014), 447–93.

to refer to the Russia of the period, because it is only beginning to expand. There are then six chapters plus a conclusion. (The chapters are labeled with a metaphor of the Milky Way. This is taken from my book in a tale where the world tree presents the god of the forge with a baby Milky Way, which will serve as a warrior's guide on moonless nights, but at times will disappear.³) There are nine figures and two maps. There is an appendix of selected Ottoman sources and one of Russian sources. Appendix 3 is a glossary of terms and appendix 4 is a chronology. The book concludes with a bibliography and an index.

The first chapter is remarkable for what it does not mention, or rather, what the sources do not mention. The Circassians are covered in some detail, from the west to the east, the Janeyts, Kemirgoys (who continue the ethnonym of the Cimmerians of Antiquity), Besleneys, to the Kabardians (always noted as Kabardinians, from Russian *Kabardinski*) who continue the ethnonym of the Kabar tribe of the Khazar Empire). One may note that the Janeyts no longer seem to exist. Their fate may be a topic for future research. The Abkhaz ('Abkhazis' as cited, p. 30), Abazas, and Ubykhs are noted in passing. Reference to them appears in the Ottoman sources, but being south of the Caucasus, they are absent from the Russian ones. The caste-like system of social rank of the Circassians is noted, as is the similar one of the Abkhaz. Some of the Circassian terms of social rank mentioned (p. 27) are recognizable: *pshihua* is *pshi-khwa* prince-mighty, strong (no longer used), *pshim yapsh* is *pshi-m y-a-pshi* is prince-oblique.case possessive-plural-prince, so "Prince of Princes." *tlakotlesh* is properly *tlkhwaq'otl'esh* which is *tlkhwa-q'we-tl'e-sh* 'born-free-man', the *-sh* suffix is no longer used. Other terms are less clear, suggesting some social change.

What is most remarkable about the survey is the ethnic groups that are not mentioned, namely the Ossetians and Chechen - Ingush (pp. 31, 36), to the east of the Kabardians, and the Karachai-Balkar, up in the highland pastures of the Circassian zone. Clearly, there has been some major ethnic movements in the past 500 years. The Daghestanis enter the scene as state-like groups, the largest being that of the *shamkhal* of Tarku, made up of Kumyks and Laks (usually written 'Lakks'), the Kaytaks, made up of Dargins, the Avars, a mixed group, and the Tabasarans.

Perhaps even more remarkable is the strategic situation that the Circassians faced. The entire North Caucasus was considered to be the territory of the Crimean Khanate, a surviving fragment of the Golden Horde. The Ottomans intruded into this early picture to a limited extent with holdings at the mouth of the Sea of Azov, Kefe (Caffa). The Crimean Chingisids (descendants of Chingis Khan) viewed the Circassians as prey and themselves as exclusive predators. They routinely raided Circassian lands, seizing booty, including slaves. Their depredations were beyond effective Ottoman control at this stage, the mid 16th century. This vulnerable situation predisposed the Circassians to seek an ally to the north that could save them. So, initially they were well disposed to Muscovy's contacts.

At this time, the powers in the North Caucasus, apart from the Crimean Khanate, are marginal, being the Ottoman Porte and the Duchy of Muscovy. What happened over the next chapters is a classic case of filling a power vacuum. Moscow, having seized the Khanate of Kazan (1552) and that of Astrakhan (1556) began a sustained but gradual penetration

3 John Colarusso, *Nart Sagas from the Caucasus, Myths and Legends from the Circassians, Abazas, Abkhaz, and Ubykhs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

southward. The Ottomans saw the Crimean Khanate as a vassal state and sought to articulate a coherent policy that incorporated the North Caucasus, on the assumption that it was naturally an area of Ottoman control despite the Crimean presence. The Russians sought influence in the region, presenting themselves to the Circassians as the bulwark that could stand against Crimea, but trying at all costs to avoid direct conflict with the Ottomans. Muscovy enlisted Cossacks, who had emerged in the steppes just north of the region, to do its dirty work and to offer it deniability. If the Porte complained to Moscow of some Cossack raid, Moscow simply denied any knowledge or control over these marauders, so-called. Of course, it was Muscovy that armed and sustained the Cossacks and even supplemented their numbers with musketeers when forts were built in the region to base such forces. If the Porte demanded that Russia take down a fort, then it would oblige (although it was difficult to know at times if this had been done), part of its effort to avoid outright conflict with the Ottomans.

The Ottomans seemed to have abandoned their steppe identity and seem unable to articulate a coherent policy toward Muscovy's seizure of Kazan and Astrakhan, a penetration of the steppe zone. Astrakhan, at the mouth of the Volga, and hence a potential base from which the Caspian and North Caucasus both could be controlled, was the settlement that the Porte considered as worthy of retaking. Facing the Habsburgs in Eastern Europe and the Safavids of Iran in the east, the Ottomans were no longer really a steppe nation, but rather one that straddled two major cultural zones, a position that placed heavy demands on its resources and precluded any simple and direct absorption of the North Caucasus. The retaking of Astrakhan, therefore, with the exception of one disastrous attempt, remained a vague idea rather than a solid strategic imperative. But, the one failed attempt served to bring the Ottomans into direct contact with the peoples of the North Caucasus and to begin the process of converting them from small, geographically marginal nations into a borderland. The supply line for the Astrakhan campaign ran through the Circassian territory, along with some contact with the shamkhal at the mouth of the Terek. The campaign failed for a number of reasons, but it marked the start of efforts by the Ottomans to gain the allegiance of the North Caucasians. The Circassians were the main target. Inducements ranged from bribes (*annuities*) of money to coats of arms, fancy cloaks, to titles, and even marriages of daughters. The most notable of the last is that of "Maria" to Ivan IV (*Ivan the Terrible*) arranged by her Kabardian father, one Temriuk (*temir-i-quo* Temir-his-son).

The poles of power eventually consisted not only of the ones already mentioned, the Ottomans, Muscovy, the Crimean Khanate, the Cossacks, the Safavids, but also the nomadic Nogays, who split into Greater and Lesser Hordes, with the former aligned with Moscow and the latter with the Porte. The Lesser Horde was weakened when they decided to attack the Crimean Khanate, thereby suffering a devastating defeat. One can even consider the Kabardians divided into two sharply rival clans, the Kaytuks and the Idars, (the latter the clan of Temriuk), as effectively forming two fronts as well, with the Kaytuk Kabardians and the Western Circassians favorable to the Ottomans and the Eastern Kabardians to Muscovy. One must add to this mess a dynastic feud over succession among the Gireys, rulers of the Crimea. The results of this chaos were three-fold.

Since the strategic needs and goals of the North Caucasians were largely internal, along with the goal of ceasing raids from the Crimean Khanate, the strategic needs of outside powers were never met with any degree of authentic commitment on the part of local elites. Gifts were taken, allegiances given or sometimes exacted by threats, only to be ignored or even replaced in short order by similar overtures from the opposing power.

This fundamentally superficial dynamic of recruitment had two other effects. It enhanced existing rivalries or animosities among the elites of the North Caucasian peoples. The Circassians, with their elaborate social hierarchy were particularly vulnerable to this sort of social distortion. It effectively split the Kabardian region in two, between the Kaytuks (*kayt-i-quo* kayt-his-son, not to be confused with the Daghestani Kaytaks) and the Idars.

The other effect was to preclude any serious efforts to pull together as a people to resist the pressures and efforts of the larger powers. The social result within a polity, Circassian or Daghestanian, was a sort of internal chaos that mimicked the strategic chaos on the larger international scale. These three effects constitute the formation of a borderland, one of the main conditions that this excellent book explicates.

The flux and chaos of this region gradually drifted toward a resolution. Eventually, the Russians ceased their efforts to avoid antagonizing the Ottomans. The Russians stopped handing out inducements and finally invaded Daghestan. In this they characteristically overextended themselves. At the request of the shamkhal, whose stronghold had been seized by the Russians, the Ottomans organized a force along with the Daghestanis and drove the Russians out of the North Caucasus. It was then that the balancing acts and the local political strife ceased and the North Caucasus became an Ottoman protectorate if not a full fledged province. The dynamics of balance and chaos finally tilted in favour of one of the actors, the strongest one, the Ottomans.

In chapter six, Dr. Yaşar has put together sketches of the lives of five “Narts”.⁴ One example, that of the Kabardian Solokh, with daughters married to the Crimean Khan and to the Daghestani shamkhal, shows that the elites did not take the blandishments of Muscovy or the Porte out of greed or a desire for a superficial status, but rather as a balancing policy (pp. 181-186). He was able to hold on to power and became “the dominant Kabardinian prince at the turn of the century.” Another example is Kazy of the Kaytuks. He invited two sons of Temriuk to a feast, Mamstriuk and Domanuk, both his rivals and both fervent supporter of the links to Muscovy established by their father. After the feast he put them both in chains and eventually had them murdered. If one is familiar with the Caucasian traditions, *adat*, as it is called, (*khebza* in Circassian), the host - guest relationship, though temporary, is virtually sacred. A host is even expected to give his life to protect a guest. I can think of no greater violation of *khebza* than the murder of these two *psbis*. This would have triggered a blood feud lasting seven generations. If the account is accurate, and there is little reason to doubt it, this would be the greatest debasement of Circassian culture imaginable.

4 "Hero" in the epics attested in the North Caucasus; Colarusso, *Nart Sagas from the Caucasus*; John Colarusso - Tamirlan Salbiev (ed.), *Tales of the Narts, Ancient Myths and Legends of the Ossetians*, trans. Walter May (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Having been driven out of the North Caucasus in 1605, the Russian would begin a return toward the end of the 18th century under Peter the Great, once again bringing chaos and war. One can now see why the Circassians turned to the Ottomans for help in their war with the Tsarist forces.⁵ That the Ottomans could only offer them refuge from a near genocide reflected the weakness of the Porte. What restraint Moscow showed in the 16th century would be a distant memory in the 18th and 19th centuries. There would be no more epistles professing respect and affection of the Russian ruler to the Sultan. The Cossacks would ride again and the Russians would simply push into the region, despite meeting some of the stiffest resistance a small nation would ever mount against a major power. By 1864, after 101 years of warfare, the majority of the surviving Circassians would be sent into the Ottoman Empire in what is probably the first modern ethnic cleansing.⁶

One can only hope that Dr. Yaşar, with his unique ability to read both the Russian and Ottoman archives, will use his skills to illuminate more of the history of the North Caucasus.

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5 Walter Richmond, *The Circassian Genocide* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

6 Paul B. Henze, *The North Caucasus Barrier: Circassian Resistance to Russia*, ed. Marie Bennigns Broxup (London: Hurst & Co., 1996).