

Introduction

The Caucasus is defined as a region by history, culture, and geography. In terms of geography, it is bordered to the west by the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, to the east by the Caspian Sea, and to the north by the lower Don River and the Kuma-Manych Depression; the southern border is political, based on longstanding Russian-Soviet borders with Turkey and Iran. But these external boundaries are far from clear-cut. The northern geographic boundary leaves the current capital of the Russian Caucasus—Rostov-on-Don (Rostov-na-Donu), the “gateway to the Caucasus” and administrative center of Russia’s Southern Federal District—outside the region. (In early 2010 this district was divided in two, with the new North Caucasus Federal District centered in Pyatigorsk and comprising six of the Caucasus’ seven “ethnic” republics plus Stavropol Territory.) And beyond the southern political boundary, as it has taken shape over the past two centuries, there are still significant areas that historically, culturally, and linguistically might be considered a continuation of the Caucasus region.

The heterogeneity of the Caucasus’ outer borders (natural and geographical to the north and political to the south) suggests a need to investigate the processes underlying the region’s historical and cultural cohesion, which developed within a single imperial state and through political engagement with that state. Historically, the Caucasus region was first seen as both an inter-imperial buffer zone and, beginning in the early nineteenth century, a special territory of Russia. Its distinct qualities have been reflected in the institutions and functions of the viceroyalty (namestnichestvo) and the military district, and in the unique ethnocultural mix that has existed on the southern frontier of the Greater Russian expanse. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Caucasus gradually took on attributes of Russia’s military, political, administrative, and ethnographic spheres, while at the same time it was being defined by its own internal cohesion and diversity.

These features of Caucasian history also give this atlas its chronological framework: it is devoted specifically to the Rus-

sian era, still ongoing, and begins with an overview of the imperial rivalry in the early eighteenth century, when Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and Persia jockeyed for control over the region. Three significant milestones mark the dawn of the Russian era: the 1722 Persian campaign by Peter the Great; the 1763 establishment of the Mozdok Fortress, which provided a base for further expansion; and the 1774 Russo-Ottoman Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji. This treaty essentially denoted the end of the neutral status given Greater and Lesser Kabarda in 1739, paving the way for their military and administrative incorporation into the Russian Empire and extending the Russian border to the Greater Caucasus Mountains and the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakhetia.

The temporal boundaries of the Caucasus’ “Russian era” share some of the ambiguity of the region’s physical boundaries. The decision to view 1763 or even the last quarter of the eighteenth century as starting points is not self-evident: one might begin with the conquest of Astrakhan in 1556 and the acquisition of areas along the lower southern reaches of the Terek under Ivan the Terrible along with his military and political alliance with neighboring Idarian Kabarda. Peter the Great’s Persian campaign of 1722 appears to have been little more than a reconnaissance raid to the eastern Caucasus and did not lead to any long-term territorial acquisitions. But the establishment of the fortress of Mozdok by Catherine II immediately after her ascension to the throne was the prelude to successful Russian expansion into the region. The result was a new war against the Ottomans (1768–1774) and international recognition of both Kabardas as Russian territories.

In this work I shall briefly trace the more than two hundred-year evolution of the administrative and ethnic composition of the region. My goal, in particular, is to explore how the variables involved in the region’s ethnopolitical conflicts came about and to study current risks associated with these conflicts. The book comprises a series of maps, each of which reflects what can be seen as a significant stage in the region’s development or as an interpretation of important trends or themes in

this development, accompanied by commentary in which these trends and themes are discussed.

The Caucasus has never been deprived of scholarly attention. Its abundant history, rich ethnic and cultural composition, and dynamic social and political processes have always attracted the interest of researchers throughout the social sciences. But we still lack a historical atlas of the region as a coherent social, cultural, economic, and political entity. An atlas makes it possible to visualize this coherence in its temporal and physical expression while seeing the movement of the region’s collective actors—their place within the historical trajectory of Greater Russia and other powers—in the context of common perspectives and interests. By offering a series of maps illustrating certain aspects of the political and ethnic history of the region that appear significant from today’s perspective, the atlas also provides the basis for a comprehensive historical atlas.

In this work I have striven to depict the historical fluidity of ethnic borders and the relativity of “indigenous” territories. While there are claims to the contrary, the historical record seems to indicate that significant portions of Caucasian territory were originally politically and administratively attributed to ethnic groups (peoples) and divided and redivided accordingly during the imperial period. The ways in which Russia and the Soviet Union drew administrative lines have affected how Caucasian groups themselves identify the boundaries of ethnic “homelands.” In this atlas I examine the imperfect correlation and problematic relationship between administrative and political boundaries on one hand and the boundaries of ethnic areas on the other, aiming in particular to demonstrate that the region’s political and administrative boundaries rarely (in fact, almost never) come close to matching its ethnic boundaries. Throughout history, however, each type of boundary—political, administrative, and ethnic—has influenced the others.

For two hundred years the Caucasus’ political and ethnic dynamic has been shaped by the variety of modes of governance used to integrate the region into a single country. None

of the competing political strategies ignored the ethnic component. The drawing and institutionalization of boundaries did not represent an arbitrary, unfounded approach to government. On the contrary, the process was for the most part guided by a particular logic in ordering and classifying ethnic categories and identifying and exploiting ethnic solidarities. Therefore the administrative lines drawn within the empire were not arbitrary in their relationship to ethnic boundaries, nor did their creators invent ethnic distinctions where there was no preexisting collective identity on which to base them. But these identities were neither clear-cut and one-dimensional nor socially irrelevant and static.

How government was structured in the Caucasus region and the changes this structure underwent during the imperial and Soviet periods played a significant role in shaping ideas about the “historical” borders of “national territories” (ethnic homelands) and, correspondingly, the conflict over these borders and territories. But the strategies for governing and the specific applications of a nationalities policy by imperial and Soviet authorities have always been influenced by rivalries among local elites and can be viewed as a way of regulating and institutionalizing internal antagonisms and conflicts. Many conflicts that look as if they were imposed from the outside or were even artificially created are more likely to reflect an institutionalizing of endogenous processes recast in the terms and expressed through the procedures of the empire’s own political and legal machinery. Therefore, final responsibility for the dynamics of these conflicts—especially for their future dynamics—lies with the Caucasian collective and individual actors themselves.

My aim is to provide a sketch of regional history capable of serving as a stepping stone toward understanding the unity but also the fragility of the contemporary Caucasus. If this book has a theme, it is that historical justice and the drawing of borders that satisfy everyone cannot be driven by the past, by treating the past as a repository of bygone national greatness. By using roughly sequential maps to trace the processes that shaped the region it is possible to demonstrate the fluidity of borders and the overall dubiousness of claims to national borders that have existed “from time immemorial.” I also strive to promote (in the resolution of ethnoterritorial and status conflicts) a general reorientation of attention from the past to the present and the future. Conflicts cannot be resolved through efforts to adjust current boundaries to bring them more in line

with their “original” configurations. “Original” is too relative and malleable a concept to be used as the basis of a responsible political strategy for solving today’s conflicts. The future shape of the region will be determined not by historians but through the development of a civil society that transcends national boundaries and of the political institutions within them. Nevertheless, the region’s common history can play an important role in this development as a reserve that can be drawn on in the critical reappraisal of current policies.

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