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Jeronim Perović

From Conquest to Deportation. The North Caucasus under Russian Rule

London: Hurst, 2018. XXIV, 466 S., 9 Abb., 7 Ktn. ISBN: 978-1-84904-894-1.

This monograph focuses on the history of the North Caucasus under Russian rule between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. What Jeronim Perović has to say about Russian-North Caucasian relations in earlier and later periods, however, also deserves attention. Indeed, the author's approach to studying the history of the region – where state-society relations were sometimes violent, sometimes productive – can serve as a model for studying imperial situations in other places. By attending seriously to the ways that Russians and North Caucasus peoples shaped the history of the region, Perović manages to avoid the worst excesses of the extant scholarship and provide the richest account of the subject to date.

The work is a revised and updated version of his *Der Nordkaukasus unter russischer Herrschaft. Eine Vielvölkerregion zwischen Widerstand und Anpassung* (Wien, Köln 2015), whose subtitle suggests the author's "between resistance and adaptation" thesis concerning the ways that North Caucasus peoples shaped their own histories and Russian rule in the region. And while some readers may be familiar with the stories of the Chechen Sheikh Ali Mitaev (ca. 1891–1925) and the Stalinist collectivization campaign from Perović's English-language publications, there is great value in bringing them together within the covers of a single volume. Here, the author rejects the "mono-dimensional, monochromatic perspectives" (p. 18) that characterize the historiography in favour of ones that emphasize the complexity of cross-cultural relations. He combines "analysis of 'high' politics with the 'thick description' of local circumstances" (p. 18) in order to understand "not only why people took up arms against certain measures introduced by the state [...] but also the ways in which people perceived the new opportunities [presented by Russian rule] and sought to take advantage of them" (p. XXII). As a result, he is able to show both the varied forms of native resistance to Russian rule and what Linda Colley has called "the degree of mass acquiescence in empire", which helps to explain the longevity of Russian empire in the region.

Perović devotes one quarter of the book to the pre-1917 period of Russian rule. In discussing the consequences of the Great Caucasus War, he shows that Russia retained some indigenous administrative structures and appointed non-Russian natives, including Muslim clerics, to leadership positions and involved them in drafting the basic rules of local administration, which incorporated elements of sharia and customary law. He focuses less on the well-documented case of Russia's deadly forced resettlement of hundreds of thousands of people from the northwestern Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire (which Ottoman agents encouraged), and more on the situation in the northeastern Caucasus, where Cossack-led "land confiscation, arbitrary rule by the local potentates and the threat of internal resettlement prompted many people to emigrate" (p. 59). He uses the case of General Musa Kundukhov to emphasize the complexity of the situation. An Ossetian Muslim appointed in 1860 to head the Chechen administrative district Kundukhov considered himself a loyal soldier and champion of native peoples (according to his self-serving memoirs). He ultimately concluded that Russia's treatment of Chechens necessitated their removal to the Ottoman Empire, which he himself organized and led and for which Russia granted him enormous sums and the Ot-

tomans considerable landholdings and the title of pasha. As a result, Russia achieved the removal of thousands of Chechens, the Ottomans gained a valuable military asset and Caucasus expert in Kundukhov, and tens of thousands of people lost their native homeland.

Following the war, Russia pursued a “minimalist state-building project” in the North Caucasus aimed less at integrating the tsar’s new subjects into the empire than at pacifying and managing them with minimal effort. Instead of investing sufficient resources in infrastructure that might have facilitated their incorporation into the empire, tsarist administrators pursued inconsistent and often discriminatory policies that sought to curtail native peoples’ rights and traditions without offering much in exchange, leading to numerous revolts and ultimately failing to create the conditions for stability (p. 76). Much of the discussion of the period between 1860s and the “last jihad” of 1877 should be familiar to specialists, and this reader wishes the author had done more to document the four decades separating 1877 and 1917, as this period is critical for assessing claims concerning tsarist efforts to stabilize the region.

In any case, these efforts ceased with the collapse of the Romanov monarchy in 1917, which was followed by revolutions and civil war that brought “unprecedented” (p. 105) chaos to the region. In navigating the extraordinary challenges presented by the First World War, two Russian revolutions, violent civil war and inter-ethnic fighting within the region, most Caucasus communities, according to the author, were primarily interested in preserving their lives and livelihoods. Ultimately, external pressures and internal contradictions made it “impossible” (pp. 106, 141) for native groups to work together to achieve a lasting independent North Caucasus state. The Bolsheviks promised national liberation and religious freedom and, using their insider knowledge of the region, managed to win hearts and minds; this led to relative stability, at least for a time.

To consolidate their power in the region, the Bolsheviks sought to appease the Muslim population by removing Cossack families to make room for Ingush and Chechen settlements. Their *korenizatsiia* program aimed at promoting national cultures by incorporating members of native groups – including, again, Muslim clerics – into state administrative structures, while also inculcating socialist ideology and undermining supranational identities among native populations. But as the case of the Chechen Sheikh Ali Mitaev shows, the promise of true autonomy and religious freedom for North Caucasus Muslims was illusory. By the mid-1920s, real power, at least in Grozny, was concentrated not in the hands of co-opted native administrators like Mitaev, but instead in the Soviet secret police and the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party. An ally of the Bolsheviks during the civil war, Mitaev was appointed as a member of the Chechen government in 1923, arrested for alleged anti-Soviet activities in 1924, and sentenced to be executed the following year. Outside Grozny, however, the lack of national unity among Chechens meant that no administrators, whether native or otherwise, appointed by outsiders could claim legitimacy in the eyes of most Chechens, who remained oriented toward their village communities, councils of elders, and clans. By the end of the decade, the Bolsheviks had only “marginal success” in transforming non-Russian natives into an urban proletariat, while in Chechnia the experiment proved “an abysmal failure” (p. 224).

Having determined that more robust measures would be needed to realize the socialist transformation of the country, the Soviet state departed from previous efforts to mobilize society and “for the first time relied on massive [sic] terror” in carrying out a “full frontal assault on the agrarian economic system and way of life” (pp. 225, 227). Though intended to make agricultural production more efficient, the collectivization campaign targeted not only peasants and village assemblies, but also religious institutions. This was met with armed resistance in all parts of the country. In the

North Caucasus, which the Soviet Politburo had “explicitly designated as the pilot region” for the plan, and especially in its mountainous parts, resistance was “exceptionally fierce” (pp. 228 f.). The Soviet state used mass terror and Red Army regular troops to crush the revolts, which nonetheless caused the state to suspend collectivization in these parts of the region until the mid-1930s. Even when collectivization efforts resumed there, collective farms “largely existed on paper”, and Moscow’s “mountain problem” (p. 254) remained unsolved until the Second World War.

Perović devotes two of the book’s strongest chapters to analyzing events in the North Caucasus during the Second World War. He shows that in the years preceding the war the region’s native peoples, and those in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR in particular, were the subject of continuous negative reporting that reached the highest levels of power in Moscow. Not only the slow pace of socialist transformation, but also problems surrounding the military conscription and wartime actions of non-Russian North Caucasian draftees caused frustration. Thousands of these draftees defected to the German side or deserted into the mountains where they led anti-Soviet insurgencies. The government abandoned conscription in favour of voluntary recruitment, conducted dozens of military operations against the insurgents, and used the conditions of war to attempt to “impose order once and for all” on peoples it viewed as “very difficult to control” (p. 284). Between 1943 and 1944, the Soviet government deported the Karachai, Balkar, Chechen, Ingush, and Balkar peoples to Central Asia, resulting in the death of probably more than 130,000 people, and took extraordinary steps to erase all memory of these peoples from the region. Several thousand non-Russian natives, however, resisted these measures and fled into the mountains. Perović uses the fascinating case of Khasan Israilov to show the “manifold causes” of anti-Soviet resistance in the North Caucasus mountains that were brought on by “a concurrence of external circumstances with specific realities within society and personal circumstances” (p. 290).

The majority of the deportees returned to their ancestral lands in the 1960s, but they would have to wait until the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev for the Soviet state to declare the deportations an “illegal and criminal” act of “defamation and genocide” (p. 320), and to provide resources for its memorialization in the North Caucasus. Chechen political entrepreneurs worked to replace the official Soviet myth of “peaceful annexation” and “friendship of peoples” with one of permanent conflict between Russia and the Chechen people, which served to mobilize the population for independence and ultimately failed wars against Russia (p. 323).

Perović rightly concludes that both “heavy-handed [Russian] state intervention[s]” (p. 325) and intra-Caucasian violence “rooted in [native] societal structures and traditions” (p. 326) help to explain the history of violence in the region. But there was much more to Russian-North Caucasian relations than violent conflict. Many in the region, including Chechens, availed themselves of opportunities for social advancement made possible by interventions by the central state, leading to state-society relations “ultimately characterised by a relatively high measure of stability” (p. 326). Indeed, the division that mattered most was not between state and society, but between modernity and tradition, town and country. Nor was the center-periphery relationship the only one that mattered in the region; the constellation of relationships among non-Russian North Caucasus peoples, and within individual ethnic groups, also mattered greatly, enabling local actors of diverse backgrounds to shape state-building processes across the centuries and even today.