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RELATIONS AND SECURITY STUDIES**

**The Caucasus under the rule of Tsarist Russia
1801 – 1917**

**The Caucasian Army, the defender of the southern
border of the Tsarist Empire**

PHD THESIS SUMMARY

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Summary

Keywords: Caucasus, Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire, Persia, Separate Caucasian Corps, Caucasian Army, Ciscaucasia, Transcaucasia

The history of the Caucasus as part of the Tsarist Empire is very complex. The interest for this territory located on the border between Europe and Asia¹ it began to be more visible with the expansion of the Russian Empire in the 17th and 18th centuries. The annexation of Georgia (in 1801) opened the way for the conquest of the entire Caucasus by the Russian States. Turkey and Persia were defeated in a series of wars in the first half of the 19th century, being almost completely eliminated from the Caucasus (here we mean the Russo-Turkish wars of 1806-1812, 1828-1829 and 1877-1878 as And the Russian-Persian wars of 1804-1813 and 1826-1828). However, the Russian conquerors had to win the obedience of the native populations with the help of the army. It took more than 60 years after the incorporation of Georgia for the pacification of the entire Caucasus².

¹ From a geographical point of view, the Caucasus is divided into two large parts that are cut by the mountainous massif called the Great Caucasus. The two parts are called Ciscaucasia (the northern part comprising the area between the Taman peninsula and the Caspian Sea ending at the foot of the Great Caucasus) and Transcaucasia (the southern part bounded by the Great Caucasus, Eastern Anatolia and the mountainous area north of the current Iranian border

² Chapter I of the doctoral thesis contains a fairly detailed history of the battles that took place between 1830 – 1864 between the Muslim populations and the tsarist troops in the mountains of Dagestan (I refer to the murid movement led by imam Shamil).

The main perspective pursued in the doctoral thesis was a military one because Russia had to deploy and maintain an army that gradually reached more than 300,000 soldiers to conquer and rule the entire Caucasian isthmus. The troops that initially acted in the defense of Georgia (having the name of the *Georgian Separate Army Corps* and then the *Caucasian Separate Army Corps*) turned into a strong and autonomous unit that received the name of the *Caucasian Army* (since 1856). The commanders of this special army corps ensured the leadership of the entire Caucasus, both military and civil. As such, when we talk about the role of the *Caucasian Army*, we must consider:

- the mission of defending the southern border of the Tsarist Empire;
- attributions on the line of ensuring peace and order in the entire Caucasus;
- efficient administration of all governorates and oblasts of the Caucasus.

The *Caucasian Army* constituted a guarantee for the Russian government, for over a hundred years, that the rule of the Caucasus cannot escape from its hands. For this reason I considered this military perspective to be very important. As a result, the subtitle chosen for the doctoral thesis was: **Caucasian Army, defender of the southern border of the Tsarist Empire.**

Russian historiography (tsarist, communist or the current one) abounds in histories and testimonies that show us the wars of conquest of the Caucasus, but all these materials subscribed to political sayings specific to each historical period. However, in my analysis I went on to filter the various reasons that made the Russians conquer the Caucasus. As

a result, I sought to corroborate the information obtained with as many archival documents as possible. I aimed to provide the most complete answers to the following tasks:

1. the motivation of Tsarist Russia's interest in the Caucasian area at the end of the 18th century - the beginning of the 19th century;
2. why was the Russian army sent to Tiflis (the capital of the Georgian kingdom) in 1801;
3. the explanation of the wars fought by the *Separate Georgian Army Corps* to eliminate the Persians and Ottomans from the Caucasus between 1804 and 1813;
4. the role of the *Separate Caucasian Army Corps* during the wars with Turkey in 1828-1829, 1853-1856 and 1877-1878;
5. explaining the reasons for the outbreak of the Caucasian War;
6. the presentation of the governance and administration policies of the Caucasus after the appearance of the viceroyalty in 1844;
7. explaining the reason for the deportation of the Circassians (Circassians) from the Caucasus;
8. the role of the spheres of Russian and British influence in Persia that appeared in 1907;
9. the mission of the *Caucasian Army* during the First World War;
10. explaining the reason for the collapse of Russian rule in the Caucasus at the end of 1917 and the disintegration of the *Caucasian Army*.

The chronological framework of the doctoral thesis is between 1801 (the accession of Georgia to the Tsarist Empire) and December 1917 (the disintegration of the Tsarist Empire and the exit of parts of the

Caucasus from Russian domination).

The scientific novelty of the research is based on a new approach, without prejudices or ideological concepts of the theme proposed to be analyzed.

The sources of my work were extremely varied. The testimonies of the participants in the conquest of the Caucasus from the 19th century, unpublished archival documents (mainly those from *Акты собранные Археологической Комиссией*³ - *Acts of the Archaeological Commission from the Caucasus*) and a rich historical literature were sources important for the elaboration of the doctoral thesis. The monumental encyclopedia - *Военная энциклопедия (Military Encyclopedia)*⁴, which contains detailed information on various subjects in the history of the Caucasus, should be mentioned here as well.

The doctoral thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter I - The Military Conquest of the Caucasus by the Russians (1801 – 1859) – focuses on dealing with the following topics:

- a) the annexation of Georgia in 1801 followed by the presentation of the Russo-Persian and Russo-Ottoman wars that took place in the period 1804-1829;
- b) the Caucasian War (the period between 1830-1853) led by the *Separate Caucasian Army Corps* for the subjugation of all the Muslim tribes in the

³ This impressive collection of documents appeared between 1866 and 1904 in Tiflis, then the capital of the Caucasian viceroyalty, in twelve volumes (of which volume VI has contains documents issued by the heads of the Separate Caucasian Corps from 1801 to 1862 but also a rich diplomatic correspondence in Turkish, Persian, Armenian or Georgian languages.

⁴ *The Military Encyclopedia* was published between 1911-1915 by a prestigious Russian publisher, Ivan Dimitrievici Sytin. Through the clear presentation and the provision of very good quality information, the Encyclopaedia is a work that cannot be bypassed by any researcher of the history of imperial Russia.

Caucasus who opposed Russian rule⁵;

c) the defeat of Tsarist Russia in the Crimean War of 1853 – 1856;

d) the presentation of the measures taken by the Russian officials to quickly end the Caucasian War through the decisive defeat of the murid movement led by Shamil and then of the Muslims on the Black Sea coast (1856-1864).

Chapter II, The Rule of the Caucasus between 1860 - 1900

wants to present how this part of the Tsarist Empire evolved economically and socially in the second half of the 19th century. The Caucasian provinces benefited from special attention during the time of Czar Nicholas I (he undertook a visit to Transcaucasia in 1837)⁶. The same special interest was shown by Tsar Alexander II. He appointed his brother, Grand Duke Mihail Nikolaevich, as Viceroy of the Caucasus (1862-1881). In fact, the policy of the government in Saint Petersburg aimed at strengthening the *Separate Caucasian Army Corps*, as through it the imperial decisions affecting the entire Caucasus were transposed at the local level. All the viceroys of the Caucasus were also commanders of the *Separate Caucasian Army Corps* (then of the *Caucasian Army*).

⁵ *Военная энциклопедия (Military Encyclopedia)*, in vol. XI, on p. 220, defines the Caucasian War as "the struggle of Imperial Russia with the numerous tribes of the Caucasus for the purpose of their conquest and subjugation."

⁶ In 1844 Nicholas I established the Caucasian Viceroyalty at the head of which he appointed Prince M.S. Vorontsov. The institution of the viceroyalty was unique in the Tsarist Empire. Only the Caucasus benefited from this form of organization. The viceroy had almost unlimited powers both over the local administrative apparatus and over the Separate Caucasian Corps, which answered only to the sovereign. In 1881 the viceroyalty was abolished by Tsar Alexander III during the period in which a more accentuated Russification of the peripheral provinces of the empire was attempted. In 1905, against the backdrop of inter-ethnic struggles in Transcaucasia, Tsar Nicholas II decided to re-establish the viceroyalty. I.I. Vorontsov-Dashkov (1905-1915) and Grand Duke Nicolae Nikolaevich (1915-1917) were the last two Caucasian viceroys.

Chapter III, titled The Last Period of Tsarism in the Caucasus (1900 - 1917), reveals the situation in this part of the Russian Empire in the period leading up to the First World War and the revolution of 1917, during these events and immediately after. The local economic-social developments are analyzed, as well as the interest of the tsarist authorities to subordinate the countries neighboring the Caucasus as much as possible. Russian-English divergences regarding spheres of influence in Persia are also touched upon.

The main conclusions emerging from the content of the doctoral thesis show that Russia wanted control of the Caucasus:

a. for the defense of the southern border of the empire against any enemy penetration;

The majority of Russian historians from the period before the fall of tsarism affirmed that Russia's presence in the Caucasus in the period between 1801-1917 was determined by military, strategic and economic needs. These considerations were also confirmed by archival documents. During the 19th century "the southern borders of the Russian Empire changed as the Ottomans and Persians retreated. The expansion of Imperial Russia sometimes took place along the lands of the Cossacks between the Caspian and Black Seas, sometimes through wars of conquest, and sometimes through acquisitions sealed by diplomatic treaties"⁷. After the war with the Turks from 1828 - 1829, the expansion of Russian conquests in the Caucasus reached a historical maximum. Military-strategic considerations prevailed for the Russian countries in all political-military actions that targeted the Caucasus. Iakov Gordin, an important

⁷ François Thual, *Le Caucase*, Flammarion, 2001, p. 25.

Russian historian, wrote in one of his books that the possession of the Caucasus was especially important after "the conquest of the Khanates of Kazan, Astrakhan and Crimea and the territories around them, as a military-strategic danger (represented in the first line of Ottoman influence in the region) and the bridgeheads were eliminated from which enemy invasions could be launched at any moment into Russia proper"⁸. I.V. Borchanikov also mentioned that:

<<Russia's wars with the neighboring states of the Caucasus were of a traditional nature and took place, as already mentioned, for the possession of favorable strategic borders in the Caucasus and beyond.>>⁹

After Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, the role of the Caucasian Isthmus as a barrier to the penetration of possible enemies to the heart of the Russian Empire was reconfirmed. This was also due to the pronounced antagonisms that existed at that time between Russia and several Western powers, especially England and France¹⁰. It was therefore very important in whose hands this territory was. The Tsarist Empire understood this and strictly controlled the Caucasus until its disappearance.

b. for capitalizing on the economic potential of the conquered Caucasian territories;

⁸ I. Gordin, «Поговорим о бурных днях Кавказа...» ("Let let's talk about the troubled days of the Caucasus...») in *Осада Кавказа (Siege of the Caucasus)*, p. 5 (in the following it will be cited «Let's talk about the troubled days of the Caucasus...»).

⁹ I.V. Bocharnikov, *Геополитическая экспансия России на Кавказе в XVI-XX вв (Geopolitical expansion of Russia in the Caucasus in the XVI-XX centuries)*, material available at e-journal.ru/time-st1-24.html, accessed 15 December 2022.

¹⁰ The strained relations between Russia and England were due to the tsarist expansion in Central Asia. In 1875, Russian troops arrived very close to India, the pearl of the British crown. London considered this move a threat to its Asian colonial possessions. The differences between the two great powers were significantly mitigated after the conclusion of an agreement on August 30, 1907, by which the Russian and British governments divided their spheres of influence in Central Asia and Persia.

Even if for the Tsarist Empire "the position of the Caucasus, adjacent to Persia and Asia Minor, could offer it the best means to establish profitable trade relations with South Asia"¹¹, in fact, it was only at the beginning of the 20th century that this advantageous position began to matter¹². In fact, the economic objectives pursued by Russia in the Caucasus were limited due to the continuous wars and military actions¹³. In fact, the historian Iakov Gordin offered a very good justification when he said that "ensuring the flank and the rear of the Russian army in case of wars with Turkey and Persia"¹⁴ were the only certain gains brought by the conquest of the Caucasus. Another fact that should be mentioned is the desire (which became a reality at some point) of imperial Russia to consider the Black Sea, from an economic point of view, an inland sea. After 1880, the Russians mainly used the route through the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea to export their goods to Western Europe or the rest of the world. Possession of the Caucasus was an asset in imposing Russian supremacy in the Black Sea basin.

c. for asserting the military superiority of Tsarist Russia in front of the enemies;

¹¹ I. Gordin, «*Let's talk about the turbulent days of the Caucasus...*», p. 7.

¹² The connections of the Russian Empire with the countries of Asia increased especially after 1870 when the "exploitation of oil in Baku" began (Jean Sellier, André Sellier, *Atlas of the Peoples of the Orient*, Niculescu Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007, p. 168). Oil products have been, moreover, the main source of Russian exports to Europe since 1900 when "an oil pipeline will connect Baku with Batumi (a port on the Black Sea). Baku was then the main oil producer in the world" (*Ibidem*).

¹³ In addition to the wars with the Turks and Persians, which occupied almost half of the 19th century, the Caucasus had to endure the long war between the Russians and the Muslims of Dagestan and Chechnya - also called the Caucasian War - (1829-1859), Russians and Circassians (1830-1864) and a series of local uprisings, the largest of which was the uprising of the Muslims of Dagestan in 1877-1878. Thus, only one third of the more than 100 years of rule of the Caucasus could be used by the Russian administration for the economic exploitation of this territory.

¹⁴ I. Gordin, «*Let's talk about the turbulent days of the Caucasus...*», p. 5.

d. for the colonization of this territory and its definitive incorporation into the Russian Empire;

The Russian administration in the Caucasus did not consider a colonial conquest of the Caucasus until around 1850. In principle, this motivation appeared in the final phase of the Caucasian War. The tsarist authorities wanted to get rid of the peoples who had fought with arms against the Russian rule by encouraging voluntary departures or by specific deportations. Czarist Russia relied heavily on Christian populations to maintain its rule over the entire territory of the Caucasus (Armenians, Georgians, Cossacks).

The integration of Georgians into the great Russian Empire happened quite quickly. During the viceroyalty of M.S. Vorontsov "Armenians and Georgians were encouraged to attend Russian schools and join the local administration, where some of them obtained high positions"¹⁵. For Georgians, Russian rule facilitated a closer connection with Europe. Members of the Georgian nobility practically abandoned any relationship with Persia and began to attend Russian and European universities. The government in Saint Petersburg was aware that without the help of the Georgians and the Armenians, the control of the entire Caucasus was practically impossible. The history of I.V. Borchanikov said that without this help Russia had no choice but to leave Transcaucasia. He explained that the other Caucasian peoples, mostly Muslim, opposed any attempts to be subordinated or conquered and did not collaborate with the Russian authorities.

The Armenians were also a people loyal to Tsarist Russia. "Many

¹⁵ George Bournoutian, *Russia and the Armenians of Transcaucasia 1797-1889: A Documentary Record*, Mazda Publishers, 1998 , p. 454.

Armenian volunteers participated and were decorated in the Russian-Turkish war of 1828-1829. A small number even served in Dagestan (against the murid movement)" ¹⁶ . Historian George Bournoutian mentioned that:

<<The Russian administration in Saint Petersburg saw the Armenians as defenseless Christians, oppressed by Muslims and longing for Russian protection. In general, he favored the Armenians and gave them preferential treatment. The Russians considered the Armenians responsible for strengthening the Christian faith in the region and not only acting as a deterrent to the domination of Transcaucasia by Persia or the Ottoman Empire, but also defending Georgia and assisting Russian administrative and military personnel in their struggle against the Muslims of Transcaucasia and the mountains of Dagestan.>>¹⁷

The Armenians, who were scattered on territories under the rule of several states, saw the Russians as liberators who helped them get rid of the Ottoman or Persian yoke. It should also be mentioned that both the Georgians and the Armenians have remained under the control of Russia to this day. After the disappearance of the Russian Empire, both Georgia and Armenia became part of the U.S.S.R. until the beginning of the ninth decade of the 20th century. Even today the two states have a special relationship with the Russian Federation, the successor of the U.S.S.R.*

Cossacks were often used by the Russian tsars to push the Muslim peoples as far south as possible¹⁸. They received the vast lands abandoned

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 467.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

*Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

¹⁸ "The Russian states began to use these Cossacks in the middle of the 17th century, due to their vast military experience, and this would become essential for the Russian advance in the Caucasus" (Frederic Coene, *The Caucasus - An introduction*, Routledge, 2010, p.

by the Circassians from Ciscaucasia, especially those adjacent to the Black Sea (between 1850 and 1864). The descendants of the Cossacks, despite the repression from the Stalinist period, still today inhabit large areas located north of the Great Caucasus mountain massif.

This doctoral thesis offers those interested a unique point of view about the past history of the Caucasus. The Russian Empire disappeared, but the Russian presence in the Caucasus remained strong. This, to which are added the conflicts in Transcaucasia, remnants of the tsarist and communist rule, but also the new challenges that have appeared in the Black Sea basin, show us how important knowledge of the past has become in order to find answers to the challenges of the future.

124). The Cossacks (who received a series of rights and freedoms) colonized and defended the newly acquired Russian territories. These "were devout Christians and considered that their task was to defend their lands but also of Russia from Muslims" (*Ibidem*).

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