

THE WHITE TSAR AND HIS «UNFAITHFUL» SUBJECTS: INTERCULTURAL DIPLOMACIES ON RUSSIA'S ASIAN FRONTIER

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What is Russia? Is it “a riddle wrapped in a mystery” as the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill famously described it? A state driven by “messianic expansionism” according to the Nobel Peace Prize winner Andrei Sakharov? A civilization stuck between apocalypse and revolution in the words of the 20th century Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev? Or is it simply a space defined by its vast size, imperial ideology, intertwined cultures, and co-habiting civilizations?

This paper examines how a Russian government approached and conceptualized its relationship with various non-Russian peoples during Russia’s relentless expansion along the southern and eastern frontiers. Throughout the centuries, Russia’s paramount concerns remained geopolitical rather than commercial. From the outset, Russian authorities insisted on the non-Russians’ subordinate political status codified through diplomatic means. Indigenous peoples, however, perceived their relationship with Russia through the prism of their own societies, which exhibited significant structural differences with that of the Russian state. Perceiving the native peoples through a set of distorted mirrors and its own rigid ideology, Russian authorities consistently denied a colonial nature of what was, in fact, Russia’s colonial empire. Inevitably, however, the rise of ethnic and national identities among the non-Russian peoples within the empire pulled down the very imperial structures that helped to create them.

Key words: Frontier, Russia, Caucuses, diplomacy, intercultural dialogue, colonial administration

It is, of course, a truism to say that Russia was an empire that, like its imperial symbol, the double-headed eagle, simultaneously faced east and west. What is important to emphasize, however, that Russia’s imperial challenges and therefore the government objectives and policies differed substantially in the west and east. In the west, Russia confronted sovereign Christian states with distinct political and geographic boundaries. In the east, beginning from the middle of the 16th century, Russia was expanding into the areas populated by a multitudes of peoples, whose societies were primarily tribal, with segmented political authority, nomadic or semi-nomadic, and above all, non-Christian (animist, Muslim, and Buddhist). No clear state boundaries could be drawn here, and only a fluid zone of uncertainty, a frontier separated advancing Russian posts from the indigenous population. How Russia approached and conceptualized its

relationship with the various peoples it encountered in its southern and eastern borderlands is the focus of this paper.

Until the mid-eighteenth century, one would search in vain for any memoranda addressing Moscow's foreign policies or any attempt to reason and articulate its attitudes and policies toward the peoples along the frontiers. It is hardly surprising that in highly centralized Muscovy, the opinions of local officials were not solicited, and any discussion of such issues was limited to a narrow and secretive circle of the tsar's advisors. Nonetheless, the evolution of Russia's perceptions of and attitudes toward its southern neighbors is clearly visible through the changes in the government's use of royal titlature and diplomatic procedures.

Ivan III was the first ruler to appropriate the title of tsar, but it was not recognized outside Muscovy, and his son, Vasili III, reverted to the less controversial title of grand prince. The elaborate coronation of Ivan IV in 1547 as the tsar of all Russia was only one sign of Moscow's renewed confidence and assertiveness. To assume the title of tsar was an act of tremendous diplomatic and political ambition, for it meant to declare the Muscovite ruler equal to the kings of Europe and the khans of the steppe. But it was also more than that. In a direct challenge to the Holy Roman Emperor and the pope, Ivan IV confirmed the Muscovite rulers' claim to be heirs to Byzantium and his status as emperor and universal Christian ruler who "upheld the true Christian faith." Ivan's assumption of the title of tsar and his subsequent conquests of Kazan and Astrakhan were an equally unambiguous challenge to the status of the Crimean khan as the sole heir to the Golden Horde. Moscow was to be the center of the universe, as the Muscovites knew it, and its ruler was the tsar, the heir to the Byzantine emperors and sovereign of all Christians, and the "white tsar," a title that in the world of steppe diplomacy was reserved for the heirs of the Golden Horde. In other words, Moscow was the Third Rome, the New Jerusalem, and the New Saray, all at the same time¹.

Convincing its Muslim neighbors, the Crimean khans and Ottoman sultans, that Moscow was a sovereign state equal to its western counterparts was an uphill battle. The Muscovite sovereign's appropriate titlature was to be safeguarded at all costs. In 1515 the Muscovite envoy to the Ottoman Porte was to watch carefully that the title of the Muscovite

¹ The idea of the Muscovite princes as heirs to the Chinggisid rulers of the Golden Horde was first developed by one of the founders of the "Eurasian" school, N. Trubetskoi, in *Nasledie Chingiskhana* (Berlin, 1925). Various aspects of this idea were further discussed by George Vernadsky in *A History of Russia* (1969), and Michael Cherniavsky in "Khan or Basileus: An Aspect of Russian Mediaeval Political Theory," (1959, pp. 459–76). Moscow clearly displayed its attitude toward Rome during its negotiations with the pope's Jesuit envoy, Antonio Possevino, in 1582. Possevino strongly objected when the Russians referred to the pope as if he were an ordinary priest. He exhorted them that the emperor and other rulers considered the pope a representative of God and the teacher of all Christians (Possevino, pp. 128–29, 173).

МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ НА ФРОНТИРЕ

sovereign not be belittled and that the sultan refer to the grand prince of Moscow as “brother,” on the grounds that the grand prince was the brother of the Roman emperor, Maximilian, and other glorious rulers. To check whether the title was rendered correctly, the envoy had to request a Russian translation of the Ottoman text and take it to the Russian embassy’s residence, where it could be checked against Moscow’s version (SIRIO, 1895, p. 113).

Early Russian diplomacy was extremely prescriptive, rigid, and centralized. The embassy was expected to send regular messages back to Moscow as it proceeded toward its destination. Discouraged from any personal initiative in negotiations, the envoy carried with him several versions of the proposed treaty. He was to submit and insist on the acceptance of the first version. While appearing to negotiate, the envoy, after much bargaining, was merely to replace one fully drawn-up version of the treaty with another until one of the versions of the treaty was finally agreed to by the other side.

Diplomatic protocol also had to reflect the new conquests of the Muscovite rulers, which often proved a challenging task. Thus, in 1655, the Crimeans refused to recognize the tsar’s title, which described him as a grand sovereign of Lithuania, Little and White Rus, Volyn, and Podol’e. In response to the Muscovite envoy’s protestations, the Crimean official stated that the title was improper. In addition to demanding the appropriate titlature for the Russian ruler, Moscow instructed its envoys to communicate directly with the Crimean khan or sultan and to refuse to kneel in their presence. More than one Muscovite ambassador was thrown out of the courts of various Muslim rulers and Chinese emperors for arrogant and disrespectful behavior (ARAN, F. 1714, op. 1, Novosel’skii, A. A., no. 66, l. 21; SIRIO, 1884, pp. 231–36, 264).

The stubbornness of Russian government’s officials and its envoys abroad was, of course, more than bureaucratic rigidity. It concerned honor, prestige, and dignity, all of which Moscow was eager to acquire. Honor, however, was a product of the specific political culture, and it is not surprising that Moscow’s expectations often differed from those of its neighbors. One symbolic and recurring issue was the Russian Christian custom of taking off one’s hat as a sign of respect. The customs of other peoples demanded the opposite, to have the head covered.

Taking off one’s hat in honor of the Russian monarch became first and foremost a symbol of submission, and it was demanded from Muslims and non-Muslims alike. A comic compromise on the issue was reached between the Russian envoy to the Kalmyks, the diak I. S. Gorokhov, and the Kalmyk *tayishi*, Daichin, in 1661. During the reception, Gorokhov suggested that Daichin should stand up and take off his hat when the name

of the tsar was mentioned. When Daichin replied that the Kalmyks did not have such a custom, Gorokhov reproached him, saying that monarchs of all states did so, and for Daichin to remain seated with his hat on was to show dishonor. An embarrassed Daichin explained that he meant no offense. As a compromise, he ordered his interpreter to stand up and continue to translate with his hat off. On this Daichin and Gorokhov agreed (Khodarkovsky, 1992, p. 69).

Honor was commensurate with status and status with presents, which were of particular importance in steppe societies. Russian envoys at the courts of the nomadic chiefs and the Crimean khan were abused when they refused to submit the required presents and payments, and in return the envoys from the steppe were thrown out of Moscow.

Conscious of its spectacular rise, Moscow viewed the Golden Horde's numerous successors as lacking the essential trappings of sovereign states and increasingly dependent on Moscow's economy and military might. By the seventeenth century, Christian Muscovy was making increasingly clear its superior status through diplomatic language even before confirming it with military victories.

Traditionally, Moscow's primary concerns were geopolitical and military. With exception of the fur trade in Siberia, commercial considerations were almost always secondary. During the first encounters with the indigenous peoples, Moscow invariably insisted that they become the tsar's faithful subjects. Their subject status was not open to negotiations. The subject status of the natives in the empire's southern and eastern frontiers was conceptualized in specific terms, which were used only in these regions. All of these terms were of Turkic origin and indicated that Moscow conceived of itself as a legitimate heir to the Golden Horde.

But claiming legitimate authority over the numerous non-Christian peoples, who previously formed a part of the Golden Horde, also meant adhering to the traditional Mongol political practices. Thus, it was not accidental that Moscow conceptualized its relations with the peoples in the eastern and southern borderlands in terms distinctly different from those used in the empire's western territories and that these terms were of Turko-Mongol origin. In other words, in its Asian territories Moscow excluded itself from the more nuanced system of international relations, which prevailed in Europe and which was based on Roman legal practices, such as the *amicitia*, a traditional treaty cementing an alliance between Rome and the non-Romans. The suzerain versus subject relationship was the only way the tsar, who considered himself a universal sovereign, could conceptualize his relationship with the non-sovereign, non-state organized societies. In this regard, Russia's application of the concept of a universal

МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ НА ФРОНТИРЕ

sovereignty in its Asian borderlands was similar to those of the Ottomans and Chinese.

More than once the Russian rulers claimed to be the descendants of Chinggis khan, the only way to claim legitimacy among the peoples of the former Golden Horde. Perhaps the most comic example of such a claim was General Aleksei Ermolov's embassy to the Iranian court. In May 1816 Ermolov arrived in Tiflis to assume command of the Georgian Corps, later renamed into the Caucasian Corps. A man of war, he found himself in an atypical role a year later, when he was entrusted with a delicate peace mission to Iran. His task was to mollify the Iranian court into acquiescing to Russia's annexation of Azerbaijan and accepting the Russian border along the Kura and Araks Rivers. The Iranians had been forced to cede control of most Azeri provinces to Russia in the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813, but now, encouraged by Britain, they were pushing to revisit the conditions of the treaty. Ermolov was instructed to reject the Iranian demand for Russia's withdrawal north of the Terek River but to do so without provoking a military confrontation with Iran, whose army had been newly supplied and trained by the British East India Company officers.

Ermolov's tough, direct, and uncomplicated approach combined with a derisive and condescending attitude toward "Asiatic customs" was both confrontational and offensive to his Iranian hosts. Arrogant and cocky, Ermolov behaved like so many Russian envoys before and after him who balked at following the customs of various royal courts lest the dignity of the Russian envoys and the sovereign they represented be compromised. Defying custom, Ermolov refused to take off his boots and put on red socks before entering the royal quarters. In return, he was not allowed inside the palace and was received in the courtyard.

During his brief ambassadorial mission Ermolov displayed the righteousness, conceit, and disdain that characterized his attitude toward "the oriental other." Relying on contemporary clichés that viewed the Orient as a place of corrupt, immoral, treacherous, and cruel despotism, he ignored St. Petersburg's instructions to spend the large sum allocated for gifts for the Iranian court and instead directed most of the embassy funds toward the construction of a Russian military hospital in Tiflis.

Ermolov also believed that the "Asiatics" were guided by different moral standards where notions of truth and honor need not apply. At one point during the negotiations, he proclaimed himself a descendant of the Chinggis khan and mused unabashedly about his destiny of representing the country that had long been ruled by his ancestors. To convince their incredulous hosts, the Russians produced Ermolov's cousin, who at the time was serving in the Russian consulate in Tabriz and whose high cheekbones indeed made him look Asian. This was a grand and daring lie!

In the world of Asian politics, the claim of Chinggisid heritage meant that one had a legitimate right to the throne; this therefore implied that the “Chinggisid” general in command of the large army across the border was a serious threat to Iran’s ruling dynasty. Whether this absurd claim was taken as seriously as Ermolov believed it was, we do not know (Khodarkovsky, 2012, pp. 66-69).

Throughout the time, while preserving the traditional terminology, the Russian government infused it with a meaning of its own, that is a rationally understood concept of sovereignty. Henceforth these were to be policy concepts intended to emphasize the tsar’s unquestionably superior political status. As usual, political rhetoric and reality did not match, and many of the non-Christian peoples continued to view Moscow in traditional terms.

For almost three centuries since Moscow’s early conquests in the 1550s the Russian government relied on several specific terms to define its relationship with the peoples in the south and east of the expanding empire. All of these terms were traditionally used in the Turko-Mongol world to describe a broad range of relationships. In time, Moscow succeeded in redefining these terms and suffusing them with the meaning of its own. Thus, a *shert*, traditionally understood as a peace treaty, became an oath of allegiance to the tsar, an *amanat*, an exchange of hostages with the status of eminent guests, became a one-way hostage taking, a *yasak*, a form of a barter transaction, became a tribute, and the Muscovite rulers’ own traditional tribute to the native chiefs morphed into presents and annuities now generously bestowed by Moscow. Taken together with a systematic and deliberate mistranslating of the written and oral communications with the indigenous peoples, these terms became a set of colonial tools intended to turn the formerly independent peoples into Russia’s subjects¹.

The reality, however, was different. The native chiefs and their elites understood their relationship with Moscow in different terms. They projected onto Russia the conceptual framework of their own societies characterized by a high degree of political differentiation and independence of the elites from their nominal chief. Instead of a suzerain, they conceived of Moscow as their ally and saw their relationship with Moscow as that of a military and political alliance between the older (Moscow) and younger (local chief) brothers. Not surprisingly, misinterpretations and different expectations on both sides resulted in numerous conflicts.

Shert: a Treaty or an Oath of Allegiance?

¹ For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Michael Khodarkovsky (2002, ch.2).

МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ НА ФРОНТИРЕ

Moscow's presence in the region was marked from the very beginning by a single concern: securing the political loyalty of the local peoples. From a Russian point of view this was accomplished through a ritual idiom of pledging an allegiance (*shert*) to the Russian sovereign. But the government's official rhetoric of self-aggrandizement and the ritual of allegiance, which portrayed the natives as the subjects of Moscow, persistently failed to recognize that the reality differed substantially from the official language. The government preferred to deny the uncomfortable fact that Russia's relationship with the local chiefs was more akin to a military-political alliance of unequal but independent rulers.

At various times, Russian officials and military commanders observed that applying the yardstick of the empire's official terminology to the natives was not helpful. During the eighteenth century, several prominent natives of the Caucasus, who had long been in Russian imperial service, advised the government to adopt a more realistic view of the indigenous peoples. In 1714 Prince Alexander Bekovich-Cherkasskii wrote to Peter I and stated unambiguously that "these peoples [the Kabardinians] were independent and submitted to no one." Bekovich-Cherkasskii explained that the nature of relations between the Kabardinians and Russia was no different than that of the Kumyks with Persia, whose rulers traditionally provided large payments for the Kumyks to ensure their amity. Addressing the same issue in his report to the Senate in 1762, the Georgian prince and lieutenant colonel in the Russian army, Otar Tumanov stated emphatically that the peoples of the North Caucasus were Russian subjects more in name than in fact (Russko-dagestanskii otnosheniya 17–pervoi poloviny 18 vv., no. 96, pp. 224–25; RGADA, F. 248, op. 113, Opis' del Sekretnoi Ekspeditsii Senata, d. 1257, l. 14 ob).

If they could have been dismissed as too sympathetic to their kin, this could apply to Russia's legendary commander, the future field marshal Alexander Suvorov. In 1779, after having received a report about the oath of allegiance taken by the Adyges, Suvorov penned in the margins, "The notion of becoming a subject is not as important in their language as it is in Russian. It is better to avoid such descriptions." (Sokurov, pp. 116-117).

For Suvorov the conceptual differences between Russia and the native peoples implied the need for a better understanding of the other side, but for others they were a call for even harsher measures when dealing with the natives. Such was the case of his superior commander, General A. P. Tormasov, that the oath of allegiance was meaningless to the natives and putting it in writing was of no help. Yet, if Russian military commanders allowed such glimpses of reality in their internal correspondence, the same was not permissible in their reports to St. Petersburg. A year later, despite Delpozzi's warning, General Tormasov reported to the emperor that the

Ingush people had voluntarily taken an oath and became the eternal subjects of His Imperial Majesty (АКАК, 1870, pp. 471, n. 654). At one point, Russian authorities began to use the term “half-loyal highlanders” to capture the ambiguity of the situation. To reconcile Russia’s claims to the region and its peoples with the contrasting reality was never an easy matter. The supreme commander in the Caucasus, General I. F. Paskevich, attempted to do so in 1830, following the orders from the capital to compile a map of the Caucasus demarcating the peoples who had submitted to Russian rule. A large part of the map that was eventually sent to St. Petersburg was colored green, indicating the peoples loyal to Russia. Paskevich was compelled to attach a special report explaining that even though “the green line on the map delineated the peoples who swore allegiance to the sovereign and emperor, this did not mean that they had been subdued, because many of them often violated their allegiance which they usually swore as a matter of temporary necessity during the military expeditions against them.” (Lapin, pp. 257-258)

The reports from the Asian frontiers and the advice of the local commanders fell on deaf ears in St. Petersburg. One incident from the Kazakh steppe provides a particularly useful insight into the mentality of the Russian officials and their attitude towards the numerous non-Christian peoples in the south and east of the empire. In October 1731, a Tatar translator from the Russian Foreign Office, Aleksei Tevkelev (Muhammad Qutlu Tawakkul), was dispatched to the Kazakh khan, Abulkhayir to execute the oath of allegiance. Unexpectedly Abulkhayir confessed that he was the only one interested in a Russian protectorate, that the Kazakh notables were against it, and that they could be convinced only if offered numerous presents. He explained that after losing his towns and his wife to the Oirats, he had found himself surrounded by enemies: the Oirats in the east, Bukhara and Khiva in the southwest, the Kalmyks and Bashkirs in the northwest. He now was at peace with Bukhara, Khiva, and the Kalmyks, although the latter were unreliable. If he could secure peace with the Bashkirs, he could then avenge himself against the Oirats. But because the Bashkirs refused to reconcile without the tsar’s permission, he wished to become Russia’s subject, so he could make peace with them.

Abulkhayir’s motives in his search for Russian protectorship could hardly have been more prosaic. The following events exhibited the inner workings of Kazakh society and displayed both Abulkhayir’s ability to appropriate the Russian political vocabulary by promising to become Russia’s subject and the popular Kazakh opposition to his subservient relationship with Russia. A week later Tevkelev witnessed a sharp exchange between the notables and the khan. While the notables loudly protested that the khan had written to Russia and asked to become an

imperial subject without the customary consultation with them, Abulkhayir complained that he had no power over the Kazakhs and was a khan only in name. When the notables emphasized that they had advised the khan to have his envoys sent to Russia only to conclude a peace treaty, and not to submit to the Russian sovereign, it was Tevkelev's turn to respond. His tirade was one of indignation: "The Russian Empire is in high repute among many states in the world, and it is not befitting such an illustrious monarch to have a peace treaty with you, steppe beasts, because the Russian Empire has no fear of the Kazakhs and not the least need of them, while the Kazakhs are in great danger from Russian subjects, the Kalmyks, Bashkirs, Yaik Cossacks, and from the Siberian towns." He added that even sovereign tsars and khans were Russian subjects (Georgians, Kalmyks, Kabardinians, et al.), and signing a peace treaty with the Kazakhs would only defame the Russian Empire (Kazakhsko-russkie otnosheniia v 16–18 vv., no. 33, pp. 53–54).

Amanat: a Hostage or a Guest

Another critical institution in conceptualizing Russia's relations with the non-Christian, non-state organized societies was the *amanat* or hostages. Typically the Russian government and the native chiefs held different assumptions and expectations of hostage taking. Russian officials traditionally demanded hostages from among the sons of the local chiefs as a confirmation of the native peoples' oath of allegiance and their unconditional and exclusive submission to the Russian tsar and emperor. The natives, on the other hand, regarded submission of hostages as a reluctant but necessary act, which accompanied their military alliance with Russia. In 1779 the nobles of the Greater Kabarda explained to the Russians that they understood their hostages as being guests (*kunaks*) of the Russians and a symbol of a kind of a mutual nonaggression treaty.

In time, the institution of hostages evolved to produce Russia's indigenous colonial elite. From the late eighteenth century on, Russian authorities began to demand that the native elites send their sons to the imperial capital to be educated at the emperor's court or in Russia's prestigious military schools. The formation of the special non-Russian units of the imperial guard in the 1820s sought to serve the same purpose—to educate and acculturate young men from distinguished indigenous families. In contrast to previous policies of assimilating and turning non-Christians into Russians, the authorities were now satisfied with merely acculturating these indigenous elites. The newcomers were to learn the Russian way of life but at the same time remain sufficiently "native" to command legitimacy among their own peoples. They were expected to return to their kin as cultural interlocutors, projecting Russian influence

and representing imperial interests. In other words, the former hostages were to become a freshly minted colonial elite.

Distorted Mirrors

Yet even then the political terms and notions of both old and new Russia continued to collide with the traditional notions of the native societies. I have shown in my previous work that long after the initial encounters, the relationship between Moscow and many of its newly acquired subjects was based on structural misconception and misunderstanding of each other. Where Moscow saw a suzerain-subject relationship reinforced by hostage taking, the natives saw a mutual military alliance of partners where the young native men were sent to Russia as an act of trust; where Moscow saw a tribute (*yasak*), the indigenous people believed to be an exchange and barter; and what Russian government believed was an annuity and presents sent to the chiefs, the natives saw as a tribute paid to them to maintain peace along the frontier.

Many of the same customs that the Russian authorities confronted throughout the entire Eurasian steppe tenaciously stood in the way of Russian colonization of the North Caucasus. The native societies continued to rely on the *barimta*, a widely practiced custom of seizing herds or humans as bargains in adjudicating disputes, which the authorities saw as simple brigandage. The *kanly*, a kin-based vendetta against an enemy and his kin that could involve several generations, often seemed to the Russians to be unstoppable. The boundaries of families and clans were extended further through the institution of *atalyk*, which promoted bonds across different clans and social groups through the adoptive relations between fathers and sons. Another long-established tradition continued to spit out socially ostracized individuals or communities, the *abreks*, who became the most formidable raiders across the frontier. Finally, the institution of the *konak*, had also sealed the bonds of the inviolate hospitality between the individuals and often those seeking refuge as the *konaks* proved to be outside the reach of Russian authorities (Leontovich, 1882; Kosven, 1964; Gardanov, 1967).

Russia's attempt to impose its political and legal norms upon the indigenous societies continued to be at odds with the traditional values and practices forged through the centuries of communal experience. Russian imperial authorities saw some indigenous institutions as particularly invidious in constraining the government's ability to impose imperial rule and order in the region. For example, native peoples conceptualized their relationship with the Russian authorities through two traditional institutions: the *maslakhat*, a truce and an alliance against a common enemy, and the *konak* (*kunak*), a form of patronage and mutual protection.

МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ НА ФРОНТИРЕ

Neither of these implied the kind of subservient relationship that the Russians expected from their putative subjects.

Russia's acquaintance with the region began with the peoples of the plains and the foothills of the northeast Caucasus, the Kумыks and Kabardins. It was the Kумыks who provided the Russians with the first glimpses into the native societies of the North Caucasus. The Kумыks were a part of the Turko-Mongol world and spoke a dialect of the Turkic language that was a lingua franca throughout the Eurasian steppe. They possessed the most centralized political structure among the peoples of the region. At the top of the social hierarchy of princes and nobles, known as the *uzden*, was a ruler with the title of the *shamkhal* who exercised substantial political authority.

The Kabardins and their language belonged to a distinct Adyge-Abkhazian branch of the Caucasian language group. The Adyge people, widely known as Circassians, populated most of the northwest and central Caucasus. The Kabardins were the most powerful and numerous people among the various subdivisions of the Adyge, and their territories, largely known as the Greater and Lesser Kabarda, occupied the central part of the North Caucasus. To the east there were clusters of the numerous village societies, later subsumed under the name Chechens; to the southeast were the Ingush, Ossetians, and Balkars.

Kabardin society, like that of the Kумыks, was highly differentiated. The hereditary nobility consisted of the members of the four princely families, the *pshi*, whom the Russian called princes, and the lesser nobility, *uork*, whom the Russians called *uzden*. Applying the term *uzden* to the Kabardins indicated Moscow's tenuous grasp of the social hierarchies of the different indigenous societies. The term, of Turkic origin, was a title of nobility among the Kумыks and other Turkic peoples (the Karachays and Balkars). The Kabardins and other Adyge peoples, however, did not use the term but instead carefully differentiated among the types of uorks.

It was only in the 1820s that the government began to realize the importance of the finer gradation of ranks among the Kabardin nobility. Even then, the subtleties of the indigenous social rules continued to elude the Russian authorities, as they attempted to systematize and divide the lesser Kabardin nobility into the *uzden* of four different ranks. To the Kabardins the new administrative language made little sense (Gardanov, 1967, pp. 180-182)¹.

Other peoples of the region, most notably the Abadzhekhs in the west and the Chechens in the northeast Caucasus, were organized into free

¹ The original social categories were often rendered incorrectly; see G. M.-P. Orazhev, (Orazhev, 1984, p. 182).

societies. Nineteenth-century Russian observers distinguished them from others by referring to them as democratic societies, which essentially were a cluster of villages or clans united by kinship, territory, and a mutual oath; the elders decided common matters in the council, and the most skillful fighters led others in raids and ambushes.

These free societies had little social differentiation and were essentially brotherhoods, alliances of communities bound by mutual oath, which the Russians translated as *soprisiazhnichestvo* (cf. the Eidgenossenschaft of the early Swiss confederations). Among the Chechens, such brotherhoods were known as *tukkhum*, which consisted of a number of clans (*taips*). These alliances functioned as a way of adopting a fugitive individual into the local clan as well as cementing the ties among different clans, which formed complex co-fraternities (Gardanov, pp. 254-261; Mamakaev, 1973). The fiercely independent societies of the Chechens and western Adyges offered the most resistance to the Russians and, with no traditional elite to co-opt, proved hardest to subdue.

Like imperial conquests elsewhere, Russia's expansion into the region had begun with indirect rule: paying off the native elite and manipulating local factions in an effort to secure the political loyalty of the indigenous population. By the late eighteenth century the increasing presence of the Russian military, the arrival of the colonists, and a demand for Russian trade allowed for a shift toward direct rule over annexed lands and subjugated peoples.

In the early 1790s the government decided that the time had come to consolidate Russian rule by introducing a new system of courts and justice. Catherine the Great believed that military force alone was not enough to subdue the highlanders and that "the rule of law was the best way to soften and win over their hearts." In the nineteenth century some government officials continued to envision the cautious and phased transformation of native customs and laws as the only way "to achieve the desired moral and civil development of indigenous tribes." (Malakhova, p. 147; Maremkulov, p. 110; Kemper & Reinkowski, 2005)

In an attempt to introduce Russian legal and administrative norms, Russian authorities set up clan (*rodovoi*) and frontier courts. The clan courts, composed of members elected from the local nobles, notables, and some clergy, followed adat. Their decisions could be appealed to the frontier court at the frontier town of Mozdok, which included both native and Russian officials and was chaired by the Mozdok military commander. Ultimately, the frontier court was under the jurisdiction of and subordinate to the Astrakhan governor-general. Despite the token native representation in the courts, all major decisions were in the hands of Russian authorities.

МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ НА ФРОНТИРЕ

The new court system functioned as intended by the government: a barely disguised tool of Russian domination.

It is likely that Russian authorities did not quite realize the full extent of damage that the new courts and laws would inflict upon Russia's relations with the native population. This court system effectively excluded the Muslim clergy and sharia courts from decision-making. Likewise, a series of measures severely circumscribed the traditional rights of the secular elites by requiring them to seek special permission to travel, to convene public meetings, or to offer refuge and hospitality to outsiders. In other words, the Russian government effectively antagonized both the religious and the secular elites.

With the courts' members turned into salaried officials and much of the secular elite bought off with military ranks and entitlements, the local population increasingly saw the clan and frontier courts as a vehicle of Russian colonization. Election to the clan courts was usually preceded by the deployment of Russian troops among the locals and could not have taken place without the threat of force (АКАК, 4:341, no. 1272).

In 1807, a series of insurrections in the midst of the continuous wars with the Persian and Ottoman empires compelled Russian authorities to replace the clan courts with *mahkeme* courts. Composed of native secular elite and Muslim judges (*qadi*), the mahkeme adjudicated cases mostly on the basis of sharia law and did not allow any appeal to Russian authorities. The emergence of the mahkeme signaled a temporary retreat from the government's goals of Russifying the region.

In 1822, continuing his "gradual but persistent conquest," Ermolov announced a new assault on Islamic institutions: the hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, was banned and the mahkeme courts were replaced with the Provisional Kabardin court. The new court included elements of adat, sharia, and Russian laws. Its members were no longer elected but appointed by Russian authorities. A surrogate legal and administrative body with the task of governing the Kabardins, the new court intruded into the Kabardin local affairs more than any previous Russian attempts at projecting imperial authority. But the court proved to be less provisional than Ermolov had intended. It survived until 1858, when it was replaced by a similarly hybrid court, now renamed the people's court, with better-defined judicial functions (Maremkulov, pp. 108–130; Malakhova, pp. 148–161; Kosven, 1964, p. 133).

Throughout this period, Russian authorities relied on an incomplete and fragmented knowledge of both adat and sharia. In 1841, the local military authorities proposed compiling the customary law of the peoples of the North Caucasus and translating it together with sharia into Russian. Four years later, the first of the adats were collected and annotated. In

1847, Captain M. Ia. Ol'shevskii, whose task was to systematize the adats of the North Caucasus, had to admit that his efforts were incomplete and some of his descriptions were likely to be erroneous. In 1849, another captain of the general staff in Tiflis, Baron K. F. Stahl, annotated a large body of the Adyge adats. Yet the progress of collecting adats was slow and continued into the 1860s. The administration's acquaintance with adat and sharia laws remained tenuous, and it continued to rely on the Russified local elite as its guide through the native legal realm (Leontovich, pp. 73-94).

Often at the core of many misnomers and misunderstandings was an issue of translation. One example may illustrate how the task of translation was further handicapped by political and religious considerations. During the visit of the Muscovite embassy to the Georgian tsar Alexander in 1596–99, it turned out that the Georgians could no longer translate letters from Moscow because the Georgian translator had died. The Georgians suggested to the Muscovite envoys that they have their missives interpreted into Turkish, and the Georgians would then transcribe them in the Georgian alphabet. The envoys replied that although their interpreters knew Turkish, they were illiterate and could not read Russian or Turkish, and therefore they could not translate. Moreover, the envoys declared that “the letters contain many wise words from the divine scriptures, but the interpreters cannot translate them because these words are not used in the Turkish language.” The Georgians continued to insist; the Russians continued to refuse, saying that it had never been done before, and one could not translate properly through three languages. In the end, the impatient Georgians suggested, “Then do not read the divine words, read to us only what concerns the substance of the matter and the interpreters will interpret that into Turkish.” On this they finally agreed (Belokurov, pp. 297-99). Contrary to what the Muscovite envoys claimed, translations “through three languages” were the only way to communicate with the natives and were used routinely until the mid-eighteenth century, when the Russian authorities learned to rely on natives with knowledge of Russian.

Apart from sheer incompetence or concerns for sensitive theological propriety, translations were further compromised by the deliberate efforts at misrepresentation and selective editing, so that, for instance, letters from the natives, often written to the tsar as an equal, had to be rendered in the form of a supplication to the Russian sovereign. Translators and their censors took great pains in trying to avoid precise translations whenever the original phrasing could possibly harm the dignity of the Russian monarch; they rendered them instead into acceptable political and diplomatic terminology. Available copies of translations often show numerous signs of editing. The corrections spelled out fully the title of the

tsar and introduced such polite expressions as “your royal majesty,” “the grand sovereign,” and others that were not mentioned in the original. Often the arrogant tone of a letter was changed, making it more humble and subdued (Khodarkovsky, 1992, p. 65).

Indeed, translations often deliberately misrepresented the issues. Most of the time the natives were not provided with a written copy of the documents they were expected to sign. Instead they had to rely on the Russian interpreters, who related the contents of the document to them. A contemporary Russian translator, Vasilii Bakunin, asserted that prior to 1724 the Kalmyks were not familiar with the contents of the treaties they had signed and that were regarded by Moscow as the Kalmyks’ oaths of allegiance. In contrast to earlier documents, which had been written in Russian with the tayishis’ signatures affixed to them, the document the Kalmyks signed in 1724 was written in Kalmyk and discussed among the Kalmyks in numerous meetings before they agreed to sign it (Bakunin, pp. 214-215).

Colonial Empire

I have argued elsewhere that Russia was a colonial empire in denial. The Russian government was unable and unwilling to separate the internal from the colonial functions and thus blurring the boundaries of the internal and external.

At the same time as officials in Petersburg refused to consider a notion of colony within the Russian empire, they continued to rule over numerous non-Christian peoples and regions through the various arms of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs or the War Ministry. For example, throughout the nineteenth century, the empire’s Asian territories were administered by the Asiatic Department, founded by the imperial decree of April 19th, 1819 as a part of the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs. The Department was charged with dealing in “matters related to Asia and the Oriental non-Christian population” (*Upravlencheskaia elita Rossiiskoi imperii. Istoriia ministerstv, 1802-1917*, pp. 74-75)¹

The French too, among other European powers, ruled Tunisia and Morocco through the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs. But with the exception of Algeria, which was considered to be an integral part of France, Paris regarded its North African territories as protectorates and ruled them as such. Russia, by contrast, made no distinction between colonies and protectorates and considered all conquered lands as an integral part of the Russian empire (Ruedy, pp. 45-78).

¹ For more on the Asiatic Department and Asiatic Committee in the War Ministry, see Alex Marshall (2006, pp. 26-37, 176-77)

No wonder that denying the existence of colonies, Russia, of course, had to deny the existence of the colonial institutions as well. In reality, however, the Asiatic Department was similar to the colonial institutions of other European empires, which throughout the second half of the nineteenth century consolidated various colonial functions, previously dispersed among several government departments, into national Colonial Offices: the British Colonial Office, the French *les Ministere des Colonies*, the Spanish *Despacho Universal de Indias*, or the German *Kolonialamt*. Prior to the emergence of the Colonial Departments, most colonial functions were given to the Departments of Navy and War in Britain and France, and the Council of the Indies in Spain. The German example offers the closest parallel, where the colonial affairs were also run by the Colonial Department (*Kolonialabteilung*) within the German Foreign Office (*Auswärtiges Amt*) until it became separated into a Ministry of Colonial Affairs (*Reichskolonialamt*) in 1907. (Conrad, 2012; Steinmetz, 2007).

The absence of clearly defined colonial institutions in Russia was in some ways similar to the dispersal of the foreign and colonial administrative functions among Russia's imperial neighbors in Asia. Like Russia, the Qing China too considered all conquered territories as an integral part of its empire and communicated and ruled the frontier regions through multiple means: the civil and military bureaucracy, individual officials communicating in secret code directly with the court, and the office of *Lifan Yuan* in charge of relations with Mongolia, Tibet, and parts of southern China. The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs formally appeared in China for the first time in 1901. Likewise, the Ottoman Empire lacked any official office in charge of the foreign matters until the mid-nineteenth century. While *Re'is ül-küttab* (literally "the chief scribe"), the head clerk of the Imperial Council, *de facto* presided over the Ottoman relations with foreign powers, the government did not formally recognize his foreign affairs responsibilities until 1792. After the establishment of the Ottoman Foreign Ministry in 1836, the position of *Re'is ül-küttab* was finally given a new title of a Foreign Minister (*Hariciye Naziri*). Thus, it was only with the establishment of the western-style foreign ministries that the Qing and Ottomans would borrow and apply to their own experiences the western concepts of "an empire," "a civilizing mission," and by implication "a colony." (Patterson, pp. 209-11; Deringil, pp. 150-165; Inalcik, pp. 671-683).

The Russian empire faced similar dilemmas as other European empires in controlling and governing the territories populated by the non-Christians. From early on, however, Russia chose a different approach. Some Western European empires relied on the privately financed

МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ НА ФРОНТИРЕ

companies to administer the colonies: the British and Dutch East India Companies operated in Asia, or the Hudson Bay Company in the North America, to mention a few well known examples. Others, like the Spanish and Portuguese, relied on a combination of state, church and private governance. By contrast, St. Petersburg put faith solely in the state administration of the new territories. The only exceptions were the short-lived charters given to the Stroganoff brothers to explore Siberia in the 1560s and to the Russian-American Company in Alaska, which was founded in 1799 as the first joint stock company in Russia to survive for two decades before being disbanded and put under the government control (Khodarkovsky, 2006, pp. 317-337; Vinkovetsky).

In short, while the colonial rule of most European empires evolved from the one administered by the private companies to the one placed under the control of the state in the nineteenth century, Moscow, similar to its imperial counterparts in Istanbul and Beijing, placed its colonies under a firm government control from the sixteenth century onward.

The tension between the colonial nature of the empire and the government's denial of the reality was obvious as early as the middle of the sixteenth century when Moscow first came into possession of the territories with a large non-Christian population. While de jure, Moscow considered the newly conquered non-Christian peoples as the tsar's subjects incorporated into his empire, de facto Moscow recognized the limits of its authority by governing the new regions and peoples through a series of colonial offices that combined military, diplomatic, fiscal, and administrative functions: the Kazan Office (Prikaz) created in the sixteenth century to run the lands in the south and east of Muscovy, specific chanceries of the Foreign Office in the seventeenth century (the Kalmyk and Siberian Offices), the Orenburg Frontier Commission to deal with the Kazakhs in the eighteenth century, and the Asiatic Department to address "the matters related to Asia and the Oriental non-Christian population" in the nineteenth century.

The history of Russian expansion into Asia is more than just a story of military conquest and colonization. It is also a story of the encounter between the worlds that were structurally incompatible: the world of the highly centralized empire-state and indigenous, kinship-based societies with rudimentary political organizations. In this sense, it is the story of a continuous learning process by both sides. Viewing the outside world through the prism of its own society, each side projected upon the other its own values and expectations. The fact that multiple clan, tribal, linguistic, and later ethnic identities in the region intersected in complex and poorly understood ways did not make communication easier. Thus, Russian government policies must be seen not only as a product of government

objectives and ideologies but also in the context of genuine and persistent mutual misperceptions.

In time, the Russian authorities became deeply involved in the power struggle within the native societies, taking sides, favoring some and antagonizing others, and providing financial and other incentives to the loyalists. In other words, the Russian state acted as a great disruptor of the traditional balance of power and eventually found itself in a position of a state and nation-building.

To rule its imperial subjects, the Russian government resorted to creating ethnic and national identities among them. The task of constructing ethnic identities fell on the Russified local elite and Russian scholarly and government officials. After all, ethnicity was a western concept brought from Russia. The ironies of the empire were often inescapable, as in a case of Shora Nogma, the Kabardin polymath from the North Caucasus. He was greatly influenced by A. J. Sjögren--an ethnic Finn educated at a Swedish gymnasium at the time when his homeland was part of Sweden and who later continued to write in Swedish. Shortly after Finland became annexed to the Russian empire in 1809, Sjögren became a conduit of the Western ideas in the Russian imperial periphery and was bestowed with the membership in the Russian Academy of Sciences. It was a Russified Swedish Finn who brought the modern ideas of ethnicity, philology, and historiography to the North Caucasus! (Khodarkovsky, 2012, p. 108)

By the early 20th century, Russia's relations with the indigenous peoples in Asia came full circle: from the initial imperial diplomacy intended to turn the natives into subjects, to Russia's rule over them through the newly-bred colonial elite, to the emergence of distinct ethnic identities among the subject peoples, and to their growing demands for autonomy or outright sovereignty. Like other empires, Russia too created its own numerous Frankensteins that appeared in the form of ethnic identities and that eventually help to undermine the very empire that created them.

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МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ НА ФРОНТИРЕ

БЕЛЫЙ ЦАРЬ И ЕГО «НЕНАДЕЖНЫЕ» ПОДДАННЫЕ: МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ ДИПЛОМАТИЯ НА АЗИАТСКОМ ФРОНТИРЕ РОССИИ

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Что такое Россия? Это "загадка, завернутая в тайну", как ее лихо описал британский премьер-министр Уинстон Черчилль? Государство, движимое "мессианским экспансионизмом" по мнению лауреата Нобелевской премии мира Андрея Сахарова? Цивилизация, застрявшая между апокалипсисом и революцией, по словам русского философа XX в. Николая Бердяева? Или это просто пространство, определяемое его огромными размерами, имперской идеологией, переплетенными культурами и сосуществующими цивилизациями?

В статье рассматриваются подходы российского правительства к построению отношений с различными нерусскими народами в период интенсивной экспансии России вдоль южного и восточного фронтиров. На протяжении веков Россия была больше озабочена геополитическими проблемами, чем коммерческими. С самого начала российские власти настаивали на кодификации дипломатическими средствами политического статуса нерусских подданных. Коренные народы, однако, воспринимали свои отношения с Россией через призму своих собственных обществ, которые демонстрировали значительные структурные отличия от российского государства. Воспринимая коренные народы через множество искаженных зеркал и собственную жесткую идеологию, российские власти последовательно отрицали колониальный характер того, что было, по сути, Российской колониальной империей. Тем не менее, подъем этнической и национальной идентичности среди нерусских народов внутри империи неизбежно разрушил те самые имперские структуры, которые помогли их создать.

Ключевые слова: фронтир, Россия, Кавказ, дипломатия, межкультурный диалог, колониальная администрация

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