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1763–1913: 150 Years of Russian Colonization

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1913: The Terek Cossack Host

Russian settlement in the Caucasus was both a factor in and a consequence of the region's integration into the empire. Colonization was one component of the empire's military, political, socioeconomic, and, to some extent, cultural absorption of its Caucasian periphery.

The overall structure and dynamic of colonization were determined by a complex of strategies that were part of the empire's rivalry-driven foreign policy and its approach to integrating the region into the Russian state—from Cossack military settlements organized by the government, to forced relocation of Russian religious minorities to Transcaucasia, to spontaneous peasant migrations to new territories that had been added to the empire.

During the years 1711–1735 the Caucasian border of the Russian Empire first began to take shape along the lower reaches of the Terek River, formed by the outer boundaries of the Greben, Kizlyar, and Terek-Semeinoe Cossack Host lands. During this period the imperial border began to evolve from a porous area of Russians living in proximity to mountain and steppe peoples into a dividing line, with former zones of uncertainty transformed by the presence of a chain of new fortresses and stanitsas that constituted a distinct barrier. This chain first grew to the west toward Mozdok (1763) and later extended through the North Caucasian Steppe from Mozdok northwest to the Azov fortress at the mouth of the Don (1777–1778). The swath of land that had been captured by Cossack forces constituted a new border, the empire's advancing southern frontier, which put pressure on Nogai nomads and—as it approached the Malka River and Pyatigorye—Kabarda. In the rear, protected by this militarized Cossack frontier, civilian colonization was beginning. Villages populated by state serfs and the nobility's landed estates started to appear.

The annexation in 1783 of the Crimean Khanate and its

Kuban lands moved the Russian border down to the middle and lower reaches of the Kuban River. After 1792, on the land bordered by the Kuban and Yeya Rivers and the Azov coast that was once the realm of Nogai nomads, Russian-Ukrainian Chernomorye (literally, the “Black Sea region,” though almost none of it was on the Black Sea except a small strip of the Taman peninsula) emerged—a powerful Cossack bastion populated by resettled Zaporozhian Cossacks. By the end of the eighteenth century the Caucasian Defensive Line was taking on a distinct contour—a continuous line of Cossack settlements from Taman and the mouth of the Kuban in the west to the mouth of the Terek in the east.

By 1829–1830 the overall configuration of three zones or stages of Russia's imperial advance into the Caucasus region could be clearly seen:

The North Caucasian Steppe (Ciscaucasia). This area north of the Kuban, Malka, and Terek Rivers was a zone of vigorous colonization under the auspices of the militarized frontier, the Cossack Defensive Line along its southern perimeter. This zone was predominately inhabited by Russians, with scattered areas of Nogai, Turkmen, and Kalmyk nomads along the edges of the Stavropol Plateau and in the semi-arid steppe along the northwestern shores of the Caspian.

The Greater Caucasus. This area was populated by highlanders who were to a greater or lesser degree dependent on the empire (or entirely independent of it). Even after Russia had absorbed the region it served as a sort of internal frontier for the empire, its “internal abroad.” On the North Caucasian frontier, settlers from the empire and mountain populations lived in a state of uneasy proximity—a proximity that came with economic ties, the first experience administering these new acquisitions, and armed conflict. The new Russian cordons, initially put in place to block highland raids, with time turned

into outward-moving rings from which Cossack offensives were launched against highland territories.

Transcaucasia. Here a rather well-established Russian imperial administration governed a multi-ethnic native population. The displacement of a portion of sedentary and nomadic Muslim Turks to the Ottoman Empire or Persia opened up niches here for future Russian, Armenian, and Greek colonization.

The nineteenth-century Caucasus War was a struggle to solidify the empire's military and administrative control over the Greater Caucasus, which separated Cis- and Transcaucasia, by merging the three zones and making them a stable part of the empire, with a secure outer border extending to the Black Sea coast, the Kars highlands, and the Arax River. The Cossack military expansion was shaped by both the logic of the fight against the mountain communities and the desire to secure communication between the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia, which by 1813 was gaining recognition as a part of the empire. In the 1830s Russian colonization began extending to the provinces of Transcaucasia. This region, which had long since had a substantial settled population, experienced a different type of Russian colonization from that of the North Caucasus, where a continuous stretch of Russian settlement was imposed on steppe that was sparsely populated by nomads. In Transcaucasia, colonization could be described as enclave or dispersive and consisted of isolated settlements scattered among local populations. The settlements fell into several categories: villages populated by Russian religious minorities, military settlements or settlements of retired soldiers, rural settlements of recent Russian colonists (in the late nineteenth century), and urban settlements (slobodas).

Russian religious minorities (sectarians) were the pioneers of Russia's colonization of Transcaucasia. They were settled only in areas where there was no Orthodox Christian population.