



The Freedom Struggle of the Caucasian Highlanders in the XIX Century and the Influence of Mountain Relief on Military Tactics

Sevinj Nasibova ✉ 

School of Political and Social Sciences, Department of History, Western Caspian University, Baku, Azerbaijan

Abstract. In this work, we consider the resistance of the Caucasian highlanders during the 19th century in relation to the Caucasian War of 1817-1864 (although several Western authors date this period from 1763 to 1864). We compare the two main centers of geopolitical resistance: the organized resistance headed by Imam Shamil in the Northeast Caucasus (Chechnya and Dagestan), and the more scattered but no less consistent resistance of the Circassians (Adyg) in the Northwest Caucasus. In this work, the main emphasis is placed on the relationship between the geography of the Caucasus mountains – gorges, mountain ranges, forest cover, and mountain auls – and the tactics used by both sides of the conflict: the highlanders and the Russian army. With the help of historical-comparative and descriptive-analytical approaches, this work shows how the geography of the Caucasian mountains was not just the environment for the war, but its active component: it made the highlanders engage in guerrilla tactics instead of fighting in the open field, forced the Russian command to change its operational methods – building roads, deforestation, the policy of settling Cossacks, and building the fortified network. We discuss the emigration (muhajirism) that occurred after the end of military operations in the Northwest Caucasus in 1864: although this process is referred to as genocide by several researchers and several countries (for example, the Georgian Parliament in 2011), the official Russian historiography does not accept this view, and this work presents the dispute objectively, mentioning both points of view. We conclude that neither the duration of the Caucasian War nor the similarities and differences in tactical methods in its two different theaters can be explained without taking into account the decisive role of the terrain.

Keywords: *Caucasus, Caucasian War, mountain warfare, guerrilla tactics, Imam Shamil, Caucasian Imamate, Circassian resistance, muhajirism, military geography, national resistance*

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1. Introduction

The 19th century for the peoples of the North Caucasus was defined by a protracted and unequal struggle against an ever-expanding imperial power. After having brought Georgia and parts of the South Caucasus under Russian domination, the Russian imperial regime attempted to solidify its grasp on the wider region. However, in the rugged terrain of Chechnya, Dagestan, and Circassia, the empire faced a different challenge to the traditional imperial wars that it had engaged in against Iran and the Ottoman Empire. A protracted conflict, which came to be known as the Caucasian War, was to rage over several decades of mixed alliances and evolving tactics among communities of mountain dwellers, religious leaders, and local elites who sought to avoid incorporation into the Russian imperial administrative and taxation regime (Jersild, 2002).



The precise timing of the Caucasian War, whether the conflict officially commenced in 1817 when the commander of Russian forces in the Caucasus, General Alexey Yermolov was appointed or whether the conflict goes back further to the latter half of 18th century with Russian settlement in the North Caucasus beginning in 1763 (King, 2008), with the founding of fortress in Mozdok and the further expansion into Circassian lands as has been argued by some Western and North Caucasian scholars and in general in historiography it can date back to 1817, remains somewhat contentious, not simply concerning the specific historical data, but rather representing an understanding as to the very nature and scope of the wars. Beyond the political history and military chronology of the Caucasian Wars – which is extensively covered in historical studies – this article attempts to analyse an element which was clearly stated but poorly analyzed in the literature. The role of the mountain geography of the Caucasus has influenced the military procedures. A narrow mountain gorge, a high steep peak, dense forests, and remote khorog on inaccessible slopes where auls are located influence possibility both sides (Griffin, 2004).

For mountain peoples of the Caucasus, the environment helped protect them and suggested the choice of unconventional guerrilla tactics (ambush, surprise attacks from shelter, detachments). Russian army found itself in difficulty; movement and supply lines had to be adjusted and adapted for the features of this environment. Also need to be noted that the Caucasian Wars cannot be viewed as one integral conflict. It encompasses a series of wars – the Russian-Chechen, Russo-Daghestani, and Russo-Circassian (Bliev & Degoev, 1994).

All this can be united in one process of the struggle against the Russian expanding regime, and it presupposed the use of mountain terrain for military operations; however, they did differ in the territorial features of a region, the social organization of societies, peculiarities of military groups. For these reasons, in this work, this war, the northeastern Caucasian example, the movement guided by Imam Shamil separately, and later by compare them with the struggle of North–West Caucasians, as for circumstances, tactics, and outcomes, different. This study makes an attempt to answer the following questions: What were the stages and drivers of the highland liberation movement in the 19th century? How has the mountainous environment of the Caucasus influenced the tactics and organization of the movement in this period?

To what extent are they similar to one another, and the reasons for discrepancies in resistance forms in the North–East and North – West of the Caucasus? How did the Russian Imperial Army modify tactics and organizational aspects for combat operations in mountainous terrain? Did these peculiarities cause protracted conflict in the Caucasian War as a result not only from the above-mentioned factors but also from the interdependence of geographical circumstances and military strategy?

This paper carries out analyses using a historical–descriptive method and compares cases of military and political developments; a theoretical discussion on mountain warfare, together with historical research about the Caucasian Wars, has been considered in this work in order to provide a clear picture of what led to varied developments within the Caucasus, and why Russian imperial control took so much time to take effect.

2. Historical Context of the Freedom Struggle of the Caucasus Mountaineers.

2.1. Socio-Political Organization of Mountain Societies in the Pre-Globalization Era

In the early 19th century, socio-political structures in North Caucasian mountain societies were based much less on consolidated state power and much more on traditional clan-tribal and rural structures rooted in customary law (adat). In Dagestan there were dozens of small "free communes" (jamaat), each with its own traditions, assembly and a complicated system of alliances and mutual rivalry with adjacent communes. Likewise, in Chechnya it was primarily kin-based organisations - teips.

To the north-west of the Caucasus, things were a bit more complex: while there was evidence of some feudal hierarchical principalities like the Kabardian one, most Circassian (adyge) tribes (especially those



inhabiting the coast) had a democratic-communal structure exempt from princely rule.

And so, while this decentralised mode helped Moscow fight a concerted, uniform opposition, it paralysed the Russian armed forces, used to topple a whole people by seizure of the center and administrative organs. As a result, the highlanders had to be gradually captured, one commune at a time. This often took some time to accomplish.

2.2. The Origins of the Resistance and the Yermolov Era

The establishment of a unified highlander resistance in the North Caucasus usually goes back to the last two centuries of the 18th century and the first two centuries of the 19th. It was then that the Russian extension of fortification lines on both sides of the Terek and Kuban rivers increasingly encroached on mountain communities' independence. Many local historiographies claim that General Aleksey Yermolov's appointment to the post of commander of the Caucasian Corps in 1816 is a turning point. Yermolov's policy of punitive raids, forced relocation, and construction of fortification lines deep in the mountains pushed Chechen, Avar, and other Daghestani mountain societies towards unity (Baddeley, 2013; Gammer, 2006).

The strategy employed by Yermolov had two key components. First, it consisted of 'opening up' mountainous territory to Russian presence, which consisted of clearing forests and building new roads into the mountains; second, the use of severe punitive measures against resisting societies, which included burning settlements and relocating communities. Despite all the facts, these measures increased Russian territorial and authoritative control in the short run, and had the opposite effect in the long run. These facts pushed the mountain societies together.

2.3. The Muridism Movement and the Ideology of the Ghazavat

The stirrings caused by Yermolov's era produced Muridism—a religious-political movement that fused the esoteric practice of Sufism with open religious warfare (ghazawat) against the invading empire (Zelkina, 2000). Its leaders—first Ghazi Muhammad and Hamzat Bek, and most enduringly Imam Shamil—managed to organize disparate acts of opposition into a logical, unified ideological movement. We are here dealing not merely with a religious movement; Muridism also played a crucial role in uniting mountain society under a single central authority, the antithesis of previously existing tribal and village independence.

The introduction of a unified, sharia-based legal and administrative system was crucial, as the customary law was inherently piecemeal and localized. The latter was replaced by a fully fledged, if imposed, law for all subjects of the Imam. Along with this shared ideology of struggle and of martyrdom, the mountain societies, hitherto broken by tribal distinctions, maintained an organized struggle for decades.

2.4. Imam Shamil and the Caucasian Imamate

Between 1834 and his capitulation in 1859, Imam Shamil organized a resistance movement in the Chechen and Daghestani mountains, uniting local tribes into a theocratic state (the Caucasian Imamate) that had its own courts, tax and revenue collection systems, and military formations (Gammer, 2003). Shamil's command structure and strategy can be viewed as a variation on an archetype that runs throughout most national or religious based resistance movements: a unifying ideology and a widely dispersed military organization grounded in the local territory and taking advantage of defensive opportunities provided by its contours and topology (Kaziev, 2001).

Shamil's armies always had the numerical inferiority; they didn't even have a comparable level of artillery and logistical capability. What they had was an instinctive relationship with, and tactical capability to exploit, the high mountains in which they found themselves, something no outside opponent was to have. It is this relationship of forces that helps explain why warfare was to take on its present form, and how the highlanders' (however it fell short in its initial political objectives) war of freedom continued so long against their Russian opponent.

2.5. Management Structure of the Caucasus Imamate



It was not just a military pact - The Imamate of the Caucasus was an actual organisation, a state it could even be called; it had its own institutions. Its area was split into a number of provinces with a "naib" (a substitute) appointed by the Imam, which possessed civil and military powers and was directly to reply to the Imam. Shariat superseded local customary law; taxation was centralized; there were arms production workshops; a new system of military organisation was put into service. All this, reinforced by the mountainous terrain, allowed the Imamate to withstand to such a powerful empire as Russia for a couple of decades.

Not everyone accepted all the changes the movement introduced. Localities didn't wish to reduce their traditional freedoms and, at some point, they went over to the Russian side as well. This situation caused a lasting historiographical dispute about whether the national or the religious movement was in predominance for Shamil's organization.

2.6. Shamil's Foreign Relations: Ottoman and British Factors

Imam Shamil did not operate alone during his campaigns, and he always worked to establish diplomatic connections with the Ottoman Empire and Britain, and to gain their support and official recognition of his position. During the Crimean War between the Ottoman Empire and Russia (1853-56), Shamil tried to ally with the Ottomans and planned an offensive toward Georgia, but these plans did not yield significant results (Hamburg, Sanders, & Tucker, 2004). Public sympathy for Shamil and his cause existed in Britain and was reported on by many journalists, but no practical aid from Britain was ever received at a government level. The reason for this policy vacuum seems to lie in the fact that the Caucasus question was simply not a high enough priority for either the Ottoman Empire or Britain; for both of these powers, the risks of provoking an immediate, large-scale war with Russia far outweigh any benefit they might receive.

The example also highlights how a military superiority gained through geographical terrain was not necessarily sufficient to negate the weakness caused by a lack of foreign political support; no matter the longevity of a local struggle, its success against a vast empire with numerically and militarily superior resources depended, to some extent, on assistance from beyond local borders.

3. Circassian Resistance in the Northwest Caucasus

3.1. Political Organization of Circassian Communities

Circassian (Adyghe) communities of the Northwest Caucasus do not give us such a model of a union around a single religiously-political center (as opposed to the northeast Caucasus) but rather actions of individual tribes, federations of tribes, Shapsugh, Abzeks, Ubykhs, Natukhai, etc (Jaimoukha, 2001; Natho, 2009), in response to an imagined general enemy. After events in the northeast Caucasus, the northwest Caucasus did experience a limited level of centralizing pressure in the 1830s with attempts by naibs like Muhammad-amin to launch campaigns into the area under the authority of Shamil, though without any sustained impact in terms of formal institutional centralization.¹²⁵ yet for all its greater diffusion of organization, it was no less resilient and effective. The character of the natural environment and, first and foremost, the coastal rich forests and very complicated mountainous terrain of the foothill-mountainous regions of the North Caucasus in the given range afforded advantages in battle for Circassian fighters of particular interest for the following examination (Henze, 1992).

3.2. Impact of the Russo-Circassian War and the Crimean War

The Russo-Circassian War period is viewed within a 108-year war, starting in 1763, which date - according to some Western researchers - was regarded as the first date of the Russian-Circassian war with the establishment of Russian defensive fortresses in Mozdok. With the beginning of the Crimean War of 1853-56, Circassian chiefs tried to seek foreign support from the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain. However, the British and the French, following the signing of the Treaty of Paris, turned away from the Caucasus issue, thus increasing their isolation. Russia could now bring all her attention to bear on the Caucasus, and



Yevdokimov proceeded to wage a war of a thoroughly military and administrative nature, of resettlement and repopulation with Cossacks, on a large scale, of the depopulated parts of the Northwest Caucasus.

3.3. Migration: Mass Migration and Its Interpretation in Historiography

It became the object of fierce discussions in contemporary historiography how historical-legal qualification of those events would be given: numerous representatives from the West (Walter Richmond and others) and from Circassian communities consider the represented processes as a genocide as a consequence of deliberate destruction and/or eviction, and in 2011 the Georgian Parliament even defined those events by a special resolution as a genocide (Richmond, 2013). By this date, it can be said that the process of mass emigration (muhajirism), which is regarded as the greatest trauma in Circassian history and displaced over one million (some count only 100 000) Circassians from their native land into different Ottoman regions, in which many have perished during the voyage from epidemics, starvation, and shipwrecks, has come to an end.

The historical-legal characterization of these events has become the issue of a serious debate in modern historiography: number of the researchers from the West (Walter Richmond etc.) and Circassian diaspora organizations interpret the described process as a genocide, referring on intentional pursuit on the extermination or deportation of the population, and in 2011 a special resolution adopted by the Georgian Parliament, the events were called genocide. In contemporary Russian historiography, they interpret it as forced resettlement under the circumstances of war and its inevitable humanitarian implications (Shenfield, 1999). Being objective to both positions, the article states that the question of the definition of these events is debatable, but the factual existence of mass destruction and deportation is a well-documented phenomenon.

The significance of analysis of the process of muhajirism also lies in explaining the weakness of possible long-term resistance on the basis of the terrain of the mountains and forests: despite the ability of territory to retard the army campaign, if the opponent were disposed to systematic conquest and destruction of its lands, deforestation and deportation, military-geographic arguments could not change political and demographic conclusions.

4. Mountainous Terrain as a Determinant of Military Tactics

4.1. Geomorphology of the Caucasus and Its Strategic Implications

The Great Caucasus chain contains a system of sharp ranges parallel to each other, intersected by deep gorges crossing and deep rivers that cut into the canyons, and usually it passes through these passes. The fortresses and defensive works of highlanders' settlements in Dagestan and mountain Chechnya were built up to rock faces (cliffs), which themselves formed the main or one-sided defense; the other sides were fortified with stone ramparts and narrow approaches (one or few), easily accessible for an ambush. A sort of defensive system needing neither walls nor any constructive solutions was created naturally by nature's landscape itself. The landscape gave highlanders several tactical advantages a regular army almost never had: firstly, it leveled the Russians' advantage of numbers and numbers of cannon, since even the best of machine guns could not be used on high and steep elevations or in the passes.

Secondly, it allowed small mobile units to deal fatal damage to large convoys navigating through a defile. A force marching in a narrow pass can simultaneously sustain fire from both flanks from the heights, with little opportunity for maneuver or escape. And thirdly, especially in Chechnya, low slopes covered by dense forests made conventional observation almost impossible; that was to the advantage of fighters with deeper local knowledge.



4.3. Mobility, Ambush and Fortified Settlements Tactics

"In this terrain the Highlander guerrillas had devised tactical methods quite suited to it. The Highland "in two's" strategy of open country attack combined with territorial defence was a statement on a more general truth. Avoid war altogether with the opposing major power and, if forced into it, take offensive action only by favour of any favourable terrain which you are forced to take into account (and not the opponent's). Small bands of highlanders would attack solitary garrisons or troop convoys, and then vanish into terrain in which it was almost impossible for the regulars' horse and foot to pursue. It is, however, this wider phenomenon of the strategy of irregular war whereby a weaker force in terms of technology or of numbers combats a stronger regularly arrayed one, when there is rugged topography involved, whether mountains or densely forested country (Baumann, 1993).

In conjunction, the stone walls of the mountains served whenever required as strong points to permit sustained, positional fighting, such as that involved in several of the war's greatest sieges. The bifurcate nature of the highlander's strategy: highly mobile in open ground; firmly static in defense on the defensive, where it enjoyed the benefits of the topography reflected a broader principle: do not commit at all to decisive battle when you can help it; and where do commit at all to an assault on any territory you propose to conquer, so far as you possibly can – as much by virtue of the terrain you are required to contend with, as of your will to deny an opponent every advantage.

4.3. Case Events: Akhulgo, Dargo and Gunib

There was, however, a certain number of events during the long conflict wherein terrain and strategy intersected to serve as particularly good examples to illustrate what kind of results this mixture would engender. Akhulgo of 1839 was a fortified aul perched upon a rocky crag virtually isolated on a river and the result of the several-weeks-long siege involving large casualties of both opposing sides was that the Russians finally stormed the position (Kaziev, 2008); the latter shows how a position can be occupied despite severe disadvantages either in firepower or indeed in numerical superiority.

Russia's Prince Mikhail Vorontsov's campaigning of 1845 had demonstrated more clearly still the dangers faced by regular troops operating so far into enemy territory of the mountainous regions – after Russia had reached, captured and burned Dargo (Blanch, 1960); the return through forests susceptible to ambushes was costly, and in historians' view disproportionate losses, and this example often served in Russia to demonstrate that mere seizure of territory without effective control of its routes to communication would not pay off - although Russia eventually achieved and held it for decades.

Russian command had changed its operating pattern by the end of the protracted conflicts, though - for the last significant operation, the siege of Gunib, which brought about Shamil's surrender, and where the Russian commander (Prince Alexander Baryatinsky) utilized the advantage of operating as converging bodies to block exit routes, for example, to provide cover for his troops, to starve his foes without the perils of mass assault.

4.4. The Influence of Forested Terrain in the Western Caucasus on Circassian Tactics

In stark contrast to the open, rocky plains of the Northeast Caucasus, the Northwest Caucasus territory was, for the most part, a region of high foothills and dense forests. This resulted in a slightly different strategy being employed by the Circassian fighters than by Shamil's forces: instead of the sustained defence behind fortified aul walls seen in Daghestan, the former utilized forest ambushes, hidden movement through vegetation, and quickly devastating raids by small groups, instead. It is therefore understandable that the most important means of counter-strategy employed by the Russian army in the Northwest Caucasus was the systematically enforced, total deforestation of the area; without the forests, the cornerstone of Circassian strategy disappeared.

Such forest-clearing operations, orchestrated by General Yevdokimov, combined with the subsequent



establishment of a vast road network and proliferation of Cossack stanitsas (military-agricultural settlements), altered the military-geographic character of the territory, and greatly reduced the military-geographic advantages enjoyed by the Circassians. That Circassian resistance eventually culminated in total emigration after total military defeat - i.e., a complete demographic expulsion of the population from its land - rather than the conclusion met with in the East Caucasus, is therefore not wholly inexplicable.

5. Adaptation of Russian Military Forces to Mountain Warfare

5.1. Transition from Punitive Expeditions to Systematic Sieges

Part of the reason the Caucasian War took so long was that the Russian imperial army approached the beginning of the war with the techniques that had evolved from regular war against state armies, and these had limited use against an irregular enemy in the mountainous terrain. The first punitive raids against Highlander villages, first under commanders like Yermolov and Grabbe, often brought tactical victories, but the gains were only short-term because the Highlanders could escape into terrain the Russian army could neither garrison nor patrol, and could retreat and regroup. Eventually, the Russians began a much more methodical approach combining forward movement with construction of fortified lines and multi-column advances to seal off districts rather than simple attacks on settlements. Under the command of Baryatinsky and N.I. Yevdokimov for the final stage of the war, they began to learn how mountains could be conquered by slow investment rather than isolated punitive raids.

5.2. Roads, Deforestation and Fortifications

Perhaps the most innovative Russian approach to mountain warfare was the establishment of the 'forest' regime on roads and surrounding fixed positions, in order to remove one of the key sources of secrecy for Highlander ambushes. The construction of new roads through terrain hitherto impassable had two effects, namely 'to increase the speed of movement of all armaments and all transport' and 'to eliminate those advantages of space possessed by highlanders in high mountain zones where other troops' transport cannot pass without a road and all supplies'. Meanwhile, the systematic consolidation and extension of Russia's network of fortifications in key valleys and passes continuously reduced the maneuvering room for highlander resistance. This illustrated a clear example of the 'accumulative result over long periods of engineers' success' overwhelming the natural tactical advantages of mountainous terrain.

It must, however, be stressed that these tactics had evolved over long periods and at great cost in terms of both life and resources; the evident high stakes placed on terrain in this battle of imbalanced powers would be indicated by the longevity of the conflict with highland tribes of half a century or more of relatively constant combat (in the E. Caucasus) and of about three-quarters of a century in the longer perspective E. Caucasus, etc.).

5.3. Cossack Settlement Strategy

And not just by Military Engineering measures but to maintain long-term control over the region, the Russians resort to the tactic of demographic strategy. We shall replace the native population in the areas under Russian rule with a Cossack colony in the form of *astanitsa*, a militaro-agricultural colony permanently on watch with connection to regular troops (Barrett, 1999). And this was practised especially widely in the Northwest Caucasus; and so, following military success, an abrupt restructuring began to take place in the ethno-demographic terms of this region of our country, showing what one could oppose as long-term demographic and administrative measures, with the support of military advantage inherent in mountain terrain.

5.4. Exploration, Local Guides and Collaborating Highlanders

Another (though less investigated but important) aspect of the Russian success in this environment was that locals served as guides, interpreters, and members of allied detachments among the Russian army. Not



every highland community allied itself with either Shamil or the Circassians; a range of communities had their own locally framed objectives, often linked to inter-family and inter-clan disputes and a desire to survive. This naturally often resulted in these communities defecting to the Russian side to assist the army through the mountains. This highlights that this important aspect of terrain-based advantage of information, i.e., familiarity with locality (the local map knowledge) was by no means exclusive to the resistance forces.

It further demonstrates why the Russian forces found their ability to navigate and conduct reconnaissance in the mountains continuously improved in spite of the other hurdles; locally sourced intel eventually turned many supposedly 'unfamiliar' routes through high mountain passes, concealed paths and annual nomad paths familiar to the army, thereby offsetting some aspect of the informational terrain superiority held by the defender.

5.5. Climate, Seasonality and Logistical Challenges

The Impact of climate and seasonality on military tactics. When evaluating the effects of mountain terrain on military operations, one must not underestimate the influence of climate and seasons. On the peaks of the Caucasus, winter snows blocked many of the mountain passes for months, and melting spring snow produced floods and mudflows that destroyed communications facilities such as bridges and roads. Both sides, on this basis alone, would be severely limited in their timetable for the waging of warfare: the Russian side would largely be forced to concentrate large-scale offensives between spring-summer and autumn and in this manner limit warfare strictly to warm weather.

Meanwhile, the Highlanders would effectively use winter to stock provisions, maintain weapons, and so on in preparation for the following period of hostilities. Logistics: On an extremely practical note, providing supply lines in mountains was a particularly hard challenge for the Russian army. Every convoy could be considered as an individual (and difficult to defend, subject as convoys are to enemy attack and ambush as they would likely be at various points along the route) military action in itself - thus substantial human and material resources would have to be devoted not to the fight itself but to securing the transport routes - giving a clue as to the extent that military operations were influenced not only on the battlefield itself but also at a strategic and planning level, due to its mountainous characteristics.

6. Comparative Analysis: Eastern and Western Caucasus Resistance Models

A comparison of resistance experiences between the Eastern and Western Caucasus offers several interesting insights. On both sides of the range, the same strategic parameters apply – the mountain geography was the main basis for a lasting struggle; the same road-building, deforestation, fortification, and demographic warfare would eventually be waged by the Russian army against both. Differences are equally marked, however. Firstly, as far as political structure is concerned, the Eastern Caucasus yielded an institutional, centralized state in the form of the Caucasian Imamate.

A similar high level of organization failed to emerge in the Western Caucasus, where resistance largely remained tribal in nature. Secondly, terrain structure in the Eastern Caucasus (high-mountainous, rocky, open) provided the possibility of static fortified defense (Akhulgo), whereas terrain in the Western Caucasus (forested foothills) provided excellent conditions for mobile ambush tactics. And most crucially, resistance took a much more devastating demographic turn in the Western Caucasus when a protracted, but ultimately successful, displacement of the population occurred instead of an agreement of capitulation. The comparison thus shows not only the impact of mountain landscape on the practices of warfare as a generally recurrent phenomenon but also demonstrates the dependence of the actual outcome of that influence on the peculiarities of the form of political organization existing there, on the opponent's strategic moves and even on a particular historical setting of a fight (such as the results of the Crimean War for the western Caucasus). The territory is never simply decisive; rather, it shapes the boundaries of the feasible strategies.



7. The Legacy of the Struggle and Its Place in the Collective Memory

7.1. Shamil and the Circassian Resistance in the National Collective Memory

Aftermath and Collective Memory and Identity (21 May and the “Circassian Holocaust”) XIX The Caucasian War legacy also takes a central position in the current collective memory and nation-building process in the region. A reference character that emerges in the narratives of the dastans and folklore associated with the War is Imam Shamil, whose personality as a symbol of independence, religious sincerity, and the obstinate struggle against external occupation is remembered, and place-names, buildings, and courses of study continue today carrying his name. In the Circassian Diaspora-living in Turkey, Jordan, Syria, etc.- also, the 1864 exile remains the fundamental triggering traumatic act of creation of a nation and is commemorated annually as an “exile day”(21st of May). Viewed in this way, an analysis of the XIX Century Caucasus War provides not only another chapter on Military History, but rather is an essential background for the comprehension of the formation of national identity and the collective memory in the region. The resilience of the region, provided by its topography over millennia, helps us to establish a direct link between the way today’s generations conceptualize their past and the events that are regarded as glorious or a source of collective trauma.

7.2. Literary and Artistic Echo

The Caucasian War has also made its mark in Russian literature. First and foremost, the childhood and young service as an officer for some time in the Caucasus inspired Leo Tolstoy. His work Hadji Murat became among the earliest books to offer to the Russian readership a far richer and more ambivalent conception of Highlander opposition to Moscow (Tolstoy, 1912). Together with it, the Caucasus-related literary output of Mikhail Lermontov also played a significant role in forging for the readers of the period an image of the “wild though honourable” Caucasus in Russian Romanticism (Layton, 1994).

8. Result

The 19th-century highlander freedom struggle was inexplicable in exclusively political or religious terms; Muridism and the Imamate of Imam Shamil, as much as the less coherent but similarly persistent struggle of Circassia of the North-Western Caucasus, offered both the intellectual basis and the organizing frame, but it was the physical space of the Caucasus that for decades sustained the strategic feasibility of war against the stronger empire. Mountains became their fortress, ambush site, and refuge; they drew them to fluid, guerrilla warfare, while forcing an overhauling of conventional warfare approaches by the imperial Russian Army towards relentless road and forest construction, settlement of Cossacks in key areas, planned encirclement, etc. Of land in the highlanders’ midst. Akhulgo, Dargo, and Gunib demonstrate that tactical primacy gradually switched hands from the early highlanders’ exploitation of local terrain conditions into ambush and fortification, to eventual Russian hegemony in mountain warfare through years of costly adjustments.

In turn, by contrast between Eastern and Western Caucasus experiences we see that if terrain influence is ubiquitous, in specific cases both the forms of political organizing, as much as specific contexts of foreign politics made important differences to how this influence manifested - in the one instance a personally chosen act of capitulation, and in the other, a tragically decided forced emigration of people, the muhajirism. This history lesson teaches us a great deal about the place and meaning of terrain beyond the limits of the “Caucasus problem” per se: terrain is not neutral scenery of combat but an active element of strategy which can guarantee sustainability of resistance, direct tactics of two belligerent Parties and determine the very nature and duration of warfare between two unequals. I recommend this book also on the basis that its further studies would benefit from extending comparison with other mountain resistance movements in such locations as the Balkans, Hindu-Kush, or the Atlas, and thus may demonstrate whether here, specific as it may seem, patterns of mountain warfare revealed have wider applications. And I also



recommend it for the fact that the issue of the legal definition of the Circassians' emigration in historical and scholarly communities still remains, by reason of its nature, a lively and controversial subject of study.

Author's contribution

The sole author is responsible for conceptualizing, collecting, and analyzing data, and writing and editing the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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