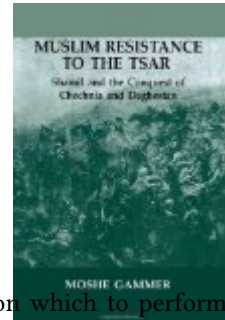


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Moshe Gammer. *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan*. London: Frank Cass, 1994. xxiii + 452 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7146-3431-9.

Reviewed by Anthony Rhineland (St. Thomas University)
Published on H-Russia (October, 1995)



It is rare to be reviewing a history of relatively obscure events of a century and a half ago when the subject and even some of those events are front-page news. The Chechens, refusing to admit defeat, have announced a life-long vendetta against the Russians. The Russian military has demonstrated appallingly poor leadership. *Deja vu*.

In the summer of 1837, during a lull in the fighting during which each side declared victory, Shamil enheartened his Chechen and Daghestani followers with these fighting words: "The looks of the Russians are falsehood, and their words are lies. We must destroy the works of their hands and slay them wherever we find them, in the house or in the field, by force or by cunning, so that their swarms shall vanish from the face of the earth. For they multiply like lice, and are as poisonous as the snakes that crawl in the desert of Muhan... Be strong and hold fast together like the tops of the mountains above your heads" (quoted on p. 90). It took altogether four decades of impressive military and diplomatic blunders before the Russians finally managed to put their vastly superior resources to more efficient use, thanks partly to the new administrative professionalism emerging around the middle of the 19th century, partly to the new style of administration introduced into Caucasia by the new viceroy, M.S. Vorontsov, after 1845. The Russians were able methodically to throttle the unruly Caucasians and by the late 1850s to capture Shamil and impose an uneasy peace on mountainous northern Caucasia.

Why did pacification take so long? The Russian imperialists had (still have) thick skulls. Illiterate mountain peoples living simple lives were at best wayward children and at worst mere insects to Russian policy-makers. For most officers, members of the Russian elite, the Cau-

casian wars were merely a stage on which to perform and win honours. The inhabitants of the Caucasian highlands, fiercely devoted to land and clan, proud and hardy survivors of a hostile environment, had an inbred hatred of outside authority. Atomized they were sitting ducks for the Russian imperial juggernaut. Shamil, a man of intelligence, charisma, and spirituality, united them for a time and made them a match for the emperor's regimented legions.

The author, in what is essentially his published dissertation, sets out to describe and explain this entire fascinating process, although his work is perhaps more descriptive than explanatory. Six chapters (1, 2, 5, 21, 22, and 23) constitute a much-needed attempt to explain the North Caucasians' outlook and Shamil's rule; the other twenty are a description in painstaking detail of the military actions. It is the former, the examination of the nature of Shamil's rule, that gives the work its importance. (The ambiguous subtitle misleadingly suggests that the book is about Shamil's, rather than the Russians', conquest of the North Caucasians. Since Shamil did have to enforce his rule over often-reluctant Caucasians, it is an aspect could have been usefully much expanded.) Given the North Caucasians' general illiteracy the author's reliance on Russian sources was unavoidable, yet the flavour of authenticity is often lacking.

The latter aspect, the military conflict, adds enormous detail to what we know, although little to the general picture so excellently painted by J.F. Baddeley in 1908 (*The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, repr. NY: Russell & Russell 1969), which work appears to have been the author's touchstone and primary inspiration. Again there is a problem with sources. Although the author has combed the contemporary sources with great diligence, they in-

clude a great many highly unreliable memoirs penned by ex-officers in disgruntled retirement aiming to “set the record straight.” An historiographical study of the writing of the Caucasian wars could have been most interesting, but the author seems unaware or unconcerned about bias in his sources and appears to relay on them uncritically. He regularly inserts quotations without critical comment and as an extension of his own argument; the highly prejudiced description of Vorontsov written by Leo Tolstoy in 1904, which is presented without comment (152), is just one example. The author’s anti-Russian bias (which he shares with Baddeley) also robs him of the opportunity to explain the workings of Russian imperialism in this crucial period in this particular territory, instead of treating it as monolithic and as always representing a single (i.e., the emperor’s) view.

Though the book is long and detailed, it is well written (though not as well written as Baddeley’s account), and the general reader with a penchant for military conflicts will have an enjoyable and informative read. For illustration there are several good pictures and many maps, though the latter would have been less confusing if they had been related to the whole Caucasus. And a helpful glossary of unfamiliar terms appears at the end.

The scholar, however, will encounter great frustrations. Primary is the inexcusable absence of a bibliography. If this is the publisher’s fault, Frank Cass & Co. should be roundly condemned for it. A note refers the interested reader to an “extensive bibliography” on the subject published three years earlier in a relatively obscure journal, i.e., one not likely to be available in the average library. In a lengthy book, fully one-third of

which is devoted to end-notes, this is a serious obstacle to scholarship. Even note-finding is a challenge since page references are not printed at the top of each note page. At the very least one expects an alphabetical reference to the first appearance of works in the notes. (It gets worse. Even when located, the referred-to, somewhat out-of-date bibliography is hard to use.)

There are also some important omissions, such as the very names the Chechens and Ingush call themselves (Nokhchi and Ghalghay, respectively); some odd spellings, e.g., Paskiewicz, who spelt his name Paskevich, Zajaczkowski for Zaionchkovsky, Adharbayjan for Azerbaijan; and several errors, e.g., : “Prince” A.I. Chernyshev (p.130) though he won high honours never became a prince; it is not true that M.S. Vorontsov “had no experience or knowledge of Caucasian affairs whatsoever” (p.153), for in 1828 he led a successful campaign to capture Varna, a Turkish fortress. Odd, too, are references to Soviet institutions as if they still exist (pp.xv, xvi); perhaps the work was completed around 1990 and never updated for publication. More important, some works relevant to the broader Russian imperial experience in Caucasia do not appear to have been consulted, such as E.W. Brooks’s articles on A.I. Chernyshev (1978) and on Russian military attempts to conquer the Caucasus (1981), or A.L.H. Rhineland’s *Prince Michael Vorontsov* (1990).

In sum, the work is a minutely researched work of scholarship on a complex and timely subject. It is unfortunate that the author does not relate the topic to the broader situation, but perhaps that is only a reflection of the present-day problem of young scholars having to rush into print.

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Citation: Anthony Rhineland. Review of Gammer, Moshe, *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Dagestan*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. October, 1995.

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