

Northern Caucasus Life Writing

Contents

Early Modern Period
19th Century
20th Century

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

During the early modern period, many European travelers to the northern Caucasus and the Islamic world provided detailed and nuanced accounts of local culture and ways of life based on what they witnessed on their journeys. Key early modern travellers to the Caucasus include the German scholar and geographer Adam Olearius (1599-1671), Jean Chardin (1643-1713), a French merchant who later became the English ambassador to Holland, and the Ottoman polymath Evliya Çelebi (1611-1684). Adam Olearius' Persian travels are widely known; his journey through the Caucasus—especially his notes on Derbent (in southern Dagestan)—on the way to Moscow are also worth noting.

Germany

Olearius was employed secretary to an embassy sent by the small German state of Schleswig-Holstein for the purpose of developing an overland route for trade with Persia. He was entrusted with the task of gathering information about the regions he travelled to and recorded what he saw and learned in a volume, *Much-coveted description of the new oriental journey, facilitated by the Holstein legation to the Persian King (Offt beehrte Beschreibung der neuen orientalischen Rejse, so durch Gelegenheit einer Holsteinischen Legation an d. König in Persien geschehen*, first edition 1647) that included seventy copper engravings, focusing on scenes of daily life and cityscapes, sketched by himself. Well-versed in the local languages of the regions through which he traveled, Olearius also translated Sa'di's *Rose Garden (Gulistan)* from Persian into Latin and prepared a Latin-Persian-Turkish-Arabic-Hebrew dictionary.

Greece

Contemporaneously with Olearius, the Greek traveler and mapmaker Vasileios Vatatzes (b. 1694), who was based in Moscow, travelled to Persia and the Caucasus and spent time in Derbent on his way back to Moscow. He also visited Shirvan and Shemakhi, traditional centers of Persianate culture located in present day Azerbaijan near the Dagestani-Azeri border. Vatatzes's poetic account of his travels, called *Periegetikon*, consists of two thousand verses. Based on the example of the 2nd century CE author Dionysius the Traveler, *Periegetikon* is considered to be an outstanding example of first-person narrative in Greek geographical literature.

Ottoman Empire

With his *Seyâhatnâme* (Book of Travel, 1640s), Çelebi became one of the earliest travellers to transcribe the language of the regions of the northern Caucasus he visited, including Abkhaz, Ubykh, and Mingrelian. Çelebi journeyed through the entire North Caucasus twice, from 1641-1642 and from 1666-1667. His transcriptions of the Ubykh language are the only known transcriptions by a non-linguist. Along with languages, Çelebi took a deep interest in the cultural history, folklore, and geography of the Caucasus and his *Seyâhatnâme* is regarded as a classic of Ottoman literature. Another early modern traveller who made a significant contribution to early understandings of the languages of the Caucasus is Latvian-born German, Johannes Anton Güldenstädt (1745-1781).

Other Europeans

Most early modern travellers to the Caucasus passed most of their time in Tbilisi and did not venture north across the Caucasus mountains, to Daghestan, Chechnya, or Circassian lands. Two exceptions include Jacques François Gamba (1763-1833), who served as Consul in Tbilisi from 1821 to 1824. Alongside his knowledge of Georgian and travels to mountainous Georgian areas, Gamba travelled to Circassia and Abkhazia. Finally, Jacques Victor Edouard Taitbout de Marigny (1793-1853) travelled along the Black Sea coast in Circassian lands from 1813 to 1818. He became the Netherland's Consul for the Black Sea region in 1821. The German Orientalist Heinrich Julius Klaproth (1783-1835), best known today as a specialist of East Asian languages, pursued a similar trajectory, publishing his travelogue *Reise in den Kaukasus und Georgien in den Jahren 1807 und 1808* (Halle, 1812–1814; French translation, 1823), recording his travels throughout the Caucasus during this same time period.

While early travellers to the Caucasus were often driven by commercial motives, later travellers journeyed to these regions for political reasons, out of simple curiosity, or in pursuit of knowledge about the region for its own sake, or for adventure. The German writer Friedrich Bodenstedt (1819-1892) combined several of these motives in his travel writings. Bodenstadt was a German author who in 1841 was employed as tutor in the family of Prince Gallitzin in Moscow. It was through this connection that he gained his knowledge of Russian, as well as an appointment as head of a Russian school in Tbilisi, when the city was called Tiflis and was capital of the Tiflis Governorate of the Russian empire. In 1849, Bodenstadt wrote what was at that time arguably the definitive account of Imam Shamil and his resistance to the Russian conquest: *People of the Caucasus and their Struggle Against the Russians (Die Völker des Kaukasus und ihre Freiheitskämpfe gegen die Russen, 1849)*. Bodenstadt followed the pattern of the Russian Romantics Pushkin and Lermontov in writing a book-length poem in the Romantic tradition glorifying the mountaineers' struggle against the tsar's army, called *Ada the Lezgi (Ada die Lesghierin. Ein Gedicht, 1853)*.

French

Europe's most famous writers journeyed to the Caucasus, including Frenchman Alexandre Dumas, best known for his adventure tales such as *The Three Musketeers* (1844). Dumas' *Journey to the Caucasus (Voyage au Caucase, 1859)* traces the author's journey, to Tiflis via Baku, Shemakhi, and Kizlyar, site of a fortress on the Daghestani-Chechen border built by the army of the tsar.

British

The Scottish traveler and diplomat David Urquhart (1805-1877) took a particular interest in the Circassians and their struggle for freedom during his travels there in the 1830s. So powerfully moved was he by the Circassian cause that he designed a flag for a united Circassia and tried to persuade the British government that was funding his journey to wage war on Russia following its seizure of a ship containing a cargo of salt that was intended for trade along the Circassian coast. Two other British travelers followed in Urquhart's footsteps soon after, and at his prompting: J. A. Longworth, correspondent for *The Times* in London, and the merchant James Stanislaus Bell. These three authors collectively offered the first extended explorations of the social and political institutions of Circassia in their journalistic writings for a British readership.

Further Reading:

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Discussion Question:

How did European and other non-local perceptions of the northern Caucasus change over time? What factors contributed to these transformations?

19TH CENTURY : Russian Empire

Biographical Dictionaries

Autobiographical writing in the North Caucasus under Russian rule is encompassed within the wider genre of the biographical compendium, known in Arabic as *tabaqat* and in Persian as *tazkira*. Although these traditions proliferated during the 19th and 20th centuries, there are also earlier Arabic and Persian examples of such works, including al-Darbandi's *Basilica of Verities and Garden of Delicacies*, discussed above in the section on documentary prose. Often, autobiographies are nested within such biographical texts. One example is Bakikhanov's *Heavenly Garden*, a work that combines the genre of *tazkira* and history, and includes an autobiographical account of the author's journeys throughout the world at the end.

In parallel with the *tazkira* tradition that flourishing in the Persian-speaking and Persian-literate regions of the Caucasus, the *tabaqat* tradition flourished among the Arabic-literate communities of the North Caucasus, including in particular Daghestan. Key works in the *tabaqat* tradition include Shu'ayb al-Bagini's *Compendium of the Lives of the Naqshbandiyya Teachers (Tabaqat al-khwajagan al-naqshbandiyya)*. This work exists in a unique manuscript, that was copied in 1906. Often focusing on Sufi saints and their teachings, such works are vital historical sources that also offer insight into the construction of the self in Daghestani literature. These works provided detailed overviews of the lives of various pious Muslims, who are often scholars, or who are well-known for their achievements in other areas of literary endeavor.

Abdullah Omarov

Daghestani teacher Abdullah Omarov from the village of Kukli had the good fortune to meet the philologists P.K. Uslar during his studies in Temir-Khan-Shura. At that time, Uslar was compiling the first alphabet for the Lak language that was based on Cyrillic script. Omarov assisted with preparing Uslar's primer for the Lak language, which was published in 1865. When Uslar founded one of the first secular schools in the region, located in Ghaziqumuq, he appointed Omarov as a teacher there. In 1868, Omarov published the first instalment of his memoirs, which focused on his experience of teaching the Lak language to his fellow Daghestanis. Like many other important works of the period (e.g. Laudaev's work on Chechen tribes) this was published in the first issue of the premier venue for longform journalism on the Caucasus, *Collection of reports on Caucasus mountaineers (Sbornik svedenii o Kavkazskikh gortsakh, abbreviated here as SSKG)*. Two further installments followed in 1869 and 1870, in the same venue. Tolstoy drew heavily from Omarov's memoirs while producing the early drafts of his *Hajji Murat*, a novella widely regarded as among the most visionary accounts of the mountaineer resistance to Russian conquest. Omarov noted in these memoirs that, although he was focused on one specific Daghestani people—the Lak of Ghaziqumuq—“Daghestanis resemble each other so much that it is possible to develop a picture of Daghestani ways of life in general based on the life of the Laks.”

Omarov passed much of his life in Tbilisi, where he belonged to a growing community of North Caucasus mountaineers residing there, who helped to shape Russian rule and also often participated in it. In his others writings for *SSKG*, Omarov contrasted his own activities with those of local Sufi leaders who, in his assessment, had nothing to offer Daghestanis. In the preface to his translation of Muheddin-Muhammed-Khan's Arabic-language treatise on “Truthful and Deceitful Followers of the Righteous Brotherhoods [*tariqat*],” published in the fourth volume of *SSKG* in 1870, Omarov expressed his reservations concerning the militant anti-colonial jihad led by Imam Shamil. The author of the, Muheddin-Muhammed-Khan, had recently been released from a Russian jail. On his release, he was invited by the Russian authorities to explain the differences among the various Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqats*), in order to help officials distinguish between those that should be respected and the one that should be condemned. He accepted the invitation, and produced the treatise which Omarov translated. In his prefatory remarks, Omarov reflects on the increasing irrelevance of the mullah's profession and of his religious knowledge for Daghestani society following its incorporation into the Russian empire. Omarov writes and translates for a culturally distant audience, explaining and translating vanishing modes of Daghestani religious existence to a Russian colonial readership.

Further Reading:

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Muheddin-Muhammed-Khanov, "Istinnie i lozhnie posledovateli tariqata," trans. Abdullah Omarov *Sbornik svedenii o Kavkazskikh gortsakh*, vol. 4 (1870).

A. P. Sergeenko. "Hajji Murat: Istoriia pisanie," in L. V. Tolstoi. *Polnoe sobranie sochineni v 90 tomakh*. Vol. 35 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennie Literatura, 1950).

Discussion Question:

What role did life-writing play in enabling 19th century North Caucasus intellectuals to articulate an identity for themselves and their people?

20 TH CENTURY : Soviet and post-Soviet Period

Repression of Arabic

The persistence of Arabic and Arabic-script writing well into the Soviet period in the case of Daghestan meant that the 20th century witnessed significant continuities with earlier life-writing traditions. Ali al-Ghumuqi (Ali Kaiaev)'s *Biographies of the Scholars of Daghestan (Terâcim-i ulemâ-yı Dagıstan)* is a case in point; composed during the Soviet era, the work provides an overview of Daghestani scholarly activity for nearly a millennium, from the scholars of Derbent during the 11th century to the scholars of the 19th century. Al-Ghumuqi also produced an incomplete biographical dictionary in Arabic which he was working on during the 1930s, arguably the most repressive decade of the Soviet period, when writing in Arabic was actively discouraged. Many of the most important autobiographical and biographical writings of North Caucasus peoples during the 20th century could not be published during their authors' lifetimes. Many also remain unpublished to this day. One important autobiography which has not been published to date is Abu Sofyan Akaev's Arabic-language autobiography, which is held in the Institute of Manuscripts of Azerbaijan's Academy of Sciences, along with several other of Akaev's as-yet-unpublished manuscripts.

As with 19th century literary production, the most common genre where autobiographical writing is found is within biographical literature, known alternatively as *tabaqat* in Arabic and *tazkira* in Persian. Just as Bakikhanov's *Heavenly Garden* incorporated autobiographical materials at the end of the work, so does Hasan al-Alqadari's *Vestiges of Daghestan* incorporate a personal account of the author's trials and tribulations at the end of a work that is mostly devoted to recounting the history of Daghestan. The biographical tradition in Arabic persisted in Daghestan well into the 20th century. One of the last known major works, that is a direct continuation of al-Alqadari's work in Azeri and Bakikhanov's work in Persian, is Nadhir al-Durgili's *Stroll through the Minds in the Generations of Daghestani Scholars (Nuzhat al-adhhan fi tarajim ulama` Daghistan)*.

Chechen Life-Writing

In Chechnya, life-writing took a quite different turn from its path in Daghestan, linguistically, thematically, and in terms of genre. Memoirs figured prominently in the literary output of Chechens, perhaps as a result of the persecutions they experienced and the need for documenting in detail these repressions and human rights violations. Abdurahman Avtorkhanov (1908-1997) was a Chechen historian and intellectual whose autobiography, simply titled *Memoirs (Memuary)*, 1983, was composed in Russian like many of the works of life-writing by Chechens, and published after the author had been living in Germany for many years. Avtorkhanov's work is valuable for its insights into the inner workings of Soviet power, as well as for his account of the experiences of Chechens under Soviet rule.

The first part of Avtorkhanov's book, which precedes the autobiography proper, is entitled "From the biography of my people" and consists of two parts: an account of the Caucasus War of the 19th century, including the imamate of Imam Shamil, and "Caucasus banditry," including the story of the noble bandit (*abrek*) Zelimkhan. This prefatory material reveals the close intertwinement between the authorial self and collective consciousness in Chechen life-writing. Avtorkhanov then proceeds to interweave his

own story into the background of historical events: escaping from home, his school years, his years in Moscow, the beginnings of Soviet rule, a memoir of the Soviet revolutionary Bukharin, whom he calls a “utopian,” and Stalin, whom he calls a “realist,” his publications in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, reflections on Marxism, his personal encounter with an *abrek*, his arrest in 1937 under the charge that he had become “an enemy of the people,” and his fortuitously timed migration from Grozny to Berlin in 1943, immediately after his release from prison.

Had Avtorkhanov remained in Grozny instead of leaving the Soviet Union forever, he would have been deported to Central Asia along with the rest of his fellow Chechens. Avtorkhanov was arrested by the Gestapo after crossing enemy lines, and adopted Germany as his home country. It was in Germany that Avtorkhanov completed his PhD and became a professor of Russian history, writing many significant works on Soviet politics and history over the course of his long career. In 1951, Avtorkhanov co-founded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty with US funding. He died in Munich a year after the end of the First Chechen War in 1996.

Forced Deportations of the 1940s

The trauma of the forced deportations of the 1940s that affected seven North Caucasus peoples—Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks, Balkars, Karachays, Meskhetian Turks, and the Crimean Tatars—became a focus of many autobiographies and memoirs composed by North Caucasus peoples during the second half of the 20th century. One of the most remarkable of these works is the memoir *Life in an Instant and in Conflict (Zhizn' vo mgle i bor'be, 1996)*, subtitled, “On the tragedy of the repressed peoples,” by the Chechen linguist Yunus Desheriev. Desheriev memorably tells the tragic story of the fate of the Chechen people during the second half of the 20th century, both as a social phenomenon and through his own personal experience. He describes the secret life he led in Moscow, where he concealed his Chechen identity in order to avoid deportation to Central Asia. Notwithstanding all the difficulties he faced, Desheriev continued his studies in Moscow after the deportation of his people. He managed to “pass” as Russian, and kept a low profile so that his Chechen identity would not be brought to the attention of the authorities. Had that happened, he would likely have faced deportation and even execution. During these difficult days, Desheriev managed to complete his studies and embark on a scholarly career, specializing in linguistics, and becoming the foremost scholar of the Chechen language at a time when the language itself was either repressed or discouraged by Soviet policy.

Desheriev was exceptional in many respects: he is one of the very few Chechens who managed to evade the genocidal actions of the Soviet regime, and avoid deportation, even though he was not permitted to live a normal life. Yet his story reveals a common theme, shared by millions of deported peoples. As Desheriev documents in his book, from 1944-1953, the regime tried to eradicate every trace of the Chechen people from their homeland. Chechens were only permitted to return to their homeland in 1953, when Khrushchev declared them “rehabilitated,” although without issuing an apology for their forced displacement and the dispossession of their homes. The path to recovery was far from complete, however, and Desheriev chronicles the legacy of Soviet policy as well. His work is at once a moving example of Chechen life-writing and a work of critical analysis, composed by one of the most renowned Chechen scholars of the 20th century. Reading this work in the aftermath of the post-Soviet Chechen wars—one of which had ended the year the book was published, while the second war would begin three years later, in 1999—adds yet another layer, reminding the reader that Desheriev’s chronicle of the persecution of his people attests to a pattern that recurs throughout modern Chechen history.

Post-Soviet Wars

The breakup of the Soviet Union led to violence in many regions of the former Soviet Union. But nowhere was the violence more intense, Russian attacks more brutal, or the casualties as high, as in Chechnya, a region that under the Soviet Union comprised the largest part of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. The First Chechen War began as a campaign for independence from the newly formed Russian Federation in 1994 and ended with Chechen defeat in 1996. A Second Chechen War dragged on for ten years, from 1999-2009, after Chechnya was declared an independent state for the second time. As with any war in which international powers are implicated, journalists from around the world flocked to the scenes of war crimes and bombings, producing their own memoirs, documentaries, and extensive photojournalism.

While the books produced by these journalists sold well in western markets, the writings of Chechens who suffered most from the war were by and large ignored. One Chechen literary masterpiece that gained some attention in Europe is *Scratches on shards (Tsarapiny na oskolkakh, 2002)*, translated

into French as *To Survive in Chechnya (Survivre en Tchétchénie, 2006)* by Chechen writer Sultan Saidalievich Iashurkaev (1942-2018), who published this work under the pseudonym Yunus Sheshil. Iashurkaev was born and educated in the Chechen town of Kharachoi, which is also the birthplace of the famed *abrek* Zelimkhan, who became a symbol of Chechen anticolonial resistance, and a protagonist of North Caucasus fiction, during the 20th century.

Iashurkaev received his university degree from the Chechen-Ingush Pedagogical Institute (which had become a state university by the time he graduated in 1974). He began his writing career as a poet and participated in Prometei, the organization of young Chechen writers founded in 1975, and named after Prometheus, the mythical stealer of fire from Zeus. After receiving his university degree, Iashurkaev moved to Moscow to study law at Moscow State University. He then taught law and subsequently became an investigator for the Supreme Council of the Chechen-Ingush Republic. All this time, Iashurkaev was busy writing stories and novellas in Chechen and Russian. It was not until the publication of *Scratches on shards*, however, in the middle of the Second Chechen War, that Iashurkaev became known to the broader Russian reading public. Iashurkaev began drafting these memoirs, which are written in an experimental mode, in the form of a diary, and bear the subtitle “essay chronicle,” in 1995. An excerpt from the memoirs appeared in the prominent Russian literary *Friendship of Peoples (Drezhba Narodov)* in 2010. Chechen memoirs of the war were also written in the languages of the growing Chechen diaspora, including English. One such example is Khassan Baiev’s *The Oath: A Surgeon Under Fire* (2003).

Further Reading:

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Sultan Saidalievich Iashurkaev (Yunus Sheshil), *Tsarapiny na oskolkakh: khronika-esse* (Moscow: Graal', 2002).

---. *Survivre en Tchétchénie* trans. Marianne Gourg (Paris: Gallimard, 2006). French translation of *Tsarapiny na oskolkakh*.

Discussion Question:

How did the post-Soviet wars impact the production of life writing in the North Caucasus, especially Chechnya?