

1881–1888: The Caucasian Periphery of the Emerging Russian Nation

The assassination of Alexander II in 1881 marked the beginning of a new stage in the history of the country and its Caucasian periphery. Alexander III abolished the Caucasian viceroyalty with the aim of creating a more “homogeneous” empire. An essential component of this new policy was the consolidation of control over the non-Russian borderlands and efforts to bring these territories more firmly under a central imperial authority. This desired homogeneity was viewed as a way to strengthen political loyalty among the Caucasian outposts of the empire as it solidified its national footing. Being “Russian” was less and less equated with being a “subject of the Russian empire” and was apparently evolving into a much narrower, more ethnocentric concept. The empire’s “core identity” was being nationalized at a time when the policy of Russification was becoming more pronounced throughout the ethnic borderlands. Imperial policy appeared to contain an innate contradiction: it strove to assimilate people while treating them as *inorodtsy* (literally, “of other birth,” a term used to designate non-Slavic and non-Orthodox subjects of the Russian Empire), thereby weakening its ability to integrate non-Russians by functioning more as a policy of alienation. Government strategy beginning in the late 1880s was perceived as favoring “the systematic elimination of natives from local administration, a campaign targeted against schools and the native language of pupils” (*Kavkazskii zapros*, pp. 238–239).

The fact that Russian identity was not strong in the Caucasus was seen as something that could be compensated for by firm rule. The administrative dynamic in the Caucasus during this period inevitably reflected the policy of strengthening institutions of autocratic state power and ensuring the steady cultural absorption of the country’s non-Russian population into the Russian national core. The way the empire governed the Caucasus shifted from a regionalist approach to a more rigid centralist policy, which paradoxically combined integrationist aims and segregationist tools (the latter, in turn, stemmed from an about-face in Cossack policy, which now favored keeping the

privileged military estate intact). The civic merging of the two main North Caucasian population segments (Cossacks and highlanders) and the incorporation of both into a Russian nation was not yet on the horizon; in fact, changes in the administrative division of the region reflected the rejection of the idea of merging Cossack and highlander societies with the rest of the empire’s subjects.

In Terek Province the civil districts that had existed during 1871–1883 were redivided into *otdels* (primarily populated by Cossacks) and *okrugs* (primarily populated by mountain populations). As in the period of military-native administration of highland territories (1865–1870), ethnic and administrative borders dividing not only Cossacks from highlanders but one local ethnic group from another were instituted, with a few exceptions. (One exception had to do with a portion of the lands settled by highland peoples, Ingushetia and Lesser Kabarda, which were located in the center of the province. These were incorporated into Sunzha [Sunzhensky Otdel], a Cossack district, which gave this strategic Cossack area greater territorial integrity and direct access to Transcaucasia.) Among the reasons behind the new divisions within Terek Province was the desire of the authorities to end the practice of highlanders’ renting and settling Cossack lands and to avoid the “dilution” of the Host’s holdings. But although they were administratively separate, both types of districts were kept under Cossack governance, which now embraced all levels of authority in the province—from the *oblast* (headed by a governor, or *nachalnik oblasti*) to the district (*okrug* and *otdel*) and *uchastok*.

After 1883 Kabarda and the adjoining lands of Mountain Tatar (Balkar) communities were made into the Nalchik District (Nalchiksky Okrug); North Ossetia became the Vladikavkaz District (Vladikavkazsky Okrug); Chechnya became the Grozny District (Groznsky Okrug); and the lands of the Sulak Kумыk, Aukh (Akkintsi) Chechen, and Salatau Avar communities became the Khasavyurt District (Khasavyurtovskiy Okrug). The concepts “Kabarda,” “Ossetia,” and “Chechnya” were again given a degree

of administrative expression through the organization of these units. (This administrative tendency continued in 1905, when the territory populated by the Ingush was carved out of the Sunzha Cossack District [Sunzhensky Otdel] to create Nazran District [Nazranovskiy Okrug], and Lesser Kabarda was removed from Sunzha and incorporated into the Nalchik highlanders district [Greater Kabarda]. That same year, however, another administrative move led to the division of the unwieldy Grozny District, incorporating all of Chechnya, into two administrative units—the Grozny and Vedeno Districts.)

For the highland populations of Kuban and Terek Provinces, the removal of the viceroyalty from the imperial chain of command meant direct rule by Cossack provincial authorities. This new system of “military-Cossack administration” (1886) closely resembled the military-native system, which had also subordinated highland communities to the military and administrative authority of army officials. But now the military administration in highland territories was much less bound by the institutions of local self-governance and the standards of ordinary and sharia law. Furthermore, the military administration was now made up entirely of Cossacks, enhancing their privileged position and reinforcing the social distance between Cossacks and non-Cossacks (not only native populations but Russians as well). The government’s effort to gain firmer control in the North Caucasus only resulted in the growing influence and power of the Cossacks.

Differences between three North Caucasus territories (in terms of ethnic composition and loyalty of the population to the empire, strategic position, and military and political stability) led to a differences in how they were governed. Total predomination by Cossack (and Russian) populations in the Kuban, almost total predomination by highland populations in Daghestan, and more or less equal population components (Cossack and highlander) in Terek Province also meant that social cleavages resonated differently in the ways different types of territories were administered.