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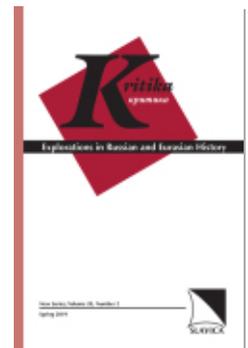
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Writer, Rebel, Soldier, Shaykh: Border Crossers in the  
Historiography of the Modern Caucasus

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## Writer, Rebel, Soldier, Shaykh

### Border Crossers in the Historiography of the Modern Caucasus

ALEXANDER E. BALISTRERI

Rebecca Gould, *Writers and Rebels: The Literature of Insurgency in the Caucasus*. 352 pp. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. ISBN-13 978-03000200645. \$85.00.

Reinhard Nachtigal, *Verkehrswege in Kaukasien: Ein Integrationsproblem des Zarenreiches 1780–1870* (Transportation Routes in Caucasia: A Problem of Integration for the Tsarist Empire, 1780–1870). 448 pp. Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2016. ISBN-13 978-3954901234. €128.00.

Jeronim Perović, *Der Nordkaukasus unter russischer Herrschaft: Geschichte einer Vielvölkerregion zwischen Rebellion und Anpassung*. 544 pp. Cologne: Böhlau, 2015. ISBN-13 978-3412224820. €45.00. Published in English as *From Conquest to Deportation: The North Caucasus under Russian Rule*. 480 pp. London: Hurst, 2018. ISBN-13 978-1849048941. £65.00.

For nearly a century and a half, the Caucasus found itself under Russian and Soviet rule, and *kavkazovedenie*—Caucasology—fit into the rubric of “domestic social sciences” (*otechestvennoe obschestvovedenie*). Under one state with a lingua franca in administration and scholarship, the Caucasus thus lent itself to study as a region. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, however, the emergence of strictly controlled national boundaries, armed conflict, and hermetic academic institutions made it not only more difficult to move around the Caucasus but also to study the region as a whole. Today structural, disciplinary, topographic, ideological, and linguistic hurdles remain too high

for most scholars to write histories of the Caucasus that traverse geographic and temporal boundaries. Studies generally remain confined to ethnic and national histories, to one side of the Greater Caucasus mountain range, or to one side of the events of 1917. Quixotic attempts at writing a grand unified history of the Caucasus, meanwhile, run the risk of producing unwieldy quasi-encyclopedias based by necessity on unreliable secondary sources—compare James Forsyth’s recent 938-page *Caucasus: A History*.<sup>1</sup>

Three scholars have recently taken up the challenge of traversing these seemingly insurmountable geographic and temporal boundaries of Caucasian historiography. Collectively, these authors invite us to find elements that define the Caucasus as a region. Rebecca Gould collects literary works from both the North and the South Caucasus and finds a common aesthetic vector of insurgency pointing from the mid-19th century to the Soviet period and beyond. Jeronim Perović crosses the temporal boundary of the 1917 revolutions, too, giving us a longer-scale perspective on state-society relations in the North Caucasus across regimes. Finally, Reinhard Nachtigal shows how new transportation infrastructure across physical barriers turned paths of local import into integrating networks that consolidated the Caucasus and connected the region to the Russian heartland. As this essay hopes to show, such scholarly border crossing helps make debates about colonialism, violence, and modernity in the Caucasus relevant for scholarship beyond the confines of area studies as well.



Gould’s *Writers and Rebels* is an anthropology of “the literary Caucasus”—the Caucasus as imagined in locally produced texts, primarily dealing with the topic of violent insurgency.<sup>2</sup> Her corpus consists of literature written in Arabic, Chechen, Georgian, and Russian, mostly between the mid-19th and the mid-20th centuries. Gould is not concerned with establishing a chronology: *Writers and Rebels* is explicitly not a history but a literary analysis, and Gould considers literary forms valid even if they “invert the historical record.” The ethics and aesthetics reflected in Caucasian literature, she argues, help us understand and explain violence better than a strict historical analysis, since the latter’s singular focus on causality ignores nonhistorical experiences (like

<sup>1</sup> James Forsyth, *The Caucasus: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Leah Feldman, *On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), examines the “intertextual encounters” of Russians and Turkic Muslims in the revolutionary early decades of the 20th century and holds promise for a more *intradisciplinary* comparison with Gould’s work.

miracles, mourning, or personal acts of redemption) that nevertheless shaped lifeworlds and framed violent acts. Yet Gould slides into a causal mode as well, arguing that “literature shapes history and experience . . . by giving birth to new ways of conceiving political life [and] generating new idioms of resistance and new and ever more complex languages of accommodation” (23). The glue holding these modes of analysis together is an aesthetic of violence Gould calls “transgressive sanctity.”

In a frequently cited article published in this journal in 2007, Gould defined “transgressive sanctity” as “a particular form of religiosity that is constituted through its violation of the secular codes of colonialism.”<sup>3</sup> Gould’s 2007 article, however, was less concerned with a precise definition of transgressive sanctity than with an excavation of the representations of the *abrek* (social bandit) in Caucasian literatures. *Writers and Rebels* gives the concept of “transgressive sanctity” a complete makeover. Religion and secularism play a more limited role in transgressive sanctity’s new definition; in its place is something much broader, sometimes even difficult to pin down. In one iteration, Gould’s 2016 monograph defines transgressive sanctity as “an aesthetic consciousness that arises in vacuums of legal authority when states coercively impose their laws on unwilling populations” (5; see also 172). In another iteration, transgressive sanctity is “understood politically [as] the process through which state-sanctioned coercion generates a new ethical and aesthetic relation to violence” (37). In other words, transgressive sanctity is both an aesthetic that finds expression in texts *and* the historical process that generates this aesthetic. Elsewhere, it is a system of “indigenous ethics” (58, 71) or an “insurgent ideology” (131, 155, 205). Yet it can also be exhibited by members of the colonizing society as a critique of colonial law: The “same aesthetics of transgressive sanctity that founded modern Chechen literature,” writes Gould, also served as a basis for the “literary sensibility” of Lev Tolstoi and the Georgian poet Titsian Tabidze (166; see also 63).

The four substantive chapters in *Writers and Rebels* each cover a distinct set of texts. Chapter 1 examines the reception of the figure of the *abrek* in Soviet literature, especially the portrayal of the notorious Zelimkhan Gushmazukaev in the mid-20th-century novels of Dzakho Gatuev and Magomed Mamakaev. This chapter identifies a specific Chechen aesthetic of transgressive sanctity, in which violent acts committed by *abreks* became memorialized as part of an anticolonial struggle. Gould then uses this Chechen aesthetic as a baseline from which to compare other literary currents. The first of such comparisons, in chapter 2, consists of Daghestani texts on the 1877 uprising, particularly

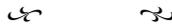
<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Gould, “Transgressive Sanctity: The *Abrek* in Chechen Culture,” *Kritika* 8, 2 (2007): 272.

those written by ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ghāzīghumūqī, Ḥasan al-Alqadārī, and Najm al-Dīn al-Ḥutsī (Nazhmuddin Gotsinskii). While influenced by the Chechen aesthetic, these Daghestani texts stand apart in their regular rejection of rebellion and critique of acts of violence. Chapter 3 looks at Georgian literary reflections of transgressive sanctity, particularly through the poetry of Titsian, who, according to Gould, used this aesthetic in an “internal critique of Georgian participation in the conquest of the Caucasus” (197). Finally, in chapter 4, Gould argues that transgressive sanctity continues today, albeit in “degenerated” form, in the search for recognition among female perpetrators of violence in the post-Soviet North Caucasus. “Looking beyond any single ethnicity,” argues Gould in one of her most pronounced statements on the issue, “articulated in Arabic, Georgian, Russian, Chechen, Avar, and other Caucasus vernaculars, transgressive sanctity is arguably the dominant theme of Caucasus literary modernities” (185; see also 58, 237).

Literary scholars will find much richness and nuance in Gould’s treatment of transgressive sanctity, which may perhaps be imagined as a spirit with “visceral and verbal power” (236) inhabiting North Caucasian societies and literatures at various times. The tenuous methodological dance that Gould choreographs between literary and historical modes of analysis, however, will leave some historians wondering how to apply the concept of “transgressive sanctity” in their own work. As a quality inherent in an act of violence and an aesthetic that is used to interpret this violence in texts *ex post facto*, transgressive sanctity is a shapeshifter, manifesting itself in different ways in different eras. Transgressive sanctity was “a new way of aestheticizing violence that was *most fully realized* during colonial rule, and which helped validate anticolonial insurgency for a pious community” (88, emphasis mine). Yet it was in Soviet Caucasian literatures that transgressive sanctity attained its *most visible* form. The reification of the tsarist past in Soviet-era novels, films, and histories enabled their authors to sanctify transgressive violence as anticolonial, using local idioms to recast such violence as a struggle that was legitimate for a Soviet audience as well (41).

Given such flexibility, it remains largely unclear why transgressive sanctity could not emerge as a response to other hegemonic legal projects in the Caucasus, including the establishment of the imamate or Soviet rule. In the case of the imamate, Gould suggests that colonial law was “external” and “non-hegemonic,” while Islamic law shared with indigenous law the advantages of being “internal” and “hegemonic” (widely accepted by the population). The status of Islamic law as indigenous and hegemonic was true, however, only at the time of the Russian consolidation of power. The Soviet case presents a

similar puzzle. At the same time that Soviet novelists were “sanctifying” the abrek’s transgression against Russian imperial law, Soviet administrators were concerned with North Caucasian bandits who rose to prominence in local eyes as resisters to Soviet law. Yet, as Perović shows, the equally “doomed” resistance of Khasan Israilov in the 1940s would be condemned to popular oblivion, without a folk song or epic written in his honor (Perović, Eng. 291–92, Ger. 450–51). Though Gould enjoins readers to understand resistance “as an act of the imagination that transcends time-space barriers” (155), such a wholesale departure from the historical realm may thus be infeasible.



Perović’s masterful history of the North Caucasus examines the attempt to incorporate the region into a Russian-led polity. Originally published in German under the title *Der Nordkaukasus unter russischer Herrschaft*, the book was later translated into English, with some modifications, under the title *From Conquest to Deportation*.<sup>4</sup> The 12 chapters of Perović’s monograph (10 in the English version) are organized chronologically and cover the period from the region’s conquest by the Russian Empire to the deportation of many of its major ethnic groups in the 1940s. Many chapters use newly uncovered sources to advance our understanding of key episodes in North Caucasian history. Perović’s account of the late 19th century (Eng. chapter 3, Ger. chapter 4), for example, rehabilitates the period from being deemed a mere transition between two explosions of violence and instead dissects the inner workings of Russian imperial rule. In so doing, Perović questions what is often described as a policy of Russification, replacing it with an underlying notion of segregation. In a chapter on the implementation of collectivization in the late 1920s and 1930s (Eng. chapter 7, Ger. chapter 9), Perović uses documents from Russian and Chechen archives to correct errors arising out of decades of Western overreliance on the secondhand reports of anticommunist writers in exile. His account of anti-Soviet resistance during World

<sup>4</sup> The German and English editions of Perović’s history exhibit subtle differences. While the German-language subtitle speaks of “rebellion” and “adaptation” (strategies pursued by local Caucasians), the English translation features “conquest” and “deportation” (acts carried out by the state). Even the cover images reflect this change of emphasis. While both depict Dmitrii Moor’s 1920 allegoric poster “To the Peoples of the Caucasus,” the English cover has cropped out the half of the image actually depicting the peoples of the Caucasus, leaving only the state, represented by a lone Bolshevik liberator on horseback. Finally, the German edition of Perović’s history includes more material, allowing the author to add nuance to his analysis of state-society relations.

War II, meanwhile, deftly navigates around the present literature's obstacle course of glaring omissions, claims of national heroism, and accusations of Nazi collaboration (Eng. chapter 8, Ger. chapter 10). Narratively, Perović's is a history riddled with contingency, failure, unexpected outcomes, and hidden agendas. Its main and supporting characters are complex in motivation and muddle the analytic boundary between state and society. These range from Cossack atamans who helped draft Russian imperial law to improve their own community's position to Chechen communist officials who demurred when ordered to liquidate bandits for fear of incurring local blood feuds.

A prominent feature of Perović's history is the inclusion in one continuous narrative of a number of "life stories," interspersed at regular intervals to give contour to his more abstract historical chapters.<sup>5</sup> To illustrate the ambiguities of Russian cooptation of local power structures in the North Caucasus, for example, Perović introduces the Muslim Ossetian officer Musa Kundukhov, who switched from carrying the banner of the Russian state in the Caucasian Wars and fighting against the Ottoman Empire during the Crimean War to organizing a mass migration of Muslims from the Russian to the Ottoman Empire and fighting against the Russian Empire in the war of 1877–78 (Eng. chapter 2, Ger. chapter 3). The abrek Zelimkhan appears in the German edition as a foil to discuss the limits of the imperial state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force in the early 20th century (Ger. chapter 5). The tenuous encounter between the shaykh Ali Mitaev and the new Bolshevik government in Chechnya reveals the tension between locally focused North Caucasian authorities and the attempts of the Bolsheviks to establish their own authority (Eng. chapter 5, Ger. chapter 7). Meanwhile, Perović's account of Khasan Israilov is a thrilling reconstruction of the life of a resistance fighter based on tantalizingly incomplete diaries, which Perović tried his best to unearth in the Federal Security Service (FSB) and State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) during research in 2012 (Eng. chapter 9, Ger. chapter 11).

These and several other life stories are not simply entertaining vignettes but serve Perović's methodological purpose: to relativize the importance of the state as an actor in Caucasian historiography and to highlight "complex causalities" that inform individual agency (Eng. 290, Ger. 448). Though it uncovers voices and perspectives that have rarely played a central role in Caucasian historiography, Perović's history, one should note, does not necessarily seek to give voice to the subaltern but rather focuses on (male) individuals somehow engaging the hegemonic project of the state. In Perović's

<sup>5</sup> The use of a life story to help narrate a period in North Caucasian history was used to good effect by Michael Khodarkovsky in *Bitter Choices: Loyalty and Betrayal in the Russian Conquest of the North Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

history, such individuals enjoy agency vis-à-vis the state; they are constantly weighing the costs and benefits of compliance and noncompliance with state demands. They also weighed such considerations against a host of obligations to other institutions in North Caucasian society, including family, clan, village, or Sufi order. Such considerations tended to result in an equilibrium between assimilation and resistance that was broken only in extreme cases, as when the demands expressed by the state and society were mutually unintelligible. In most cases, however, the state had to accommodate society, and vice versa. This is true even of the Soviet state, which, as the case of redistricting Chechnya shows, was often bound to respect—or at least balance—local demands against the inexorable dictates of modernization (Eng. 217–19, Ger. 344–46).



The final work reviewed here, Nachtigal's *Verkehrswege in Kaukasien*, will undoubtedly serve as the port of first call for scholars researching transportation infrastructure in the Caucasus during the first decades of Russian rule. A more or less chronological survey of documents from the relevant military and historical archives in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Tbilisi, and Berlin, Nachtigal's monograph is a straightforward history of transportation planning and road building. Nachtigal makes the case that the Caucasus held a unique position in the history of Russian imperial transportation. Because of the topographical difficulties involved in governing the "unruly" Caucasus, "secure lines of transportation acquired a much greater significance than in the lowland plains of eastern Europe or in Siberia" (9). By establishing not only communication but also security, lines of transportation (in Nachtigal's case, mostly roadways) became the key factor integrating the Caucasus as a region and connecting this region to the larger Russian Empire.

The lion's share of attention in Nachtigal's monograph goes, deservedly, to the Georgian Military Highway (*Voenna-Gruzinskaia doroga*). This road represented the single major crossing point between the North and the South Caucasus during the early 19th century and was, in Nachtigal's words, "for decades the most important element in the integration of the *entire* Caucasus into the Russian Empire" (18). Nachtigal's history of this most prominent Caucasus crossing (chapter 2) begins in the 1770s, when geopolitical considerations encouraged imperial administrators to seek out better connections to the Georgian kingdoms, and concludes in the 1860s, with the end of major construction projects and the establishment of the Georgian Military Highway as the undisputed route to the South Caucasus. Striking in Nachtigal's account is

its portrayal of the construction not as a coherent, linearly executed idea but as a project that emerged in fits and starts, responding to conjuncture and tactical calculus—a characteristic of the project that was acknowledged and criticized by central imperial planners themselves (95). In this way, Nachtigal's account might parallel recent works on the Caucasus Line that call into question the portrayal of Russian expansion in the North Caucasus as an inexorable march southward, including Perović's history (Eng. 35–38, Ger. 69–74).

In chapter 3, Nachtigal inventories alternative routes across the Caucasus that began to be realized by the mid-19th century. In addition to routes across the mountains (especially the Imeretian, or Ossetian, Military Highway), Nachtigal describes plans for mid-19th-century infrastructure expansion along the Black Sea Coast, across Dagestan, and in the South Caucasus. Here Nachtigal demonstrates the effect of diverse subregional conditions and local attitudes on different forms, intensities, and strategies of road building.

For all its detail, *Verkehrswege in Kaukasien* does not represent a terminus in the study of transportation infrastructure in the Caucasus. One problem is its ambiguous use of the word “strategic” to describe Russian aims in the Caucasus in the early 19th century. Nachtigal distinguishes these initial “strategic” aims from economic, colonial, or civilizational aims, which he argues arose later (22, 35). Yet strategic aims are hardly distinguishable from others. An example from the first years of the 19th century—a period that, Nachtigal claims, lay decades before the empire began to think about the economic exploitation of its Caucasian holdings—demonstrates the impossibility of untwining the strategic, economic, and civilizational rationale for road building: Pavel Tsitsianov, as governor-general of Georgia, justified expanding and securing the northern half of the Georgian Military Highway, arguing that increased security would both help end the uncivilized slave trade in the region and ensure the ease of trade with Persia—thus reducing the price of goods entering the empire (69). Second, Nachtigal declines to read against the grain of his sources, leaving us with an essentially literal interpretation of Russian administrators' discourse that presents Russian policy in the Caucasus as self-evident. Though local sources may indeed be difficult to use, or even nonexistent, such sources are not a prerequisite for questioning gaps in the official narrative. For instance, an examination of the social history of transportation laborers in the Caucasus would have been a welcome line of inquiry that could have spoken to historians of later periods, since it was Caucasian transportation laborers who later served as the entry point for radical politics in the region in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Baku Commune, 1917–1918: Class and Nationality in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 28. For a perspective on railway



Despite the topical and methodological diversity of these works, their differences reveal ways to discuss key historiographical debates in Caucasian history. All three authors, for example, speak to the historian's dilemma of how to properly label Russian imperial rule in the Caucasus, in particular its characterization as "colonialism." The ambiguous distinction between center and periphery in the Russian Empire, the tension between the empire's simultaneous attempt to adopt a West European civilizing mission and its self-conscious rejection of Western Europe's "violent colonialism," as well as a muddling of the concepts of "imperialism," "orientalism," and "colonization" have all set into motion a *perpetuum mobile* of scholarly debate on the colonial nature of Russian imperial rule.<sup>7</sup> There are several reasons why the Caucasus, as a region, has a special role to play in this discussion. First is its geographic position, straddling contiguous and de facto noncontiguous territory. While the North Caucasus blended into the steppe regions forming the core of the Russian Empire, the Caucasus mountain range represented a symbolic and sometimes practical limit to the empire's territorial expansion.<sup>8</sup> Second, the Caucasus was more internally diverse than many other peripheral regions in the Russian Empire. The empire's subjugation and incorporation of the Caucasus as a whole thus required a host of different strategies based on the different kinds of societies it encountered. Regardless of imperialist intention, Russian administrators could follow no monolithic political recipe in incorporating the Caucasus, with its nomads and its societies with strict social hierarchies, its "stateless" societies and its populations with centuries of state tradition. Third, unlike Central Asia, the South Caucasus in particular (and the North Caucasus to a more limited extent) were theaters of actual military confrontation between great powers. The opportunities and challenges afforded by entering into this competition shaped Russian policy and strategy in the Caucasus.

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construction in the South Caucasus that emphasizes working conditions and the labor movement, see Sonya Mirzoyan and Candan Badem, *The Construction of the Tiflis-Aleksandropol-Kars Railway (1895–1899)* (Leiden: Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> For discussions of works that speak to the place of the Russian Empire among its imperialist peers, see, among others, Jeff Sahadeo, "Visions of Empire: Russia's Place in an Imperial World," *Kritika* 11, 2 (2010): 381–409; and Seymour Becker, "Russia and the Concept of Empire," *Ab Imperio* 1, 3–4 (2000): 329–42.

<sup>8</sup> Two works that highlight the ambiguities of the imperialist nature of colonization north of the Caucasus are Thomas M. Barrett, *At the Edge of Empire: The Terek Cossacks and the North Caucasus Frontier, 1700–1860* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999); and Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

These extenuating factors, of course, did not preclude the establishment of relations of domination and exploitation. Gould shows no hesitation in labeling the imposition of Russian legal culture on the Caucasus as colonial and critiques its inherent violence. However, Gould adds a caveat in thinking about colonialism in the region: “Colonialism in the Caucasus cannot be conceived of as the domination of faraway lands and distinct peoples, for Russia is contiguous with the territories it has dominated. A postcolonial aesthetics of Caucasus cultures will need to factor in this cartographic distinction. It will also need to recognize the historical impossibility ... of severing the colonial from the colonized” (156).

Austin Jersild has shown how “the rhetoric of empire ... was also a product of shared cultural experience” between Russian and Georgian intellectual elites in the 19th century.<sup>9</sup> The point is certainly not lost on Gould, who, even more explicitly than Jersild, finds Georgian literary sources that seek to unmask Georgians’ role in the Russian conquest of the Caucasus (179, 186). Gould also expands this intertwining of the colonizer and colonized to multiple realms and nondominant cultures. By conferring new meaning on insurgency, colonial violence enabled transgressive sanctity to emerge and circulate (88–90), while colonial rule strengthened the authority of Islamic law in Daghestan (109). Later, Russian literary conventions framed texts on the abrek produced in the Caucasus in the first decades of Soviet rule (52).

Of all three authors, Perović is most skeptical of the “colonial perspective” in Caucasian historiography. Here he does not propose undertaking a cost-benefit analysis of Russian rule (an approach suggested by Nachtigal), nor does he ignore key continuities between the Russian Empire and Soviet Union’s methods and justifications for the domination of the North Caucasus. Indeed, Perović demonstrates that the discourse of using force to rule a backward region and civilize a barbaric society continued from the 19th century into the 1930s, even if the imperial army gave way to the Red Army and the Orthodox Church to the League of the Militant Godless. Instead, in rejecting the “colonial perspective,” Perović argues against influential historians like Marie Bennigsen Broxup, who viewed the process of annexation singularly as the story of state oppression of the periphery.<sup>10</sup> Perović’s objection, which emphasizes the need for historians to account for locals’ accommodation of

<sup>9</sup> Austin Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845–1917* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Marie Bennigsen Broxup, “Introduction: Russia and the North Caucasus,” in *The North Caucasus Barrier: The Russian Advance towards the Muslim World*, ed. Broxup (London: Hurst, 1992), 1–17.

the state and the state's own inconsistencies, is valid. In particular, he is right to point out that histories based on such a colonial approach tend to essentialize conflicts and violence as emanating out of two unchanging poles, failing to explain changes in resistance and assimilation over time, differences in the origins of violence, or variation among individual motivations and behaviors. "How can historians explain the fact," asks Perović in one telling example, "that many North Caucasians sympathised with the Bolsheviks during the era of revolutions and civil war, whereas others fought on the side of the anti-Bolshevik forces of the Whites, and others again fought only for themselves?" (Eng. 5–7, Ger. 32–35).

Nachtigal's approach confirms that Perović's cautions regarding the vagueness of the term "colonialism" are warranted. Though his work deals with the literal penetration of military and bureaucratic technologies of power into the Caucasus, Nachtigal rejects the use of the word "colonialism" to describe Russian activities in the Caucasus in the first decades of the 19th century. Agreeing with the Russian historian Vladimir Lapin, Nachtigal suggests that the Russian Empire did not expand into the Caucasus intending to exploit the region but argues that Russia "at first had no idea what it was supposed to do with this place called the Caucasus" (*keine Vorstellungen, was mit diesem Kaukasus anzufangen sei*) (16). Furthermore, he distinguishes between conquest and pacification, on the one hand, and colonialism, on the other. For Nachtigal, the initial building up of the transportation network in the Caucasus belongs to the phase of "conquest and pacification," merely a prerequisite for the integration of the Caucasus into Russia and thus the implementation of colonial policies like a civilizing mission or one-sided resource exploitation (16–18). Nachtigal's considerations are predicated on a distinction between Russian administrators' ideas (which may have harbored colonialist intentions but which, for Nachtigal, are irrelevant in the discussion of facts on the ground) and their actual ability to carry out such ideas (which emerged only after the introduction of the railroad) (37).

Nachtigal briefly outlines a number of more specific arguments that Russia's approach to the Caucasus was not colonialist during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Three of these stand out: that the empire did not interfere "to a considerable degree" in existing modes of custom and law; that it neither established a monopoly over the trade of goods in the Caucasus nor profited from these goods; and that the empire was too weakly ensconced in the first half of the 19th century to carry out a "civilizing mission" (15–18).

Yet Nachtigal's own work contains several counterexamples for each of these points, showing that his dichotomic approach to the periodization of

Russian colonialism merits greater scrutiny. First, the construction of major roads, especially the Georgian Military Highway, resulted in a deep-seated intervention in the lifeways of local Caucasians. The appearance of a militarized north-south axis across an east-west trade route was an intentional interruption of traditional economic flows (66, 69). Local economies were recalibrated as the population was compelled to provision thousands of construction workers and military personnel (exacerbating poor harvests) or was itself drafted as laborers (80, 82–83, 103, 232, 233). Planned or actual re-settlements of communities to and away from road construction sites were almost de rigueur (78, 104, 108–10, 135, 271). Second, Russian administrators (as well as Western Europeans) were keen to exploit the resources of the Caucasus as early as the mid-18th century (57, 153–54). This interest took concrete form when Mikhail Vorontsov, as viceroy of the Caucasus in the 1840s, sought to build roads to connect newly discovered tin and ore deposits in the Caucasus to the “state economy.” New roads were also built to “remedy the intellectual and industrial degeneration [*Versumpfung*] of these lands, so unmistakably endowed with natural wealth” (165). Such views were colonialist, even if their eventual implementation floundered. Third, while the Russian state was indeed not capable of carrying out any totalizing civilizing mission in the Caucasus during the first half of the 19th century, the discussion of road building certainly included civilizing rhetoric. One of the earliest justifications for road construction was its role in curbing the “barbaric” local trade in human slaves (66–67)—which, it should be recalled, had been an important source of wealth for aristocrats in certain North Caucasian societies. Furthermore, in addition to their ameliorative effect on the region’s “intellectual degeneration,” road construction—the disciplining labor of road building and the free trade that would develop after the roads opened—were seen as a peaceful means of providing alternative sources of livelihood, promoting the region’s civilizational status, and integrating the mountain dwellers of the Caucasus into the Russian Empire (136, 143, 163, 193, 277).

Thus the question for historians of the Caucasus is not, as Nachtigal poses, whether such evidence points to “actual” Russian colonialism in the Caucasus before the 1860s; clearly, Russian administrators viewed economic profit as grounds for territorial consolidation and labor exploitation as a means of securing it, even prior to the introduction of the railroad to the Caucasus. Rather, such evidence points to the fact that colonialist notions existed prior to the European powers’ New Imperialism and that colonial relations of power in the Caucasus emerged slowly and by degrees, not as a result of one specific technology.



Whether implicitly or explicitly, a discussion of violence undergirds most scholarly work on the modern North Caucasus. The use of violent force by the state and violent resistance to the state form only one aspect of such scholarship, which also assigns a central role to the use of violence within society. A great deal of literature has sought causes for the alleged inherence of violence and violent conflict in modern North Caucasian societies and in defining state-society relations. Three trends may be distilled from this literature: religious-cultural, structural, and geographic. The first trend finds Islam or Islamic fundamentalism in the North Caucasus to be the main inspiration behind violent conflict.<sup>11</sup> One variation on this theme is to give “Islamically motivated conflict” a positive valence, as a vigorous source of resistance against the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup> A more structuralist view finds the cause for violence in long-standing social institutions or in their breakdown.<sup>13</sup> Georgi Derluguian notes how the proliferation of certain kinds of firearms in the early modern North Caucasus led to “an anarchic and inherently dangerous social environment” in which peasants’ lives became more defined by violence than before.<sup>14</sup> Third, for centuries, observers have blamed the inaccessible mountain geography of the North Caucasus for its inhabitants’ recalcitrant militancy and rebellion.<sup>15</sup>

Nachtigal does not explicitly analyze the phenomenon of violence in his work, though frequent references to state security concerns and conquest belie the state violence undergirding the expansion of the empire’s transportation network in the Caucasus. Gould and Perović, meanwhile, both strive for more nuanced readings of agency and violence, particularly that emanating

<sup>11</sup> For a critical assessment of this view, along with references to the relevant literature, see Michael Reynolds, “Myths and Mysticism: A Longitudinal Perspective on Islam and Conflict in the North Caucasus,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 41, 1 (2005): 31–54. Viktor Avksent’ev and Igor’ Babkin reject the notion of Islam as a cause of violence in the North Caucasus but analyze how it could reframe conflict and shape mobilization in the 1990s and 2000s; see their “Islam i natsional’nye konfliktky na Severnom Kavkaze,” *Ab Imperio* 1, 2 (2000): 189–218.

<sup>12</sup> Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (New York: Routledge, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> L. S. Gatagova, *Severnyi Kavkaz v epokhu pozdnei imperii: Priroda nasiliia 1860–1917 gg.* (Moscow: Novyi khronograf, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Georgi Derluguian, “The Forgotten Complexities of the North Caucasus Jihad,” in *Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories, and the Making of a World Area*, ed. Bruce Grant and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann (Berlin: Lit, 2007), 81.

<sup>15</sup> Among others, see John F. Baddely, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus* (London: Longmans, Green, 1908), xxi–xxii.

from within North Caucasian societies. Gould aligns herself with Walter Benjamin in arguing that liberal societies lack the analytical tools necessary to comprehend certain kinds of violence, particularly those directed against the state. Rather than evaluating justifications of violent acts on the basis of the proportionality to their purported ends—the reflex, perhaps, of those living in liberal societies—Gould argues that to understand the incidence of violence in the colonial or postcolonial Caucasus, we need to grasp the productive nature of violence as a powerful “generator of value” in itself (27, 62). For Caucasians grappling with overwhelming domination, individual agency consists of more than “mere resistance to the state” (227). Quasi-religious aspects of transgressive sanctity’s “aesthetic and affective form,” writes Gould, can even “compel and inspire insurgents to sacrifice their lives” (236). These include violent transgression’s moral ambiguity, its communal orientation, and its fatalism.

Though based on a very different methodological approach, Perović agrees that individual agency, including the use of violence, was about more than simply antistate resistance. For Perović, violence is always just as much about conflicts at the local level as it is about conflict with the state. In many instances—the exploits of *abreks* during the late Russian Empire, the taking of sides during the Russian Civil War, or acts of sabotage during World War II, among others (Eng. 118–21, 280; Ger. 188, 207–11, 438–39)—acts of violence imbued with primarily local meaning could merge with ideological or antistate meanings, either at the time or in later histories. Furthermore, state-society relations were defined not simply by violence but also by stability and compromise. In fact, the default mode of interaction between the state and North Caucasian societies was one of (forced) accommodation of new actors and institutions. Politically motivated violence ensued only when the equilibrium between these sides was explicitly violated. Such violations often occurred as a result of an ultimately weak central state (Russian imperial or Soviet) experimenting with new means of control.

At the same time, Perović does not ignore the uniquely violent resistance of the North Caucasus to Russian rule when compared to other peripheries. Many grain-producing regions, for example, resisted Soviet collectivization, but “it was in the ethnically mixed, non-Russian and predominantly Muslim-populated borderland areas that resistance more frequently evolved into large-scale uprisings and military confrontations” (Eng. 228, Ger. 358). Perović argues that North Caucasian peasants’ choice to resist violently was shaped by a host of considerations. Peasants had to balance their obligations to the state against those they held to respected local institutions. Their access

to forms of nonviolent protest, like mass migration or petition writing, was more limited than in other areas of the Soviet Union. Finally, violence was triggered by a higher presence of Russian secret police and enabled by a saturation of firearms in society (Eng. 234–36, Ger. 372–75).

In practice, Gould and Perović's approaches to violence in the North Caucasus lead to two very different analytical outcomes. This is seen clearly in their differing treatments of Zelimkhan, the celebrated yet remarkably violent *abrek* active around Chechnya in the early 20th century. Gould discusses portrayals of Zelimkhan in two Soviet Caucasian novels, which give Zelimkhan's violence not only an anticolonial character but even a sacred one. In this textual manifestation, Zelimkhan metes out violence in spite of his best intentions; he is fated by political and personal circumstance to fight in a doomed struggle against an overwhelming colonial power. In the world of transgressive sanctity, Zelimkhan is violent because the colonial order against which he fights is violent. His sanctity is confirmed by the uncanny aura he acquires after being killed as a result of colonial violence (53–83). Gould views the origins of Zelimkhan's transgressive sanctity in the means by which pious North Caucasians could "validate anticolonial insurgency" (88).

Perović dismisses this Soviet reinterpretation of Zelimkhan, perhaps simplistically, as part of a "Soviet zeal for propaganda" (Ger. 167–69). Instead, he attempts to unearth the historical Zelimkhan, questioning the degree of "sanctity" North Caucasians actually conferred on him during his lifetime. Perović acknowledges that many considered the *abrek* "holy" but also emphasizes that a significant segment of North Caucasian society at the time—those who were on the other side of Zelimkhan's blood feuds, say, or those who resented being collectively punished for this social outcast's exploits—found nothing supernatural about Zelimkhan's violence. "It is clear ... that Zelimkhan and the fellow members of his band were no 'high-minded bandits.' The Zelimkhan phenomenon cannot be understood either as an expression of social protest or as the continuation of an 'anticolonial war of liberation' against Russia. Rather, the institution of the *abrek* was part of a traditional North Caucasian culture of resistance and violence in which blood feuds and vengeance played an important role as motives" (Ger. 188).

Gould views Zelimkhan's sanctity (during his lifetime and in his literary legacy) as the product of the *abrek*'s ability to violate the legal order in a specific way. Perović, meanwhile, argues that Zelimkhan was "not a representative of 'the people' standing against a hostile 'state'" (Ger. 188). Zelimkhan's propensity to indiscriminate violence could not itself have been a source of *abreks*' "popularity"; rather, for Perović, the emotions expressed on behalf of

abreks originated in a desire to find a leader who could restore an old local order.

Ultimately, Perović's historical approach is analytically incompatible with Gould's rejection thereof: Perović is concerned with establishing the facts of Zelimkhan's actions, Gould with their semifictional reconstruction. Nevertheless, they share meaningful similarities. Both seek to surpass strictly structuralist explanations for the violence underlying much of the literature. Together, they add individual agency and aesthetics as alternative ways of interpreting violent acts in North Caucasian history. Furthermore, they both blur the boundary between acts of violence and their memory, agreeing that the meanings ascribed to violence are multiple and can change over time.



These three scholars' diverging approaches are nowhere more apparent, perhaps, than in the way they treat the concept of modernity itself. Their conceptions of what it means to be "modern" in the Caucasus range from state-centered to decentered and from infrastructural to ideational. In Nachtigal's work, for instance, modernity is represented by state-driven material progress. Referring to road building in the Caucasus, he asks, "Were Russian efforts and achievements worth it, ... that is to say, did they represent a certain degree of progress for these countries as early as the nineteenth century?" Yes, he writes—most of the Caucasus, including the lower and middle classes, "profited" from Russian advances in the region. "People who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, moved along ploddingly in a customary *araba*, a single-axle cart drawn by oxen or horses, were, by the end of the century, already driving cars and trains [and] possessed a telegraph network. Industrialization began at the end of the war with the mining of nonferrous metals and developments in petroleum; this, in turn, was tied to electrification" (14; see also 277). Nachtigal thus represents a traditional perspective that views modernity as state-driven, unidirectional, and quantifiable in terms of material advances.

While Nachtigal does not necessarily ignore some of the injuries caused by modernization, he views the role of road building and related infrastructure as innocuous. Implicitly supporting his own 19th-century Russian sources, who saw road building as a spoonful of sugar to make colonial domination more palatable for Caucasians, Nachtigal calls road building a "relatively mild and civil means of pacifying and dominating space, flanked by less peaceful measures" (267). In marking road building as a distinct process

of modernization that was “largely free of violence,” Nachtigal misses the opportunity to subject infrastructure modernization per se to critical analysis. First, infrastructure projects themselves are expressions of power relations and become sites of contestation. The fact that military deployments and the construction of barracks accompanied major road-building projects is one proof of this. Locals’ throwing stones against such infrastructure projects, and the Russian state’s deployment of the military in response, also show that the notion of roads as a projection of power was one implicitly understood by both sides (66–67). Yet Nachtigal goes as far as to dismiss acts of local resistance as “anthropogenic disturbances” (72) on the path to development. Second, as Benjamin Schenk has argued in the case of railroads in imperial Russia, infrastructure modernization had an ambiguous relationship with state consolidation and imperial integration. In addition to their integrative effects, transportation projects could have centrifugal effects as well: their repair was a drain on state resources; they increased subjects’ and workers’ (unrealistic) expectations of the state; and they promoted subjects’ mobility (and thus their uncontrollability).<sup>16</sup>

In terms of approaches to modernity in the Caucasus, Gould is Nachtigal’s polar opposite. For the author of *Writers and Rebels*, Caucasian modernity was neither driven by the center nor represented by progress nor quantifiable. Modernity—which Gould describes as “any systematic and self-conscious deployment of cultural, literary, and linguistic forms of newness” (28)—is multiple and defies specific definition. Modernity has no reference point in the state but has a primarily local meaning; even colonial law was something that local Caucasians “consolidated, rejected, and transformed” (220). Since it is not state-driven, literary modernity was also generated within the Caucasus before and outside the colonial encounter (29, 239). Daghestani authors, in particular, reinvigorated and reinterpreted classical Islamic forms in their own search for newness in a changing society (134). At the same time, these authors worked in conversation with new state technologies of rule, as seen by their use of the Russian ethnic appellation “Chechen” in their Arabic-language texts (129).

Perović, meanwhile, finds Caucasian modernity in the political and social institutions that emerged out of the local interaction with the Russian and Soviet states—states that understood their own role as bringing modernity to the Caucasus. Caucasian politics could be “modern,” for example,

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<sup>16</sup> For a concise summary in English, see Frithjof Benjamin Schenk, “Mastering Imperial Space? The Ambivalent Impact of Railway-Building in Tsarist Russia,” in *Comparing Empires: Encounters and Transfers in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Jörn Leonhard and Ulrike von Hirschhausen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), esp. 69–76.

when attempting to overturn traditional social institutions or to establish national unity, whether among specific ethnic groups or in the Caucasus in general (Eng. 311–12, Ger. 471–72). Despite their diverging disciplines, Perović, like Gould, critiques the traditional approach to modernization on all counts. First, modernity in the Caucasus was not something entirely externally defined. By helping shape the equilibrium between the state's project and their own social institutions, Caucasians had as much of a role to play in creating their own modernities. Perović's seemingly self-contradictory "life stories" are proof that multiple worlds and multiple identities can emerge out of the interaction between local and external institutions (Eng. 8, Ger. 35). Perović is also deeply skeptical of modernity's claims to progress in the North Caucasus, whether in Russian or Soviet guise. In the Soviet North Caucasus, for example, Moscow failed to supplant most of the important traditional social structures and orientations, despite its recourse to *korenizatsiia* (indigenization, a policy Perović views as being somewhat duplicitous) or to outright oppression. These two policies actually may have "backfired" when measured by Soviet standards of modernity. The Soviet nationalities policy of the 1920s and early 1930s, for example, "open[ed] a doorway through which traditional power structures and value systems could gain entry into the political domain." Furthermore, the hardship caused by repressive social and economic measures may have unintentionally led to an *increase* in North Caucasians' reliance on traditional social structures like Islamic schools, *waqf* assistance, and clan structures in the 1920s and 1930s (Eng. 258–60, Ger. 410–13).



Taken together, these works demonstrate that the Caucasus is an area of the world that can speak to broader debates beyond its own borders. Vladimir Bobrovnikov and Michael Kemper, in comparing recent works on the North Caucasus and Central Asia under Russian imperial rule, have demonstrated, for example, that new lines of inquiry about the nature of empire in the North Caucasus could spark similar questions in historically similar Russian peripheries.<sup>17</sup> Yet analyzing the interplay among colonialism, violence, and modernity in the Caucasus has scholarly ramifications beyond the mere empirical; the Caucasian experience also gives credence to scholars who have pointed

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Bobrovnikov, "Chto poluchilos' iz 'Severnogo Kavkaza v Rossiiskoi Imperii': Posleslovie redaktora neskol'ko let spustia," *Ab Imperio* 9, 4 (2008): 501–19; Michael Kemper, "How to Take the Muslim Peripheries Seriously in the Writing of Imperial History?," *Ab Imperio* 9, 4 (2008): 472–82.

to shortcomings in the postcolonial critique. These scholars—including the “colonial modernity” school in East Asian studies or the *Ab Imperio* project in Russian historiography—reject the dichotomy that, they argue, postcolonial literature perpetuates between a colonial self bearing a project of modernization and a colonial other who has yet to achieve emancipation through the intervention of academics.<sup>18</sup>

Deconstruction is no easy task, and scholars react differently to its challenge. Nachtigal’s premature rejection of the term “colonialism” for the period he researches, for example, seems to stem less from any ideological agenda than from his unwillingness to wade into the brambles of theory. Perović, meanwhile, uses a critical apparatus to question received narratives and arrive at a better empirical understanding of the North Caucasus. Gould, more than the others, makes it an explicit part of her project to “reconceive the Caucasus in ... global terms,” rescuing it from its status as “postcolonial theory’s afterthought” (32).

Scholarship on the Caucasus indeed has the potential to play the role Gould ascribes to it. Debates on the colonial nature of Russian and Soviet rule, for example, show how we might locate the Caucasus less within a dichotomy of colonizer and colonized than along a spectrum of power relations conceived in spatial terms: somewhere between, say Belarus, Corsica, and Okinawa, on the one hand, and the British Raj or Belgian Congo, on the other. The debates in Caucasian historiography speak to the questions of agency raised in postcolonialism, too, showing how agency can be enacted through and outside of violence, within or outside of an anticolonial struggle. Finally, debates in Caucasian historiography show us how modernity does not emanate from a central state project but emerges out of a mutually constitutive relationship at different levels.

The network of roads described by Nachtigal is now blocked by nation-state borders; Gould’s transgressive sanctity has “degenerated” into new aesthetic forms; and the attempts at common North Caucasian political projects described by Perović remain but memories. Just as these historical instances of border crossing seem stymied today, so has the historiography of the Caucasus been constrained by geographic and temporal boundaries. When scholars of different disciplines do transgress these boundaries, however, the results can

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<sup>18</sup> Tani E. Barlow, “Introduction: On ‘Colonial Modernity,’” in *Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, ed. Barlow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–20; Ilya Gerasimov, Sergey Glebov, and Marina Mogilner, “The Postimperial Meets the Postcolonial: Russian Historical Experience and the Postcolonial Moment,” *Ab Imperio* 14, 2 (2013): 97–135.

be productive in uncovering common elements for discussion both in modern Caucasian historiography and beyond.

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