

# THE CAUCASIAN WAR ZIGZAGS OF RUSSIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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In May 2024 (20–23 May), the Abkhazian State University in Sukhum hosted a four-day International Scientific Conference titled ‘***The Caucasian War: Lessons of History and Modernity***,’ dedicated to the 160th anniversary of the end of the Russo-Caucasian War and the 110th anniversary of the renowned Abkhazian historian Georgy Alekseevich Dzidzaria (1914–1988). The conference featured scholars from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Stavropol, Grozny, Makhachkala, Cherkessk, and Maykop, who gathered to present and discuss their research on the complex history of the Caucasus.

The presentations from this conference have been published in the collection “*The Caucasian War: Lessons of History and Modernity*.” This collection is a valuable resource for historians, ethnographers, students, postgraduates, and anyone interested in 19th-century Caucasian history.

AbkhazWorld is pleased to present one of the articles from this publication, ‘*The Caucasian War: Zigzags of Russian Historiography*’ by Said-Khasan Muskhadzhev, originally published in Russian and appearing on pages 130–138. This translation into English is provided by AbkhazWorld to ensure broader accessibility for an international audience.

## **Кавказская война: уроки истории и современность**

Материалы научной конференции, приуроченной к 160-летию окончания Кавказской войны и 110-летию Г. А. Дзидзария

**Editorial Board:** A.N. Gabelia, G.D. Gumba, D.D. Indzhgia, O.V. Mamedova, A.S. Mirzoev, S.Sh. Salakaya.

Abkhazian State University

Public Chamber of the Russian Federation

D.I. Gulia Abkhazian Institute for Humanities Research

State Committee for Repatriation of the Republic of Abkhazia

**Sukhum, 2024**

## THE CAUCASIAN WAR: ZIGZAGS OF RUSSIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

**Said-Khasan Muskhadzhev**

The origins of studying this issue were of a pragmatic nature and were connected with the Caucasian War of the 19th century, which became an armed struggle of the mountaineers of the North-Eastern and North-Western Caucasus against the expansionist policies of the Russian Empire. The term *osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie* [liberation movement] began to be widely used in domestic historiography only in the 20th century, when the theoretical and methodological foundation of historical knowledge underwent significant development.

Pre-revolutionary Russian authors who addressed the subject were mainly publicists, military officials, and officers of the Russian army [1]. At the same time, they touched upon ideological-political issues and the influence of the religious factor, particularly Islam, on the mountaineers' struggle. To ideologically support the military-colonial undertakings of the autocracy, the thesis of adherence to the "fanatical" teachings of *muridism*, a doctrine which, according to R.A. Fadeev, was "an expression of the main passion and the main characteristic of Islamism, hatred of infidels", was asserted [2]. Such arguments justified Russia's expansionist policy in the North Caucasus as a historical necessity, natural state interests, and a "civilising mission."

Particularly valuable is the concept presented in the work of A. Runovsky, written based on conversations with Shamil in the 1860s [3]. In it, the Russian officer's interpretation offers insight into the leader of the liberation movement in Dagestan and Chechnya and his understanding of the movement's ideological doctrines.

In parallel with practitioners among state officials and military personnel who were only interested in practical Islam, the second half of the 19th century saw the first attempts at academic orientalist research [4]. The works of oriental scholars were based on a thorough understanding of the theoretical foundations of Islam, the specifics of confessional practice, and a deep analysis of *Sufism*, a mystical-ascetic movement within Islam that had gained significant spread in the Caucasus during the period in question.

Professional Russian historians of the 19th century touched upon the Caucasian War and the mountaineers' movement relatively little. For them, it remained a pressing plot of contemporary life. The official imperial ideological guidelines and censorship requirements also hindered a systematic and objective study of this issue.

Nevertheless, an historiographical analysis of pre-revolutionary studies allows us to conclude that works addressing the issue have considerable merits. Through the efforts of publicists, orientalists, and military authors, an enormous amount of factual material was accumulated. They laid the foundation for studying many aspects of the complex history of the Caucasian War, revealing a solid and substantial source base for the further development of the subject.

Soviet historians, in contrast to pre-revolutionary Russian authors, significantly expanded the scope of research on the mountaineers' movement. What had been a specific topic of

interest primarily to official military figures in the Caucasus and scholars of Oriental studies became a major issue not only in the historiography of the North Caucasus region but also in the entirety of Soviet historical science. A distinctive feature of Soviet historiography on the mountaineers' movement was strict adherence to a unified methodological basis – the Marxist theoretical model, which remained unchanged for nearly seventy years.

The source base was significantly enriched through the study of Arabic-language documents related to the subject, which deepened the scholarly analysis of sources and documents. However, despite this, the assessment of the liberation movement in the North Caucasus (late 18th – first half of the 19th century) and the role of Islam within it underwent substantial changes in modern (Soviet and post-Soviet) domestic historiography. Accordingly, the following periods can be distinguished: the first period from the 1920s to the mid-1940s; the second from the second half of the 1940s to the mid-1950s; the third from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s; the fourth from the mid-1960s to the second half of the 1980s; and the fifth from the late 1980s to the early 21st century.

To understand the approach of Soviet historians of the 1920s to the evaluation of the mountaineers' movement, it is essential to consider that alongside the scientific method, they adhered to the ideological principles of class-based and party-oriented approaches. There were attempts to project the Marxist formation scheme onto the economic and social organisation of the mountaineers as it appeared during the liberation movement of the late 18th – first half of the 19th century [5].

It was asserted that the "base" and "superstructural" processes within the mountain society received certain impulses due to the intensified colonisation policies of Tsarist Russia, resistance to which resulted in an "anti-colonial and anti-feudal" movement with distinctly national-liberation and class-based content. It was particularly emphasised that the mountaineers' struggle was just and heroic. Leaders of the movement, such as Sheikh Mansur, Shamil, and Muhammad-Amin, were held in high historical esteem. Regarding the role of Islam, the "surge of religious enthusiasm" was described as one of the factors in the consolidation of the "varied tribes of the Caucasian range" [6].

The Soviet school of Oriental studies achieved significant progress in the 1920s–1930s. Under the guidance of renowned scholars, work began on identifying and publishing new, previously unknown written sources on the mountaineers' movement [7]. The publication of a work by Shamil's closest associate was of great importance [8].

During this period, the younger generation of Soviet Marxist historians primarily focused their research on the military and ideological-political aspects of the issue, the class aspect, and the participation of individual ethnic groups in the liberation movement [9]. Overall, the first Soviet concept of the mountaineers' liberation movement, formed on the Marxist methodological basis with the assertion of a new state ideology, remained unchanged from the 1920s until the mid-1940s.

In the historiography of the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, there was a noticeable increase in the influence of ideological and propagandistic factors. A reassessment of the history of relations between Russia and the peoples who became part of this state, including those of the North Caucasus region, began. Armed resistance against the Russian Empire, even if it was of a liberation nature, became an undesirable topic in the study of the history of the

formation of a unified state. The sharp criticism of the views of Academician M.N. Pokrovsky, the first major Soviet scholar to address the issue of the mountaineers' liberation movement, also played a role in revising established approaches. The methods of party dictatorship and direct intervention by senior state officials in domestic historical scholarship had nothing in common with scientific approaches [10].

An emblematic representation of official stances on this issue was the article by the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, M.D. Bagirov, published in the party-political journal *Bolshevik* [11]. Without proper scholarly analysis or consideration of the rich historical material, the author labelled the mountaineers' movement as reactionary, declaring Shamil a foreign agent and a proponent of the "militant" and "fanatical" teachings of muridism, devoid of a broad social base and expressing the interests of a narrow circle of feudal-clerical nobility.

The new approach was implemented in a directive manner through decrees, resolutions, and special events. For instance, in September 1950, the Presidium of the USSR Academy of Sciences adopted a special resolution *On the Anti-Marxist Assessment of the Muridism Movement of Shamil in the Works of the USSR Academy of Sciences Researchers*. Works published during these years were not distinguished by substance or argumentation, given the predetermined nature of official approaches [12]. During this time, no serious monographic research on the mountaineers' movement emerged. The most notable achievement in the historiography of the issue was a collection of documentary materials, whose compilation was artificial and biased [13].

Professional historians researching various aspects of the Caucasian War were subjected to enormous ideological and psychological pressure. Although they could not openly reject the officially mandated concept, they did not actively develop or expand it. Attempts at a rational and professional approach by domestic researchers yielded results. In 1955, an article by A.V. Fadeev, *On the Internal Social Base of the Muridism Movement in the Caucasus*, appeared, highlighting the mass social nature of the mountaineers' struggle and suggesting a discussion on some relevant aspects of the issue [14].

During the "thaw," when direct administrative control over historical scholarship weakened, scholarly discussion of the topic of the liberation movement in the North Caucasus (late 18th – first half of the 19th century) gained momentum. In October and December 1956, academic sessions were held, first by the Dagestan branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences and later by the Institute of History of the USSR Academy of Sciences. Scholars from regional and central schools came to unanimous conclusions: the North Caucasian mountaineers' movement was massive, anti-colonial, and could not have been inspired from abroad [15]. However, the "rehabilitation" of this issue was not entirely consistent or logical.

The significant revival of research work in domestic historiography from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s is indicated by the emergence of a substantial number of publications, articles, and works that critically examined the previous opportunistic framework on the subject. Serious attention was paid to the policies of the Russian state before and during the Caucasian War, the socio-economic development of mountain society, and the social foundation and characteristics of the liberation movement in different areas of the North

Caucasus [16]. A fruitful outcome of this work was the publication of a collection of sources and materials that included numerous newly discovered archival documents [17].

A particularly noteworthy historiographical event of this period is the monographic work by Professor N.A. Smirnov [18]. This work comprehensively examines issues related to the religious ideology of the mountaineers' movement, its essence, and content, drawing on a rich source base. However, it is not without a degree of opportunism and ideological bias.

Following the dynamic surge in research in the second half of the 1960s, there was a marked decline in scholarly work on the subject. Articles on the mountaineers' movement almost disappeared from both central and local periodicals, and monographs ceased to be published. In short, the study of the liberation movement in the North Caucasus ceased to be an independent direction in Soviet Caucasus studies. The study of this issue was subjected to an unofficial taboo imposed by the party leadership, both centrally and locally. The implementation of this purely ideological task was comprehensive and obligatory, hindering the objective and professional study of many complex problems in national history.

Despite the clear dominance of the "solely correct" concept [19], the study of certain aspects of the mountaineers' liberation movement and the Caucasian War did not cease entirely. The characteristics of research from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s included a shift in research emphasis to prioritise the study of the progressive consequences of the North Caucasus's annexation to the Russian Empire. A cautious use of terminology became a hallmark of many works from this period (terms such as *osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie* [liberation movement] and *Kavkazskaya voyna* [Caucasian War] were used sparingly and with certain caveats). This was accompanied by the depersonalisation of the liberation movement, evident in the absence of historical-biographical portraits and characterisations of the movement's leaders.

Within the broader Soviet historical school, a latent discussion persisted between proponents of two approaches, each based on its conceptual and analytical foundation and differing in the interpretation of sources. According to the first approach, the mountaineers' struggle was a popular liberation and anti-feudal movement against Tsarism and its local class allies, with *muridism* serving as a positive religious ideology and Shamil as a heroic and progressive leader who unified the Dagestani and Chechen communities into a strong state-theocratic system, the Imamate [20].

The other approach was based on the thesis that the mountaineers' struggle was an expression of a "military-raid system" and "mountaineer expansion," as a result of natural shifts related to the development of pre-feudal relations and the genesis of feudalism. The religious factor in this construction was assigned a negative role. According to some authors, *muridism* represented the ideology of a transitional period, upheld by the "conservative strata" of mountaineer society, "supported from abroad" and opposed to the activation of Russian-North Caucasian relations [21].

Despite the significant characteristics of each of the aforementioned approaches, they shared a common claim of asserting their version as the only scientific one, and adherence to a unified methodological tool, Marxist theory, though there were clear differences in the ability to apply it to the problem at hand.

By the late 1980s, democratic processes in the country had an impact on historical scholarship. The situation of creative and research freedom opened up extensive opportunities for a deep and objective study of the key issues of the Caucasian War. The first publications were polemical in nature, with the main focus shifted to the critique of previous "negative" and "erroneous" concepts [22]. The traditional orientation of researchers towards "positive" or "negative" assessments and entrenched clichés seriously constrained the scientific pursuit of historical truth.

A significant contribution to the improvement of research coordination and the analysis and assessment of the level of problem development was made by academic conferences held in Makhachkala (June 1989), Koshekhabl (April 1990), Nalchik (October 1990), Grozny (May 1992), and Krasnodar (May 1994). A characteristic feature of historiography from the late 1980s to the early 21st century was its regional division into national schools: Adyghe, Dagestani, and Chechen, each prioritising the study of the liberation movement in its own region. Undoubtedly, processes of national revival and political sovereignty influenced this approach.

The studies of the Adyghe school, represented by scholars from Adyghea, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Krasnodar Krai, focused on a wide range of significant issues: the liberation struggle of the Adyghees [Circassians —Ed.] in the 19th century and the activities of Shamil's emissaries (*naibs*) among them, the formation and nature of the Russian Empire's policy in the North-Western Caucasus, Circassia's role in international relations during the period in question, the consequences of the Caucasian War, and the forced resettlement of the Adyghees to the Ottoman Empire. These issues are thoroughly researched in the works of A.Kh. Kasumov, V.Kh. Kazharov, A.D. Panesh, A.Yu. Chirga, S.G. Kudaeva, and others [23].

In the research priorities of the Dagestani school, special importance is given to studying the military-political and ideological-religious activities of Shamil, the genesis and essence of the mountaineers' movement's ideology, as well as the discovery and publication of Arabic-language documents and materials from the period under review [24].

Chechen authors, in their studies of the liberation movement of the late 18th to the first half of the 19th century, primarily focus on the investigation of individual figures, particularly the leaders, including imams and sheikhs, as well as "second-tier" heroes such as *naibs* and close associates of the leaders of the mountaineers' struggle. Considerable attention is also paid to the study of the ideological-religious foundation of the mountain movement, Sufism—*muridism*, and its philosophical-ethical and socio-political content [25].

The national-territorial emphasis of North Caucasian historians' research interests does not diminish the significance of their work but rather broadens the range of studied issues, including aspects of the mountaineers' liberation movement that previously remained on the periphery of historiographical attention due to the dominance of an official ideological concept.

In her historiographical review of the Caucasian War, P.I. Takhnayeva concludes that domestic (Russian) historiography developed under a strong party-ideological pressure from the beginning and shows that "the subject remains one of the least studied and most controversial, raising numerous questions and provoking various pseudo-academic

speculations. Despite its vastness and multi-faceted nature, post-Soviet historiography has been unable to respond to numerous requests linked to the rise of national consciousness and attempts to use the national history of the peoples of the Caucasus for political and speculative purposes" [26].

Contemporary research by regional historians is characterised by excessive politicisation, biased interpretation and presentation of sources (with selective source inclusion), aligning them more with the popular-science format of "cultural-political (ideological) struggle." A cursory historiographical overview suffices to understand that nearly all questions related to the process of the Caucasus's incorporation into the Russian Empire and the Caucasian War remain contentious due to its unique state: until the early 1980s, the history of the Caucasus's incorporation into the Russian Empire and the study of the Caucasian War, due to prolonged rigid ideological restrictions, was in a deep crisis; from the 1990s, it acquired a painfully topical and politicised character; the post-Soviet historiographical situation has not managed to overcome this crisis, remaining trapped in contradictory ideologies and clichés such as "the voluntary entry of the peoples of the North Caucasus into Russia," "the friendship of the peoples of Russia and the Caucasus," "the anti-feudal, national-liberation movement," and "the resistance of the freedom-loving mountaineers to colonial subjugation."

Of particular interest is the Kuban school of specialists on the history of the Cossacks and mountaineers, among whom a prominent figure is Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor of the Department of Russian History at Kuban State University, O.V. Matveev. In his analysis of the historiography of the Caucasian War, he notes: "An important outcome and lesson of the confrontation between the versions of the harsh colonial Russian tsarist policy and the provocative role of the wild, marauding world of the mountaineers, which Russia had to defend against, has been the realisation that accumulating a standard set of arguments does not contribute to progress. Therefore, the conceptual efforts of recent decades deserve attention, often unnoticed against the backdrop of the ongoing historiographical war, but carrying a positive charge that could help overcome historiographical deadlocks. In these concepts, the Caucasian War is not viewed as a field of classical armed confrontation but as a space for complex and in many ways productive interaction between people representing different cultures, ideas, traditions, and skills" [27].

A significant contribution to the development of certain aspects of the Caucasian War was made by the St. Petersburg scholar Ya.A. Gordin [28]. Under his leadership, a group of researchers published a series of collections containing fascinating materials and a large number of diverse documents (18th–19th centuries), both official and unofficial, which illustrate different approaches to the issue of the North Caucasus's incorporation into the Russian Empire [29].

Contemporary domestic historiography is marked by substantial progress in the scientific study and objective representation of the history of the liberation movement in the North Caucasus. The abandonment of its dogmatic interpretation in line with the official concept has had a constructive impact on the emergence of diverse approaches to the topic and the publication of foundational studies that were previously deemed incompatible with the "ideological mandate" [30].

Of particular interest are the works of M.M. Bliiev and V.V. Degoev, which are based on extensive applied and theoretical material and have the notable advantage of theoretical and methodological pluralism. These studies consistently develop the idea of the formative roots of the Caucasian War and adopt an unconventional approach to the personal factor (exemplified by Shamil) in the system of power technologies [31].

Further development of the historiography of this issue, deepening its conceptual framework, and drawing on new documents and materials stored in foreign archives can ensure the most comprehensive coverage of this multifaceted topic.

A thorough historiographical analysis demonstrates that various aspects of the subject have a long, complex, and extensive historiography. The specific features of the historiographical situation, associated with the long-standing dominance of the official ideological framework and the prevalence of concepts based on theoretical monism, underscore the need for a comprehensive study of the history of the Caucasian War. Such a study should examine the ideological-religious, political, and integrative factors that were key components of the mountaineers' movement.

Despite the complexity and multidimensional nature of the Caucasian War, its long historiographical tradition, sometimes characterised by diametrically opposed approaches and conclusions, has revealed a common feature: the dominance of ideological imperatives and emotional assessments over sober scientific analysis and professional depth. The Caucasian War is not a mathematical problem that requires finding the "right methodological scheme" for its solution. The pursuit of creating the "only correct" concept of the Caucasian War would signify a new cycle of ideologisation and a crisis in scholarly research on the issue. It is hard not to agree with Professor V.V. Degoev's conclusion that "the young generation of Russian scholars, unburdened by the old 'rules of the game' in history, has an opportunity for a creative breakthrough towards a fundamentally different perception of the Caucasian War and a qualitatively new system of professional thinking" [32].

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