



From Conquest to Deportation: The North Caucasus under Russian Rule

Teuvo Laitila

To cite this article: Teuvo Laitila (2019) From Conquest to Deportation: The North Caucasus under Russian Rule, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 34:2, 409-412, DOI: [10.1080/13537903.2019.1628397](https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2019.1628397)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2019.1628397>



Published online: 08 Jul 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

From Conquest to Deportation: The North Caucasus under Russian Rule,
by Jeronim Perović, London: Hurst & Co., 2018, xxiv + 466 pp., £65.00 (hb),
ISBN 978-1-849-04894-1

The present work by Jeronim Perović—Professor of Eastern European History at the University of Zurich—covers diverse attempts of Russian/Soviet authorities to subordinate the peoples of the North Caucasus (Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, Karachais) between the mid-nineteenth century and the Second World War when they were deported to Central Asia. The study, a revised version of the author's German book (2015), is based on extensive archival and published primary sources.

Unlike many similar works, Perović's study straddles the 'divide' of the October Revolution. He does not treat pre-Soviet history merely as an introduction to the 'more serious' Soviet period, but pays due attention to the preceding 60 years. Moreover, he argues that Russian and Soviet modernisation (e.g. industrialisation, urbanisation, schooling) meant both oppressing, challenging or refuting local traditions and social structures and new opportunities—the latter exemplified by diaries of local (male) potentates (xxii). Late in the book, Perović explains the use of diaries, pointing out that they may illuminate the "often . . . manifold causes that were due to a concurrence of external circumstances with specific realities within society and personal circumstances" (290). This might have been stated earlier and in more detail.

Perović's Introduction raises three questions: (1) what Russian and Soviet understanding informed official policy in the North Caucasus; (2) how the North Caucasian peoples perceived that policy and reacted to it; (3) how these peoples adapted to the changing realities and negotiated new positions and identities (10).

The first four chapters deal with the eras of imperial Russia and of the Russian revolution and civil war. Perović's view is (chapter 1) that, initially, the imperial government appreciated peaceful conditions and acceptance of the tsarist rule and did not try to transform local social structures. Russians preferred to negotiate and ally with local people, so that the latter's leaders considered Russia as a partner, not as a colonial power. When the locals understood that they were not regarded as equals, there was organised resistance under the leadership of Imam Shamil, which was suppressed by 1859.

During the following years, tsarist policy focused on the forced migration of various mountain peoples, mainly the Cherkess, to the Ottoman Empire (chapter 2). The exiled may have numbered as many as a million, with some tens of thousands dying because of epidemics and other calamities. Respectively, Armenian and Slavic Christians from the Ottoman Empire were resettled in the Russian borderlands. These transfers triggered more resistance, in which religion, particularly that of Sufi brotherhoods, was prominent, giving rise to the notion of it as the root of all North Caucasian revolts. A substantial part of this chapter presents the native perspective, through the memories and career of the Ossete-born general of the Russian army, Musa Kundukhov, of how it felt to be 'between two worlds'.

Chapter 3 traces the period between the 1860s and the Russian revolutions in 1917. The Russian government perceived the North Caucasus as a 'savage' world and attempted to 'civilise'—culturally 'Russificate', as the author puts it—local people and turn them into loyal imperial citizens. Initially, the government (ab)used local potentates to govern local matters. It also recurrently resorted to force to 'unify' the North Caucasians with the rest of the empire. Local reactions varied between revolt and co-operation.

The fourth chapter stays with the Russian revolutions of 1917 and their aftermath, the civil war. The term ‘mayhem’ might capture the Russian perception of the territory in these years. At grassroots level, the collapse of the central power resulted in a power struggle, with both locals and others (e.g. Whites, Bolsheviks, soldiers returning from the front) fighting over authority and disagreeing on state formation and the role of religion (Islam). Politically, the sharia-based state may be interpreted as an attempt to transcend tribal and ethnic boundaries (117) and to ‘unify’ North Caucasian Muslims. To accomplish this, part of the religious leadership proclaimed, in September 1919, the North Caucasus Emirate. For practical reasons, the Bolsheviks supported it until the following spring.

Chapters 5–10 discuss the Soviet rule when the area was considered to be backward and in need of total transformation, not only regarding social but also human structures, with the question of who should be raised to the status of ‘Soviet people’. However, this did not begin immediately after the civil war, because Bolshevik power was then still weak. Therefore, at least the Chechens rebelling against the Bolshevik rule in the early 1920s lived with the ‘illusion of freedom’, as the chapter title puts it, before the North Caucasus was divided into small administrative units and the secret police eliminated the Muslim religious leadership or “clergy” (147) around 1923. The chapter ends with a ‘case study’ of the Chechen Sheikh Ali Mitaev who co-operated with the Soviets but was executed in October 1925. Perović argues that, contrary to what some Chechen and Western authors claim, the suppression of the rebels was not “a prelude to ‘genocide’, an attempt to ... [systematically annihilate] the Chechen people and their heritage”, but an act of disarmament, similar to that taking place elsewhere in the Caucasus, aiming at consolidating the power of the still weak Bolshevik state and starting the modernisation (Soviet-style) of the territory (183).

In chapter 6, Perović deals with the modernisation during the 1920s, including secular education, industrialisation, and the emancipation of women. To ‘sell’ these ideas to local people, Bolshevik leaders resorted to *korenizatsiia*, “promoting non-Russian minorities and their cultures and languages” (14) and local people (186). However, modernisation efforts faced significant problems, particularly in the Chechnyan countryside—for several reasons. The Chechens were the most illiterate people among the Caucasians (many did not even speak Russian); the area had the lowest degree of industrialisation; the communication system was poor or entirely lacking; the traditional establishment (village assemblies, often headed by the still existing Islamic authorities) was hard to displace. Thus, the Bolsheviks had to adapt to local conditions, which in practice meant more power for some powerful locals and not much change. In 1928, on the eve of collectivisation, around 40 ‘sects’, 675 public mosques, and 2,000 prayer houses (199–200) were reported still to exist in Chechnya and Islamic schools (180) outnumbered Soviet schools (105). The chapter ends with an overview of Abdurrahman Avtorkhanov’s memoirs, a young Chechen functionary in Grozny, and a detailed history of the trials and errors in national policy efforts to Sovietise the Northern Caucasus.

Chapter 7 turns to collectivisation, officially launched in late 1929 to replace the traditional agricultural system and its social structures with *kolkhozes*. Peasants having some wealth or local authority were declared ‘enemies of the people’ and killed or deported to labour camps. Perović sees this as an urban industrial assault on the countryside, where ‘reason’ tried to overcome ‘superstitious worldviews’ and religion (227–228). However, the schedule for forming *kolkhozes* was so tight that the sowing failed, leaving not much to harvest. Nevertheless, the Bolshevik leaders (including some locals) first published favourable statistics of collectivisation progression (up to 97% by

February 1930 in some regions) and later demanded that crop quota be met. This was impossible; thus, to ‘explain’ the shortage, some were accused of ‘sabotage’ and shot or deported. This incited local armed resistance. Rumours spread about the restoration of the sharia state with Turkish support (which, given contemporary Kemalist religious policy, was, of course, nonsense), resulting in Soviet security troops confiscating arms. When this did not ‘pacify’ the area, the Soviet leadership slowed the pace of collectivisation, but increased its use of brute force against the rebels.

Perović insists (chapter 8) that the deportation of Chechens and others in 1943/1944 was in no way predetermined by the unrest of the 1920s and 1930s. He states that, “in Moscow’s sight”, the North Caucasus was not a particular security problem before the outbreak of the Second World War (262). The main reason for the deportations was the “extraordinary conditions during the war” (283). However, he then attributes some link to deportation and the early Soviet years by arguing that the war “created the opportunity to impose order once and for all on a region that seemed very difficult to control” (284) and to eliminate “‘obsolete’ [e.g. non-Soviet] traditions and customs” (315). Of course, official Soviet reasons were expressed differently, for example, in the accusation that North Caucasians—and others—had collaborated with the Germans. Whether the Chechen deportation was genocide (as the first ‘president’ of Chechnya, Dzhokhar Dudaev, argued in the early 1990s), those arguing in favour point out that over 20% (130,000) of deportees died either during the journey or within the following year (284). Therefore, it would be plausible, although anachronistic, to speak of ‘ethnic cleansing’ (cf. 287).

Chapter 9 gives an account of the war from the perspective of the Chechen Khasan Israilov “who led the armed revolt against Soviet rule for more than two years up to his death in December 1944 [after the Chechen deportation in early 1944]” (288) but was silenced in post-war Soviet historiography (although rehabilitated in 1991). As he may not fit any stereotype—he “envisaged the creation of an independent state under a German protectorate”, “chose the fight for freedom over a party career” or was actually “a fabrication by the NKVD [Russian acronym for the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs]” (292)—Israilov’s life (if authentic, see 295) is an example of how personal history and experiences are used to create a discourse in which evidently unconnected events are linked together to make up a continuous account of ‘Chechen resistance’. According to Israilov, his great-grandfather had already fought against the “Russian colonisers” (300) and the idea of this ‘common enemy’ evidently justified his co-operation with the Germans.

The last chapter briefly deals with the destinies of the deported people, considered disloyal by the Soviet authorities. They were divided into tightly controlled small groups and forced to work and stay where they had been settled. There were, especially in the early years, “protests in which religious authorities played an important role” (316). Nothing is said about these, however; they evidently ‘withered away’ by the early 1960s with the return of most of those exiled who had learnt, among other things, to speak Russian and to rethink traditional gender roles, while also strengthening their ethnic consciousness and separateness from the Russians. In Chechnya, this was nourished by, for example, the taboo of discussing deportation in public (suspended in late 1989), allocating higher positions to Russians (who represented less than a quarter of the population), and the lack of jobs for Chechens, resulting in “tens of thousands of unemployed young Chechen males in the 1980s” (318). These people formed the core of armed resistance in the 1990s and early 2000s. After 2009, when President Putin declared the end of military operations, the situation apparently finally stabilised.

Perović ends the chapter by asking why the ‘myth’ (understood in the Barthesian sense as a communicative symbol) of the ‘eternal’ enmity between Chechens and Russians was so appealing in raising (against all the odds) the Chechens in arms against Russia. This is a good question which would deserve a separate chapter rather than just the statement that “at least part of the population were prepared to attribute such symbolic power to myth ... as promoted by charismatic leaders such as Dudaev” (324). This ‘myth’ is an example of politically motivated categorisation of historical narratives being used to (emotionally) mobilise people for particular purposes. Although Perović does not put it this way, his book seems to suggest this interpretation.

In summary, this work is a detailed study of Chechen–Russian interplay and encounter. It focuses on sources, not theorising whether there are such things as ‘real’ events rather than discursive constructions. Perović seems to think it plausible to speak about historical reality and to consider humans as ‘blood and flesh’, not merely linguistic constructs. While theoretical discussion on what history is and how it can be written is necessary, the kind of ‘realism’ which Perović’s work advocates is also needed.

Finally, Perović’s transliteration of non-Russian terms and names in their Russianised form is not altogether satisfactory or, as he admits, not consistent (xix). While there is probably not an optimal solution, at least some terms and names would be easier to recognize in some other form. Similarly, the ‘retransliteration’ of names which are established in English (e.g. Beria v. Beria, Chechnia v. Chechnya) and the use of the term ‘Muslim’ to mean both follower of Islam and Islamic people of the North Caucasus are questionable. Some maps might help with geography for those not too familiar with towns and villages in the North Caucasus.

Teuvo Laitila

*Department of Orthodox Theology,
University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland*

 teuvo.laitila@uef.fi

© 2019 Teuvo Laitila

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2019.1628397>



Becoming Better Muslims: Religious Authority and Ethical Improvement in Aceh, Indonesia, by David Kloos, Princeton, NJ & Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2018, *Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics*, 212 pp., US\$77.00, £60.00 (hb), US\$27.95, £22.00 (pb), ISBN 978–0–691–17664–2 (hb), ISBN 978–0–691–17665–9 (pb), ISBN 978–1–400–88783–5 (eb)

This concise and informative book on Muslims provides a detailed background of Islam in Aceh, Indonesia, and then turns towards an anthropological study in a few villages. The author approaches the latter through a central question that has preoccupied the field. In the context of a widespread return to religion, anthropologists of Islam are locked into correcting Western assumptions of what this return means for ordinary Muslims. Against Western public perceptions that Muslims are either too radical or too conservative, anthropologists seek to offer more nuanced perspectives. Following Saba Mahmood (2005), one option is to show that Muslims are turning to piety through the cultivation of moral selves. The turn to piety, it is claimed, ignores the imposition of