
Empire and Mountains: The Case of Russia and the Caucasus*

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ABSTRACT

In the article the author discusses issues related to the history of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus, the peculiarities of incorporation of the region into Russia for almost two centuries, the Chechen Wars in the 1990s and contemporary situation in the Caucasian region and certain aspects of Russia's policy which the author considers as an imperial one.

The term 'Empire', whether continental or maritime, is associated in our minds with topographically sizeable states controlling extensive and relatively easily accessible territories. Mountains, due to their topography usually formed an obstacle to such territorial continuity. Practically, no pre-modern empire fully controlled large mountainous areas.¹ Rather, they were forced to either make use of mountains as a 'natural' boundary or to loosely incorporate them while wielding only nominal control. On the other hand, due to their topography mountain populations tend to be numerically small and divided into numerous groups, which enabled empires to play the classical *divide et impera* facilitating such loose control.

The technological leap of the recent two and a half centuries or so made control over hitherto unreachable areas increasingly possible, and therefore irresistibly luring. Thus, beginning with the first half of the nineteenth century modern Powers invested enormous efforts to fully control the territories and populations of mountainous and other hitherto out of control areas. It was at that period that France struggled to control the Atlas Mountains in North Africa, Britain tackled the area to be known as the North

Western Frontier Province and the Tribal Areas in India (currently under the same names in Pakistan), while Russia encountered the Caucasus Mountains.

To be precise, Russia came across and incorporated other mountains before and after the Caucasus: the Urals and the mountainous eastern part of Siberia in the seventeenth century; the Crimea by the end of the eighteenth century, and the ranges surrounding Central Asia from south and east in the second half of the nineteenth century. But none of these forced on it such a prolonged struggle to conquer them at such huge human and material costs. Certainly, none left such a lasting impact on the Russian culture, psyche and collective memory. Most of the other mountains were either peripheral or marked natural borders.

The Urals, the first to be encountered chronologically, is perhaps the only range comparable to the Caucasus in its central geographical position. Although more than twice longer than the Caucasus – about 2,500 km as opposed to about 1,100 km – the Urals are not as formidable as the former. They are significantly lower (average elevation of about 1,000 m as compared to 3,600 m of the Caucasus); by far more passable; leave a wide gap between the southern tip of the range and the Caspian Sea; were thinly populated at the time of conquest, which meant that resistance, if there was one, was very weak; and, perhaps most important, were conquered before the era of ‘obsession’ with territorial direct control.

Although in contact with the Caucasus from ancient times and claiming it since the reign of Ivan IV (‘the Terrible’; r. 1533–1584), the Russian conquest of the Caucasus started in earnest during the reign of Catherine II (‘the Great’; r. 1762–1796). Under her the Caucasus Defence Line (*kavkazskaia kordonnaia liniia*), established by Peter I (‘the Great’; r. 1696–1725) opposite the eastern side of the mountains, was extended westward to the Black Sea to confront the entire length of the range and the kingdom of Kartli and Kakheti (nowadays eastern Georgia) was brought under Russian protection. Catherine's successor Paul I (r. 1796–1801) annexed eastern Georgia and his successors Alexander I (r. 1801–1825) and Nicholas I (r. 1825–1855) conquered and annexed in two rounds of wars with the Qajars (1805–1813 and 1826–1828) and the Ottomans (1807–1812 and 1828–1829) the areas south of the Caucasus roughly comprising the present day states of Georgia,

Armenia and Azerbaijan (Baddeley 1908: 1–206; Gammer 1994a: 1–7). These conquests necessitated control of the Caucasus range as it was an obstacle in Russia's communications with its new possessions to the south.

First, the mountains could be crossed at two points only – along the Caspian coast, where the ridges reached at several points the sea, and through the Daryal pass in the centre, where the Russians paved the Georgian Military Highway. Anywhere in between, as Marlinskii was supposed to have said, ‘the Minister of Ways and Communications must have been the Devil Himself’ (Baddeley 1940, II: 43).

Second and more important, these passes were threatened by a large tribal, warlike and growingly hostile population. No exact figures can be extrapolated for the population of the Caucasus Mountains at the turn of the nineteenth century, though it is known that the country was densely populated. One can only grossly estimate that it might have reached one million people (Kabuzan 1996). These were divided into numerous tribal and tribal-like communities speaking about seventy languages/dialects. The great diversity notwithstanding, all these groups shared a common identity as ‘highlanders’ and a common culture. This included shared values – such as equality of all warriors that is, freedom, that is resistance to any external authority – and martial spirit, as well as common traditions, popular literature and legends, food, customs and costume (Kovalevskii 1890; Luzbetac 1951).

Third, and perhaps most menacing, with the Russian encroachment, especially from the time of Catherine II, Islam in its Sunni variety was becoming increasingly a unifying common ground. It was in the 1780s that Islam was used for the first time as a rallying call to unite all the groups of the Caucasus in resistance to Russia. More important, Islam was used to solicit Ottoman support and to join the Ottomans in their war(s) with Russia. Although this first attempt (1785–1794) by Ushurum, who assumed the title *al-Imam al-Mansur* (the victorious leader), failed eventually, its long term meaning was not lost on the Russian leadership (Benignsen 1964). Thus, immediately after the end of the Napoleonic wars, in 1816, Alexander I sent his confidant Aleksey Yermolov to subdue the Caucasus. Thus, started a very costly struggle, known in Russian historiography as ‘the Caucasian War’ (*kavkazskaia*

voina), which ended only in 1864 (Henze 1983; Zelkina 2000b; Gammer 1994a; Baddeley 1908).

The Caucasus imposes two of the most difficult modes of war on an invading army – mountain warfare and forest warfare. In some areas these two combine. Both supply numerous advantages to the highlanders fighting an irregular war while denying a regular army its big advantage – waging a pitched battle. Luckily for St. Petersburg, the population astride the Daryal pass, the Ossets, tied its lot with Russia. While not completely securing the pass from hostile attacks this fact meant that the tribes to the east and west of the pass faced a serious obstacle in uniting their efforts against Russia. On the other hand, it meant that Russia had to fight two almost completely different wars in two separate theatres.

Yermolov, or rather his chief of staff Vel'iaminov, was aware of the enormous obstacles to a direct assault on the mountains. 'The Caucasus', he wrote in a famous memorandum to be frequently quoted in the future,

should be likened to a mighty fortress, marvellously strong by nature, artificially protected by military works, and defended by a large garrison. Only thoughtless men would attempt to storm such a stronghold. A wise commander would see the necessity of having recourse to military art; would lay his parallels; advance by sap and mine, and so master the place. The Caucasus, in my opinion, must be treated in the same way, and even if the method of proceeding is not drawn up beforehand, so that it may be continually referred to, the very nature of things will compel such action. But in this case success will be far slower owing to frequent deviations from the right path (Volkonskii 1894: 524; N. Sh. 1883).

Even though he subscribed to this system, Yermolov proved too impatient to implement it fully. Rather, he preferred to rely on terror. 'I desire', he wrote, 'that the terror of my name should guard our frontiers more potently than chains of fortresses, that my word should be for the natives a law more inevitable than death' (Potto 1887–1889: 15). He established a new advanced line in the east expelling the Chechens by extremely cruel methods (Gammer 2003a). When these actions triggered a general revolt in Chechnya and Daghestan, Yermolov crushed it by extremely brute force and

reported to the emperor that ‘the subjugation of Daghestan, begun last year is now complete; and this country, proud, warlike and hitherto unconquered, has fallen at the sacred feet of Your Imperial Majesty’ (ACAC 1866–1904, VI, II: 41).

In 1827, Yermolov left the Caucasus in disgrace. Although his dismissal by the new Emperor had nothing to do with the subjugation of the Caucasus, his campaigns there proved to be counter-productive. Far from subduing the population, as his many admirers up to the present have asserted, his activities rather intensified hatred to Russia, stiffened resistance to it and helped to enhance the role of Islam, in the form of the spread of the Naqshbandi *tariqa* (Sufi brotherhood) which would lead now resistance in the eastern part of the Caucasus and for some periods of time in some of its western parts too (Gammer 1994b).

By 1829, when Russia was free again to undertake the conquest of the mountains, the situation had changed on two counts. To start with, in the eastern Caucasus the Naqshbandiyya had established a firm hold over the people and was to serve as the organizational basis for the Imamate declared late in 1829 and again in early 1830. The three successive Imams (leaders) that led it – Ghazi Muhammad (l. 1829–1832), Hamza Bek (l. 1832–1834) and Shamwil (pronounced Shamil, l. 1834–1859) – established a state with an administrative, fiscal and religious structures and a regular army. This included artillery, engineers and an Ottoman style *nizam (-ı cedit)* regular infantry. The Russians were thus facing a unified resistance in the eastern part of the Caucasus and had to increasingly concentrate their efforts there (Zelkina 2000b; Gammer 1994a).

In St. Petersburg on the other hand, the new Emperor was too impatient with the siege strategy. Nicholas I repeatedly told his generals in the Caucasus that he saw no reason why the mighty army that had defeated Napoleon, could not crash ‘a few gangs’. Therefore, a ‘one blow’ approach was adopted aiming at conquering the country and crushing resistance in a single effort (Gammer 1992a). Thus, beginning with 1830 a series of campaigns was launched to crush the Imams. Most campaigns ended in failure and even the few ones deemed successful by the Russians only served to enhance the Imam's power and prestige. The Russian response was typical to all mediocre generals past and present: to try again

with more fire and manpower. This strategy reached its peak and dead end in 1845, when an 8–10,000 strong column commanded by Count Michael Vorontsov, was lured into the forests of Chechnya, surrounded, and only by sheer luck escaped complete annihilation (Gammer 2003b).

Following that near disaster, the Emperor allowed himself to be persuaded that the only way to conquer the Caucasus was by return to the 'siege system'. From 1846 to the beginning of the Crimean War, in 1853, Vorontsov steered a series of operations in the eastern Caucasus designed to push the population from the piedmont up into the mountains where it would face the choice between starvation and surrender. The crux of it was the establishment of new defence lines, behind which Cossacks and 'pacified' highlanders were settled. These were accompanied by wide scale forest felling which deprived the highlanders of their tactical advantage. 'The system of the axe', remarked one of Vorontsov's ADCs, 'replaced the system of the bayonet' (Zissermann 1876: 424).

While concentrating their efforts on the east, the Russians had to continue to fight in the west as well. Here, the various groups, known collectively as Circassians, were fighting each its own war with little coordination (Henze 1986, 1992). However, by the 1840s the influence of the Imamate in the east on the west had been growing. Of the three na'ibs (deputies) the Imam sent to the Circassians, Muhammad Amin (l. 1847–1860), was successful in uniting many of their groups under his and the Imam's command (Khoon 2010a). These gains, however, did not sidetrack the Russians from their campaigns in the east. Neither did they significantly alleviate the pressure on the Imamate. 'We', wrote the Imam to the Ottoman Sultan on the eve of the Crimean War, 'have been [ceaselessly] hard-pressed year after year' and 'have no force to furnish against our enemies. We are deprived of means and are now in a disastrous situation' (Tsagareishvili 1953: 367).

The Crimean war posed a considerable threat to Russia's position in the Caucasus. All its opponents – Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire – considered to join forces with the highlanders and to push Russia out of the Caucasus. The highlanders on their part hoped to be delivered by the Ottomans and their allies. None of this happened, however. Any feeble and half-hearted attempt by the Ottomans either failed due to their own fault or was thwarted

by its allies. In the east the Ottomans failed to join forces with the Imam. In the west, they played off Muhammad Amin and another leader they introduced – Sefer Bey Zanuqua – against each other (Badem 2010; Gammer 1990, 2003c; Khoon 2010b).

With the war over but not before clearly demonstrating the need to dominate the Caucasus, Russia under a new emperor – Alexander II (r. 1855–1881) – and a new viceroy in the Caucasus – his confidant Prince Alexander Bariatsinskii – moved to do exactly that. The massive forces concentrated in the Caucasus during the war were now put to use against the Imamate. Conducting a *perpetuum mobile* offensive from three directions they reduced the territory of the Imamate within three years driving the Imam to surrender in September, 1859. Although the final ‘pacification’ of the east would take a few more years, the Russians could now turn their attention to the west. Starting in 1861 the Russians carried out a series of massive operations and completed the conquest of the western Caucasus on May 21 [June 2], 1864.² Unlike in the east, here the population was given the choice to submit and resettle in the lowlands or leave for the Ottoman Empire. This resulted in the exodus of hundreds of thousands, many of whom perished on their way, to the Ottoman Empire (Pinson 1970; Brooks 1995; Kreiten 2009).

This expulsion to another country marked a significant departure from traditional Russian policy, and would not be repeated in the future either. Russia had been using what Pinson called ‘demographic warfare’ in the Caucasus since the beginning of its involvement there. All through the ‘Caucasian War’ the Cossacks were settled in frontline zones and highlanders were relocated from the mountains and settled behind and in between these lines of *stanitsas*. Starting from the 1780s, the Russian authorities also discussed on occasion the transfer of entire populations from the mountains into inner Russia (Potto 1912, 2: 146; Vachagaev 1995: 54; Fadeev 1897: 63–64). These suggestions, however, were never attempted by the Imperial authorities, *inter alia* because their scale rendered them impossible to carry out. (The Imperial authorities would use such methods after the ‘pacification’ of the Caucasus on a smaller scale – up to the resettlement of entire villages into inner Russia.)

The decision to expel an entire population abroad ran against a basic impulse in Russian political culture – the strong will to control the population, not merely the territory. Thus, the decision to give up command over an entire population and expel it abroad was tantamount to an admission that the decision makers despaired of ever controlling it. Only a tiny minority of the original population remained in a few pockets, subsumed by the overwhelming numbers of new settlers – mainly Russians and other Slavs, Armenians and Pontic Greeks – directed there by the authorities. Therefore the western part of the Caucasus remained quiet ever since.

This was not the situation in the eastern part of the range. The Russian decision makers most probably would have liked to get rid of the newly conquered population there as well. But here, conditions did not allow for such a massive expulsion. Still, the authorities used the opportunity to ‘remove’ to the Ottoman Empire ‘the most untamed’ elements as well as those ‘inciting the people to insolence’ – all in all between 20,000 and 30,000 people (Akaev and Akhmadov 1994: 77–78). However, Russia's hold over the land remained strenuous.

An (unnamed) Austrian diplomat once remarked that ‘the whole art of Russian government is in the use of violence’ (Blanch 1960: 93). Indeed, during these decades of combat the extremely few suggestions to subdue the highlanders by ‘peaceful’ means were usually rejected ‘with scorn’ and ‘stigmatised as both weak and incapable’ (Baddeley 1908: 99). Beginning with Imam Mansur, all the leaders of resistance attempted time and again to reach an agreement with the Russians but were met with the rigid demand for unconditional surrender. Any negotiations the Russians entered into with the highlanders were for tactical purposes only, that is, to gain time or to neutralize one group in order to fight another. Even when the Emperor Alexander II himself suggested a negotiated settlement with the Imam in 1856, the suggestion was rejected on the spot by Bariatinskii (Gammer 1991, 1992b).

Once in possession of the Caucasus, the strategies employed by the Russian authorities to rule were based on the use of force too. The highlanders were put under a military administration and close scrutiny of the authorities. Standardization of the administration and the courts according to the rest of the Empire in the following years notwithstanding, they remained under military control

until 1917. They were, thus kept isolated from the rest of the country and population. This isolation (in part self-inflicted) kept them aloof of the economic development of the country, while the acute shortage in land caused deterioration in subsistence. Grudgingly submitting to the Russian rule, the population was not given any proper reason to resign to it.

The Russian authorities tried to erase the legacy of the Imamate by banning the *shari'a* and persecuting the Naqshbandiyya. Intolerant of anything independent of the authorities, they turned against the Qadiriyya too. This Sufi *tariqa*, which began to spread in the Caucasus in the last years of the Imamate, helped in fact the Russians to 'pacify' the country because it preached against resistance to the Russian rule (Gammer 2000; Zelkina 2000a). Yet in 1864 the authorities arrested its Sheikh, Kunta Hajji, shot at a demonstration of his followers and killed 100–400 people, 'including four to six women' (Akaev and Akhmadov 1994: 73; Gammer 2005: 76–79). They furthermore banned the *tariqa* and the performance of *dhikr*, turning the Qadiriyya into an enemy.

It is not surprising, therefore, that both *tariqas* led rebellions against the Russian rule at the first opportunity when prospects of success seemed promising, that is during the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877–1878. Even before the war started officially, two Imams rose up: in Chechnya – Albik Hajji supported by the Qadiriyya and in Daghestan – Muhammad Hajji supported by the Naqshbandiyya. Both had strong grievances – 'obstacles raised by Tsar Alexander II to [the practice of] Islam'. Namely,

the Russian authorities publicly forbade the performance of loud *dhikrs* in the mosques; they prohibited hajjis from the special *khalats* [robes] and *chalmas* [turbans] signifying pilgrims; and they outlawed gatherings of people in large numbers to pray for rain and other purposes (Goytakin Rasu 1991: 6).

The rebellion was crushed by military force, not without a series of blunders first (Gammer 2005: 84–103). The punishments meted out on the highlanders were extremely brutal. The population of rebel villages, instructed a senior officer in the Caucasus his subordinates, 'should be exiled to Siberia, and if these rascals refuse, they should all be exterminated ... like cockroaches and starved to death'. But the occasion was to be used also 'to pluck

out all the untrustworthy people ... as many as possible and in the most oppressive manner ... and exile them and their families to Russia forever' (Ivanov 1941: 290).

Indeed, all those accused of playing a leading role in the uprisings were either executed or exiled to far away parts of the Empire (in breach of promises of amnesty to lure them to surrender). Furthermore, many villages were forced to relocate to the foothills or to inner Russia and their lands were confiscated and divided among Russian officials and local collaborators (Jersild 2000: 5–16). The fate of those exiled to inner Russia was the worst. A Russian official inspecting the new settlements in the spring of 1878 found most of them 'exhausted by diseases and smitten by their misfortune and homesickness'. To leave them in the severe climate and unfamiliar conditions of life, he concluded, 'means to doom them to a more or less prolonged agony' (Ivanov 1941: 197–198). In view of the huge losses in life among the deportees, the Imperial authorities stopped any further resettlement and in 1883, as part of the general amnesty following the accession of Alexander III (r. 1883–1894), they were all allowed to return to their places of origin.

No similar uprising occurred in the following forty years (1878–1918). This did not mean, however, that Imperial rule was firmly established or that the highlanders embraced it. By the turn of the century the Eastern Caucasus had become the 'Wild South' of the Russian Empire, where according to an English observer intimately familiar with the country, the 'the *leitmotif*, so to speak, of existence' was 'the chord of triad' – 'brigands, rifles and revolvers' (Baddeley 1940, II: 8). As a norm, this brigandage targeted usually 'Russian' persons, firms and banks and seldom touched locals. Furthermore, this *abrechestvo* as the Russians called it (after *abrek* – bandit of honour) aimed especially at government institutions and in many cases distributed at least part of the take among the needy locals. These *abreks* enjoyed great popularity among the populace who sheltered them, and some have even become national heroes, respected up to the present day (Gammer 2005: 104–117).³

The Russian authorities usually reacted in a similar manner – clamping down on the nearby communities, fining the population and sending their leaders to prison or into exile in inner Russia. The largest round up occurred in 1911, when the thirty most impor-

tant religious leaders and their families were exiled to Kaluga, Astrakhan and Siberia. Although most of them were released in 1916, such treatment did not endear the Russian authorities with the highlanders.

The years following the 1917 revolution were no less stormy and confusing in the Caucasus than in other parts of the former Russian Empire. Following the October revolution (or the Bolshevik coup as it is fashionable to call it now in post-Soviet Russia) the Caucasus highlanders made three successive attempts to establish states – the Mountain republic in 1918, the Caucasus Emirate led by Uzun Hajji in 1919 and the Imamate led by Najm al-Din al-Hutsi (Gotsinskii) in 1920. These tried to survive amid military and political intervention by rival Powers – Germany, the Ottomans, Britain, Italy – and combating Denikin's 'White Army', the Bolshevik 'Red Army', or both (Bennigsen 1983; Bennigsen-Broxup 1992; Gammer 2005: 112–145; Reynolds 2011).

The Bolsheviks emerged victorious, *inter alia* because they were flexible and clever enough to enlist local allies – including part of the religious leadership – under the slogan '*hurriyet ve shariet*' (liberty and *shari'a*). Thus, they managed to transform the struggle with the highlanders opposing them into a local civil war in which no quarters were asked and none given.⁴ Having established themselves in power, however, they soon revealed that their basic arsenal of tools of government was not at all different from the Tsar's. But the Bolsheviks proved, at least at first, by far more sophisticated, especially in the relative use of truth.⁵ Thus, the steps they took to implement their program and eliminate their previous allies were cautious and gradual.

Stalin once finally in power, in 1929, reverted to the massive use of brute force. Two parallel campaigns were launched to transform radically society. In the 'collectivization' campaign lands and livestock were nationalized and the peasants – pressed into collective farms. The major means to enforce it was the *de-kulakization* campaign, in which *kulaks* ('rich' peasants and thus by definition 'exploiters') and their families were sent to the emerging Gulag. In the anti-religious campaign (delayed by several years compared to other parts of the USSR) Islam was banned and brutally attacked. Mosques, *shar'i* schools and courts, *mazars* (places of pilgrimage) were closed down, worshipers – persecuted, and religious leaders either executed or sent to the Gulag.

Repeated uprisings against these measures as well as against various excesses by the Soviet authorities throughout the 1920s and 1930s were termed by the Soviets 'Political Banditism' and crushed by massive military force, including the intensive use of the air force (Avtorkhanov 1992; Gammer 2005: 142–165). The peak of this process was the 'deportation' to Central Asia and Siberia of entire ethnic groups during the Second World War. From the Caucasus Mountains four groups were 'deported': the Chechens, the Ingush, the Balkars and the Karachai (Conquest 1970; Nekrich 1978; Pohl 1997, 1999).

In applying the divide and rule principle the Bolsheviks proved to be masters compared to their predecessors. They virtuosically played off numerous groups against each other and used 'the progressive' lower 'clergy' against the 'reactionary' one. What proved to be the masterstroke was the granting of administrative and cultural autonomy to each ethnic group. Each group was now in possession of its own literary language and was generously encouraged to develop it. These new literary languages and the change of alphabet (to Latin and then again to Cyrillic) amounted in the case of the Muslim groups in the USSR to a triple 'divide and rule'. They were divided from each other, from the outside Muslim world and from their past.

In the Caucasus, the highlanders were divided into nineteen officially recognized peoples which were placed in seven autonomous units, three of them bi-national and one – multinational. The separate development of each nationality and each republic enhanced and/or produced in due course a great number of rifts and tensions among various groups of highlanders. These were exacerbated by the 'deportation' and even more so by Khrushchev's 'rehabilitation' of the 'suppressed peoples' and in the case of the Caucasus their return to their original territories in 1956–1958. The situation was not, and could not be, reversed to the pre-'deportation' state.

It's not like in the United States where the Japanese-Americans who were put in camps during World War II were apologized to and given financial compensation. Or look at the Germans, the way they have apologized to the Jews and banned anything anti-Jewish. Instead, our repressed peoples came back in the late 1950s either to have

their oil exploited in the case of the Chechens, their best lands taken away in the case of the Ingush, their autonomous status removed in the case of the Karachai and, again, a loss of territory in the case of the Balkars (Smith 1998: 91).

Thus, a cloud of suspicion and mutual recrimination remained between the 'deported' peoples as a group and the others while a series of new conflicts and grievances were created between specific groups. And since these were not treated or even aired out, they festered and erupted under the conditions of Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* (Gammer 1995).

Meanwhile, the post-Khrushchev period, or the Brezhnev period, in the Caucasus was characterized by peace and accelerated Sovietization. Towards the end of that time the USSR became entangled in another mountain war in Afghanistan. While this war is out of the scope of the present paper, suffice it to mention that the Soviet military forces, their technological superiority notwithstanding, failed to win and conquer the country and that this fact had its influence on the way the population regarded the regime inside the USSR.

In his *Will the Soviet Union Survive until 1984?* Andrei Amalrik likened the opposition of the Soviet regime and people to that of an armed guard pointing a rifle at a man with his hands up. As time passes both become increasingly tired and lower the hands and the rifle respectively (Amalrik 1970). The late Soviet period was thus characterized in the Caucasus by the increased influence of nationalism and Islam and in most cases a combination of both as well as by the decreased hold of Moscow on the ground (Benignsen 1988; Rywkin 1991, 1993).

Beginning in 1989, when Gorbachev's policies reached the peripheries of the USSR, all these grievances, conflicts complaints *etc.* surfaced into the public sphere. As Moscow became increasingly preoccupied with internal struggles, which ended in the dissolution of the USSR, its interest in the problems of the periphery decreased as did its will to either seriously deal with these problems or to curb them. The elaborate structure constructed by the Soviets to enable rule through controlled and limited nation building now became their nemesis as many disputes and conflicts became unmanageable and some deteriorated into violence.

Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin reacted the same way – the use of military force. The former used the Soviet Army to quell mass demonstrations in Baku and Tbilisi and the latter used the Internal Troops of the Russian Ministry for Internal Affairs in Chechnya in 1991 and the Russian military forces in the Osset-Ingush war of 1992 (Birch 1995; Dzadziev 2003) and in the 1994–1996 war in Chechnya (Tishkov 1996, 1997; German 2003; Dunlop 1998; Lieven 1998). The war in Chechnya proved to be of particular significance on several counts.

First, the deterioration into war was not inevitable. Negotiated solutions were possible which would leave Chechnya within Russia's fold, but were not fully explored. The Russian leadership being the stronger partner to the war bares therefore the lion's share of the responsibility for it.

Second, it exposed the weaknesses of the Russian armed forces and ended in the Russian military defeat. The fact that the first war ended in a humiliating defeat to Russia and a complete destruction of Chechnya prevented any stability in Chechnya and in the Caucasus in general. The chaos inside the country affected the neighbouring areas and gave Russia the reason and excuse for *revanche* in the second war.

Third, the war was the major cause for the spread of Radical Islamism in the Caucasus, as it gave the opportunity and location to foreign volunteers to meet, train finance and influence local combatants who joined the ranks of the radicals.

This radicalization was enhanced further by the second war in Chechnya beginning in 1999 (Henkin 2006; Moore and Tumelty 2009; Sagramoso 2007; Dobaev 2009; Richmond 2008; Sokirianskaia 2008; O'Loughlin, Kolosov, and Radvanyi 2007; Nivat 2001; Politkovskaya 2001). The Russians were successful taking control of almost the entire territory and in eliminating the more moderate nationalist camp which was ready to compromise with Russia. This success can be attributed to a large degree to the fact that they gained the collaboration of major Islamic segments of the population. Russia thus was able to disengage to a great degree its armed forces from the conflict by 'Chechenising' it, that is making it a civil war between rival Chechen and Muslim factions. This success, however, enhanced the radical Islamist wing which moved now to terrorism and spread its activities throughout the entire region (Bram and Gammer 2013).

Thus, two and a half centuries after Russia began the conquest of the Caucasus its control of it is not completely stable or all embracing. Compared to other empires, however, it still holds on to the Caucasus, which cannot be said of Britain, France and others.

Compared to other empires, especially the British, Russia – Imperial, Soviet or post-Soviet, relied mainly on the use of force. Mental moulds, one of which is political culture, change at an extremely slow phase. Imperial Russian governments' preference for the use of coercion passed on to their Soviet and post-Soviet successors. 'The immediate response of the [post-Soviet] Russian government' to Chechnya's declaration of independence, 'was to crush the rebellion with armed force' (Siren 1998: 96).

Unlike Britain (and a bit more comparable to continental Empires) Russian authorities demanded full control over both territory and population and full obedience of the latter. Indirect rule was not an option. Thus, the demand on unconditional surrender during the conquest and the use of force against anything and anyone acting independently of, and outside the authorities' complete control. To achieve this Russia was ready to pay the enormous price in casualties and resources it did.

The use of force involves too many times what Barbara Tuchman called 'the March of folly' (Tuchman 1985). Although Russia was not the only one to march along that path, its mountain campaigns, in the Caucasus in particular, supply a strong demonstration of that. When one reads reports of battles in the various wars fought there, one can easily interchange them with each other. Only the personal names and dates differ. The places, the mistakes, the follies are the same and repeat themselves time and again. Amazingly as it may sound, no lessons were learnt from any of the wars and commanders who participated in previous wars repeated the same mistakes. One of the latest examples is the Russian army fighting in the first Chechen war. It included among its commanders quite a few veterans of Afghanistan, but none of the lessons of that gruelling war seem to have ever been applied in Chechnya.

Finally, a major problem of governing through the use of force is in the fact that (if one may paraphrase Abraham Lincoln) 'One can coerce all the people part of the time or part of the people all

the time. But one cannot coerce all the people all the time.’ Russia’s leadership will have to learn that lesson. One can only hope that it happens sooner than later.

NOTES

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¹ The only possible exception was the Inca Empire. For an explanation of this exception, see Korotayev 1995: 71; Berezkin 1991.

² This date, transferred to the Gregorian calendar, is now marked by the Circassian diaspora as the day of the Circassian genocide.

³ The most famous of these was Zelimkhan Gushmazukayev (1872–1913).

⁴ Of the thousands of combatants of the Imamate fighting the ‘reds’, only two survived and managed to escape to the Middle East.

⁵ Soon after the establishment of Soviet Power, a new proverb appeared among the highlanders: ‘to lie like the Soviets’.

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