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A Highlander (Gorets) in Imperial Russian Service during the Caucasian War (1801–1864): Intermediary, Marginal Figure, Traitor. Translation from Russian[1]

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Abstract

The article examines the lives and service careers of Caucasian highlanders in Imperial Russian service during the Caucasus War (1801–1864). It traces not only the trajectories of prominent historical figures but also the fates of lesser-known actors. These cases reveal the functional roles assigned by the empire, the presence or absence of mental boundaries, and local communities' perceptions of imperial service.

The study's aim is a historical-anthropological analysis of highlanders' service within Russian military-political institutions, based on personal writings and administrative records. The findings suggest that, for highlanders in Russian service, the primary motive was to enhance their standing within the local community rather than to climb the empire-wide hierarchy of ranks and titles. They often sought, through the empire, to raise their political and/or moral prestige among compatriots. When imperial service failed to increase this communal standing—or, conversely, undermined and burdened a highlander's reputation—he began to question the correctness of his choice.

This perspective helps to explain the frequent shifts in political identity, as well as the "unexpected" defections and desertions from Russian service that punctuate the history of the Caucasus War.

Keywords

Caucasus; Caucasus War; North Caucasian Frontier; Identity; Russian Empire; Caucasian Line; Highlander in Russian Service; Separate Caucasian Corps; Historical Memory; North Caucasus

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Горец на русской службе в годы Кавказской войны (1801–1864 гг.): посредник, маргинал, предатель. Перевод с русского языка[1]

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Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются особенности жизни и служебной деятельности горцев Кавказа на российской службе в годы Кавказской войны (1801–1864 гг.). При этом в статье исследуются служебные траектории не только крупных исторических личностей, но и судьбы менее известных фигур. Именно на их примере можно увидеть закрепляемые империей функциональные роли, наличие или отсутствие ментальных границ, восприятие имперской службы местными сообществами. Целью исследования является историко-антропологический анализ службы горцев в российских военно-политических институтах на основе источников личного происхождения и материалов делопроизводства. Исследование позволило предположить, что для горцев на русской службе приоритетным являлся мотив повышения собственного статуса внутри локального сообщества, а не продвижение по общеимперской лестнице чинов и званий. Горцы зачастую рассчитывали с помощью империи поднять собственный политический и/или моральный престиж среди соотечественников. В случае если служба империи не приводила к повышению «общинного» статуса или наоборот подрывала и отягощала репутацию горца, он начинал сомневаться в правильности своего выбора. Такой подход позволяет описать и объяснить частые случаи смены политической идентичности, «неожиданных» измен и побегов горцев с российской службы, которыми наполнена история Кавказской войны.

Ключевые слова

Кавказ; Кавказская война; северокавказский фронтир; идентичность; Российская империя; Кавказская линия; горец на русской службе; Отдельный Кавказский корпус; историческая память; Северный Кавказ

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Introduction

In early 2020, the Russian scholarly journal *Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana* published a thematic roundtable on the theoretical and methodological potential of the frontier concept (*How to study frontiers today*?..., 2020). Participants noted that the frontier remains a promising analytical tool, especially for analyzing the formation of the multiethnic, composite Russian state in the sixteenth–nineteenth centuries. At the same time, they pointed to weaknesses in the concept, including its theoretical indeterminacy. This is difficult to dispute; nevertheless, let us recall that frontier theory has a substantial historiography that includes landmark works.

In 2003, the historians A. Kappeler and A. Rieber proposed different typologies of frontiers. Kappeler distinguished a military frontier, a frontier of intensive exploitation (an extractive frontier), and a settlement frontier. He also underscored a fundamental shift in frontier studies: from describing perpetual clashes within the borderlands to analyzing "experiences of communication and complementary economic, social, cultural, and political interaction between societies with differing characteristics" (2003, p. 49). Drawing on an exceptionally broad comparative base (from the ancient world to modern European states), Rieber delineated several dimensions of the frontier. First is the territorial boundary, close in content to Kappeler's military frontier. Second is the sociocultural boundary, within which different economic and civilizational regimes collide and interact. Third is the symbolic boundary, an important structural element of mental mapping that separates "one's own" from the "other" (Rieber, 2003).

As T. Barrett showed (2000), a hallmark of the North Caucasian frontier of the Russian Empire was the simultaneity of all three dimensions—territorial, sociocultural, and symbolic. In the North Caucasus, the military frontier materialized in the Caucasian Line, which, like a moving wall, functioned as a mechanism for appropriating—and absorbing—space. The Line's fortifications successively "tore away" fragments of the indigenous North Caucasus's traditional map of movement and transit, while peasant settlements and Cossack *stanitsas* populated these territories with new residents. Trading posts established along the Line by the imperial administration were intended, among other things, to cultivate loyalty to the "White Tsar" among the highlanders. The symbolic boundary, coinciding with the line of Russian fortifications, separated the "territory of war" from the "territory of peace."

Within Russian historiography, D. I. Oleinikov has made important observations about the specificity of the North Caucasian frontier. Drawing on the theory of contact zones formulated in the late 1960s by the Soviet Slavist V. D. Korolyuk, Oleinikov called attention to the situation of mutual incomprehension in relations between the imperial administration and the highlanders of the North Caucasus:

> "The paths of understanding are the paths of translating from the language of one culture into that of another, and the ordinary work of the translator is clearly insufficient" (2000, p. 329).

M. A. Kundukhov also figures as a secondary protagonist in an article by M. Khodarkovsky devoted to the mediating role of highlanders in Russian service (2009). Drawing on the biographical records of S. S. Atarshchikov, Sh. Nogmov, and S. Khan-Girei, Khodarkovsky demonstrated their marginal position at the crossroads of distinct identities and value systems. He later expanded and refined these arguments in a dedicated monograph (2016).

An important historiographical event was V. V. Lapin's monograph, which persuasively showed how the North Caucasian frontier transformed the Separate Caucasian Corps into a corporation of veterans of the Caucasus War—or, in M. Yu. Lermontov's wording, into "true Caucasians" (2008). The theme of highlanders in Russian service did not receive systematic treatment in the monograph and remained overshadowed by another crucial issue: the national formations, the so-called "mountain militia," which the Russian administration employed in the operations of the Caucasus War (pp. 336–374).

This brief historiographical survey shows that the history of highlanders in Russian service during the Caucasus War is an organic part of the history of the North Caucasian frontier's formation and development. At the same time, the biographical and career trajectories analyzed in the scholarship have already become canonical. It is evident that the personal renown and career success of M. A. Kundukhov, Sh. Nogmov, and S. Khan-Girei took them beyond the realm of standard imperial procedures; actions taken with respect to each acquired a political character. Conversely, these figures' horizons and embeddedness in imperial politics created conditions for deep reflection on their own position and its conformity to moral criteria. Hence, lesser-known figures are no less important for understanding the place of highlanders in Russian service. Their cases reveal the functional roles assigned by the empire, the presence or absence of mental boundaries, and local communities' perceptions of imperial service.

The present article seeks to capture this diversity of imperial and frontier situations through the service careers and life trajectories of highlander officers in Russian service. Assessing the evidentiary potential of sources for studying the fates of highlanders in Russian service, D. I. Oleinikov noted that its core consists of "documents of personal origin, since they contain evaluative judgments and a certain self-analysis of the individual." In his view, "subjectivity in this case is not dangerous—it is necessary" (2002, p. 231). Yet it is evident that focusing solely on personal sources occludes a range of relevant dimensions—such as the military command's attitudes toward highlander officers and evaluations of their professional performance. Accordingly, this study also draws on Russian administrative records from the holdings of federal and regional archival repositories.

Shamkhals in Imperial Russian Service

The Russian Empire sought to pacify the Caucasus through local aristocratic elites. The crown administration assumed that members of the indigenous nobility would serve as a reliable conduit for disseminating loyalty to the empire and to the new order. By the late eighteenth century, the empire was openly backing the high-born Circassian aristocracy in its struggle against the Shapsug and Abadzekh communalists. In the Battle of Bziyuk (1796), the decisive blow was delivered by a detachment of Black Sea Cossacks, securing victory for the princely host. The empire pursued the same strategy in Dagestan, where its principal allies were the Shamkhals of Tarki.

Supreme Russian authority confirmed each successive Shamkhal in his title. Thus, on May 2, 1797, Emperor Paul I approved Mehti-bek as "ruler of all Dagestan and Shamkhal," who thereafter appears in Russian documents as Megdi-Shamkhal (Mehti Shamkhal) (*Russian-Dagestan Relations...*, 1988, p. 240). In early 1800, Mehti received the rank of lieutenant general in the Russian army, as well as "two bolts of rich brocade and twenty arshins of dark-green broadcloth" (p. 248). This generosity was anything but disinterested: by elevating Mehti's status and showering the new Shamkhal with favors, the Russian government expected to see Dagestan subordinated and loyal in return. Mehti did everything possible to convince the Russian command that he had full control of the situation. On April 16, 1800, he wrote to the commander-in-chief in the Caucasus, General K. F. Knorring, about the complete cessation of internecine strife in Dagestan and about bringing the entire local population into full obedience to the Shamkhal. "Former Shamkhals up to this time were unable to accomplish this," the Shamkhal of Tarki and Russian lieutenant general noted with some pride (p. 249).

Beyond ensuring Dagestan's internal security, the Shamkhal was to help organize the repulse of external threats from Persia. In a rescript of August 3, 1800, Paul I directed that, should a Persian incursion into Eastern Georgia—under Russian protectorate—be confirmed, Mehti was to join with the rulers of Derbent, Qaraqaytaq, and Tabasaran to oppose the army of Fath Ali Shah (*Documents Collected by the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission*, 1866, p. 110).

The Shamkhal fully justified the Russian government's confidence, and in September 1806 Emperor Alexander I granted Mehti the title of Khan of Derbent. This not only further elevated the status of a Dagestani ruler loyal to the empire but also brought the Shamkhal substantial material benefit: he was entitled to all revenues of the Ulus magal, with the exception of Derbent, whose economy was administered by the treasury (*Shakhmaly Tarkovsky...*, 1868, p. 62).

In 1830 Mehti met Emperor Nicholas I in St. Petersburg and secured imperial backing for his choice of successor. His eldest son, Suleiman-mirza (Suleiman-pasha), was promoted to colonel, while the next son in seniority, Zubair, received the rank of major (p. 63). On the return journey from the imperial capital, Mehti died. Suleiman assumed rule of the Shamkhalate and was soon promoted to major

general in Russian service. His reign began against the backdrop of major socio-political upheavals in Dagestan. The Sharia-based preaching of Imam Ghazi-Muhammad (1828–1832) attracted numerous followers across Dagestan, and Suleiman proved unable to counter the imam's growing popularity. The anti-aristocratic social movement was exploited by Suleiman's rival for power in the Shamkhalate—Abu-Muslim—one of Mehti's younger sons. In 1830 Abu-Muslim emerged as a disciple of Imam Ghazi-Muhammad at the head of a considerable portion of the Shamkhalate's population (Pokrovsky, 2000, p. 192). His uprising, however, was quickly suppressed by the imperial administration. Abu-Muslim and his closest supporters were arrested in the fortress of Burnaya and sent via Astrakhan to Saratov—far from the Caucasus.

Within a year, the imperial administration reconsidered the exile. On October 9, 1831, the chief of staff of the Separate Caucasian Corps, General N. I. Pankrat'ev, reported to General A. I. Chernyshev, head of the Main Staff, on the results of his expedition to Dagestan. Pankrat'ev noted that Shamkhal Suleiman was "little capable of governance and afraid of his subjects" (RSMHA, n.d., f. 14719, in. 3, c. 137, l. 76). Among the causes of popular discontent in the Shamkhalate, Pankrat'ev pointed to Abu-Muslim's banishment: "Inquiring into the exiled Abu-Muselim, I found that he has many good qualities and, in general, enjoys the trust of the people of Tarki" (RSMHA, n.d., f. 14719, in. 3, c. 137, l. 76).

Pankrat'ev's report advanced the idea of forming a coalition of aristocrats who were both loyal to the Russian government and popular among Dagestan's population, with Abu-Muslim cast in the leading role. Pankrat'ev expected that, through his hereditary domains situated on the boundary of the Koysubulin society (the core of Ghazi-Muhammad's supporters), Abu-Muslim could influence the situation in Highland Dagestan (RSMHA, n.d., f. 14719, in. 3, c. 137, l. 76). The disgraced Abu-Muslim was soon brought back from exile; in 1832 he was promoted to major. From that point he was officially recognized as Shamkhal Suleiman's successor. He supplanted his elder brother as early as the summer of 1836 and was immediately advanced to colonel in Russian service; a year later, in October 1837, he donned the epaulettes of a major general in the imperial army. By then the imam was Shamil (1834–1859), under whom, in the 1840s, the mountaineers of Dagestan and Chechnya achieved their greatest successes in the struggle against the Russian Empire and those Dagestani aristocrats who remained loyal to it. Abu-Muslim did not become a political counterweight to Shamil; he was content with the title of Shamkhal and emphasized his unbounded loyalty to the Russian government. Lieutenant Colonel of the General Staff N. I. Okol'nichii left the following characterization of the Shamkhal:

> "A man deeply devoted to us—upright and kind—but reared in the spirit of Asiatic luxury, he concerned himself only with sensual pleasures and had no military aptitude..." (as cited in Gadzhieva, 2000, p. 243).

On the occasion of Emperor Alexander II's coronation in 1856, Abu-Muslim was granted the rank of Adjutant General. Four years later he died, and his son and heir

Shamsuddin became Shamkhal; however, within a few years (1867) he voluntarily relinquished administrative and judicial functions. The Tarki domain was incorporated into the Temir-Khan-Shura District of the Dagestan Oblast. After the capture of Imam Shamil in 1859 and the relative pacification of the northeastern Caucasus, the imperial administration no longer needed political counterweights to the imams' influence or exemplars of successful loyalty. It is worth noting that all attempts by the empire to fashion the Tarki Shamkhals into an influential opposition to Muridism and its leaders, failed. The Shamkhals' influence was minimal, and their domains required constant military protection. For the Shamkhals themselves, the Russian Empire offered an opportunity to attain and maintain status, relying on the Separate Caucasian Corps. This was especially evident during Abu-Muslim's lengthy tenure: initially seeking to seize power in Dagestan as a disciple and ally of Imam Ghazi-Muhammad, he failed; once he found favor with the Russian administration, Abu-Muslim radically reversed his political loyalties and recast himself as a devoted vassal of the Tsar, for which he received numerous favors. This devotion, however, had little effect on the strategic situation in Dagestan; Abu-Muslim did not become a political competitor to the imams. The empire's political wager on the Shamkhals proved unsuccessful; the Shamkhals themselves, however, made highly effective use of Russian military-political and symbolic resources to consolidate their own authority and secure personal and familial material well-being.

Militia and Militiamen

The tradition of recruiting units for Russian service on an ethno-territorial basis has a long history in the Caucasus. This practice existed from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries and encompassed several formats of military cooperation, ranging from equal alliances to paid hire. Following V. V. Lapin, it is important to note the conventional nature of the term "militia," which most often appears in documents of the Russian administration as a label marking the participation of local detachments in the campaigns of the Separate Caucasian Corps. On the empire's southern periphery, the militia had no standard structure, training camps, terms for formation and service, or stable, continuous officer corps:

> "Essentially, on the government's side there fought local levies led by military chieftains well known to the people, who received ranks for their service" (2008, p. 345).

Large-scale experiments in forming militia units in the Caucasus began under Nicholas I (1825–1855). The impetus was the need to mobilize forces during the Russo-Persian (1826–1828) and Russo-Turkish (1828–1829) wars. When hostilities ended, the militiamen were dismissed to their homes with monetary rewards for their service. After the formation in 1830 of the Life-Guard Caucasus-Highland Half-Squadron of His Imperial Majesty's Own Convoy, the idea of creating permanent irregular units composed of Caucasian highlanders continued to be actively discussed. In 1831 Major I. O. Karganov—whom A. P. Ermolov dubbed "Vanka Kain" for his role in the demonstrative expulsion of the "Proconsul of the Caucasus" from

Tiflis in 1827 (Ermolov, 1872, p. 441)—submitted to the Third Section of His Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery a letter proposing "On forming from the free societies of the Dagestani Lezgins a cavalry regiment in St. Petersburg, or in Tiflis with the Separate Caucasian Corps." The project described the experience of the Georgian kings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who "kept men in each society in the guise of a merchant and, having learned through them who enjoyed influence among the people, kept that person on salary and, at his direction, made small annual gifts to other elders or clergy who likewise had influence over the people" (SARF, n.d., f. 109, in. 3, c. 1155, l. 2). As Karganov further described it, when the number of highlanders on Georgian pay grew,

> "volunteers were summoned from those societies to Georgia as a kind of hired force for the most modest pay; and thus, by drawing off all or most of the restless heads and sparing [Georgia] from their raids and disturbances, this hired force was employed to good effect—either to pacify recalcitrant natives or to guard the borders with Turkey and Persia, even permitting them to carry out raids within those borders" (SARF, n.d., f. 109, in. 3, c. 1155, l. 2).

Karganov deemed this historical experience successful and relevant to the military-political conditions on the Russian Empire's southern frontier in the early 1830s. His project envisioned forming a cavalry regiment from Dagestani highlanders to serve two functions: military and political. The military role was to deploy the Dagestani militia in operations of the Separate Caucasian Corps, both against recalcitrant mountaineers and against neighboring Muslim states. The political function, in Karganov's design, was to spread loyalty among the local population:

> "a highlander, having served several years among the Russians and thereby changed his way of thinking, on returning, conveys this to his relatives, tells it to the people, and passes it on to his children" (SARF, n.d., f. 109, in. 3, c. 1155, l. 3).

In 1835 Nicholas I approved the "Regulation on the Irregular Cavalry Regiments Formed with the Separate Caucasian Corps" (*Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire*, 1835, p. 695). Two cavalry regiments were to be formed: one from the inhabitants of Transcaucasia (the Muslim Regiment) and the other from the mountaineers of the North Caucasus (the Caucasus-Highland Regiment). Recruitment was voluntary. Regimental commanders were Russian officers proficient in local languages. The Muslim Regiment was assembled at full strength (six *sotnias*), while the Caucasus-Highland Regiment mustered only 170 highlanders (*A Century of the War Ministry...*, 1902, p. 259). Pay was issued in silver, while the militiamen equipped themselves at their own expense.

Delays in the payment of wages were precisely what sparked conflicts. In this connection, the case of the Kabardian *abrek* Ibrahim Tkhakakhov is instructive. In the spring of 1841, Tkhakakhov fled from Kabarda across the Kuban with his weapons and lived for about a year with a relative, Bekmurza Babukov, whom the Russian authorities regarded as a peaceful and loyal highlander. He then went

to Karachay and later returned to Kabarda to meet his brothers. The meeting did not take place; instead, the *abrek* stole a horse and weapons. This time he failed to make it back across the Kuban and was captured. During interrogation, the Kabardian stated that he had become an *abrek* under duress:

> "I fled from Kabarda across the Kuban because I was being forced to go on campaign as a militiaman without any remuneration, while other Kabardians hired themselves out and received pay for it" (CSAKBR, n.d., f. I-16, in. 1, c. 202, ll. 3–3v).

New local militia units were gradually formed. As early as the early 1830s, a Georgian Regiment was initiated and, in 1849, it was converted into the Georgian *druzhina*. According to the "Regulation on the Georgian *Druzhina*," it was established to defend Kakheti—entirely justified given the experience of Kakhetian residents in resisting raids of mountaineers from southern Dagestan. It was precisely eastern Georgia that had been the target of mountaineer expeditions in the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries, a period known in the East Georgian historical tradition as *leq'ianoba* ("the Lezgin yoke"). For Georgian levies, defending Kakheti against mountaineer raids was familiar work. The unit's commander was a Russian officer, while the middle and lower command ranks were held by Georgian nobles. The *druzhina* was assembled by a rotation (queue) principle; a man whose turn came could provide a substitute volunteer, who received monetary compensation from the absentee. The term of service for militiamen in the Georgian *druzhina* was set at six months, but—with the detachment command's consent—could be extended indefinitely (Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire, 1849, p. 253).

Nicholas I regarded the service of highlanders in the imperial army as a guarantee of a given North Caucasian society's obedience. In 1842–1843 the Russian administration negotiated the oath of allegiance with the Besleneevtsy, a large Adyghe ethnopolitical community. Nicholas I stipulated a condition for accepting their oath personally: "To better ensure the future obedience and loyalty of the Besleneevtsy, it would be highly desirable that they provide up to fifty horsemen to the Caucasus Highland Regiment with the active army in Warsaw" (RSMHA, n.d., f. 14719, in. 3, c. 504, l. 101). Only 216 Besleneev households, however, presented themselves to the Russian authorities, and, according to imperial officers, raising fifty riders proved impossible.

During Nicholas's reign, additional formations were created: the Anapa Highland Half-Squadron (1842) from Natukhai, Shapsugs, and Abadzekhs; the Dagestan Irregular Cavalry Regiment (1851) from Avars; and the Hundred of the Gurian Militia (1851) from residents of the former Gurian Principality (since 1846 the Ozurgeti District of the Kutaisi Governorate) (*A Century of the War Ministry...*, 1902, p. 260).

A characteristic feature of indigenous irregular units was their structural instability. These detachments were frequently reorganized, merged, or abolished outright. This is evident in the reign of Alexander II (1855–1881), when the number of irregular units initially declined (in 1857, the Transcaucasian Muslim Cavalry Regi-

ment was disbanded), and then, in 1860–1862, new formations were raised: the Terek Irregular Cavalry Regiment, the Labin and Kuban Irregular Cavalry Squadrons, the Dagestan Militia, the Kutaisi Irregular Cavalry Regiment, and three mounted *sotnias* of the Andi Okrug (p. 393). Further reforms followed in 1865, when the Kuban and Labin Squadrons and the Terek Irregular Cavalry Regiment were dissolved and replaced by the Terek and Kuban Permanent Militias. These were established "to safeguard internal security and good order in the oblast," with militiamen performing military–police functions. The imperial administration paid special attention to selecting officers from among local inhabitants who, without fail, enjoyed respect and authority among their compatriots (Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire, 1865, p. 122).

Lieutenant Colonel Omar-bek Kasymkhanov of the No. 2 Muslim Cavalry Regiment was precisely such an authoritative figure among the population of the Shamakha Governorate, from whose inhabitants the regiment's ranks were drawn. On June 28, 1855, Omar-bek Kasymkhanov, together with thirty horsemen of the Muslim Cavalry Regiment, as well as Collegiate Registrar Shah-Palank-bek Askerkhanov and Mullah Ragim Efendi, defected to the Turks at the fortress of Kars (RSMHA, n.d., f. 14719, in. 3, c. 462, l. 2). The defection caused a stir. In the context of wartime confrontation, the treason of an entire group of riders from an irregular formation could set an example for others. The imperial administration conducted a detailed investigation to determine the reasons for Kasymkhanov's betrayal.

According to the report dated July 24, 1855, from the Shamakha military governor S. G. Chelyaev to V. O. Bebutov, head of civil administration in the Caucasus, Omar-bek Kasymkhanov hailed from a noble family related to the last khan of Shirvan, Mustafa, who had violated his Russian oath and fled to Persia in 1820. Omar-bek's hereditary estate was confiscated to the treasury; in exchange, the family received a modest government stipend of 500 rubles per year. Omar-bek lacked the material means to maintain a lifestyle commensurate with his social status. "He often complained among his own people, and even to Russians, that his father's estate had not been returned to him, unlike to others, despite all his efforts" (RSMHA, n.d., f. 14719, in. 3, c. 462, l. 31), – the military governor Chelyaev noted in his report. Approximately a year before his defection, Kasymkhanov radically changed his daily life. Whereas previously, according to Chelyaev, "he enjoyed the company of Russians and neglected the customs of his nation that were incompatible with the pleasures of European life" (referring to the consumption of alcohol and card playing), from the autumn of 1854 Omar-bek began to observe Islamic rites and "spent his time chiefly with Muslims, who visited him constantly—some out of respect for the nobility of his family, others for conversation" (RSMHA, n.d., f. 14719, in. 3, c. 462, l. 31). Chelyaev concluded that two circumstances prompted the lieutenant colonel's treason: the comparative poverty of a born aristocrat and the spiritual pull of Islam. The case is indicative of the imperial administration's, at times, poor grasp of the living conditions and

dispositions of officers in indigenous irregular units, leading to mutual incomprehension, service conflicts, and betrayal.

The formation of new irregular units from the local population in the 1860s was linked to the high assessment of their effectiveness by the Caucasus Viceroy, A. I. Baryatinsky (1856–1862), who enjoyed Emperor Alexander II's personal confidence. In his report on the administration of the Caucasus for 1857–1859, Baryatinsky highlighted two factors that made the irregular militia particularly effective. First, the highland militia provided an "outlet for the warlike spirit of these tribes" (*Documents Collected by the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission...*, 1904, p. 1290). The viceroy plausibly argued that during the long war in the northeastern Caucasus several generations had come of age for whom war was the only way of life. After the subjugation of Chechnya and Dagestan in 1859, this entire armed and warlike mass, in his view, could not long remain without military employment:

> "All the brigands, all the ardent men, all the youth—condemned to perpetual idleness, and many to hunger—would, in quiet, sharpen their weapons against us, whereas those weapons can be turned to such profit against the enemies of the fatherland" (p. 1290).

Second, the viceroy noted the militia's high standing in the eyes of the local population:

> "The people see in them their picked men and fear to oppose them, because the killing of one of their own entails, according to highland custom, blood vengeance—even on the part of the family that, in the given case, acted in concert with the killer. Against the population of the mountains, one hundred men of the Dagestan Cavalry Regiment are far more reliable than a battalion. With a small number of local *druzhiny* we can keep the mountains in obedience more surely than with numerous Russian regiments" (p. 1290).

Baryatinsky's assessment attests to the high status of highlander militiamen in local eyes. Imperial service provided militiamen with income and functioned as a vehicle of social mobility.

Irregular Caucasian formations reached their greatest numbers in 1877–1878, which was directly tied to the mobilization of military resources for the war with the Ottoman Empire. By 1878, six regiments and seven separate hundreds, three mounted and three infantry hundreds, had been formed from the mountaineers of the North Caucasus. In the South Caucasus, eight regiments, seven divisions, one mounted *druzhina*, and twelve separate hundreds were raised. The total strength of irregular detachments in 1878 exceeded 24,000 men (*A Century of the War Ministry...*, 1902, pp. 393–394). After the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, many militia units were disbanded and the remainder reduced.

The headcounts of these irregular military formations were only approximate. Thus, at the beginning of Emperor Alexander III's reign (1881–1894), the total number in permanent and temporary indigenous units was on the order of 7,000 men (pp. 393–394). The permanent formations were: the Life-Guard Caucasus Squadron of His Imperial Majesty's Own Convoy; the Dagestan and Kutaisi Irregular Cavalry

Regiments; the Dagestan, Kuban, and Terek Militias; the Georgian *druzhina*; and the Gurian Infantry Hundred. Temporary units, formed at the order of the Commander-in-Chief of the Caucasus Army, consisted of the following: the Akhaltsikhe Mounted Hundred; the Gurian Infantry *druzhina*; and the Kars and Batum Mounted Militias. Subsequently, some units were disbanded or reduced.

The increase in the number and overall strength of irregular units in the Caucasus region prompted additional bureaucratic procedures to regulate the service of militia levies. In the 1850s–1870s, Russian legislation established certain material guarantees for local combatants. Thus, in the autumn of 1859, militiamen of the Georgian *druzhina* who had been wounded in action and rendered incapable of work were granted the right to a pension. On March 3, 1877, an order of the War Minister announced that the right to a pension extended to militiamen of the Georgian *druzhina* who sustained serious injuries while on duty in peacetime (Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire, 1902, p. 555).

Regulating the material aspects of militiamen's service was, on the one hand, evidence of the imperial administration's high assessment of these units' effectiveness and, on the other, a necessary condition for making service to the "White Tsar" attractive and stable. In this framework, service in Russian irregular formations became prestigious for local inhabitants both socially and materially.

Highlander officers: between mediation and treason

Historiography has already noted that highlander officers in Russian service functioned as mediators in the incorporation of the Caucasus into the Russian state's politico-legal, socio-economic, and cultural space (Khodarkovsky, 2009). In the Caucasus, the empire faced an acute shortage of qualified personnel (Urusadze, 2020, pp. 398–414). The thesis of the imperial space's general under-governability appears well founded (Mironov, 2017, p. 232). Under these conditions, officers drawn from the local population who had been trained in Russian military schools were a highly valuable resource for the crown administration. Regional authorities needed interpreters and guides, negotiators and scouts. Symbols also mattered to imperial power: mountaineers in Russian uniforms signified the subjugation of the Caucasus—even if among the mountaineers themselves the symbolism was often far less unambiguous (Lapin, 2003, p. 9).

Representatives of the highland aristocracy became Russian officers; the imperial administration assumed that their high social standing would enable them to disseminate loyalty to the empire among their compatriots. Yet Russian service often devalued a highlander officer's nobility, and he might be subjected to ostracism. A. Kh. Benckendorff (1826–1844), head of the Third Section of His Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery, wrote to G. V. Rosen, commander of the Separate Caucasian Corps (1831–1837), that S. Magomet-Girei—the father of the noted Adyghe enlightener and Russian officer S. Khan-Girei—who "for many years displayed unwavering devotion to the Russian throne," had become the object of

hatred among many Western Adyghe who resisted the establishment of Russian sovereignty (AKBIHR, n.d., f. 1, in. 2, c. 52, l. 1). Nor did S. Khan-Girei's own ambitious designs come to fruition, though in the 1830s he was regarded in St. Petersburg as the leading expert on the Caucasus (Zhemukhov, 1997, p. 19). In 1837 he was dispatched to the southern frontier on a diplomatic mission to prepare the Adyghe to accept Russian subjecthood during Emperor Nicholas I's tour of the Caucasus that same year. The plan failed: the Adyghe did not believe Khan-Girei's assurances. With that, the political career of the Adyghe intellectual—the author of *Notes on Circassia* (Khan-Girei, 1978)—came to an end.

Service to the empire, when it entailed action against one's compatriots, could lead to the marginalization of a highborn mountaineer. The complex fate of the Kabardian prince Khatokshoko Magomet, known in imperial paperwork as Magomet Atazhukin, is instructive (Aloev, 2019). The noble Kabardian entered imperial service in 1819 and distinguished himself on several occasions. In 1821–1822 Atazhukin took part in the expeditions of A. P. Ermolov, the "Proconsul of the Caucasus," against the Kabardians—campaigns accompanied by the devastation of the local population and the destruction of *auls*. In 1822, acting as an imperial "assassin," Atazhukin crossed the Kuban to kill the leader of the Kabardian rebels, Prince Khatokshoko Talostan (Tau-Sultan), who died in an ambush arranged by Atazhukin. The killing of one of the anti-imperial resistance leaders did nothing to increase Atazhukin's popularity among the Kabardians. As T. Kh. Aloev notes, "such a form of vengeance, as ignoble, was condemned not only in aristocratic circles" (2019, p. 26). In 1823 Atazhukin served in further North Caucasus expeditions as a guide to Russian detachments. For these services he received monetary rewards and won the confidence of the imperial administration, including that of Gen. A. A. Vel'yaminov, Ermolov's well-known associate and commander of the forces on the Caucasus Line. In the 1830s Atazhukin served in the Kingdom of Poland with the Caucasus Mounted-Highland Regiment; he was promoted to lieutenant in 1838 and received an annual stipend of 250 silver rubles (AKBIHR, n.d., f. 1, in. 2, c. 13, l. 31).

On August 13, 1842, Lieutenant Magomet Atazhukin defected to the "unsubdued mountaineers." In April 1844 he was struck from the rolls; upon capture he would have faced a court-martial. The defection was unexpected; clearly Atazhukin had stood in good stead with the Russian command. Administrative records note: "Before his defection to the mountaineers he had served 23 years; as an officer, 12 years 3 months; and as a lieutenant, 4 years 8 months; he had incurred neither penalties nor trial and was rated 'adequate' in his attestations" (AKBIHR, n.d., f. 1, in. 2, c. 13, l. 32). He later attempted to return to imperial service, but the scantiness of the surviving evidence does not permit us to assert with confidence that the prince-fugitive succeeded.

In T. Kh. Aloev's view, the vicissitudes of Atazhukin's life and service reveal his "inner immaturity" and "inability to fulfill his princely station in Circassian society" (2019, p. 32). This conclusion may be supplemented by noting that the prince's

Russian service was itself an important factor in his marginalization within Circassian society. It was likely his status as a Russian officer that aggravated negative perceptions of Atazhukin's actions. His oscillations in political identity reflect the severe moral and ethical predicament of the highlander officer in Russian service during the Caucasus War.

One of the best-known highlander officers in Russian service is M. A. Kundukhov (1818–1889). His informative memoirs have been the subject of dedicated analysis in Russian historiography (Degoev, 2003). His biography has already been recounted in numerous publications and need not be repeated here. It is worth dwelling, however, on one little-known yet telling episode of the officer-highlander's service.

Kundukhov recalls his negotiations with Imam Shamil in 1848, which he conducted on the Russian side at the behest of the first Caucasus Viceroy, M. S. Vorontsov:

> "In 1848 the commander-in-chief instructed me to induce Shamil to enter into peace talks through the mediation of his naibs known to me—Magomet Mirza, a Kabardian, and my kinsman Dudarov, both held in high esteem by Shamil and by the mountaineers" (Kundukhov, 2002).

Scholarly commentary generally treats these events as the sole instance of Kundukhov's participation in negotiations with Shamil.

Yet correspondence survives between A. I. Neidgardt, Chief Administrator in Georgia and Commander of the Separate Caucasian Corps (1842–1844), and V. I. Gurko, Commander of the forces on the Caucasus Line and in Chernomoria (1842–1845), dated November 1842–January 1843. Notably, in his memoirs Kundukhov remarks on these superiors' hostility toward him: "Both were ill disposed toward me, suspecting me of dealings with Shamil" (2002). The two administrators' exchange, however, sheds light on preparations for Kundukhov's talks with Shamil already in 1842–1843. In a report to Neidgardt dated November 25, 1842, Gurko wrote:

> "Captain of cavalry (rotmistr) Kundukhov, seconded to the Separate Caucasian Corps (Kundukhov notes in his memoirs that he was promoted to rotmistr in 1840—A. U.), has received through a messenger from Shamil a proposal to come to him in Dargo for certain important negotiations. The messenger also said that, before his departure, elders came to him from the Shubuz, the Shatoi, and other tribes of mountainous Chechnya and declared that, weary of the present state of affairs, they were ready to submit and were merely seeking an opportunity to enter into relations with us." (RSMHA, n.d., f. 14719, in. 3, c. 504, l. 18)

General Gurko attached limited importance to this diplomatic overture, supposing that Shamil wished, through Kundukhov, to sound out the possibility of the return of his elder son Jamaluddin, given as an *amanat* (hostage) in 1839 during the fighting for Akhulgo. Gurko also assumed that, by such maneuvering, Shamil hoped to gain time and shield Chechnya from the Separate Caucasian Corps' winter raids. Even so, Gurko authorized Kundukhov to enter into talks:

> "…under present circumstances, we should not spurn a proposal that may allow us to sow discord among the principal agitators or, at the very least, serve to obtain most useful intelligence regarding the current condition of Chechnya and the temper of minds therein." (RSMHA, n.d., f. 14719, in. 3, c. 504, l. 19)

Kundukhov, however, received no formal instructions, held no powers to represent the regional Russian command, and was not authorized to make Shamil any offers on behalf of the imperial administration. This may have offended him and helps explain the remark in the officer-highlander's memoirs about strained relations with Generals Gurko and Neidgardt. For his part, Gurko rated Kundukhov positively as a "well-intentioned and cautious officer." In his reply to Gurko's report on December 4, 1842, Neidgardt likewise offered an unequivocally complimentary assessment of the officer-highlander:

> "I fully approve the permission you granted Captain of Cavalry Kundukhov to proceed, at Shamil's invitation, to Dargo—all the more so in view of this officer's known dispatch and fidelity and the instructions you have given him, which give reason to hope that he will in no case spoil the matter." (RSMHA, n.d., f. 14719, in. 3, c. 504, l. 24)

But in 1842–1843, the negotiations between Kundukhov and Shamil did not take place. At first, Shamil's men—who were to escort him to the imam—failed for a long time to appear. And at the end of December 1842, Kundukhov fell from his horse and, in General Gurko's words, "was injured so severely that his very life was in great danger" (RSMHA, n.d., f. 14719, in. 3, c. 504, l. 79). Given Kundukhov's remarks about his relations with Gurko and Neidgardt, one may surmise that the officer-highlander felt affronted by his superiors' distrust in refusing to accord his diplomatic mission official status. It is possible that Kundukhov deemed it unacceptable to go to Chechnya as a private individual, effectively tasked with espionage, and therefore delayed his departure by every means. Indirect evidence for this is the telling absence in his memoirs of any mention of preparations for negotiations in 1842–1843. This interpretation also aligns with another episode in Kundukhov's biography—his killing of a Chechen elder who turned out to be his sworn blood-feud foe. As Z. D. Avalishvili, the annotator of Kundukhov's memoirs, aptly observed, "here, beneath the uniform of a Russian army officer, there emerged a man of clan-based lifeways—a formation, so to speak, pre-state" (Avalishvili, 1937, p. 13). Russian military schooling and years of service in various imperial institutions did not eradicate Kundukhov's traditional value system and its corresponding imperatives of conduct.

Thus did Kundukhov's resentment toward the Russian administration accumulate, and together with the profound psychological turmoil described in the officer-highlander's memoirs, it led him to decide to depart for the Ottoman Empire (1865).

Conclusions

The incorporation of the Caucasus into the space of the Russian Empire was accompanied, among other things, by the erosion of traditional identities and the formation of new ones. Old inter-clan and ethno-territorial boundaries and mental demarcation lines gave way to new lines premised on loyalty to the empire. First in imperial paperwork and then in political everyday life, a division took hold between pacified and unpacified highlanders; between supporters of Shamil and other (sub)regional leaders of anti-imperial resistance; and loyalists who sided with the empire. Functional roles disappeared and were reconstituted, as the ethno-territorial aristocracy (princes, khans, shamkhals, beks) was recast as Russian officers and administrators. Such roles often failed to align with formerly prestigious social statuses and habitual structures of daily life. In this respect, the defection of Omar-bek Kasymkhanov analyzed in the article is indicative.

The Russian Empire sought to harness the knowledge and social capital of highlander officers for the pacification of the Caucasus. Yet schooling in Russian institutions and years of service to the “White Tsar” did not guarantee the overcoming of the sociocultural distance between the imperial command and mountaineers in imperial uniforms. Formal promotions and decorations were not viewed by highlander officers as decisive recognition; any hint—sometimes merely perceived—of distrust from superiors elicited a painful, protest response. Here the episode of preparations for negotiations between Captain of Cavalry M. A. Kundukhov and Imam Shamil, discussed above, is instructive.

For highlanders in Russian service, the paramount motive appears to have been the enhancement of their own standing within the local community rather than advancement up the empire-wide ladder of ranks and titles. They often hoped, through the empire, to elevate their political and/or moral prestige among compatriots. When this succeeded—as in the case of the Shamkhals of Tarki—they demonstrated maximal loyalty. When imperial service failed to raise communal status, or, worse, undermined and burdened a highlander’s reputation, he began to doubt the correctness of his choice. This perspective helps to describe and explain the frequent shifts in political identity and the “unexpected” defections and desertions from Russian service that mark the history of the Caucasus War.

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