

CHARLES KING: *The Ghost of Freedom. A History of the Caucasus*. xxii + 291 pp.
Oxford: OUP. 2008.

The Caucasus is Europe's most complex region in terms of its ethno-linguistic makeup; even if one draws the line between Europe and Asia along the ridge of the main chain, this statement would remain true. On this basis alone, then, there is wide scope. The 'Father of History', Herodotus, knew that the Caucasus extended to the Caspian Sea, noting (Book I, section 203): 'Along the west of it [the Caspian] stretches the chain of the Caucasus, the longest and loftiest of all mountain-ranges, inhabited by many different tribes.' He speculated on the Egyptian origins of the Colchians of western Caucasia (which is reflected in the folk-history of one of the races, the Abkhazians, who are indigenous to what was northern Colchis), basing his opinion in part 'on the fact that the Colchians, the Egyptians, and the Ethiopians are the only races which from ancient times have practised circumcision' (Book II, section 104). One might, thus, conclude that there is also much to say on the vertical axis of time. But the Caucasus rather slipped off history's highways (at least as far as Europe was concerned). Writing of late 18th-century Russian knowledge about the contemporary western Georgian kingdom, Isobel de Madariaga noted in her *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (2001.369): 'So little was known about the area that when an emissary of King Solomon of Imeretia asked to be received in St Petersburg in 1768, Catherine called for maps, and found that according to some of them Tiflis was on the Black Sea, according to others, on the Caspian)', whereas the Georgian capital in fact lies somewhere in the middle of the isthmus formed by these seas.

King wisely concentrates on the modern history of the region. Some pages are devoted to the competing claims to imperial dominance of the Persians and the Ottomans, with allusions to Russia's dalliance through Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great. But the work begins in earnest with Russia's determined move southwards from the time of Catherine the Great. And the first point for which the author deserves credit is his accuracy in noting that the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk was between Russia and the central-eastern Georgian kingdoms of Kartli-K'akheti ONLY (rather than with 'Georgia' as a whole, for no such single realm then existed), just as it was these same kingdoms (and not 'Georgia') which were annexed by Russia in 1801.

Indeed, it should be openly acknowledged at the outset that King has produced a work that is remarkable for its breadth of coverage, the depth of the author's insights, and the eloquence of the text. It is hard to imagine how the goal King set himself could have been better achieved. Each region and modern-day conflict receive due attention. Sources beyond those commonly consulted are cited, and occasionally the account of contemporary (Russian) attitudes is mediated through analysis of some literary oeuvre by Pushkin, Lermontov or Tolstoy, an approach which at first feels out

of place in a work of history but which nevertheless manages to enrich the narrative, though the allusion to David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (p. 133) is perhaps a reference too far. In short, readers will find this a rewarding and (mostly) reliable guide to the peoples of the Caucasus over recent centuries, their aspirations, triumphs and tragedies. There is little more to be said, but I shall still permit myself a few comments nevertheless.

Being an American, King labours under a heavy linguistic burden whereby the word 'Caucasian' is totally devoid of association with the Caucasus. He, therefore, feels compelled to employ such phrases as 'North Caucasus peoples', whilst 'North Caucasian peoples' sounds much more felicitous (and unambiguous) to speakers of British English.

Fussiness over another matter of terminology impels me to question the choice of the form 'Adyga' to represent the self-designation of the Circassians of the North West Caucasus, namely [адыгэ]. I have never seen this particular representation in any language and would advise adoption of the more usual 'Adyghe', which keeps the three vowels distinct and also captures the back fricative of the original. In similar vein the North East Caucasian region should be 'Daghestan' (rather than 'Dagestan', as used here).

This book is not primarily concerned with language, but I have to take issue with the picture painted on p. 36 of the language-situation in the North Caucasus: 'The Adyga languages of the northwest (Circassian) bore no relation to the Nakh languages (such as Chechen) of the northeast. These, in turn, were distinct from the mix of indigenous languages spoken in Dagestan'. Whilst I am one of those yet to be persuaded of the genetic link argued by some to unite all the indigenous languages of the North Caucasus in one family, the Nakh (or Veinakh) languages (Chechen, Ingush and Bats or Ts'ova-Tush) in the North Central Caucasus are most certainly related to those spoken in Daghestan in the North East Caucasus; I would, however, concur in not linking the North West Caucasian family (Abkhaz-Abaza, Circassian and Ubykh) to the others. The South Caucasian (or Kartvelian) family (consisting of Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz and Svan) is, as universally accepted, quite separate, representing an isolated family of its own.

On p. 128 the Svanetian mountain is actually Tetnuld (not Tetnuli). Whilst canonised in 1987, the writer, publisher and political activist, (formerly) Prince Iliia Ch'avch'adze, assassinated (some say on the orders of the youthful Stalin) in 1907, is hardly Georgia's 'national poet', as claimed on p. 149, for this sobriquet properly belongs to Shota Rust(a)veli (fl. 1200).

With reference to the start of the war in Abkhazia on 14th August 1992, King writes: 'Shevardnadze proved incapable of controlling those politicians who called for a quick military solution to the Abkhaz problem...the proximate cause of the

incursion is still debated on both sides' (pp. 215-6). I have myself argued in print that the proximate cause was quite simple: the first post-communist president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, had been ousted in a coup in January 1992, sparking a civil war which Eduard Shevardnadze, called back to his former fiefdom from retirement in Moscow in March, had been unable to quell. And so, he recklessly gambled that, by starting a war against a 'common foe', Gamsakhurdia's supporters, based largely in Abkhazia's neighbouring province of Mingrelia, would rally to the 'national' (viz. Shevardnadze's) cause — the gamble failed, and Abkhazia was duly lost to Georgia when the war in Abkhazia ended on 30th September 1993.

One of the leaders of the movement opposing Russian advances towards the Caucasus in the 1830s was the solidly pro-Turkish diplomat David Urquhart. He did what he could to promote Circassian (North West Caucasian) rights to control their own territory, securing support from King William IV but proving less successful in courting Lord Palmerston. Others taking up this banner were the businessman James Bell and the journalist John Longworth, both of whom wrote valuable and moving 2-volume descriptions (published in the 1840s) of their time living amongst the local anti-Russian warriors. Urquhart is honoured to this day in Circassia as the man who designed what remains the national Circassian flag. These British champions of North West Caucasian liberty were naturally denigrated by the Russians as 'spies', and it is surprising that King borrows without comment this slight to refer to Urquhart on p. 263.

But these minor deficiencies (along with a few misprints) are more than balanced by such truisms as the observation: 'At various points in the late 1980s and early 1990s, violence might have been averted had visionary leaders proved more assertive and those most committed to fomenting conflict less able' (p. 217).

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