

## **Oriental Studies and Geographical Discoveries in Favor of Colonial Strategy: The Case of Russian Colonial Policy in the Southern Caucasus**

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### **Abstract**

Tsarist Russia's dominance over the Caucasus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a turning point in the history of this region. It was a consequential change that determined the future destiny of the Caucasian people within the colonial strategy of the Russian empire. The birth of "Caucasus" as a modern phenomenon with its multidimensional and geopolitical connotations was the result of this process. This process most often viewed and surveyed from European or Russian perspective and the resulted studies naturally reflect a Russo-Orientalist/Euro-Centrist narrative. The present paper aims to propose a rather different perspective; keeping in mind the pre-colonial history of the so-called Caucasus region, it will trace the process during which Tsarist Russia's colonial strategy toward the Caucasus was developed and try to explain how this strategy led to creation of "Caucasus" as a colonial-geopolitical conceptual structure.

The central question of this study is that how Tsarist Russia discovered the Caucasus. As a time-tested rule, discovering and reconnoiter of any region is an essential requisite of its colonization. The region that the present study focuses on - namely the Caucasus - has not been a "terra incognita" with an uncivilized indigenous people. Its extensions were wide enough to be home to a great population with different and multicultural backgrounds who developed advanced civilizations and historical relations with their western and eastern neighbors. While the northern Caucasus was mostly home to tribal peoples with Turkic origins, parts of Southern Caucasus welcomed Christianity in an ancient time. The first appearance of Christianity could be traced back to the very earliest day of the religion and long before Russian themselves converted to it. Moreover, Armenian and Georgian people along with their Iranian and Turkic neighbors have their own culture and civilizations with a prosperous history.

From an Iranian point of view, there was not any historical region called as the Caucasus. The voluminous literature in Persian language dealing with the historical geography of the lands between Caspian and the black seas do not mention to this word. Authors of these works mostly have called the

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Caucasus Mountains as “Alborz Küh” and treated the peripheral lands as provinces of Iran. Except for Arabic, this is the case of indigenous texts in other languages. In some Arabic texts, there are references to the word “Kabk” (كَبْك) whose origin is questionable. Yet, there are clear references to the word “Caucasus” in the Greek and Roman geographic and historical literature. This latter seems to be the main source of Western travelers to revive the denomination in the modern period. Hence, we can ask that did Russians themselves reproduce this toponym or European visitors intermediated it? This paper tries to prepare an answer for this question.

As the documentary base of this study shows, European orientalist discourse played a crucial role in paving the way for the Russian dominance over Caucasus. From 16<sup>th</sup> century on, many Europeans as diplomats, tradesmen and adventurous travelers passed the Caucasus lands in order to develop relations with the Safavid Iran. A wealth of travelogue literature produced by these Europeans among whom there were scientists and artists who certainly contributed to the Russian discovery of the region. We can mention to a few names among the Russian tradesmen who also contributed to their countrymen's familiarity with the region and its people. Yet, the main work was fulfilled by a group of German scholars who were in service of Tsarist colonial policy. Peter Simon Pallas and his savant students, Y. G. Guldenshtadt and S. G. Gmelin were among the most influential figures who provided the Russians a wealth of scientific and experimental material in different fields of history, geography, ethnography, commerce, fauna and flora and the like about the region. No doubt this group of the Europeans played a central role in formation of Caucasus as a part of the Tsarist colonial empire.

A third group also played an essential role in formation of the orientalist-geopolitical concept of Caucasus within the Russian colonial strategy; Among this last group who came from the indigenous elite, Armenians have allocated an exclusive contribution to themselves. This unique role had been so important that led some scholars to introduce the Armenian people as the inviters of Russians into the region. Yet, as the results of this study show, they were not alone and their Georgian neighbors played an influential role as well. Among the Georgian elite who from late 16<sup>th</sup> century on, began to migrate into the Russian lands, Sulikhan Saba Orbeliani played an important role. As a famous figure who belonged to the Georgian landowning elite, Orbeliani provided the Russian government with important data on the geographic situation of the region, its ethnographic composition and political conditions. As Allen has shown, Orbeliani's geographical Atlas of Caucasus was an invaluable source to be used by the famous German geographers, G. Deslisle to produce his invaluable 1721 map of Caucasus by request of Peter the Great. Comparing with those of Armenians and Georgians, the contribution of Muslim elite was not so much to be accounted. Yet, there

were some indigenous figures with an Iranian cultural lineage, who also played an influential role in the process. A. Q. Bakikhanov was a typical figure among this group who appeared as the consultants of the colonial rule in the Caucasus.

This study is based on a volume of literary materials that are gleaned from first-hand sources in different languages including Persian, Arabic, Russian, French, English and German. With a critical and analytical approach, these materials were employed in order to prepare an answer for the main question of the study. Its results show that between 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Tsarist Russia advanced an expansionist policy toward the Caucasus region. Parallel to this expansionist policy and as an essential part of it was a discovering strategy to acquire an experimental-scientific reconnoiter of the occupied region and its people. Here, the pre-modern European mentality which was a legacy of the classic period along with the scientific attempts of the German scientist who were in service of the Tsarist regime and worked within the discourse of European orientalism, played a crucial role. Figures among the indigenous elite came to help their European colleagues. Formation of the “Caucasus” as an orientalist/geopolitical concept with certain colonial connotations was the result of this process.

**Keywords:** Caucasus, geographical discovery, orientalism, Russia, Russian colonial policy.