

Map 2

1722–1739: The Imperial Rivalry over the Caucasus Borderlands

Map 3

1763–1785: The Caucasus around the Time of the Russian Conquests

During most of the eighteenth century the Caucasus was a buffer separating three competing powers: the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and Russia. (A broader view reveals other geopolitical players as well, primarily Britain, which strove to block Russia from reaching the warm southern seas.) The powers were attempting to expand their presence in the region, transforming the Caucasus into a field of focused strategic interest. The region's political composition, the fact that its territory was divided among three powers (in terms of either influence or actual control), reflected the fluid aftermath of previous stages of imperial military and political rivalry. By the early 1770s the general contour of international borders had been determined by key treaties: the Treaties of Rasht (1732) and Ganja (1735) between Persia (Iran) and Russia, which returned the provinces along the western shores of the Caspian Sea to Persia and retracted the Russian border back to the Terek and Sulak Rivers (as can be seen in Map 2); the Treaty of Belgrade (1739) between the Porte (the government of the Ottoman Empire) and Russia, as a part of which Kabarda was established as a neutral zone (literally, "barrier lands") between the parties to the treaty and the territories south of the Kuban River were recognized as being under Turkish protection; and treaties between the Porte and Persia (including those in 1639 and 1736) delineating their territories south of the Caucasus range in the area later called Transcaucasia.

The next military phase of the Russo-Ottoman conflict (1768–1774) concluded in the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji (Küçük Kaynarca, 1774), which gave Russia "barrier lands" and shifted the border between the two empires to the lower reaches of the Kalmius River north of the Sea of Azov (not shown on the map and not to be confused with the Kalasus) and along the Yeya River to the east of this sea. Kuchuk Kainarji was followed by Russia's annexation of the Khanate of Crimea and its Kuban

lands in the northwest of the Caucasus (1783). These years (illustrated in Map 3) saw a significant territorial expansion by the Russian Empire into the central Caucasus (Kabarda and the dependent highlander communities south of it). With Persia in crisis (particularly during the second half of the eighteenth century), semi-autonomous states began consolidating in the southeastern portion of the region, the largest of which were the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakhetia and the Khanate of Quba (Kuba). Russia was attempting to impede Turkey's expansion toward the Caspian Sea and to prevent the forced reintegration of Kartli-Kakhetia into Persia. Under the Treaty of Georgievsk (1783), eastern Georgia (Kartli-Kakhetia) became a Russian protectorate. This seemed to assure Russia a foothold that would later permit it to take over the remainder of the southern Caucasus.

The rivalries among the three powers in the Caucasus served as a catalyst for a network of internal conflicts and antagonisms (for example, among different factions of Greater Kabarda's princedoms and between rulers in coastal Daghestan) that gradually began to be mediated by the empires. The vagaries of geopolitics were tied to the structure of the inter-imperial field, within which a number of parameters can be identified.

POLITICAL HIERARCHY AND POLITICAL AND ETHNIC BOUNDARIES

In addition to the states of Transcaucasia and coastal Daghestan, which had well-developed urban centers, there were feudal confederations of sovereign lands in Kabarda and northern Daghestan, confederations of "free" (independent and self-governed) communities in the mountains, and powerful and politically organized tribal groups of steppe nomads. Not only did forms of authority among these groups vary widely and differ

in terms of the military and political weight they carried, the groups also had unequal status within inter-imperial relations. A hierarchy is clearly reflected, in particular, in the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainarji. At the top were the parties to the treaty, Russia and the Porte; the Crimean Khanate (to which the Ottomans were forced to grant independence) occupied a second level; Tatar mirzas (the nobility of the Kuban Nogai Horde) a third; and the two Kabardas a fourth. The fifth level is not even mentioned in the text of the treaty—the mountain communities that depended on those higher up in the hierarchy.

The hierarchy of political entities was mirrored in a corresponding set of multilayer boundaries and a hierarchy of ways in which these were determined and legitimized. In other words, the diversity of political entities that appeared throughout Caucasian history was paralleled by a diversity of types of borders, from internationally recognized imperial borders to fluid nomadic boundaries or almost immutable naturally imposed "limits" enclosing mountain communities. Large feudal domains led by culturally defined elites (Georgian, Turkic, or, to some extent, Adyghe) usually encompassed territories with an ethnically diverse population. The political borders of these domains had little to do with ethnicity. However, the region's political makeup was also shaped by its tribal or ethnic composition, and not only because gaps in state sovereignty in highland areas or weakly defined zones of steppe left blank spots on color-coded political maps. Ethnically homogeneous free communities or tribal groups often played an active role in local politics. Ethnic dispersion inevitably impacted political dynamics and influenced the political map, as did the shifting ethnic borders of highland communities and steppe nomads. The Djar-Belokan Avar communities are an example of shifts in the dispersion of "Lezgins" (used in the Georgian-Russian political language of the time to denote any of several related ethnic groups of