

David Urquhart's holy war

by Joseph Brewda and Linda de Hoyos

In 1785, a Chechen leader, Naqshbandi Sufi Sheikh Mansur, raised the Chechen, Ingush, Ossetes, Kabard, Circassian, and Dagestani tribes in revolt against the steady advance of the Russian Empire into the Caucasus Mountains. Before 1774, the Caucasus and Transcaucasus region, now embracing Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, had been loosely ruled by the Persian and Ottoman empires. After Russia's victory over the Ottoman Empire in the war of 1768-74, the Russian military moved in on the Caucasus. Sheikh Mansur raised the flag of the "Mountain Peoples" against the czar. Although Mansur's 20,000-man force was crushed by the Russian onslaught in 1791, Sheikh Mansur became the hero of the Mountain Peoples, his revolt the inspiration for the uprisings in the Caucasus today.

Strangely, Sheikh Mansur was not a Chechen. He had been born Giovanni Battista Boetti, and had been a Dominican monk before his conversion to Islam. Although Boetti's direct ties to Venice and London are not known, his rebellion served their geopolitical aims.

Years later, another hero of the Mountain Peoples emerged. In 1837, James Bell, an agent of the British secret

services who was touring the Caucasus, wrote in his memoirs that "a Circassian prince pointed out [to me] the sacred spot (as they justly esteem it) where Daud Bey had held (just three years ago) his meeting with the chieftains of this neighborhood, and first inspired them with the idea of combining themselves with the other inhabitants of the mountain provinces as a nation, under one government and standard." Daud Bey had penned the declaration of independence of Circassia and designed its flag.

Daud Bey was not a native of the Caucasus either. His name was David Urquhart, and he had been sent into the region on a special mission in 1834 by British intelligence. Urquhart had been a protégé of Jeremy Bentham, the founder and head of the newly organized British secret services in the aftermath of the American Revolution. At the point that he was posted to the Ottoman Empire in 1833, Urquhart reported directly to Sir Herbert Taylor, private secretary to King William IV, as well as to Foreign Minister Lord Palmerston.

The occasion of Urquhart's first trip to Turkey was the 1833 Russo-Turkish treaty, through which Russia had virtu-



In the nineteenth century, Britain's Lord Palmerston (left) employed such agents as Giuseppe Mazzini (above) to create a veritable zoo of ethnic and other insurgencies. One of his principal operatives was David Urquhart (right).

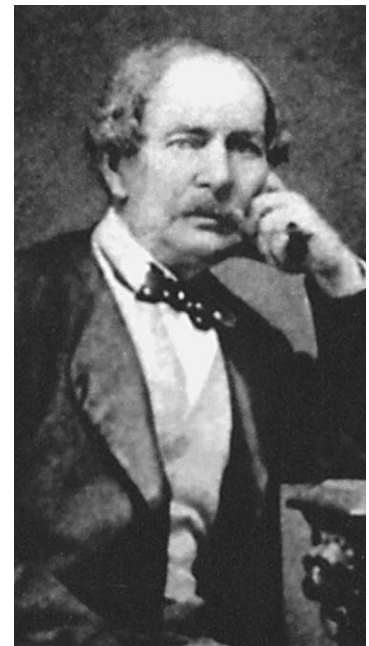
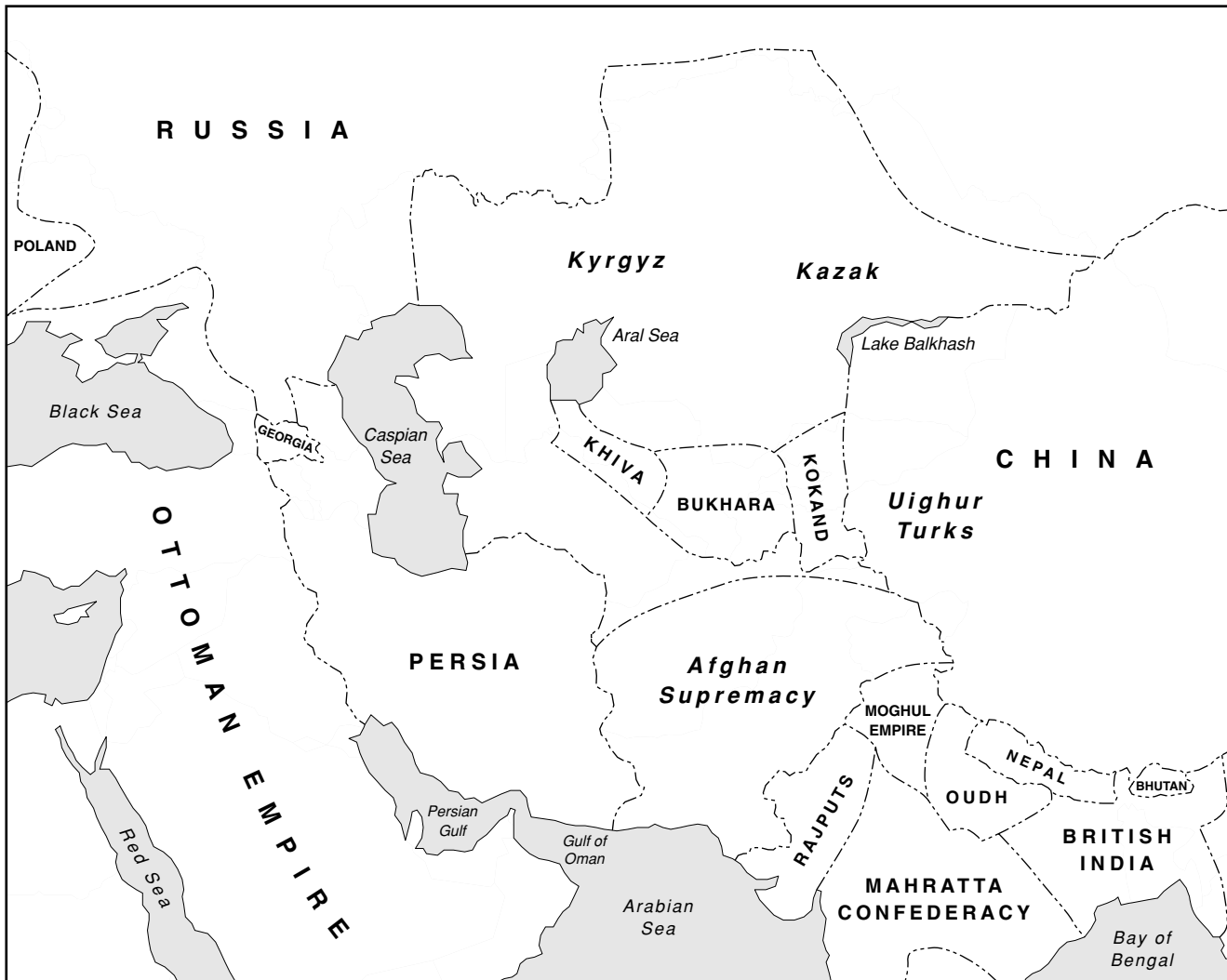


FIGURE 4

The Caucasus and Central Asia in 1763



Key to Figure 4:

The Seven Years' War between the British and French empires ended in 1763, with Britain victorious. France was finished as a naval power. Britain was poised to expand its presence throughout Asia and elsewhere. In its aftermath, France abandoned India, where it had been the dominant European power a decade earlier. British-controlled Bengal became the base through which Britain took over the entire subcontinent. French domination of the Ottoman Empire began to come to

an end; British influence there was at a take-off point. China, while not yet under British control, was weak.

The vast region between Russia, China, and what became British India, was inhabited by Turkic nomads and Afghan tribes, and the three oasis khanates of Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand. Russia was the only major, nearby land power. Further west, Russia was situated to take over the entire Caucasus region between the Black and Caspian seas. Control over these regions was later dubbed the "Great Game."

ally won control of the strategic Dardenelles. As Urquhart wrote in a memorandum, his mission was: "by obtaining the information necessary, to suggest measures of internal organization if the British government takes Turkey under its protection, or for meeting . . . the disorganizing influence

of Russia in the contrary sense."

Urquhart's mentor in instigating revolt in the Caucasus was Prince Adam Czartoryski, an ethnic Pole who had been a Russian foreign minister during the Napoleonic wars, and who later helped lead the failed 1830 Polish rebellion

FIGURE 5
The Caucasus in 1763



FIGURE 7
The Caucasus in 1864

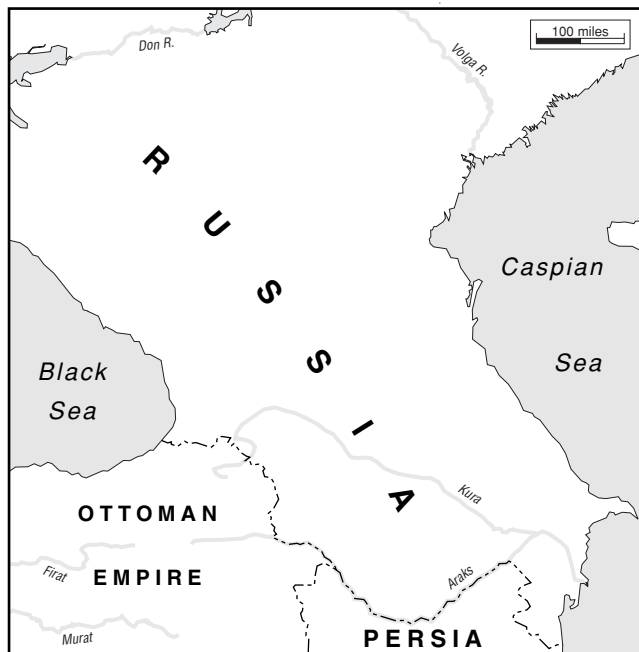


FIGURE 6
The Caucasus in 1830



Key to Figures 5-7:

Russia expanded into the Caucasus in the 16th century, but did not complete its subjugation of the region until the mid-19th century. This expansion was not a simple north-south movement, due to the difficulty of subduing the backward mountain tribes. Most of the region was then squabbling emirates dominated or part of the rival Ottoman and Persian empires, with Georgia having some degree of semi-independence. By 1763, Russia had taken over much of the northern flanks of the Caucasian mountain range, and the strategic Daryal Gorge, the passageway into Georgia and the entire Transcaucasus. Russia took over most of Georgia in 1783, annexing it in 1805-10. It crushed a mountain tribe revolt in the 1780s in the Caucasus.

Russia took control of the northeastern Black Sea coast after the 1787-91 Russian-Ottoman war, most of the Caspian Sea coast by 1796, formally annexing it in 1805. It dominated the Black Sea coast by the end of the Napoleonic wars, and following the 1828-29 Russian-Ottoman war, forced the Ottomans to cede all their Caucasian lands. Russia took formal possession of the entire region by 1830.

But two enclaves remained outside of Russian control: a Circassian tribal enclave on the Black Sea coast, and an eastern mountainous enclave inhabited by Dagestanis, Chechens, and Ingush. It was only in 1864, after 30 years of brutal guerrilla warfare, that Russia finally subdued these regions.

against Russia.

After that venture, Prince Czartoryski fled to Britain, where he was inducted into the British Foreign Ministry, with the mission of organizing insurrections against the Russian Empire, becoming a patron of the Caucasus tribes and of Urquhart.

Full British support

During July and August 1834, Urquhart, posing as a businessman, toured the eastern shores of the Russian-controlled Black Sea. Landing near the Anapa fortress, he met some 15 Circassian beys and 200 village chiefs, offering them salt, gunpowder, lead, and, eventually, full British support for revolt against Russia.

Urquhart's mission was made all the easier by Russia's murderous oppression of the Caucasus people, zealously carried out by First Viceroy Mikhail Vorontsov. As Prince Kochubey explained to an American visitor at the time: "The Circassians are like your American Indians—as untamable and uncivilized. . . . And owing to their natural energy or character, extermination only would keep them quiet."

"Daud Bey" was good to his word, as supplies and aid flowed into the Caucasus.

In 1834, Urquhart published a pamphlet, *England, Russia and Turkey*, to drum up support for his developing rebellion. He argued that it was necessary for Britain and France to check Russia's advance in the Caucasus in order to secure Turkey. In 1835, Urquhart formed *Portfolio*, a publication dedicated to the "Eastern Question." His first issue published Russian secret dispatches allegedly confirming Russia's ambitions. A later issue featured his Circassian declaration of independence.

In 1836, Urquhart returned to Istanbul as secretary at the British embassy. Toward the end of October, he outfitted a private schooner, the *Vixen*, to trade with the Circassians, in defiance of Russian trade restrictions. In early April 1837, the Russians seized the ship; the British ambassador to Turkey called on Palmerston to send a fleet, but Palmerston decided to avert a crisis at that time.

By 1840, Circassian guerrilla actions against Russian forces finally succeeded in sparking a general insurrection of all the Mountain Peoples—the Chechens, Ingush, Dagestanis, and Kabardians. The insurrection was led by Sheikh Shamil of Dagestan, who, like the former Dominican monk Sheikh Mansur, was a leader of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. Shamil created an Imamate which ruled the region with an iron fist.

During the 1853-56 Crimean War between Russia and Britain, Britain considered invading the Caucasian Black Sea coast with the help of the Circassians, but scotched the option. At the 1856 Paris peace conference, London failed in its bid to create a Circassian buffer state between Russia and Turkey.

Even after the Crimean War, London continued to aid the Caucasus rebellion. Circassian chiefs traveled to Istanbul to meet the British ambassador, Sir Henry Bulwer, to plan opera-

tions. But Russian response to the rebellion became increasingly brutal. By the time the revolt was finally crushed in 1864, more than 1 million Caucasians had either been killed, or deported to the Ottoman Empire.

"Daud Bey" had left the mountains long before. After the *Vixen* incident, Urquhart officially left British government service, insinuating himself as an adviser to the sultan of the Ottoman Empire.