CHAPTER THREE

THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS

He represented the Russian State in the East, and this was not a trifle. Thousands of former captives were returning to Russia, changing their lives. In his mind’s eye he saw himself leading them out of Persia the way Moses had led the Jews out of Egyptian captivity …

(Iu. Tynianov, The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar)\(^1\)

If all the Caucasus needed was the rule of Law, Our Sovereign would have sent here not me, but The Legal Code of the Empire.

(Viceroy Prince Vorontsov)\(^2\)

Even when looking at an ordinary map of the Caucasus it is easy to see that between Russia and the Southern Caucasus there lays a mountain ridge of a formidable size. If a map could be made three-dimensional, the impression would be even stronger, making it extremely clear, what a forbidding obstacle in the way of any territorial expansion such a ridge must be. Nevertheless, it was here, in the Transcaucasia, and not in the Northern Caucasus as might be imagined, where Russia’s conquest of the Caucasus started. Until the end of the 18th century this territory was dominated by the Persian Empire, and the local states were clearly divided along the lines of their relations with this central power: they were either the Persian vassals or Persia’s opponents, albeit much weaker ones. The states of the eastern part of Transcaucasia, partly bordering on the Caspian sea and those close to them, were predominantly Moslem khanates, allies and vassals of Persia: such were the Khanates of Baku, Erivan, Nakhichevan, Derbent Shirvan, Quba, Karabakh, Ganja, Sheki and Talysh.

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\(^1\) Iu. Tynianov, Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara; Iu. Tynianov, Sochinenia, t. 2., M., Terra, 1994; 381.

The opponents of Persia in the Southern Caucasus were represented by a few Christian states, loosely allied to each other and, for the most part, used by the Persian Shahs as a constant source of slaves for the needs of their court and of the army. These were the Georgian kingdoms of Kartli-Kakheti and Imeretia and also the principalities of Mingrelia, Guria and Abkhasia. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Georgian slaves for the Persian state. W.G. Clarence-Smith uses a picturesque term “tidal wave”, when referring to the numbers of the Caucasian prisoners of war, regularly driven to Persia for enslavement. Georgian kingdoms and principalities existed under constant threat of a Persian invasion, and such existence drained their resources, bringing their very future into question.

The most important political move for the future fate of Transcaucasia was made in 1783 when, confronted again with an immediate Persian threat, king Erekle II of Kartli-Kakheti appealed to Russia for protection. Catherine the Great reacted to the appeal and, according to the treaty of Georgievsk, a Russian protectorate was established over this Georgian kingdom. Russian presence there was at the time very limited and amounted to only two battalions with four field cannon stationed in Georgia’s capital, Tiflis. However, this bridgehead opened possibilities for creating the infrastructure, which would later be extensively used by the Russians in Transcaucasia. The newly-founded fortress of Vladikavkaz was intended to become the key Russian stronghold on the northern side of the mountain ridge as evidenced by its significant name—Vlad(e)i Kavkaz(om), or, Possess the Caucasus. A chain of smaller forts linked it to the older garrison in Mozdok. These fortified settlements now sat on a new road built across the Main Caucasian Ridge, which became the supply route for the Russian troops in Georgia. Later, this road would be called the Georgian-Military Highway and in a not unfair unofficial metaphor, “Russia’s lifeline to its possessions in Transcaucasia”.

The first attempt to station troops in Georgia was short-lived due to the logistical problems posed by the mountains. The two battalions were

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4 A.R. Ioannisian, *Prisoedinenie Zakavkazia k Rossii i Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya v Nachale XIX stoletiia*, (Erevan, Izdatelstvo AN Armianskoi SSR, 1958), XIX.
5 Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, 20–21.
6 Ibidem.