Peter the Great, the Ottoman Empire, and the Caucasus

In Russian, Soviet and Western historiography, Peter the Great cuts a brilliant figure as an ever-successful Superman. His occasional minor failures are considered to be of no historical account. This legend was created during the reign of Catherine the Great, and since that time Russia and the Western world see in Peter a far-sighted statesman and a brilliant military chief, who “smashed out a window” into Europe and triumphed over all his enemies: the Swedes at Poltava, the Turks at Azov and the Persians in Transcaucasia.

This heroic picture undergoes a change if we abandon the Russian point of view and consider some of his various endeavors from the standpoint of his Southern enemies: the Ottoman Turks and the Crimean Tatars, to whom he was not “Peter the Great” but “Peter the Mad” ("Deli Petro").

As a matter of fact, Peter had attempted to smash out a second “window”: southwards, onto the Black and Caspian Seas. For the development of Russia this window would have been at least as important as the Western one, but Peter failed in this attempt and this failure had lasting and tragic results for the Russian monarchy.

To understand better the importance of Peter’s failure on the Southern front, we must remember that at the end of the eighteenth century, when Peter’s armies besieged the Turkish fortress of Azaq (Azov) which defended the mouth of the Don River, the Ottoman Empire was hard-pressed by the Austrians and the Poles in Hungary, in Serbia and in Volhynia and, consequently, was unable to give any help to the Crimean Khanate which for centuries constituted the “Northern Shield” of the Ottoman Empire.

Contrary to the assertions of certain Russian historians who state that the enfeebled khanate had become useless to the empire in the later seventeenth century,1 the Tatar cavalry was then more necessary than ever to the Sublime Porte and was constantly being moved from one front to another to help the Turks fight Imperials, Poles, Russians or Persians.

During the long war which started in 1683 and ended in 1699, waged by the Porte against Austria, Venice, Poland and later Russia, the Crimean khan, Hadji Selim Giray, spent practically fifteen years on horseback, rushing from Kamenets-Podol’sk, to Belgrade, besieged by the Austrians, back to Volhynia; then, in 1687, to Perekop, where after a hard battle he succeeded in beating back the first Russian expedition against the Crimea. Immediately after this victory, we find him again on the Austrian front. In 1690 he helped the Turks recapture Belgrade, and from 1691 to 1695, the Tatar armies were engaged without interruption in a struggle against the Imperials. This was an unbearable burden for the dwindling resources of the khanate. In 1695,

1. For instance V. D. Smirnov, Krymskoe Khanstvo pod verkhovenstvom Otomanskoii Porty v XVIII stoletii (Odessa, 1889).
Selim Giray was once more asked by the Porte to “extend his protecting wings over both borders of the Empire,” in other words, to engage his troops simultaneously against the Austrians in Hungary and the Russians at Azov.

This time, exhausted by years of incessant fighting, the Tatar forces were unable to offer serious resistance to the Russian armies: Azov was almost defenseless and though the first Russian attempt in 1695 was unsuccessful, it fell to Peter in July, 1696. Immediately after the conquest of Azov, the Russians occupied the Turkish fortified town of Taganrog and built two new fortresses: Novobogoroditsk on the Dnieper River at the mouth of the Samara River (in Turkish Yeni Qal‘e) and Kamenzî Zaton (in Turkish Kaminka) also on the Dnieper River. At the turn of the century, with Russian front lines advanced close to Perekop and bordering the Northern coast of the Sea of Azov, it looked as though Peter had decided to deal a decisive blow against the enfeebled Crimean Khanate.

From the Ottoman or Tatar point of view, the conquest of Azov was certainly Peter’s greatest victory—greater than that of Poltava. Moreover, this conquest and the appearance of the Russian fleet in the Sea of Azov was considered by the Ottomans to be as dangerous as the threat to the Crimea for the following reason: for centuries Azov had been the main Ottoman stronghold in the north, protecting the Azov and Black Seas from the incursions of the Don Cossacks. More important still, it was the key to the Northern Caucasus, to Transcaucasia and, thence, to Persia and India. So long as Azov was in Ottoman hands, the communications of the empire with Daghestan and the Caspian Sea were secure and a Russian advance toward the Caucasus could be considered an adventurous and even impossible endeavor.

Now, with Azov in Russian hands, the road to the Caucasus was open. At the time, the North Caucasus mountains represented a political no-man’s land. The strenuous struggle which went on throughout the second half of the sixteenth century between the three Great Powers in that area—the Ottoman Empire, Muscovy and Safavi Persia—for the possession of the Caucasus had ended in a draw. The Russians, who suffered a heavy defeat in 1604 on the banks of the Terek River, were the first to be ousted. Later, Shah Abbas occupied almost all the Turkish possessions in the region, but at the end of the century the rapid decadence of the Safavi Empire left the Caucasus in a state of complete anarchy.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the North Caucasus presented a confused mosaic of peoples, tribes, languages and religions. Islam had penetrated into this area as early as the ninth century, but its progress was extremely slow. At the time of Peter’s conquest of Azov, only Daghestan was an entirely Muslim area; but divided as it was into dozens of small rival feudal principalities it could not offer any serious resistance to the conqueror.

The Chechen country, which a century later was to become the strongest Islamic bastion of the Caucasus, was at the time only superficially “Islamized.” The Ossetians, who controlled the strategic Daryal pass, were entirely Christian. Among the Kabardinians, only the highest members of the feudal nobility were Muslim; half of the popular masses were Christians, the other half animists. The strongest Cherkess tribes (Natukahy, Abadzëkh) were animists, with an important Christian minority; only the Western tribe, the Zhaney (of the Taman Peninsula) and the Besleney of the Kuban closely related to the Giray dynasty by the “atalyq” system, were already Muslims and