

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a mountain valley. In the foreground, a river flows through a green field. In the middle ground, a village with several stone buildings and a tall tower is visible. The background shows steep, hazy mountains under a cloudy sky.

THE GHOST OF FREEDOM

A HISTORY OF THE CAUCASUS

CHARLES KING

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A History of the Caucasus



CHARLES KING

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For Maggie

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On Words

IN A PART of the world where ethnic, religious, and political categories are hotly contested, being sensitive to labels is particularly crucial. In speaking of the lands divided—or, rather, connected—by the Caucasus mountain range, I have used the terms “north Caucasus” and “south Caucasus.” I use the term “the Caucasus” for the region as a whole. The terms “Caucasia” and “Caucasian,” which one sometimes finds in older scholarly works, seem to me too redolent of racial politics to be redeemable. Since few “Caucasians” understood racially have any sense of connection to “Caucasians” understood geographically, I have avoided these terms altogether. Nor have I used the label “Transcaucasia” (Russ. *Zakavkaz’e*) for the south except in direct translations of a Russian phrase or title. Of course, the area is only “trans” if you are standing in what used to be known rather quaintly as Ciscaucasia, that is, southern Russia.

In the Russian Empire the generic term “highlander” or “mountaineer” (*gorets*) was applied to any indigenous person living anywhere except on the steppe or in lowland river valleys, people whom we might now class as Chechens, Avars, Lezgins or Georgians. The equivalent term in English was “Circassian.” In its narrowest sense, however, Circassian (Russ. *cherkes*, Turk. *Çerkez*) specifically refers to speakers of Adyga languages, the major linguistic group of the northwest Caucasus. I have used Circassian in this more restricted

sense, except in direct quotations or other contexts where the broader meaning was intended by a writer or speaker.

Most of the languages of the Caucasus—around forty unique to the region, plus others from surrounding areas—are dauntingly complex to native English speakers. Many have remarkable phonetic systems. Ubykh (probably extinct as a mother tongue) may hold the world record for the number of consonants (around eighty). Others have fearsome grammatical structures. The notorious Georgian verb can agree not only with the subject but also with the direct and indirect objects. Of all the major languages now spoken in the region, only a few—such as Russian, Armenian, and Ossetian—have Indo-European roots. Most of the others are marvelously idiosyncratic, so much so that their proper typology is still a matter of some debate. The Turkic family is represented by Azerbaijani in the southeast Caucasus (close to modern Turkish) and Balkar, Karachai, Kumyk, and other languages in the north. In the southwest the Kartvelian language group is composed of Georgian and the related languages of Mingrelian, Svan, and Laz (the last spoken along the Black Sea coast of Turkey). In northwestern Georgia the language of the Abkhaz is related to the Adyga family (Circassian) across the mountains to the north. The north-central Caucasus features Ossetian, while the northeast harbors the Nakh languages, including Chechen and the related Ingush, as well as the so-called Dagestani family, a mixed bag of disparate languages that includes Avar, Dargin, and Lezgin.

The north Caucasus languages use a variant of the Cyrillic scripts developed for them during the last century and a half. In the south Armenian and Georgian have their own ancient alphabets, while Azerbaijani now employs a variant of the Latin script used for Turkish. The Victorian-era explorer Douglas Freshfield once wrote that any effort to stick to the scholarly rules of transliteration for these languages produces only “words of fear,” intimidating jumbles of letters unpronounceable to anyone but a specialist. I have taken the pragmatic course of using indigenous names wherever possible, Russian wherever appropriate, and English wherever they exist. Because the Caucasus remains a place where few English-language versions of ethnic and geographical names are well established, inconsistencies are inevitable.

The Gregorian calendar in use in the West was only adopted in Russia in 1918. The old Julian calendar was thirteen days behind the Gregorian in the twentieth century, twelve days behind in the nineteenth, and eleven days behind in the eighteenth. Unless otherwise

indicated, old-style dates have been provided for events occurring in the Russian Empire.

The following glossary includes major terms that may be unfamiliar to many readers. Definitions reflect local usage. Alternate spellings are given in parentheses. Place names not listed here can be found by consulting the maps included in this book.

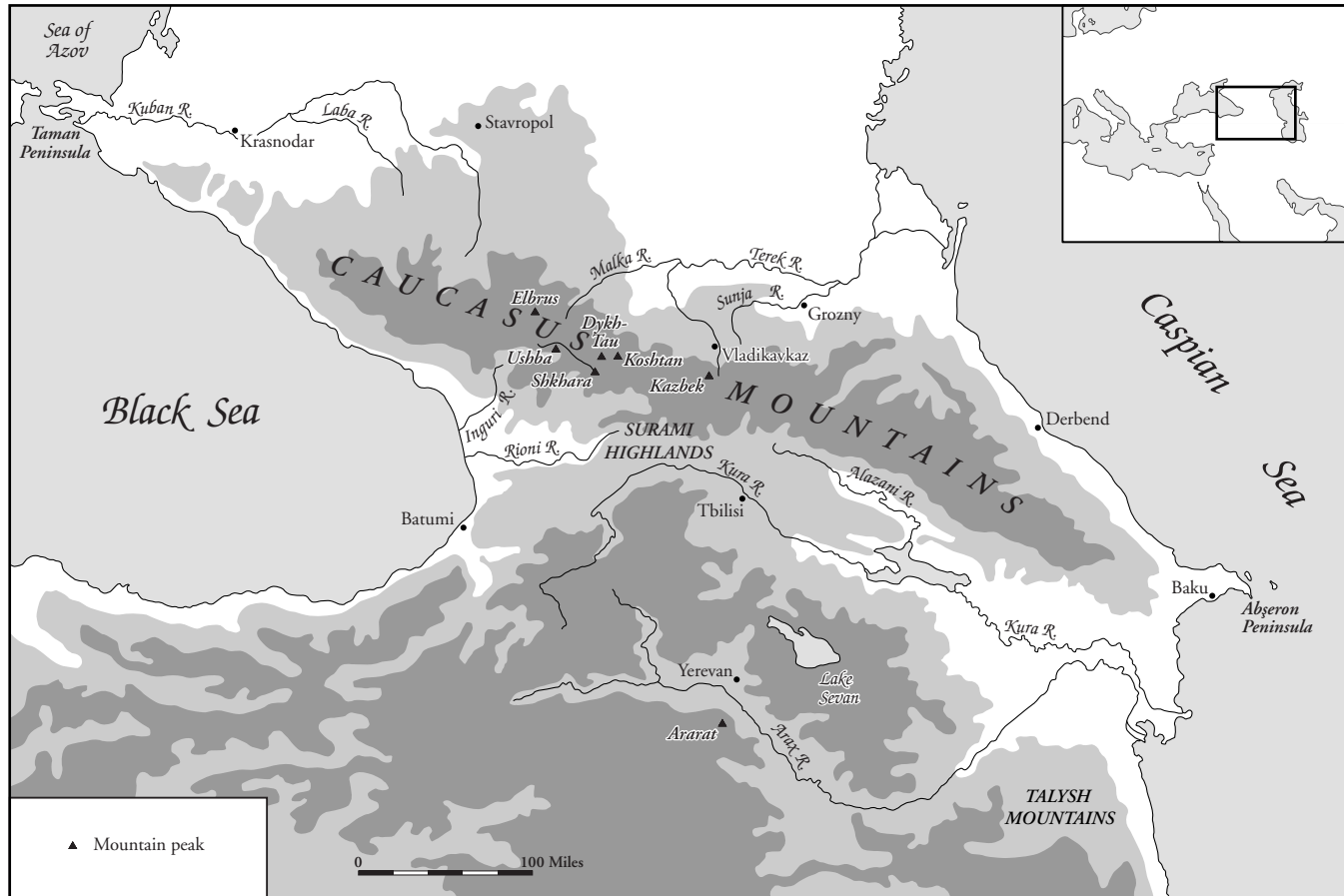
<i>abrek</i>	highland bandit; renegade hero
<i>adat (adet)</i>	customary law
Adyga (Adiga, Adyghe, Adyghei)	Circassian; one of the indigenous peoples of the north- western Caucasus
<i>amanat</i>	diplomatic hostage, usually surrendered to (or taken by) an enemy to ensure good relations
<i>atalyk</i>	customary rearing of young men by a nonrelative
<i>aul</i>	highland village
bey	gentleman; an honorific title or form of address
<i>catholicos</i> (<i>katbolikos</i>)	supreme leader of the Georgian or Armenian church; patriarch
<i>cherkeska</i>	long tunic worn by men, with rows of cartridge holders on the chest
<i>dbikr (zikr)</i>	attainment of enlightenment through quiet meditation, song, or dance—particularly in Naqshbandi Sufism
<i>fedayin</i>	Armenian guerrillas, especially during the First World War
<i>gazavat (gbazawat)</i>	sacred struggle; holy war; jihad
<i>gorets (pl. gortsy)</i>	highlander; mountaineer
<i>guberniia</i>	Russian imperial province
imam	Muslim leader, often with authority over a given population
<i>jamaat</i>	variously a village confederation, religious order, or other broad social unit in the north Caucasus
<i>jigit</i>	highland warrior; daring horseman
<i>kinjal</i>	hiltless dagger
<i>korenizatsiia</i>	indigenization; early Soviet policy of creating a native administrative elite in non-Russian regions
<i>maballe</i>	neighborhood
<i>mesame dasi</i>	the “third group,” a movement among Georgian intel- lectuals and liberal activists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
<i>murid</i>	Sufi adept; general term for a follower of the nineteenth- century highland leader Shamil (hence Muridism, Murid wars)

<i>murshid</i>	Sufi master
<i>naib</i>	trusted officer in Shamil's administration
<i>natsional'nost'</i>	ethnicity or nationality
Naqshbandi	Sufi order prominent in the north Caucasus—especially Chechnya and Dagestan—in the first half of the nineteenth century
<i>oblast'</i>	Russian imperial and Soviet-era administrative district
<i>papakha</i>	tall, brimless hat usually made of sheepskin
Qadiri	Sufi order prominent in the north Caucasus—especially Chechnya—after the 1850s
<i>shamkhal</i>	title of the ruler of Tarki, on the coastal plains of eastern Dagestan
<i>sharia</i>	Islamic law
<i>shashka</i>	hiltless saber
sheikh	Sufi leader; respected elder
<i>stanitsa</i>	Cossack fortified village
Sufism	general term for various branches of Islamic mysticism
<i>tariqa (tarikat)</i>	a Sufi school or “path”
<i>teip</i>	extended clan in Chechen society
<i>tergdaleulni</i>	reform-oriented generation of Georgians in the late nineteenth century, literally, “those who have tasted the waters of the Terek River”

Chronology

1556	Muscovy conquers khanate of Astrakhan
1722–23	Persian campaign of Peter the Great on Caspian Sea
1762	Unification of eastern Georgian kingdoms (Kartli and Kakheti)
1763	Russia builds fort at Mozdok on Terek River
1768–74	Russo-Turkish War
1783	Kartli-Kakheti placed under Russian protection
1787–92	Russo-Turkish War
1795	Agha Muhammad Khan, Qajar ruler, sacks Tiflis
1801	Russia annexes Kartli-Kakheti
1804–13	Russo-Persian War
1806–12	Russo-Turkish War
1816–27	Gen. Alexei Ermolov serves as proconsul in Caucasus
1818	Groznaia/Grozny founded
1822	Pushkin's "Captive of the Caucasus" published
1826–28	Russo-Persian War
1828–29	Russo-Turkish War
1834	Shamil becomes imam in Dagestan
1840	Lermontov's <i>A Hero of Our Time</i> published
1844–55	Mikhail Vorontsov serves as viceroy in the Caucasus
1853–56	Crimean War
1859	Surrender of Shamil

1864	Exile of Circassians
1868	Douglas Freshfield climbs Mounts Elbrus and Kazbek
1877–78	Russo-Turkish War
1904–6	Armenian-Muslim violence in Baku
1915	Genocidal violence against Armenians and other Christians in eastern Anatolia
1918–20	Armenia and Azerbaijan are de facto independent
1918–21	Georgia is de facto independent
1931–38	Lavrenti Beria heads Georgian Communist Party
1943–44	Deportation of north Caucasus peoples, including Chechens
1953	Death of Stalin and execution of Beria
1988–	Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (ceasefire 1994)
April 1991	Georgia declares its independence from Soviet Union
August 1991	Azerbaijan declares its independence from Soviet Union
September 1991	Armenia declares its independence from Soviet Union
1991–	Georgian-Ossetian conflict (ceasefire 1992)
1992–	Georgian-Abkhaz conflict (ceasefire 1994)
1994–96	First Chechen War
1999–	Second Chechen War
2003	“Rose Revolution” removes Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze



MAP 1 The Caucasus Landscape



MAP 2 The Caucasus circa 1780



MAP 3 The Caucasus circa 1890



MAP 4 The Caucasus in 2008

THE GHOST OF FREEDOM

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Introduction: Nature's Bulwark

*He turned his back on his native borders
And flew off to a far-away land,
Alongside the merry ghost of freedom.*

Alexander Pushkin, "Captive of the Caucasus" (1822)

TWENTY-FIVE MILLION YEARS ago two great land masses collided at a place we now call the intersection of Europe and Asia. They crashed against each other with such force that, over time, their edges soared skyward, crinkling together in a series of long accordion folds. A string of rugged peaks and valleys, running some seven hundred miles from northwest to southeast, rose up to separate the great expanse of the Eurasian steppe from the arid uplands of eastern Anatolia and western Persia. From the earliest times it has been called the Caucasus, "the longest and loftiest of all mountain ranges," as Herodotus wrote in the fifth century B.C., a place "inhabited by many different tribes, most of whom live off wild scrub."¹

I first saw the mountains from south of the main chain, in a village near Telavi, a city in eastern Georgia. The late afternoon was misty, but the wooded hills could be seen in the distance on the far side of the Alazani River and, beyond those, the snow-capped peaks that mark

the natural boundary between Georgia and the Russian republics of Chechnya and Dagestan.

I saw all this from inside a rattletrap Zhiguli, the ubiquitous post-Soviet automobile, as it trundled down a rough road and into what looked like an abandoned soccer field. The car pulled up to a group of men sitting at a table outside a cinderblock hut. A small aluminum camper trailer was parked near the doorway.

As I sat in the Zhiguli's passenger seat, wondering why my taxi driver had taken me here, a red-faced man with a wrestler's build walked around to my door. His breath was sour with vodka as he reached inside and tried to pull me through the window. When I resisted, he yanked open the door and hauled me out, intertwining his arms with mine as he frog-marched me around to the back of the car.

I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach. I was on the periphery of the periphery, in the far reaches of the former Soviet Union, in a village on the outskirts of a provincial city, situated in a part of the country that rarely saw foreigners. No one knew where I was, and I knew no one except for my Muslim driver, Mammed, and his mysterious Georgian friends, who were now pushing me toward the open door of the trailer. At that moment it all seemed terrifyingly clear: Mammed had sold me out. He had handed me over to a band of kidnappers who were now plotting how to make the most of their charge, an American, probably the first to have set foot in their village in recent memory.

But it was all in good fun—an instance of the oppressive hospitality for which the Caucasus has long been famous. The drunken wrestler dragged me over to a table outside the cinderblock building, where his two even drunker friends and two very large prostitutes were enjoying a late lunch. I joined them for a piece of dry cake and several toasts to Georgian women, American women, and women in general. Later, I slunk back toward the Zhiguli and made my way to Mammed's house, where his aged mother offered me a bed for the night and breakfast the next morning before driving on to Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. He had made the stop, Mammed later told me, because the Georgians owed him some money, and he thought having a stranger along—especially an American—might shame them into paying up. (It didn't.)

More than once during that trip I was convinced that I was being sold down the river, delivered into the hands of men who must surely have reckoned an American professor worth far more than they could earn by driving taxis or trading in the Telavi bazaar. After all, the Caucasus, as guidebooks point out, is a place where kidnappings are not unusual and travel off the beaten path inadvisable, even in such a

relatively safe place as Georgia. However, that evening I realized that I had become a captive of the Caucasus in a much more profound sense: captive to the common vision of this mountainous land as a place of both unimaginable beauty and everyday barbarity.

I was in good company. The British painter Robert Ker Porter viewed these mountains in 1817 from the opposite slope, atop a low hill on the northern plains, near the Russian village of Severnaia. Hillocks rose from the steppe, leading on to higher, forested ridges. Beyond those stood the granite face of the main chain, the perennial snow on the summits just visible through the clouds. “I know not who could behold [the] Caucasus,” he wrote, “and not feel the spirit of its sublime solitudes awing his soul.”

It was not just the mountains’ transcendent majesty that caused such rapture. Porter also believed that he was moving toward the frontier between two worlds. Behind him lay the Russian Empire, heir to the modernizing vision of Peter the Great, now reaching out to tame and cultivate the peoples of the Near East, from the Black Sea to the Caspian and beyond. Before him stretched the unexplored vastness, populated by primitive highlanders—some Muslim, others Christian or even pagan—whose depredations were already widely known in Europe: women sold into bondage by Tatar slavers; travelers held for ransom; bandits lying in wait in craggy defiles; rival clans waging ancient blood feuds, now prosecuted with the modern musket.

The mountains marked the troubled marches between confidence and insecurity, between civilization and barbarism—“nature’s bulwark,” as Porter put it, “between the nations of Europe and of Asia.” Travel in these parts demanded constant vigilance, but that, in turn, had an effect on the experience itself. The inherent uncertainty of crossing through this borderland cast a shadow over the scenery, “obscuring the impressions of its grandeur, by a deeper, but less noble one, of fear.”²

Awe and terror have often been intertwined in outsiders’ conceptions of the Caucasus. For centuries travelers have seen the region as the homeland of both nobles and savages: proud highlanders who heroically resisted the onslaught of foreign empires, or backward mountaineers whose propensity for violence was matched only by their cultural chauvinism. Not long after Porter’s journey, European and American newspapers would begin to carry regular stories of the struggle of Caucasus highlanders against the expanding Russian Empire. Highland chieftains toured Britain and delighted audiences with their exotic attire and stately bearing. Russians soon came to consider the

Caucasus their own wild South, imbuing it with the same ambivalent magnetism that characterized American notions of the western frontier. Russian poets and novelists, from Pushkin to Tolstoy, described the noble mien of the upland tribes or criticized their own government's increasingly brutal war against them.

There was a dark thread running through these images, one that concerned the animal brutality of the Caucasus peoples and their ferocious treatment of prisoners, their fallen state as lapsed Christians or fanatical Muslims, and their adulterated customs and identities on the frontier between Occident and Orient. In art, literature, travel writing, political reportage, and other spheres, the Caucasus was a place both attractive and repulsive to foreign visitors as well as to the Russians, who by the 1860s had established nominal sovereignty over the lowlands and highlands on either side of the mountain chain.

The end of the twentieth century resurrected and reinforced the less flattering of these views. Most of the armed conflicts that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union took place in the Caucasus. The independent countries of the south—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—are beset by economic problems, social unrest, and territorial disputes. The Russian republics of the north—unfamiliar places such as Kabardino-Balkaria and tragically well known ones such as Chechnya—make headlines only after the latest hostage crisis or bombing. In fact, just counting the truly sovereign states of the Caucasus is no easy matter. The independent countries coexist with several unrecognized ones, places such as Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia. Burdened by territorial conflicts, radical religious movements, terrorism, corruption, kidnappings, human trafficking, and ethnic nationalism, the Caucasus, as used to be said about Ireland, must surely be a place of very long memories and very short tempers.

Yet the history of this place is more than an interminable tale of social ills and political disorder. It is about the successes and failures of building modern states as well as the late conversion of ancient social practices into the accoutrements of nationhood. It is about the ways in which political and social modernization—whether in the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union—often produced unexpected results. It is about the place of a mountainous land at the confluence of Asia and Europe in the imaginary geography of both East and West, and how such tenaciously ambiguous labels as “empire” and “nation” have been transformed over the last two centuries.

This book tries to make sense of a part of the world that has seemed, during the past twenty years, the epitome of senselessness, where gov-

ernments have had no qualms about bombing their own citizens, where terrorists have held hospitals and schools under siege, and where acts of selfless hospitality and unspeakable cruelty seem to be two sides of the same cultural coin. This is a history of the modern Caucasus as a place from the beginnings of Russian engagement down to the present day. But it is also a history of the Caucasus as an array of contrasting ideas—of liberty and lawlessness, of things both awe-inspiring and awful.



The main chain of the Caucasus mountains extends from the Taman Peninsula on the Black Sea to the Abşeron Peninsula on the Caspian Sea. The mountains form a series of high parallel ridges. In the west the mountains rise as low, wooded hills. In the center of the range they become imposing granite edifices, girded by snow and ice. In the east they split into two different chains and flatten out, continuing as a mass of high tablelands cut by deep gorges. The entire range thus forms a vast arrow, its flèche fanning out toward Asia and its tip pointing toward Europe.

The height and number of peaks in the Caucasus eclipse those in the Alps, although they do not approach the scale of the Himalayas. Near the largely uninterrupted main chain rise some of Eurasia's most impressive mountains—Elbrus (18,510 ft.), Shkhara (17,064 ft.), Dykhtau (17,054 ft.), Kazbek (16,558 ft.), to name just a few—which have been favorite challenges for climbers for more than a century. There are formidable peaks even beyond the main chain, lying on spurs and parallel walls that break off from the central cluster. Altogether the mountains form a complex jumble of highlands and plateaus packed into a rather small corner of the world. The distance between Elbrus in the Russian high Caucasus, usually labeled the tallest mountain in Europe, and Ararat (16,804 ft.) in eastern Turkey, one of the tallest in the Middle East, is only about three hundred miles.

Until relatively recently, there were only a few ways of getting from one side of the main range to the other. One was to travel along either of the two seacoasts, bypassing the highlands entirely by sailing around them or by going overland along the narrow passage between mountains and water. The route along the sandy shore of the Caspian, the so-called Derbend gap, was known in antiquity. It was a frequent point of encounter between the peoples of the Eurasian steppe and those of the Near East. The land route along the Black Sea was only completed in the 1890s, when tsarist administrators built an artificial coastal road and, later, a rail link that flanked the ridges of the western Caucasus.

Another option was to go straight through the middle of the range. Beginning north of the mountains, one could go upstream along the banks of the Terek River into the mountains, trek through narrow ravines and over highland passes, and then descend through the valley of the Aragvi River in the south, reaching out from the headwaters of one major river to link up with those of another. This road would eventually become the overland route through the heights, the course now followed by the famous “military highway” that leads from Vladikavkaz in Russia to Tbilisi in Georgia. Other routes were available, but they were usually no more than shepherd’s trails and single-track paths until the last century, when Soviet planners devised ways to bridge over and blast through this grand continental divide.

The main chain marks off two broadly distinct regions. The northern slopes lead down to the Eurasian steppe. The southern slopes slip into lush river lowlands, the Mughan plains along the Caspian, and the rough uplands of Turkey and northern Iran. Although the icy mountains attract most of the attention, the entire Caucasus region is a land of considerable geographical diversity. Rich agricultural zones flank the wide lowland rivers. Expansive prairies run into green hill country. High plateaus provide summer grazing lands for cattle, sheep, and goats. The experience of taking the Georgian Military Highway south, squeezing through the treacherous Darial Gorge, and then coming upon the Aragvi River and the hills of Georgia below was an experience that enthralled travelers. Jacques-François Gamba, the French consul in Tiflis (later called Tbilisi), recorded his impressions on first passing through the mountains in 1820: “Italy, the Tyrol, Switzerland: none offers anything more admirable and romantic than the valley of the Aragvi. . . . After the steep crags which continually threatened to crush travelers under their debris, after the mountains covered in snow and ice . . . now came hills and prairies of the most beautiful verdure. . . . Before us, the landscape was alive with a throng of villages set amid well-tended agricultural lands.”³ The Caucasus has never been one place but many, including arid plains, semitropical foothills, craggy gorges, and alpine peaks. Moving through these varied landscapes—crossing rivers or coming down out of the hills—literally meant exiting one world and entering another.

The variety of topography and climate helps account for the multiplicity of political, cultural, and economic influences that have long defined the region. Roman writers claimed that scores of translators were required when traders sought to do business there, while Arab

geographers sometimes labeled the region the *djabal al-alsun*, the mountain of languages. According to the tenth-century Arab scholar al-Masudi, the peoples who lived there could only be numbered by Him who made them.⁴ In the 1870s the American traveler George Kennan expressed a similar view: “The Caucasian mountaineers as a whole are made up of fragments of almost every race and people in Europe and Western Asia, from the flat-faced Mongol to the regular-featured Greek. . . . How such a heterogeneous collection of the tatters, ends, and odd bits of humanity ever blended into one coherent and consistent whole I don’t know; but there they are, offering problems to ethnologists and comparative philologists which will be found very hard to resolve.”⁵ The same sentiment would continue to be repeated—at times in equally racist terms—down to the present: the Caucasus as an impenetrably complex ethnic space, where the bonds of kith and kin have been reinforced by geographical isolation. The ecological diversity of this narrow causeway, lying between two major Eurasian seas, has meant that the range of disparate cultures has been even more extreme than in most places. One cannot help but be struck by the many languages, religious practices, and social structures concentrated in a territory smaller than Texas.

In the northwest forested mountains and hills slope down to the plains that run toward the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea, cut by the course of the Kuban River. Here traditional farming and herding were practiced by those who spoke a range of similar languages often collectively labeled Adyga (or Circassian), along with several Turkic peoples. Islam touched the region from its earliest moves north of the mountain chain, but periods of re-Islamicization—via the Ottoman Empire, the Crimean Tatars, or indigenous proselytizers—washed over the area through the nineteenth century. The region is today divided into three Russian republics—Adygeia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria—as well as the much larger Stavropol and Krasnodar provinces to the north and west. Only in Kabardino-Balkaria do ethnic Circassians constitute the majority of the population.

In the middle of the Caucasus lies the republic of North Ossetia, separated from South Ossetia by the border between Russia and Georgia and populated by a largely Christian population cultivated by the Russian Empire as a buffer between Muslims in the eastern and western highlands. Farther to the east, along the course of the Terek River, are the lands of Nakh-language speakers, which were divided by later ethnographers into the categories of Chechen and Ingush. Islam