

Introduction

The Caucasus was one of the most colourful and varied regions of the Russian Empire, and indeed has been called ‘In respect of ethnography . . . one of the strangest and most interesting regions of the globe.’¹ It has also been one of the most turbulent, its political and cultural history reflecting a complex succession of peoples and influences from many neighbouring countries flooding in or passing through. It links Europe and Asia (so far as these two great cultural realms can be demarcated geographically) and for thousands of years has been a region where many routes of migration, invasion, trade and cultural influences intersect. This book is an attempt to present a many-sided, integrated account of Caucasian history from a viewpoint which is not Russocentric but concentrates instead upon the region’s indigenous peoples. This is particularly necessary at the present time because of the relative inaccessibility of the Caucasus and the restrictions on travel there – which, because of Russian domination and continuing unrest, are almost as severe now as they were before the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

By the 1900s many Russians lived in the Caucasus, but before the seventeenth century no part of the Caucasus had ever belonged to Russia. In this respect it resembled India, where imperialist penetration by European states did not begin until the sixteenth century. Although the Caucasus, of all the colonial possessions of the Russian Empire, justly enjoyed a special reputation for its natural beauty, ethnic diversity and ancient cultures, its name as a geographical and historical concept awoke relatively little resonance in Europe and North America. It was isolated, having no border with any Western country and relatively few relations with Europe, from which it was fenced off by Turkey and Russia. Thus – despite early contacts with Greeks and Romans, the existence of early Christian churches in Armenia and Georgia, and the proximity of Greek, Roman and subsequently Italian colonies on the Black Sea – to

¹ K. Baedeker, *Russia, with Teheran, Port Arthur, and Peking: Handbook for Travellers*, Leipzig, 1914 [reprint, London, 1971], p. 440.

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Europeans in general the Caucasus remained remote in culture and ways of life, and such knowledge about it as did exist in the wider world was due mainly to its annexation to the Russian Empire. So far as continental affinities are concerned, Caucasia was allotted by some map-makers to Europe, by others to Asia, and histories of Europe usually gave it little, if any, space.

The Caucasus, with its towering mountain range and deep gorges, was always rather a 'wild' place, austere, unpredictable and dangerous for travellers, but since 1988 it has been more violent than at any time since Russia's nineteenth-century wars of subjugation, with ongoing conflicts in Highland Karabagh (between Azerbaijanis and Armenians), in Abkhazia and Osetia (against the Georgian government) and in Chechnia (against the Russian government), as well as inter-ethnic violence within the Georgian republic, and brutal Soviet government assaults on peaceful demonstrators in Georgia, Azerbaijan and North Caucasus. While the invaders of the Caucasus in earlier ages – Mongols, Persians, Turks and Russians – were cruel in their lust for plunder, slaves or imperial power, the commanders of the late twentieth-century Russian war machine, with their modern weaponry employed in flattening the city of Groznyy in 1990–1 and in other ways ruthlessly destroying Chechen people, have shown even less respect for human life than their predecessors. The present-day situation in the Caucasus is an anachronism – a lingering decolonization struggle waged by subject communities against their former imperial masters.

This book is not about the Russian people and the empire-state which they created, but about a region and its indigenous, non-Russian peoples, who have been used as the material of empire-building by Russia's rulers, but who in their own right merit attention and consideration at least as much as the Russian or other intruding imperial invaders. One aspect of the book is the relations between the native peoples of the Caucasus and the metropolitan power which still imposes its rule over those whose territories lie north of the great mountain range. Those who live to the south of the Great Caucasus enjoy a precarious independence, but Russians were not the only outsiders who made their mark on the Caucasus during its long history: it involves many neighbouring peoples who to varying degrees impinged on the Caucasus as friends or enemies. Relations with these outsiders were neither simple nor always exclusively detrimental to the native inhabitants of the Caucasus, and they still play an important part in its life.

The Caucasus – despite its strategic location between two virtually land-locked seas, clustered around serious mountain barriers with few passes, through which land routes link Asia with eastern Europe – has

never received the attention it deserves in histories of Europe or Asia. Late twentieth-century studies of the Middle East made little reference to the Caucasus, their regional maps mainly drawing a line at the USSR frontier on the river Araxes, leaving what lay to the north mysteriously blank and nameless² or, worse, labelling it simply ‘Soviet Union’ or calling everything north of the mountain range ‘Russia’ – which it certainly is not. On recent visits to the local branch of a well-known bookshop the author has regularly found half a dozen current books on the Middle East which conform to this pattern.

In previous times this ignoring of the countries of the Caucasus reflected a tacit political agreement not to upset the Soviet Union’s rulers by questioning the situation in South and North Caucasus, but to leave the fate of its native peoples entirely at the disposal of Soviet Russia. My intention is to reintegrate the Caucasus with its Middle Eastern historical context, while relating it culturally (in particular Georgia and Armenia) to Europe rather than Asia. Another aspect involved here is religion, since pro-communist sympathy is not the only bias one encounters: some specialists on the Middle East have been apologists for Islam, especially, in some cases, the Turks. Less recognition has been awarded to Iran; indeed it has been pointed out by an Armenian author that ‘Iranian influence throughout the breadth of the Caucasian lands is the aspect of the culture of this region that has received the least attention from scholars’, despite the ubiquity and depth of Iranian influence in its material and spiritual cultures, attesting to ‘the tenacity of ancient traditions with a heavy Iranian admixture in Caucasia, even into the twentieth century’.³ The author of the present book can make no claim to being an Iranist, but when he began this study he found that the frequent necessity of making reference to Persia was inescapable. The time was favourable in that it was soon after the publication of a large body of new writing about Iranian history, including much about the Caucasus, e.g. in the impressive multi-volume *Cambridge History of Iran* (which I have plundered shamelessly, but I hope with due acknowledgment), many works by R. N. Frye, and the later volumes of the new edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Although I have only the rudiments of Georgian, this was also the time when a well-edited Russian translation of the history of Georgia

² E.g. P. Mansfield, ed., *The Middle East: a Political and Economic Survey*, 4th edn, London, 1973, map at end; B. Lewis, *The Middle East: 2000 Years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day*, London, 1995 and paperback reprints, pp. 414–17; and many others.

³ N. G. Garsoyan, ‘Iran and Caucasia’, in R. G. Suny, ed., *Transcaucasia: Nationalism and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia*, Ann Arbor, 1983, pp. 7, 23.

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by Vakhushti Bagrationi, originally completed in Georgian in 1745, was published, and is probably superior to the only version available to British historians of Georgia – a French translation – up to 1970, as was another history of Georgia written in Russian by Davit Bagrationi (1767–1819), the son of the last king of Kartli-Ḳakheti. My knowledge of Georgian is rudimentary, but gradually, since chancing upon a Russian *Teach Yourself Georgian* in a Moscow bookshop in about 1962,⁴ I have become competent at least to use bilingual dictionaries in Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani, as well as an excellent Persian–Russian dictionary.⁵ In general, my knowledge of Russian gave me the key to a vast field of publications about the non-Russian peoples of the Russian Empire/Soviet Union – much contaminated with ideological bias, and containing frequent evasions, omissions and lies – but particularly rewarding where an author had succeeded in salvaging passages almost free from (although seldom counter to) the Communist Party line. From 1989, under Mikhail Gorbachov and ‘perestrojka’, there came – particularly from the countries of the North Caucasus – a stream of informative publications not suffering from perversion of scholarship, and often dealing explicitly with previously banned topics. These resulted from the opening of the state’s formerly secret archives, which shed light on events during the terrible period from 1917 to the 1980s, such as the collectivization of agriculture, the man-made famine of the 1930s, the mass incarceration of ordinary citizens in appalling concentration camps, and the wholesale deportation of smaller Caucasian nations to Central Asia in 1943. As Russian had become the normal medium for scholarly publications in the USSR’s smaller ethnic territories, many such studies, based on previously suppressed writings, became accessible to Russian-speakers in the 1990s.

The territory covered by this book cannot be limited to the possessions of the former Russian Empire/Soviet Union, because its historical ‘neighbourhood’ is considerably wider. While the main focus is upon the lands of the native peoples of the North Caucasus foothills and plain (the Circassians, Osets, Chechens, Ingush, Kumuks and other peoples of Daghestan) and those of the plateaux and valleys south of the mountain range (principally the Abkhazians, Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis), a considerably wider geographical perspective is required to give due acknowledgment to the outsiders with whom the Caucasian peoples had

⁴ V. G. Tšuleyskiri and P. G. Chanishvili, *Samouchitel gruzinskogo yazyka*, 4th, revised and augmented edn, Tbilisi, 1960.

⁵ *Persidsko-russkiy slovar/farhang fārsī-berusi*, compiled by Yu. A. Rubinchik, *et al.*, 2 vols., Moscow, 1983.

prolonged relations, peaceful or warlike, over the centuries – primarily the Greeks, Persians, Russians and Turks.

Until the 1990s the southern political limit of the Caucasus coincided with the frontier of the USSR – a barrier which ensured the rigid isolation of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan (what Russians called ‘Transcaucasia’) from its southern neighbours Iran, Turkey and the rest of the Middle East – and which Western states generally avoided questioning. (A particularly warped situation existed on the Soviet–Iranian frontier on the river Kura: to the north lay one Azerbaijan – a Soviet republic with Baku as its capital – and south of the river was another Azerbaijan – a province of Iran centred on Tabriz. No contact existed across the river.) In addition, since the Second World War another barrier farther north, following the line of the mountain ridge – the frontier of the Rossiyan Federative Republic (RSFSR) – had separated ‘Transcaucasia’ from its neighbours in North Caucasus (the inhabitants of the Adygey, Kabarda-Balkar, Karachay-Cherkes, North Osetian, Chechen-Ingush and Daghestani national territories, as well as that dominated until the eighteenth century by the Tatars of the Crimean Khanate). Such political realities make it necessary to widen our perspective on the Caucasus region by extending its historico-geographical limits in several directions: farther north, to the near-confluence of the Don and Volga at Volgograd, in order to accommodate the grasslands (steppes) of the migratory peoples; and farther south, to embrace parts of Turkey and Iran, across which Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan always had trading contacts with Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Arabia. Similarly, it is realistic to expand the cultural-historical limits of the Caucasus on an east–west axis, extending them west into Anatolia (formerly dominated by Greece and the Roman Empire and then subject to Ottoman Turkey), and eastward in recognition of the very great part played in Caucasia’s history by Persia and the adjacent deserts which also lay open to the equestrian Turkish and Mongol peoples of Central Asia (see Map 1).

Taken strictly as the isthmus between the Black and Caspian Seas, populated by the indigenous peoples grouped around the Great Caucasus range and the Armenian plateau, the Caucasus covers some 250,000 square miles – considerably less than Iran (623,846 square miles) but comparable with Turkey (296,185) and bigger than Iraq (168,200) or Syria (70,692). The wider field of activity proposed above for the purposes of this book is greater: approximately 1,500 miles from north to south and 2,000 miles from west to east, including the Caspian Sea and much of the Black Sea (as far as the Crimean peninsula), as well as the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean. Within this area – which includes not only the ex-Soviet states and national territories of the

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Map 1 The Caucasus, its peoples and neighbourhood.

Caucasus proper, but also the largely Russified provinces of Stavropol and Krasnodar and parts of Astrakhan, Rostov and the Crimean peninsula, with the addition of the Azerbaijanian province of Iran – the total number of native Caucasians is approximately 22.9 million. Obviously the multiplicity of peoples now inhabiting the region makes it impossible to do justice to them all: the Caucasus is home to more than fifty distinct ethno-linguistic communities, ranging in magnitude from nearly 7 million (the Azerbaijanis) to a few thousand (some peoples of Daghestan).

This number is made up as shown in the table (territories in descending order of their percentage of indigenous Caucasian (non-Russian) peoples, aggregated in each case).⁶

	Total population	Indigenous peoples	Percentage of total (in descending order)
Armenia	3,304,776	3,235,216	97.9
Azerbaijan	7,021,178	6,513,268	92.8
Georgia	5,400,841	4,946,243	91.6
Daghestan	1,802,188	1,527,264	84.7
Chechenia-Ingushia	1,270,429	945,831	74.4
North Osetia	632,428	415,252	65.7
Kabarda-Balkaria	753,531	466,609	61.9
Kalmykia	322,579	178,662	55.4
Karachay-Cherkesia	414,970	221,557	53.4
Adygeya	432,046	109,598	25.4
Stavropol*	2,410,379	360,265	14.9
Astrakhan	991,521	96,220	9.7
Krasnodar*	4,620,876	317,983	6.9
Rostov-on-Don	4,292,291	102,732	2.4
Iran – Azerbaijanis	c. 3,000,000		
Iran – Talysh	21,000		

* In addition to the Karachay-Cherkes and Adygey territories.

⁶ Sources: E. Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, 1982, p. 12; B. Comrie, *The Languages of the Soviet Union*, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 49, 162; Russia, Statisticheskii Komitet Sodruzhestva Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv, *Itogi vsesoyuznoy perepisi naseleniya 1989 g.*, vol. VII, part 1 [microtext edition by East View Publications, Minneapolis, 1993].

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The regional setting

The Caucasus lies on the north-western edge of the Middle East,¹ where the earliest urban civilizations developed from the second millennium BC. To the south, in the fertile plain between the Euphrates and Tigris, the great powers of the region included Akkadia, Assyria, Babylon and later Persia. It was below the south-facing slopes of the Taurus and Zagros mountains and the coast of Syria that the civilizations of the 'Fertile Crescent' developed (see Map 2), where cereals were first cultivated for food, and as trade routes developed between the growing number of cities the first known alphabets were invented.² Farther north, in the mountains of present-day Armenia and Georgia, people began extracting and forging copper, then iron, for weapons and tools. Caucasian communities such as the Georgians and Albanians were not at the centre of these developments, but were well placed to adopt them and participate in the region's flourishing trade relations. By the eighth century BC mariners from Greece sailing along the Black Sea coasts had founded colonies in north-western Caucasus; and in the sixth century the city-states in Asia Minor fell under the sway of the Persian Empire, whose western frontier stood on the Aegean Sea for some 200 years. Meanwhile the Caucasus entered into Greek mythology: Colchis, where the Argonauts sought the Golden Fleece, was the western coastal plain of today's Georgia, and it was on the Caucasus mountains above that Zeus chained Prometheus to punish him for creating mankind and giving them fire.³

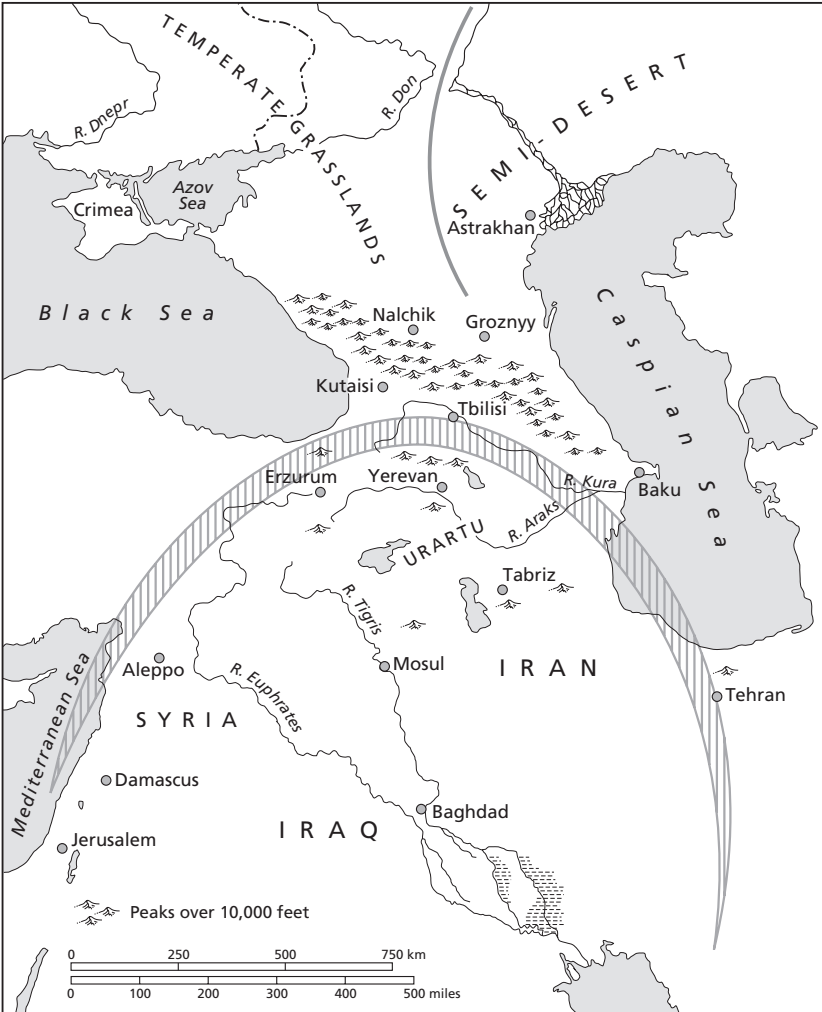
¹ For a discussion of the terms 'Middle East' and 'Near East' see G. M. Wickens, 'Introduction to the Middle East', in R. M. Savory, ed., *Introduction to Islamic Civilization*, Cambridge, 1976, pp. 1–2.

² W. E. D. Allen, *A History of the Georgian People, from the Beginning down to the Russian Conquest in the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1932, pp. 12, 18, 56–7, 59; *Past Worlds: The Times Atlas of Archaeology*, edited by C. Scarre, et al., London, 1988, pp. 80–1, 110–11, 114–17, 120–2.

³ R. Graves, *The Greek Myths*, revised edn, 2 vols., Harmondsworth, 1960, vol. I, pp. 112, 143–5, 148–9, 193, 226–7, 318; vol. II, pp. 114, 148–9, 216, 219, 221–3,

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Map 2 The Caucasus in relation to the earliest agriculture, the 'Fertile Crescent', c. 8,000 BC. The south 'Russian' provinces of Krasnodar, Stavropol and Rostov, along with the Kalmyk Republic and Volgograd province, share the same temperate climate and natural vegetation as North Caucasus and the south Ukrainian provinces to the west.

Fire has strong associations in the Caucasus, as the first observed evidence of petroleum-bearing rocks underlying much of Persia and Iraq

229, 232–5, 237–8. For a graphic overview of early Caucasian and Near Eastern history, see C. McEvedy, *The Penguin Atlas of Ancient History*, Harmondsworth, 1967.

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were the ‘eternal fires’ which in places were a conspicuous feature of the landscape. These flares arising from surface seepage of oil and gas were widespread around Baku, and aroused comment from early travellers.⁴ In our own day the importance of this persists as, after 200 years of subjection to Russia the now independent state of Azerbaijan has become the heir to petroleum resources under the Caspian which bring it the status, and the international pressures, of a force in world oil politics.⁵

Fire also suggests the religion of Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism – often referred to as ‘fire-worship’ – which was one of many cultural influences reaching the peoples of the Caucasus from Persia over the centuries.⁶ ‘Of the four great fires dominating the Zoroastrian world, the one particularly associated with the King of Kings [i.e. the shah of Persia] was located at Ganjak in Azerbaijan.’⁷ A tangible monument of Zoroastrianism survives near Baku, where ‘naphtha gas’ burned continuously from natural vents in the rock, and a fire-temple built in pre-Islamic times was restored by Parsees from India in the eighteenth century. The Persian dimension in the history of the Caucasus, which has been comparatively neglected by scholars because of the dominance of Christian and Muslim themes, is an important element in its cultural heritage, evident not only in monumental sculpture and gold and silver vessels, but also in the influence of Persian on the Armenian and Georgian languages, and the themes and style of Georgian medieval poetry exhibited in Shota Rustaveli’s *The Man in the Tiger Skin*. Even the name of the revered centre of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Mtskheta, formerly Armazis Tsikhe, means ‘Ormuzd castle’, from Ahura Mazda, the supreme god of the early Persians.⁸ Because of this strong influence of Persia as a political and cultural force inseparable from the Caucasus, its history will figure conspicuously in this book.

⁴ Baedeker, *Russia*, pp. 457–8; H. Longhurst, *Adventures in Oil: The Story of British Petroleum*, London, 1959, pp. 81–3, 85, 90–1, 103; S. V. Kalesnik, ed., *Sovetskiy Soyuz: geograficheskoye opisaniye v 22-kh tomakh. Azerbaydzhan*, Moscow, 1971, pp. 10, 44, 103.

⁵ Chechenia in North Caucasus also has significant oil resources, which, disastrously for the Chechen people, activated the covetous spirit of the Russian state and brought the current war into their homeland. On the western side of North Caucasus too there is an oilfield in Krasnodar province in Circassia.

⁶ M. Eliade, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 17 vols., London, 1987, vol. XV, pp. 579, 586–8; S. Razmjou, ‘Religion and burial customs’, in J. E. Curtis and N. Tallis, eds., *Forgotten Empire: the World of Ancient Persia* [Catalogue of an Exhibition at the British Museum], London, 2005, pp. 150–80, 228–9.

⁷ Garsoïan, ‘Iran and Caucasia’, in Suny, ed., *Transcaucasia*, p. 11. For superb illustrations of fire-temples and ancient Persian art in general, see R. Ghirshman, *Persia: from the Origins to Alexander the Great*, London, 1964, pp. 134, 199, 206, 227–9.

⁸ Baedeker, *Russia*, p. 443; Garsoïan, ‘Iran and Caucasia’; K. Gink and I. Turánszky, *Azerbaijan: Mosques, Turrets, Palaces*, Budapest, 1979, pp. 59–60, plates 94–7; C. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History*, Washington, DC, 1963, pp. 88–9.