

“Across the Main Caucasus Ridge” The Caucasus Writings of George Kennan

Irakli Tskhvediani

Akaki Tsereteli State University, Georgia

Abstract In 1870, George Kennan, a pioneering explorer, writer, and lecturer on Russia in the nineteenth century, became the first American to cross the Caucasus from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea and explore the highlands of Dagestan, a remote Muslim region west of Chechnya, only a decade after Russia violently absorbed the region into its empire. He kept detailed journals of his adventures, creating a vivid narrative of his six-month odyssey. This trip in 1870 is the subject of this paper, focusing on the account of Kennan’s Caucasus journey that chronicles his expedition from Dagestan to Georgia over the Main Caucasus Ridge.

Keywords Caucasus. Travelogue. Highlands. Travel Diarist. Diverse Cultures.

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1 Introduction

George Kennan (1845-1924), an American explorer noted for his travels in the Siberia and Caucasus regions of the Russian Empire,¹ was keenly interested in travel from an early age. In the mid-1860s, at the age

1 George Kennan was a great uncle of George Frost Kennan, the twentieth-century statesman and diplomat, born in 1904.



of twenty, Kennan, then a telegraph operator, was travelling all around eastern Siberia. He lived in yurts, eating local foods, starving at times, camping under snowdrifts at fifty below zero, and mostly just observing and interacting with native peoples, and all this just after the U.S. Civil War. He spent a couple of years exploring the land and people in preparation for the Trans-Siberian telegraph line that would connect America with Europe. Though the telegraph line failed, we are left today with George Kennan's 1870 classic travel book *Tent Life in Siberia, and Adventures among the Koraks and Other Tribes in Kamtchatka and Northern Asia* (Kennan 1877). It is a fascinating and surprisingly humorous memoir, a thrilling account of first contact with a land and a people.²

After his first trip to Siberia,³ Kennan decided to return to Russia, this time to explore the Caucasus as an unfamiliar land, virtually unknown to Americans at that time. In 1870, he crossed the Caucasus from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea, exploring the highlands of Dagestan, a remote Muslim region west of Chechnya, and, to a lesser extent, Georgia and Chechnya.⁴ This paper focuses on Kennan's accounts of the two-week expedition from Dagestan to Georgia across the Main Caucasus Ridge with the Georgian nobleman Prince Giorgi Davidovich Jorjadze, and provides some basic historical background information for context.

George Kennan never published his Caucasus writings as a book.⁵ They can be divided into two categories: manuscripts/travel diaries written during the Caucasus journey and articles published later, after Kennan's return to the United States. In this paper, most discussion is based on the 2003 edition of Kennan's Caucasus journals titled *Vagabond Life. The Caucasus Journals of George Kennan* (Maier 2003)⁶ as well as his magazine articles (Kennan 1874; 1877; 1891; 1916).

² After his return to America, Kennan gave a series of lectures and published a number of articles on Siberia, which the publisher encouraged him to expand into a book. The result was *Tent Life in Siberia* (Kennan 1877), which he completed while already on his way to the Caucasus in 1870.

³ Later, in the mid-1880s, he went back to Siberia to investigate the system of political exile. The resulting *Siberia and the Exile System* (Kennan 1891) is another great travel book, with dark political overtones.

⁴ Kennan spent the greater part of his time in the Caucasus exploring the highlands of Dagestan.

⁵ However, he planned to do so. As Peter Bridges points out: “In his index card files in the Library of Congress in Washington is a card from 1883 on which he had written “Title for my book on the Caucasus *Yalboos or the Great Ice-Mane*, the Tatar name for the Caucasus range” (Bridges 2011).

⁶ The journals have been organised into three parts. The first part, titled “Journey to the Caucasus”, covers Kennan's journey to the Caucasus (Kennan 2003a). The second one, “Across the Main Caucasus Ridge, with Prince Jorjadze”, chronicles his expedition across the main Caucasus Ridge with the Georgian nobleman Prince Jorjadze (Kennan 2003b). In the final part, Kennan circles back through the lands of Chechnya to slip once again into the Dagestan highlands (Kennan 2003c). Primary source for each section is the two-volume Caucasus journals included in *George Kennan Papers*

Kennan's sources on the Caucasus vary from more or less unreliable oral (and sometimes written) accounts to more serious scholarship. For instance, his first references to other Caucasus travellers apparently derived from what he was told in Dagestan by a correspondent for a Moscow newspaper (Kennan 2003b, 116-17). His references to what Strabo and Plutarch had to say about the Georgians come from Prince Chavchavadze's adjutant (Kennan 2003b, 194-9). The oral information provided by Russian officials, army officers, and newspaper correspondents was either politically biased or inaccurate and misleading. However, there are a few lucky exceptions, including Kennan's meeting with Petr Uslar and Prince Jorjadze who provided him with valuable materials on the Caucasus they had collected. Kennan also drew from Russian popular geographies and mythologies of the Caucasus mainly derived from the modified version of the Caucasian folklore and the 19th century Caucasus writings in Russian, including travel journals, verses, semifictional accounts and fictional writings by such prominent Russian authors as Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy who served in the Caucasus in the first half of the 19th century – often as punishment for writings critical of the political establishment. Exotic romanticism was common to all these stories. Kennan acquired Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev (which of their work is not specified), *Oblomov* by Ivan Goncharov and *War and Peace* by Lev Tolstoy on his way to the Caucasus (Kennan 2003a, 70). In addition to oral and semifictional sources, Kennan relied on more or less serious scholarship on the Caucasus. In particular, his sources included, among others, Arthur Cunyngame (Cunyngame 1872),⁷ James S. Bell (Bell 1840),⁸ George Ditson (Ditson 1850),⁹ and the multivolume *Sbornik svedenii o kavkazkikh gortsakh* (1868). Kennan acquired his book knowledge over the years after he returned home. In fact, he made a lifelong study of the history as well as the folklore of the Caucasus after his return. By the time he published his first article on the Caucasus in 1874, he had obviously ac-

available at the Library of Congress. My discussion is primarily based on the second section of the book (Kennan 2003b).

7 Arthur Cunyngame (Cunyngame 1872) visited Dagestan the year after Kennan was there.

8 James Bell, a merchant who also actively supported the locals' independence struggle, had lived among the peoples of the North Caucasus in the 1830s (Henze 1992, 84). Bell's book leaves no doubt that he considered the Russian influence a negative one. Perhaps, that's the reason Kennan, an ardent supporter of tsarism at that time, never mentions this book, although he must have been familiar with it.

9 George Ditson travelled along the Black Sea coast and in Georgia in the late 1840s. The most famous early foreign visitor to the Caucasus was the author Alexandre Dumas, who travelled there in 1858. However, most probably, Kennan was not familiar with his *Voyage au Caucase* (1859) since its partial English translation was published only in 1952 (Dumas 1952).

quired more or less systematic information about Caucasus geography and history. Consequently, his published articles suffer less from inaccuracies than his travel accounts/journals. The published articles reflect the fact that Kennan started to study the Caucasus thoroughly after his travels and became a recognised expert on Caucasus and Russia well before the end of the century, one whose views would have a significant impact on America's policy toward the region. In a word, the study of the Caucasus became, as Maier puts it, "a life-long project" (Maier 2003a, xi).

2 The Highlands of Dagestan

When George Kennan set off for the Caucasus in 1870, the Caucasian War of 1817-64 had just ended. The invasion of the Caucasus by the Russian Empire had resulted in Russia's annexation of the North Caucasus, and the ethnic cleansing of Circassians, also referred to as Adyghe or Cherkess. Transcaucasia had also been incorporated into the Russian Empire. However, Russia exercised only superficial control and sought to firm up its hold on the war-worn Caucasian nations.

Kennan arrived on the shores of the Caspian Sea with no definite itinerary but a rough plan to make his way across the Caucasus to the Black Sea and give a series of lectures titled *The Land of the Golden Fleece* on his return to the United States, focusing on Georgia's coast. His purpose he said later was "[...] partly to gratify a love of rough travel, and partly to study a comparatively unknown and highly interesting race of people - the Caucasian mountaineers" (Cit. in Maier 2002-03, 80).

In Kennan's time, travel was a very hard endeavour. It took young Kennan a full month to go from New York to Dagestan on the coast of the Caspian Sea. In June, 1870, he sailed for Russia and spent July in Saint Petersburg, finishing his book on Siberia and acquiring books on the Caucasus. Having reached Dagestan in September, Kennan planned to travel over the mountain range dividing the Caspian and the Black Seas but he found the reality of travel there less romantic than he had expected. His conversational Russian turned out to be useless, for Russian had not yet become a *lingua franca* for the Caucasus. After a week spent searching unsuccessfully for guides, transportation, and interpreters, the explorer nearly abandoned hope.

By chance, he met a Georgian nobleman, Prince Jorjadze, headed home to his estate in the Alazan Valley of the eastern Georgian kingdom of Kakheti, across the rugged spine of the Caucasus mountains. During the two-week journey from Dagestan to Georgia, Kennan got a remarkable introduction to life in the highlands. When he arrived in Dagestan, Kennan knew next to nothing about the country,

its history and culture, but travelling in Prince Jorjadze’s entourage allowed him to begin to understand the communities they visited.

1.1 Physical Geography

Dagestan (the Dagestan Oblast (province)¹⁰ of the Caucasus Viceroyalty of the Russian Empire at the time when Kennan arrived there), the southernmost part of Russia, is situated in the North Caucasus mountains and is bordered on its eastern side by the Caspian Sea. Lying just north of modern-day Azerbaijan (Elisavetpol [Ganja] Governorate¹¹ in 1870), Dagestan borders with predominantly Christian Georgia in the southwest and with Chechnya (also referred to as Ichkeria or Iskeria in the nineteenth-century Russian sources) in the west. It occupies about one-seventh of the coastline of the Caspian Sea. The Dagestani landscape changes from high mountains in the South to flat steppe land in the North. Because there is no easily accessible pass over the Caucasian mountains, the coastal plain of Dagestan, bordering the Caspian Sea, is an important North-South passage. The territory’s physical geography is quite varied, and Kennan seems to be well aware that the regional differences in part explain the historic patterns of cultural diversity. Therefore, he pays much attention to the description of the North Caucasian landscapes.

“The Mountains and Mountaineers of the Eastern Caucasus”, published by Kennan after his return to the United States, opens with the description of the physical geography of Dagestan. The geographical position of the Caucasus Mountains reminds him of the Sierra-Nevada of California:

If I were asked to compare the Caucasus, for the purpose of illustration, with some better-known range of mountains, I should say it resembles a little in relative geographical position the Sierra-Nevada of California. (Kennan 1874, 170)

Kennan often notes parallels between the Caucasus and the West (frequently the United States) as he tries to map the unfamiliar on to

¹⁰ It was created in 1860 out of the territories of the former Caucasian Imamate, a state established by the imams in Chechnya and Dagestan during the early-to-mid 19th century, to fight against the Russian Empire during the Caucasian War.

¹¹ One of the *guberniyas* of the Caucasus Viceroyalty of the Russian Empire, with its centre in Elisabethpol (official name for Ganja in 1805-1918). Most of the Azerbaijani Khanates, considered a part of the Safavid Iran prior to the Russo-Persian wars (a series of conflicts between 1651 and 1828), were absorbed by the Russian Empire in the course of the 19th century. In the newly-Russian-controlled territories, two provinces were established which became most of present-day Azerbaijan: Elisavetpol (Ganja) in the west and Shamakhi District in the east.

the world he knows. Comparing Dagestan to "a rather long and slender triangle", he finds it by no means an easy task to convey an adequate idea of the physical configuration of the region (Kennan 1874, 170-1). Summing up the section on the physical geography, he mentions "the main Caucasus Ridge" for the first time:

The physical geography of the Daghestan watershed may be summed up as follows: the backbone of the country is the main Caucasus Ridge, averaging about 10,000 feet in height, reaching in two or three places 13,000. The principal rivers rise between this ridge and the equally high snowy range, pierce the latter and flow through enormously deep and narrow valleys in a northward direction to the Nogai steppes, where they turn abruptly to the eastward, and empty into the Caspian. (Kennan 1874, 172)

The article also touches on the climate of the region, comparing it with that of New York City: "The climate varies, according to location and altitude, from the climate of New York City to that of Siberia" (Kennan 1874, 175).

In his Caucasus notes and articles, as we shall see below, Kennan often describes breathtaking landscapes of the Caucasus mountains; his descriptions are always impressive, eloquent, and picturesque. However, sometimes the information Kennan provides is misleading. It is possible that his sources for the interior of the Caucasus were not fully accurate. For instance, his discussion of Mount Barbale (Kennan 1874, 171) is inaccurate, as the mountain is not on the Main Caucasus Ridge; moreover, it is not clear which mountain he is referring to. Such geographical inaccuracy is not surprising from the adventurer and explorer travelling in the North Caucasus for the first time with a very limited access to reliable sources.

1.2 The Highlanders. Tribal and Ethnic Identities

Almost all inaccuracies and mistakes we come across in Kennan's Caucasus writings can be explained by his very limited knowledge of the region, unreliable sources of information (during his travels in the Caucasus, Kennan's sources were limited to Russian officials and army officers because few highlanders spoke Russian, not to mention English), and his naïve pro-Russian political bias at the time of his Caucasus journey. Kennan's travels in Kamchatka and the Caucasus had left him impressed with Russian government policies. However, later, in the 1880s, when Kennan set off to Siberia firm in his pro-tsarist views, fourteen months of research convinced him he had been wrong about the system, and when he observed the harsh treatment of political dissenters he believed the empire was in fact rotten. On his return to the United States in August 1886, he became a much

more sophisticated and critical observer of Russian policy and current events, and an ardent critic of the Russian autocracy. As Frederick F. Travis has demonstrated in his comprehensive study *George Kennan and the American-Russian Relationship, 1865-1924*, Kennan became hostile to Russia's political system following his investigation of the Siberian exile system in 1885-86 (Travis 1990). Kennan, an ardent Russophile throughout his career, became a member of the Society of Friends of Russian Freedom, recanting his 'pro-Russianness' and railing against the tsarist government in influential magazines such as *Century*, *The Outlook*, *The Nation*, and *Forum*.¹²

Nowhere else is Kennan's incompetence as evident as in the passages in which he discusses tribal and ethnic identities of the mountaineers. He points out that there are two errors with reference to the Caucasian mountaineers:

There are two widely-spread errors with reference to the Caucasian mountaineers which it may be well to notice, - first, that they are all, or nearly all, Circassians; and, second, that the Circassians, properly so called, were the most determined antagonists of Russia in the Caucasian war. Both these popular opinions are wide of the truth [...].

The mountaineers of the Caucasus are not all Circassians any more than the inhabitants of Constantinople are Greeks. The true Circassians form a comparatively small portion of the mountain population, and are settled only in that part of the range which borders the Black Sea. They have been taken as representatives of the whole race of Caucasian highlanders simply because from their location they happened to become better known to Europeans than the equally powerful Lesghians of Daghestan or the far fiercer Chechenses of Ichkeria. (Kennan 1874, 176-7, 182)

Indeed, the Caucasian mountaineers are not all Circassians: the Circassians, also known as Cherkess, are a Northwest Caucasian ethnic

¹² Kennan's investigative journalism changed dramatically his own perceptions of democracy in Russia and in turn had a profound influence on public opinion in the United States. Kennan promoted the cause of a Russian revolution, mainly by lecturing, helping Russian revolutionaries and radical *émigrés* raise money for their cause, and opposing the ratification of an extradition treaty viewed as a threat to Russian revolutionaries who had escaped to America. Kennan campaigned for three decades for the elimination of autocratic despotism in Russia, turning the tide of public opinion in America against Russia's tsarist government in late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, as Frith Maier puts it, Bolshevism was not the replacement system Kennan had envisioned. He expected the Bolsheviks to be overthrown quickly; when they were not, he advocated U.S. military intervention to support the White Army (Maier 2003b, 11). For a more detailed discussion of Kennan's evolution from supporter to critic of Russia's Caucasus politics, see Foglesong 2002, 100-33; 2007; Maier 2003b, 8-12.

group native to Circassia. Most of them were exiled to Turkey and the Middle East during the Circassian genocide¹³ in the aftermath of the Russo-Circassian War. They speak a language of the Abazgo-Circassian branch of Caucasian languages. In Persian, however, the word *Cherkes* is sometimes applied generally to peoples living beyond Darband/Derbent (Manz, Haneda 1990, 816-19) and *Cherkess* was also used as the general term for the North Caucasians for the Russian popular audience in the 19th century.

Frith Maier notes that in pointing out the error in calling all mountaineers 'Circassians', Kennan himself makes the error of calling all Dagestanis 'Lezgins' (Maier 2003, 102), but mentioning 'Lesghians of Daghestan' does not necessarily mean that Kennan calls all Dagestanis 'Lezgins'. As a matter of fact, he identifies two collections of ethnic groups living in Dagestan: Turkic who live primarily in Dagestan's flatlands¹⁴ and non-Turkic who are referred to as 'Lezgins' by Kennan. Kennan's mistake is that he refers to all the non-Turkic Dagestani people as 'Lezgins' and argues that they are descendants of crusaders:

Inhabitants of Petrovskoe and all the region north of Gunib¹⁵ are mostly genuine Tartars of Mongolian descent [...]. Lezgins are said to be descended from Crusaders who stopped in Daghestan on their way homeward from the Holy Land. Proofs of this are numerous - first the Lezgins when first known wore steel helmets with capes of chain armor and shirts of mail, spikes on knees. Names sometimes resemble the names of Crusaders. Nearly all blondes or with brown hair and eyes - very few brunettes. Features tolerably regular and expressive. (Kennan 2003b, 115)

Many of the names of mountain villages are almost purely French and Italian - going to show that the mountaineers are mixed at least with Crusaders. (Kennan 2003b, 118)

Maier argues that the mountaineers Kennan is referring to were not Lezgins because Kennan did not visit southern Dagestan, so he was never in Lezgin territory (Maier 2003, 115). It is true that the Lezgins

13 As of today, Georgia is the only country to have recognised the Circassian genocide. Russia, however, denies the Circassian genocide, classifying it as a simple migration of 'barbaric peoples'. For more information, see Richmond 2013.

14 These include Kumyks, who make up about 11% of the total population, and the Nogai people who number less than 2% of the total population (Maier 2003, 115; Benningsen, Wimbush 1985, 173).

15 Gunib is an administrative centre of Ghunib District of the Republic of Dagestan. It was historically important as a natural fortress during the Caucasian War of the 19th century.

(*Leks* in Georgian), a Northeast Caucasian ethnic group, are native predominantly to southern Dagestan and make up about 10% of the republic's population (Bennigsen, Wimbush 1985, 165). However, it should be also noted that it was common practice in the 19th century to refer to all Dagestan's inhabitants as 'Lezgins'. Until the time of the Russian Revolution, 'Lezgin' was a generic description of the highlands southwest of the Caspian Sea in what is today the Dagestan Autonomous Republic. Since then, ethnologists have grown more careful in making group identifications, and the once generic Lezgins have become the Lezgins proper (Olson 1994, 438). Surprisingly, Kennan says next to nothing about Avars, a Northeast Caucasian ethnic group, the largest of several ethnic groups living in Dagestan, though he mentions "Avaria"¹⁶ twice, describing his "red-bearded interpreter" who is a native to Avaria (Kennan 2003c, 185), and "the ruins of a stone wall built during the time of Shamyl, probably to defend the approaches to Avaria" (Kennan 2003c, 201).

As far as the descent of Lezgins is concerned, the arguments Kennan provides to support his statement are naïve and unconvincing. There is no evidence to support the legend of the Crusaders having passed through Dagestan. Because the highlanders are light-skinned, Kennan considered they must be the descendants of the Crusaders – a common view in the literature of the period, but one that is not supported by historical evidence.

Sometimes Kennan was confused about the ethnicity of the Caucasian peoples he came in contact with – but then, as Maier puts it, the Russians were confused too (Maier 2003b, 20) and Kennan draws heavily from Russian imaginative geographies and mythologies of the Caucasus.

Generally speaking, the varieties of imperial/tsarist Russian Orientalism included two different, and in a certain sense even opposing, strains. One was the uniquely Russian strain of the imperial snobbery that stereotyped the Caucasians as exotic/romantic savages in part as a way to emphasise that they themselves were civilised (Maier 2003b, 14) and that it was their mission to 'enlighten the savages'. It was on this strain that Edward Said focused attention with his criticism of traditional Western Orientalism (Said 1979, 73). Said's analysis of the 19th century imperial Russian orientology should be understood in the context of his critical concept of Orientalism representing and symbolising rejection of existing power-political relationships between the imperial metropolises and the colonial world. It deconstructed traditional Western discourse on the Orient as an ideological mechanism for the self-definition of European identity

¹⁶ Avaria, or the Avar Khanate was a Muslim state, which controlled mountainous parts of Dagestan from the early thirteenth century to the nineteenth century.

through the creation of its inferior, chaotic, exotic, and subordinate 'Oriental other' in need of Western patrimonial guidance. In short, in Said's understanding, Orientalism was a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said 1979, 2-3). Similar intellectual construction and orientalist forms of 'othering', imposing profound ontological oppositions between Orient and Occident with the inherent superiority of the latter, can be found within 19th century Russian discourses on the Orient.¹⁷ As Susan Layton has shown in her influential book titled *Russian Literature and Empire. Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*, the Russians - aware of the Western Orientalism and the European Imperial manner in Asia - readily perceived the Caucasus as their own Orient. The Russian elite was beginning to form a mental map of the multinational and multicultural empire, and on this Russian mental map the Caucasus came to assume a special prominence as a version of the Orient (Layton 1994).

However, Russian Orientalism, as Susan Layton has pointed out, was not limited to the image of the uncivilised, undeveloped savage, and it also included a strain of admiration for the spirit of freedom of 'noble savages' of the Caucasian highlands as an inspiration for Russians (Layton 2001, 14).¹⁸

The ambivalence of tsarist/imperial Russian orientalism described above and romantic enthusiasm for the Caucasian mountaineers gave birth to two different, and partially antithetical, images of the highlanders: 'primitive fanatics' vs. 'noble savages' (exotic romanticism was common to both but, needless to say, to a lesser extent to the former). It would be interesting to note that Kennan might have been familiar with a similar stereotype, that of Native Americans in U.S. Taken primarily by the image of the 'primitive fanatic', emphasising the contrast between the fanatical Muslims and virtuous crusaders, on the one hand, and barbaric mountaineers and civilised Russians as enlighteners, on the other, Kennan tended to 'romanticise' and 'orientalise' landscape rather than people.

¹⁷ Said concentrated on Orientalism mainly as a British and French cultural enterprise, dealing with Germany and Russia only in passing. However, he no doubt viewed Russian imperial discourse on the Orient as a kind of version or counterpart of traditional Western Orientalism but one should be careful enough to avoid overgeneralisation: Said implied that Russian 'Orientalism', next to its German counterpart, was different from British, French, and US 'Orientalisms' but he did not elaborate on this. For further readings on Edward Said and Russian Orientalism, see: Kemper 2000; 2018; Cronin 2015; Jersild 2002; Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2010.

¹⁸ Layton sees one of the manifestations of the Russian romance with the 'noble primitivity' of the mountaineers in the excessive admiration for the Muslim leader Shamil on his way to exile in Kaluga (Layton 1994, 254).

2.1 Linguistic Situation

Caucasus has been traditionally referred to as the 'mountain of languages'. Even in the 21st century Caucasus had a greater diversity of languages and races than any other comparable territory elsewhere in the world (Wixman 1980, 5). The North Caucasian languages are divided into two groups: Abkhazo-Adyghian, or the Northwest Caucasian, languages, and Nakho-Dagestanian, or the Northeast Caucasian, languages.

Dagestan, the very heart of this ethnic and linguistic mosaic, today claims at least forty distinct languages, most belonging to the Nakho-Dagestanian language family. Different languages served as the principal *lingua franca* in Dagestan at different times. The Georgian language was a *lingua franca* of the area of western Dagestan bordering on Georgia, where the residents of various *auls* spoke mutually unintelligible languages (Wixman 1980, 112), roughly before the islamisation of Dagestan in late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. After the islamisation, the literary *lingua-franca* status to some extent belonged to Classical Arabic. The northern Avar dialect of Khunzakh has also served as a *lingua franca* in mountainous Dagestan inhabited by the Avars. Throughout centuries, the Kumyk language had been the *lingua franca* for the bigger part of the Northern Caucasus, from Dagestan to Kabarda, until the 1930s. Kumyk also had been an official language for communication of Russian Imperial administration with the local peoples. Russian became the *lingua franca* in Dagestan during the 20th century.

During his Caucasus journey Kennan encountered more than a dozen different languages as he moved from village to village, and crossing the Main Caucasus Ridge, the physical watershed and cultural divide between Christian Georgia and Muslim Dagestan. He was lucky enough to meet the member of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society's Caucasian Section, Baron Peter von Uslar (1816-75) (in Kennan's journals referred to as "Gen. Oosler"), a Russian general, military engineer and linguist of German descent, known for his research of languages and ethnography of peoples of Caucasus. Uslar was commissioned in the 1850s to write a history of the Caucasus. Since most of the indigenous languages of the Caucasus were not written, Uslar decided to create a writing system for them as the first step to a history. Although he thought that the Georgian alphabet, in which every sound can be expressed with a specific letter and every letter always has the same sound, would lend itself best to writing the mountain languages of the North Caucasus, he finally chose to write them with the less expressive Cyrillic alphabet (Magomedov 1979, 1046-68). One can assume that the Viceroy of the Caucasus he was commissioned by would not allow him to use any alphabet other than Cyrillic. Uslar made a unique contribution to serious study

of Caucasian languages and culture. He devised an alphabet for Avar that is based on Cyrillic, with the addition of modified characters to express the thirteen sounds unique to Avar. He was the first to affirm that the Caucasus languages were a distinct family.

Uslar provided Kennan with valuable materials for his journals and future studies. Kennan acknowledges his debt to Uslar and Prince Jorjadze for sharing with him materials they had collected on Dagestan (Kennan 1878, 440; Kennan 2003b, 115).

Kennan finds the articulations of the mountaineers "clicking"¹⁹ and discusses briefly the state of affairs in the field of Caucasus linguistic studies:

Strange are the articulations of the mountaineers - I cannot make these clicks, although I tried faithfully to learn them. None of these mountain languages have ever been written, nor can they be. The only medium of written communication in Daghestan is the Arabic, which is understood by most of the Mahometan moolahs, or priests. The Viceroy of the Caucasus has committed to Gen. Oosler and Col. Geetchinkov, two Russian philologists, the task of studying and classifying these languages. They have already published vocabularies and grammars of four or five of them, and Gen. Oosler is now at Timour Khan Shoura collecting materials for more. They had found, they told me, strange archaic forms of numerous Aryan and Semitic languages, various dialects of Tatar and Mongol origin, and a few which had no discoverable connection with any known language. (Kennan 2003b, 103)

He further discusses, however briefly, sound system and alphabet of what he calls "Lezgin languages", emphasising the linguistic diversity of the North Caucasus:

Lezgin languages very peculiar clicks, four distinct sounds of kh, ts, more or less prolonged, has 46 letters - alphabet invented by Gretingkov and Gen oosler who is compiling a comparative grammar of all the Daghestan languages. Two villages only a few versts apart frequently speak entire different languages. There is one village in southern Daghestan which has only 28 smokes [i.e. households] which speaks a peculiar language of their own not found in any other part of the Caucasus. (Kennan 2003b, 115)

Despite the fact that Kennan was not a professional linguist and his description of the linguistic situation in Dagestan and the North Cau-

¹⁹ The Northeastern Caucasian languages are characterised by consonant clusters pronounced with tense stops that produce clicking-like sounds (Maier 2003, 101).

casus is superficial, one may still find some of his observations useful because he provides some valuable information regarding the state of affairs in the field of Caucasus linguistic studies and the historical context.

1.3 Religion and Law

Religion has always been a major force in Dagestan, shaping its culture, legislative system, and customs.

For centuries, Georgian Orthodox Christianity was a dominant religion in Dagestan. At least up to the fourteenth century, it was expanding to the country through schools established by Georgian missionaries. Even today, near the Georgian border, crosses can be found on old graves in the cemetery. Its replacement by Islam was a slow process extending over several centuries – Islam came slowly and late to the Caucasus. Religious diversity peculiar to the region before Timurid²⁰ rule gradually disappeared and Islam assumed the position of the dominant religion in Dagestan in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, during the reign of Timur (Tamerlane). Vladimir Minorsky supports the theory that Christianity survived among the Avars down to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Minorsky 1958, 99); according to some sources, Kubachi, a small settlement in the mountains of Dagestan that spoke its own Kubachi language belonging to the Dargin dialect continuum, preserved the traces of Christianity until the end of the eighteenth century (Barthold, Bennigsen 1965, 86). Currently, most Dagestanis are Sunni Muslims of the Shafei²¹ rite, but the Azeris and Tats are Shias²² (Benningen, Wimbush 1985, 148).

The information regarding the religious practices of Dagestani highlanders is scattered all over the journals. Neither Kennan’s rigid religious upbringing,²³ nor his pro-Russian views obscured his ability to observe Muslim culture without religious bias. Kennan tells the reader a lot about religious rites, patterns of daily life, customs and etiquette. For instance, he provides an extensive description of the religious festival which he calls “Saksee”²⁴ (Kennan 2003b, 100-

20 Timurid dynasty (15th-16th century CE) – dynasty of Turkic-Mongol origin descended from the conqueror Timur (Tamerlane, 1336-1405).

21 One of the four major traditional schools of Islamic law in Sunni Islam.

22 Shia Islam or Shi’ism is one of the two main branches of Islam.

23 He was raised in a strictly religious Calvinist family (Travis 1990, 5).

24 Reference to the penitential Festival of the Ashura, the most important of the Shia year (Bennigsen, Lemerrier-Quelquejay 1967, 179). For Shia Muslims, Ashura, a Shi’ite ritual self-torture, marks the day that Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, was martyred in the Battle of Karbala. For more information, see Sanikidze, Walker 2004.

1). Kennan divides “mountain Mohammedans”, who are required to pray five times a day, into Shiite (Persians) and Sooniti (Lezgins and gortsy) Mohammedans (Kennan 2003b, 118). It should be noted that the word ‘gortsy’ is used in a strange way, alongside with the names of ethnic groups, as if it were the term for an ethnic group or tribe (“Persians [...] Lezgins and gortsy”). However, ‘gortsy’ has no ethnic significance and it refers to all peoples who live in the highlands of the Caucasus including Lezgins.

Kennan convincingly argues that religion has been a decisive factor in the resistance of the North Caucasian peoples against Russian invasion:

Men fought against the Russians with the most devoted heroism, believing firmly that if they died fighting the *Giours*²⁵ they would go at once to Paradise. They believed also that God had immutably fixed the date of every man’s death and they went into the battle with the conviction that if the predetermined day of their death had come, nothing could save them and that if it had not come, nothing could kill them. This fatalism of course made every man a hero. (Kennan 2003b, 146)

Religious/Islamic tradition had a considerable impact not only on the lifestyle but on the judiciary system in Dagestan as well. Kennan took a particular interest in the latter. He points out that three kinds of law were practiced among the Dagestani mountaineers:

- *Sharia* – Islamic law, or Sharia law, is a religious law forming part of the Islamic tradition, or written law, according to the Koran;
- *Adat* – customary law, the pre-Islamic code that orders society by mandating property rights, dispute resolution, and the punishment for crimes. Even after all the Christian and animist villages had been converted, *adat*, or “unwritten law of custom and usage” as Kennan calls it, continued to coexist alongside *sharia*.
- the laws of the Russians.

As Kennan notes, *Sharia*, the dominant law during the rule of Shamil, was replaced by *Adat* as the ruling law after the Russian invasion:

During the rule of Shamil, the Shariat was the ruling law, religion was the sole thought and business of every man and all things else

25 Muslims refer to the followers of other religious confessions as *Giours* or non-believers.

were subordinated to it. Muridism²⁶ recognised no duties but religious duties, prohibited all pleasures and turned the whole population into devoted fanatics. [...] Women were never allowed to appear in the presence of men unveiled and so strict was the observance of religious duties that a father killed his own son for omitting for three days to pray. [...] Muridism fell, however, with Shaml, and the Shariat lost in a measure its force. The Adat then became the ruling law and the Russian Gov't even now respects it as far as possible. (Kennan 2003b, 146)

Kennan's statement that Russian government respected *adat* seems to be an exaggeration, one more evidence of his pro-Russian bias. Russian administrators promoted *adat* over *sharia* courts, seeking to weaken the authority of spiritual leaders. However, Russian efforts to limit the influence of Islam and to convert the Caucasus Muslims were a failure (see Mostashari 2001, 229-49). The Russian elite expected that their cultural values would prevail over 'culturally inferior' natives but, as Mikael Mamedov has pointed out, the situation turned out to be much more complicated - both Russians and non-Russians influenced one another in multiple ways, and the Russians' influence was not always the strongest (Mamedov 2008, 275).

Substantial portion of Kennan's material on *adat* was written only well after the trip. However, Kennan's journals contain enough to suggest he developed a specific interest in the subject while in Dagestan, and in this case, as in instances where he describes religious belief and practice, he seems commonly to have relied on second-hand information.

1.4 Political Organisation and System of Governance

Kennan provides an accurate description of the political system in Dagestan before and after the Russian invasion. He distinguishes between two kinds of political organisations before the Russian conquest: hereditary khanates and what he describes as "free communities". The khans, descendants of the old Arab conquerors, were six in number and they governed about 125,000 of the population, mostly in the northern part of the province. Kennan points out that there were forty-three free communities embracing 275,000 souls or more, and they were nothing but republics in their most primitive form, ruled by assemblies and sometimes having a presiding officer, all elected

²⁶ In Sufism, a *murid* (one who seeks) is a novice committed to spiritual enlightenment by traversing a path under a spiritual guide. Sufi follower only becomes a *murid* when he makes a pledge to a *murshid*. The Russian Conquest of Chechnya and Dagestan is also referred to Murid War (1829-59).

by popular vote. There were only two ranks, freemen and slaves; the slaves were mostly Georgians and Persians, captured by the mountaineers in their raids through the valleys, on the south side of the range (Kennan 1874, 116).

The Russian conquest brought about a new type of governance and a new hierarchy. Districts, consisting of several villages, were governed by Naibs²⁷ who were assisted by local elected authorities (assemblies) and who, in their turn, were subordinated to the Governor of the province; according to Kennan, a Naib was an officer appointed by the Government who had authority over a certain district embracing perhaps five or six villages and from 1,000 to 1,500 smokes²⁸ (from 6,000 to 7,000 people). The Naib was assisted by a sort of local assembly consisting of one or more deputies from every village or community according to the number of its smokes. These deputies were chosen or elected from among the oldest, most respected and trusted inhabitants of each village. All complaints and disputes as to land, property, etc. were investigated by the Naib before this assembly, which had the power to settle them. If defendants were not satisfied with the decision of the assembly, they could appeal to the courts at Goonib and Timour Khan Shoura²⁹ and finally to the Governor of the province (Kennan 2003b, 145).

Kennan notes that the Russian government endeavoured as far as possible to accommodate its policy to the prejudices and customs of the mountaineers, and when Daghestan was conquered, “the Emperor [tsar] directed that all things should be left as they were under ShamyI” (Kennan 2003b, 145). This contradicts his own statement that the *Sharia* was replaced by the *Adat* after the fall of Muridism. This contradiction, as many others in Kennan’s Caucasus writings, I believe, should be explained by his pro-Russian bias.

3 Kakheti. The Land of Wine³⁰

In early October, Kennan and Prince Jordjadze, travelling with an escort of 25 armed men as well as guides and interpreters, passed through the last village in Dagestan, which Kennan called Bezhuta, and made their way upward to a pass at an elevation of twelve thou-

²⁷ Arabic word for ‘Deputy’ or ‘Representative of Authority’.

²⁸ Kennan’s literal translation of Georgian *Komli*. *Komli* is a metonymy for a place from which smoke rises, a household.

²⁹ Now known as Buynaksk; a town in Dagestan, located at the foothills of the Greater Caucasus; Temir-Khan-Shurá literally means ‘the lake or cliff of Tamerlane’ who is said to have camped here in 1396 after defeating Tokhtamysh during the Tokhtamysh-Timur war.

³⁰ Kakheti is the most important wine-making region in Georgia.

sand feet, i.e. over 3,600 meters. They were in a cloud, but as they descended the cloud lifted and, as Kennan wrote:

We stopped a moment to rest our horses and Prince Jorjadze, pointing downward through the fog, said "there lies Kakhetia" [...] there suddenly opened beneath us a great rent in the clouds through which appeared the green sunny valley of Kakhetia.

As the gap in the clouds slowly widened, there opened before us the most magnificent picture I have ever seen. Far, far below our feet lay the warm green valley intersected by scores of glittering streams like winding silver threads, dotted with vineyards, and orchards and rising in one long cultivated slope to the heights of Tomburg. (Kennan 2003b, 157)

Giorgi Gotsiridze argues that George Kennan was the first American who stepped into the land of Georgia (Gotsiridze 2006, 226) but he is mistaken: the first recorded American visitor to Georgia was Joseph Allen Smith.³¹ Not the first one, Kennan was definitely one of the most interesting American visitors to Georgia in that period.

At the prince's white-walled mansion at Eniseli in the Alazani valley, Kennan found the comfort he had not seen for the whole duration of his Caucasus travel:

I believe I haven't slept with my clothes off but once since I left St. Petersburg; that was when I lived with Prince Djordjadse. I have also seen just once, in the same place, sheets, pillows with cases on them, and comforters. (Kennan 2003c, 169)

Kennan provides very little information regarding the political situation or any other aspect of social and cultural life in Georgia. He describes Prince Jorjadze's estate and the Georgians who came to him with complaint, asking him to resolve their disputes. They reminded Kennan of Italians by their complexion and manners (Kennan 2003b, 158-9). This might be viewed as part of his mapping of the West onto his observations. He also gives an account of his daily routine (Kennan 2003b, 158-61) and seems impressed by picturesque landscapes and Georgian churches:

On the estate of Prince Jorjadze, a tract of land half as large as an American county, I counted 14 churches and cathedrals, all empty and deserted and at the present time there are not people enough left on that area to fill a single chapel. Every church was

³¹ For more information regarding the first American visitors to Georgia and early Georgian-American contacts in general, see Bridges 2011.

fortified like a medieval castle with moats and draw bridges and its high stone walls and flanking towers were loop-holed for musketry and cannon. In these churches the unhappy Georgians took refuge from their Mohammedan enemies and fought to the last. So terribly destructive were the raids of the Caucasian mountaineers down into these beautiful valleys that the last Georgian king despairing and hopeless abdicated his throne in favor of Russia. (Kennan 2003b, 161)

By "the last Georgian king" Kennan apparently means Giorgi XII Bagrationi who was the last king of the Kingdom of Kartli and Kakheti (eastern Georgia)³² from 1798 until his death in 1800 but not 'the last Georgian king'; the last one was Solomon II Bagrationi, the king of Imereti (western Georgia), who was deposed by the Imperial Russian government in 1810. Besides, Giorgi XII, the king Kennan is referring to, did not abdicate his throne in favour of Russia - on 18 December 1800, the Tsar signed a manifesto unilaterally annexing the Georgian realm to the Russian crown. Giorgi XII was not fated to see the manifesto published - he died on 28 December 1800, before the information reached him. The Russian emperor, Alexander I, refused to allow his son, David, to be crowned a king and formally reaffirmed the annexation in the decree of 12 September 1801 (see Lang 1957, 253-70, 283-4; Rhineland 1972).³³

This misleading statement should be explained either by Kennan's pro-Russian political bias or, more likely, by the unreliability of his source.

At Prince Jorjadze's estate, where "wine flowed like water" (Kennan 2003b, 159), Kennan relaxed for five days before travelling on alone. Kennan describes his life during these five days as "monotonous but pleasant" (Kennan 2003b, 158). After crossing the Caucasus with Prince Jorjadze, he was so captivated by Dagestan that, following a brief respite in the Alazan Valley in Kakheti, he headed back into the Dagestan highlands for another month.

The journal is the richer for his having journeyed with the Georgian nobleman and personally experiencing the Dagestan-Georgian

32 The united Kingdom of Georgia disintegrated in the 15th century - the once powerful monarchy fragmented into three independent kingdoms - Kartli (eastern Georgia), Kakheti (eastern Georgia), and Imereti (western Georgia) - each led by different branches of the royal House of Bagrationi, and five semi-independent principalities - Guria, Abkhazia, Odishi (Mingrelia), Samtskhe, and Svaneti. Kartli and Kakheti were united later as a single kingdom under Heraclius II Bagrationi, the father of Giorgi XII (see Lang 1962).

33 For the detailed discussion of the imperial Russia's aggressive Caucasian policy and the relationships between the conqueror and the conquered, see Kandelaki 2019; on the relations between imperial and national traditions in the 19th century Georgia, see Jahn 2020.

divide – the Muslim-Christian watershed that has figured so prominently in the history of the Caucasus. Much of what he did write about Georgia was focused on dramatising his frustration with petty bureaucrats in Tbilisi and his struggle to obtain travel permits. He travelled through Chechnya on his way to and from Dagestan, but did not stop for long, and his description is limited to the logistics of transportation.

In the final analysis, Kennan devoted little space to Georgia and its rich culture, so different in many ways from what he saw in Dagestan.

4 Conclusion

As a thorough travel diarist, Kennan never skips over descriptive details, paying much attention to minutiae ranging from details of clothing and household furnishings to the inventory of stores. He provides important insights into the contacts between remote villages and the outside world and the changes which undoubtedly were under way in traditional life.

All inaccuracies in Kennan's Caucasus writings can be explained either by his limited knowledge of the region, unreliable sources of information, or his pro-Russian bias. However, even the passages of Kennan's writing that were misinformed, or which are considered inaccurate based on more recent historiography, are revealing.

Overall, Kennan's Caucasus journals reflect a remarkable openness to the people and customs he encountered. His travelogues make a valuable American contribution to a body of late nineteenth-century Caucasus writing that is primarily Russian, French, and English. He stood out among early foreign travellers to the region for his determination to learn and record as much as he could about the beliefs, rituals, celebrations, and social organisation of Dagestan. A great student and interpreter of cultures, he provides insight into the Caucasus at a pivotal point in its history – the period immediately following the Russian conquest – through the eyes of a man who would be recognised as America's leading expert on Russia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. His travel accounts, when used critically by scholars, may serve as important sources in reconstructing the past and learning about the Caucasus as a land of diverse cultures. Kennan's Caucasus writings should prove useful and intriguing to historians, anthropologists, and travellers alike.

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