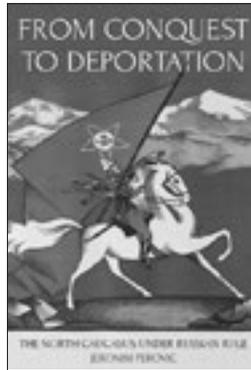


A welcome addition to North Caucasus scholarship

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From Conquest to Deportation: The North Caucasus under Russian Rule. By: Jeronim Perovic. Publisher: Oxford University Press. Oxford, United Kingdom, 2018.

Chechnya and the North Caucasus have been regions subjected to a war of stereotypes in recent years. In the 1990s western media often waxed lyrical about the “freedom-loving resistance fighters” of the small Chechen nation, resisting valiantly against the Russian juggernaut in the latest episode of their centuries-old quest for liberation. Russian media, meanwhile, took the view they were a group of terrorists and backward Islamic radicals whose savage customs threatened the Russian state itself.



Neither of these viewpoints was new, but both have an uneasy amount of echoes in the scholarship of the region, including works examining the tsarist and Soviet periods. It is against this backdrop that Jeronim Perovic's *From Conquest to Deportation: The North Caucasus under Russian Rule*

sets out to challenge the stereotypes and to give a new view of the relationship between Russian/Soviet leadership and the peoples of the empire's southern fringe.

Setting the stage

With that in mind, Perovic undertakes a thorough review of the roughly

80 years between the final conquest of the North Caucasus under the tsarist

empire and the wholesale deportation of many of its peoples under Joseph Stalin in 1943–44. While Perovic touches on the entirety of the region, he focuses on the Chechens in particular – a fitting choice given that the “struggle for freedom” narrative has been most widespread in their historiography following the surge of public interest during the First and Second Chechen Wars in the 1990s and 2000s.

The real **value** of the first chapters is the examination of how exactly the Russian Empire ruled the region for the half-century between its conquest and imperial collapse.

The first two chapters, devoted to the imperial conquest of the region, set the stage for what is to follow. Following various unsuccessful forays in the 16th to 18th centuries, Russia fully devotes itself to the annexation and subjugation of the entire Caucasus at the start of the 19th century. Having secured Georgia by treaty and modern-day Armenia and Azerbaijan through war with Persia, Russia can now focus on the encircled North Caucasus. We see a Russia that attempts first to acquire these territories through negotiation with tribal leaders for wilful union with the empire. The

success of this strategy is entirely dependent upon the nature of the specific society the Russians interacted with: for the Ossetians and Kabardins, ruled by aristocratic princes, securing them was fairly straightforward. The Chechens and Circassians presented a different challenge: fragmented clan-based societies without any central authority through which St Petersburg can establish their subjugation. As a result, decades of war ensued, only ending with mass deportation (of the Circassians) and emigration (of the Chechens and Dagestanis, under the legendary resistance leader Imam Shamil). The failure to grasp the intricacies of Chechen society and the different approaches taken to successfully deal with them was a recurring theme over the next century.

The real value of the first chapters, however, is the examination of how exactly the Russian Empire ruled the region for the half-century between its conquest and imperial collapse. After forcefully dispersing another major uprising in 1877, Russia embarked on a policy of segregated development. Towns and industry were established, including the nascent oil business of Grozny, Chechnya’s main fortress-turned-capital. Russians and Cossacks are brought in to settle in the region and to participate in its development. The locals are pointedly excluded, being expressly forbidden from living in Chechnya’s major towns and constituting only a small minority of the workers in local industry. The vast majority of the indigenous pop-

ulation remains in rural *auls* (villages), where education and literacy levels were dire: according to the 1897 census only 0.43 per cent of Chechens were able to read Russian, while 97 per cent listed farmer as their occupation. This apartheid system contributed a great deal towards socioeconomic and ethnic animosity, as the landholdings of wealthy Russians, Cossacks, and a tiny minority of the Chechen elite continued to expand at the cost of the masses – a situation that would contribute to the heavy fighting seen in the region in the wake of the First World War.

It is in the next section where Perovic offers his greatest contribution that significantly enhances our existing understanding of the North Caucasus; specifically, his thorough expose of the region during the Russian Civil War and the short-lived North Caucasian Mountain Republic (NCMR) that was established during this period. We are presented

with an image of a wildly disparate society, comprised of many people who have previously not even been able to unite themselves, let alone join others who suddenly find themselves needing to reconcile their differences and form some sort of state capable of defending and establishing itself. The NCMR is the result, but disagreements ranging from local squabbles over power distribution, to the character of the state itself (secular vs religious) leave the project stillborn, existing more on paper than in reality. This all occurs as various other armies are rampaging across the region: firstly, the Ottoman Turkish encroachment, then the occupation by the White Russian forces of Anton Denikin, and finally the ascent of the Bolsheviks. The Chechens and others ally with the Red Army in the hope of securing autonomy and land previously given to the local Cossacks – both dreams would end up in disappointment.

Novel approach

The Soviet period proved to be the most violent of all. Following the crushing internal and external threats to their rule, the Bolsheviks quickly proved they had little interest in observing the autonomy Chechen leaders had expected. Collectivisation is soon forced upon the rural communities, combined with large-scale disarmament efforts thus rendering the population helpless. Throughout this timeframe, insurrections and uprisings

are near-constant, although they never extend beyond localised areas, as Perovic often points out. Abortive attempts to establish traditional religious and cultural institutions, reformed as bastions of Soviet power, are largely abandoned by the mid-1920s, further contributing to local alienation. While the situation becomes calmer, after major revolts in Chechnya and Dagestan are put down in early 1930, the reach of the Soviet

state never quite extends to the mountain areas, where as late as 1941 collectivisation was still incomplete. The Great Purge of 1937–38 meanwhile removed what little Chechen Soviet intelligentsia had developed, leaving the region in chaos at the time of the German invasion. With the Nazis on the run and millions of troops already mobilised, Stalin finally dispensed with the troublesome people in the deportations of February 1944. The cycle of frustrated reforms and unsuccessful engagement had reached its bloody conclusion.

Throughout this exhaustively-researched book (there are nearly 80 pages of footnotes alone), a handle of themes and analytic devices emerge. The first is Perovic's use of vignettes that examination key North Caucasian figures during this period, which helps illustrate the changes and tensions the indigenous peoples were forced to grapple with. The first of these figures is Musa Kundukhov, who is fascinating as a Muslim Ossetian officer and served as a tsarist officer in the war against Shamil. In a turn of events reminiscent of Tolstoy's Hadji Murat, Kundukhov eventually finds himself unable to reconcile the increasing pressure on the local Muslim communities with his position and defects, leading a group of Chechen emigrants on the *mu-hajirstvo* to the Ottoman Empire, where he himself rises and becomes a general and leads Turkish forces in the 1877–88 Russo-Turkish War. Other subjects of the vignette treatment include Ali Mitaev, a Chechen sheikh and notable, who

became a Bolshevik functionary before being accused of treason and executed in 1925, and Khasan Israilov, the deeply-flawed leader of the 1941–44 Chechen uprising where his entire people were exiled to the steppes. These segments remind me of Orlando Figes' masterful *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* where he uses the memoirs of characters from different strata of society to give a deeply personal feel to the narrative. While Perovic does not quite reach those heights, his choice to employ such a method adds much to his prose.

The persistent inability of the Russian and Soviet regimes to grasp the nature of the regions also features heavily throughout the book. Chechen society, in particular, is a persistent challenge for authorities in St Petersburg and later Moscow, as they struggle to identify relevant vectors for advancing their interests. The tsars largely did not even attempt to engage with this problem, preferring instead to ignore the Chechens except when they revolted. The Bolshevik project, by contrast, seemed doomed to fail from the start in the conservative and agrarian community. The constant rearrangements of local political structures and administrative units in the first decade of Soviet rule speak to this, as the communist authorities cast about in vain in the search of a solution. Ultimately, they too would largely abandon their project in frustration, appointing ethnic Russians as overseers of Chechnya and making few efforts to integrate the indigenous population before finally deciding

on wholesale deportation. The failure of authorities to ever truly involve Chechens in their own state-building project

was thus a constant from Shamil's defeat in 1859 to today, with predictably violent consequences at regular intervals.

More unanswered questions

Finally, there is another recurrent theme in the book which bears noting. When the tsarist generals conquered Chechnya and Dagestan, they sought to emphasise themselves as rescuing the local population from the chaos and injustice of their formerly "backwards" tribal life. The Bolsheviks, seeking to win Chechen support in their civil war against the Whites, promised liberation from the tsarist yoke and from chauvinist imperial oppression. In recruitment drives for the Second World War, Soviet authorities even recast Shamil and his acolytes as heroic freedom fighters, striving for the same ideals as the present country in its fight with Nazi Germany. The independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria continued this tradition in the 1990s by referencing the brutality of the Soviet regime as its *raison d'être*, while today's Chechen government of Ramzan Kadyrov emphasises both a separation from the horrific misrule of Stalin and the "traitorous" reign of Dzhokhar Dudayev, the Ichkerian leader under whom Chechnya was destroyed by the Russian army. One cannot help but wonder if in the future the current leadership of Kadyrov and Vladimir Putin will be portrayed in a similar antagonistic light, possibly in the wake of yet another bloody conflict.

As with all great works of scholarship, Perovic's book opens up a number of follow-up topics, all of which could prove fascinating. The description of land conflicts between the Ingush and Ossetians already in 1917 is particularly interesting, as this issue would remain salient in the wake of the return from the 1944 deportations and the full-scale warfare of the 1992 Prigorodnyi clashes. A full assessment of the origins of the dispute would benefit North Caucasus scholarship immensely. The role and symbolism of the

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city of Grozny throughout Chechen history would also make an interesting research topic: having begun its life as a fortress from which the Chechens were to be exterminated, it served throughout most of its existence as a Russian outpost where Chechens were decidedly second-class citizens, but it now occupies a central role in today's almost ethnically ho-

mogenous Chechen Republic. Even the memoirs of Khasan Israilov and the last eight months of his rebellion, after his kinsmen had been fully deported, would make for an interesting, if lonely, read.

But these are matters for another day. In *From Conquest to Deportation*, Perovic has established himself as one of the key voices on the history of North Caucasus. His exploration of a previously understudied period and novel

approach to existing narratives make this work a must-read for those seeking to understand the evolution of affairs in Chechnya. At a time where Chechnya seems to exist in a world outside the Russian Federation more so than ever, Perovic's work provides a timely explanation that this is not an entirely new phenomenon, but merely the most recent manifestation of the estranged politics of Chechnya under Russian rule. 

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