Groom and Govern: Nineteenth-Century Native Interlocutors on Russian Colonial Frontiers

Michael Khodarkovsky
Loyola University Chicago, mkhodar@luc.edu

Recommended Citation

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.
Creative Commons License
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Author Posting © De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2015.
Elitenwandel in der Moderne
Elites and Modernity

Herausgegeben von / Edited by
Gabriele B. Clemens, Dietlind Hüchtker, Martin Kohlrausch, Stephan Malinowski und Malte Rolf

Band / Volume 17

Eliten im Vielvölkerreich
Elites and Empire

Imperiale Biographien in Russland
und Österreich-Ungarn (1850–1918)
Imperial Biographies in Russia and
Austria-Hungary (1850–1918)

Herausgegeben von / Edited by
Tim Buchen und Malte Rolf

DE GRUYTER
OLDENBOURG
Michael Khodarkovsky

Groom and Govern

Nineteenth-Century Native Interlocutors on Russia’s Colonial Frontiers

This essay focuses on one particular aspect of the imperial conquest and colonization: a group of the indispensable intermediaries, who provided the first crucial link between the imperial government and indigenous societies in Asiatic Russia. Whether they served as interpreters, government officials, or military officers, they shared a similar background. They were the native sons who, for various but mostly coercive reasons, found themselves in Russia, where they were schooled in Russian and sent back to the regions of their origin. They were a focal point of contact between the Russian authorities and different cultures and societies that Russia encountered during its ceaseless expansion. The native interlocutors became a critical conduit for information that flowed between the Russian authorities and native societies. Such
individuals existed in the history of all empires, and without them the imperial con-
quost and rule would have been impossible.

Below I will discuss the lives of a few such individuals. I will show how these new
imperial subjects became agents of the empire among their own kin, how their own
vision of their place in the empire collided with the vision of St. Petersburg, and how
they became the embryonic carriers of the new ethno-national consciousness among
their own peoples. I will also offer a brief comparison of the role played by the Indig-
igenous elite in the Russian empire and in British India.

Grooming the Colonial Elite

Throughout the centuries of Russia’s colonial expansion, the Russian government’s
paramount concern was how best to achieve the loyalty of the indigenous non-Russian
elite. In the initial stages of conquest and annexation, the native elites usually
enjoyed their traditional independence, but their ultimate integration into the empire
eventually implied their Russification and conversion to the Orthodox Christianity.
For this reason, in the late eighteenth century, the Russian administrators increas-
ingly called for founding the schools for the sons of the local elite. In the 1770s, the
Astrakhan’ governor Petr Krechetnikov suggested that this was the best way to intro-
duce the natives to the Russian way of life and “then no longer there will be a need to
take hostages and the natives will convert to Christianity.” In 1838 the commander of
the Special Caucasus Corps, General E. A. Golovin recommended to the War Ministe-


1 Michael Khodarkovsky: Russia’s Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire. Bloomington
2002, p. 60. In the Ottoman empire, a similar attempt was made through the Mekteb-I Ahsire-i
Hilmiyan (The imperial Tribal School), which was founded in Istanbul in 1892 and closed its doors
in 1907.


5 Sh. B. Nogmov: Istoriia Adygeiskogo naroda. Naichik 1958, pp. 11-12; S. N. Zhemukhov: Zhizn’
Khan-Giray’s father, Muhammed-Giray, attracted by the offers from the Russian authorities, decided to cross the Kuban River, which separated the Ottoman from the Russian borderlands, and settle on the Russian side. Following the established practice among the native peoples of the North Caucasus, Khan-Giray was sent to his father’s native village to spend his adolescent years there. In January 1839, Khan-Giray joined the Circassian Guard as a highly decorated lieutenant of the Russian army who had already distinguished himself in Russia’s wars against the Persians and Ottomans 1826–1829. An impeccable officer and well-educated charming socialite, Khan-Giray was welcomed in the literary salons of the capital where he became personally acquainted with many Russian men of letters, including Alexander Pushkin.

Shora Nogma too had vigorously pursued his intellectual interests: establishing close ties with several professors at the St. Petersburg University, studying languages and devoting much of his time to the writing of the first Kabardin grammar. Upon his return to Kabarda in 1838, he was appointed the Secretary (dejterdar) of the Kabardian military institutions in the imperial capital, the Stavropol gymnasium, and the grammar and alphabet based on the Cyrillic as well as collecting and translating Circassian legends and tales. While his grammar remained incomplete, his collection of Adyge tales was published in Russian in 1861 under the title “A History of the Adyge People.”

In the late 1830s Khan-Giray completed his treatise “The Notes on the Circassia,” compiled the Circassian alphabet on the basis of the Cyrillic script, and began to write down the Adyge folklore, stories, and history. Nicholas I called Khan-Giray “the Karamzin of Circassia,” which later did not prevent him from banning “The Notes on the Circassia” from publication. Shortly after Khan-Giray’s premature death at the age of 34, his collection of historical tales appeared in publication under the title “The Circassian Legends and Tales.”

In the late imperial and the early Soviet period in particular, when the Soviet government was engaged in the ethnicity and nation building projects within the former Russian empire, Khan-Giray was construed as a founder of the historical and literary tradition of the Western Adyge, the Circassians, while Shora Nogma of that of the Eastern Adyge, the Kabardins. It is not as if other options in constructing local traditions did not exist. For instance, the first attempts to compile the Adyge alphabet and to translate the Quran into the Adyge were made in the early 1820s by the Efendi Muhammed Shapsugov and Notauk Shereltuk. But any such efforts were firmly opposed by the ulama–Muslim legal scholars, for whom the only written language was Arabic—the sacred language of the sacred book. Likewise, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, several prominent Muslim jurists in northern Dagestan made important contributions to the study of the Sharia and Islamic discourse, but made no attempt to create alphabets for local languages or to consider the issues of local history and culture.

The task of constructing ethnic identities fell on the Russified local elite and Russian scholars and government officials. After all, ethnicity was a Western concept brought through and from Russia. The authors of the first historiography or philological studies were the members of the non-Christian elite, who later became critical in constructing the new ethnic identities among the empire’s non-Christian peoples. This new colonial elite, consisting of men raised in their indigenous societies and then educated in St. Petersburg and other Russian towns, became a conduit for the modern ideas of ethnicity and nationalism. At different time, various representatives of this elite created the alphabets for the indigenous languages, collected and wrote down the local folk tales, compiled the codes of the customary law, and authored the embryonic history of their people. Among those who created the historiographic and literary tradition for their own peoples were Shora Nogma and Khan Giray for the Adyges of the North Caucasus, Mirza Fath Ali Akhundov for the Azeris, Dorzh Bazanov for the Buriats, Chokan Valikhanov for the Kazakhs, and Mirza Kazem Bek, Russia’s first professor of the Oriental studies. Their accounts of the non-Christian peoples in time developed into a separate field of study and eventually laid the foundation for Russia’s Orientalism.

The ironies of the empire were often inescapable, as in a case of Shora Nogma, who was greatly influenced by A. J. Sjögren, an ethnic Finn educated at a Swedish gymnasium at the time when his homeland was part of Sweden and who later continued to write in Swedish. Shortly after Finland became annexed to the Russian empire in 1809, Sjögren became a conduit of the Western ideas in the Russian imperial periphery and was bestowed with the membership in the Russian Academy of Sciences. It was a Russified Swedish Finn who brought the modern ideas of ethnicity, philology, and historiography to the North Caucasus! In other words, modernity arrived in a form of ethnicity nurtured within the Russian colonial empire. It seems

7 Khan Girei: Cherkesskie predaniiia. Nalchik 1889.
Khan-Giray's father, Muhammed-Giray, attracted by the offers from the Russian authorities, decided to cross the Kuban River, which separated the Ottoman from the Russian borderlands, and settle on the Russian side. Following the established practice among the native peoples of the North Caucasus, Khan-Giray was sent to his father's native village to spend his adolescent years there. In January 1830, Khan-Giray joined the Circassian Guard as a highly decorated lieutenant of the Russian army who had already distinguished himself in Russia's wars against the Persians and Ottomans 1826–1829. An impeccably officer and well-educated charming socialite, Khan-Giray was welcomed in the literary salons of the capital where he became personally acquainted with many Russian men of letters, including Alexander Pushkin.

Shora Nogma too had vigorously pursued his intellectual interests: establishing close ties with several professors at the St. Petersburg University, studying languages, and devoting much of his time to the writing of the first Kabardin grammar. Upon his return to Kabarda in 1838, he was appointed the Secretary (defterdar) of the Kabardin Provisional Court and was in a position to choose the native candidates for studies at the military institutions in the imperial capital, the Stavropol gymnasium, and the Circassian Guards. Throughout this time Nogma continued to work on the Kabardin grammar and alphabet based on the Cyrillic as well as collecting and translating the Adyge legends and tales. While his grammar remained incomplete, his collection of Adyge tales was published in Russian in 1861 under the title "A History of the Adyge People."

In the late 1830s Khan-Giray completed his treatise "The Notes on the Circassia," compiled the Circassian alphabet on the basis of the Cyrillic script, and began to write down the Adyge folklore, stories, and history. Nicholas I called Khan-Giray "the Karamzin of Circassia" which later did not prevent him from banning "The Notes on the Circassia" from publication. Shortly after Khan-Giray's premature death at the age of 34, his collection of historical tales appeared in publication under the title "The Circassian Legends and Tales."

In the late imperial and the early Soviet period in particular, when the Soviet government was engaged in the ethnicity and nation building projects within the former Russian empire, Khan-Giray was construed as a founder of the historical and literary tradition of the Western Adyge, the Circassians, while Shora Nogma of that of the Eastern Adyge, the Kabardins. It is not as if other options in constructing local traditions and identities did not exist. For instance, the first attempts to compile the Adyge alphabet and to translate the Quran into the Adyge were made in the early 1820s by the Efendi Muhammed Shapsugov and Notauk Shereftuk. But any such efforts were firmly opposed by the ulama-Muslim legal scholars--, for whom the only written language was Arabic—the sacred language of the sacred book. Likewise, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, several prominent Muslim jurists in northern Daghestan made important contributions to the study of the Sharia and Islamic discourse, but made no attempt to create alphabets for local languages or to consider the issues of local history and culture.

The task of constructing ethnic identities fell on the Russified local elite and Russian scholarly and government officials. After all, ethnicity was a Western concept brought through and from Russia. The authors of the first historiography or philological studies were the members of the non-Christian elite, who later became critical in constructing the new ethnic identities among the empire's non-Christian peoples. This new colonial elite, consisting of men raised in their indigenous societies and then educated in St. Petersburg and other Russian towns, became a conduit for the modern ideas of ethnicity and nationalism. At different time, various representatives of this elite created the alphabets for the indigenous languages, collected and wrote down the local folk tales, compiled the codes of the customary law, and authored the embryonic history of their people. Among those who created the historiographic and literary tradition for their own peoples were Shora Nogma and Khan Giray for the Adyges of the North Caucasus, Mirza Fath Ali Akhundov for the Azeris, Dorzhi Bazanov for the Buriats, Chokan Valikhanov for the Kazakhs, and Mirza Kazem Bek, Russia’s first professor of the Oriental studies. Their accounts of the non-Christian peoples in time developed into a separate field of study and eventually laid the foundation for Russia's Orientalism.

The ironies of the empire were often inescapable, as in a case of Shora Nogma, who was greatly influenced by A. J. Sjögren, an ethnic Finn educated at a Swedish gymnasium at the time when his homeland was part of Sweden and who later continued to write in Swedish. Shortly after Finland became annexed to the Russian empire in 1809, Sjögren became a conduit of the Western ideas in the Russian imperial periphery and was bestowed with the membership in the Russian Academy of Sciences. It was a Russified Swedish Finn who brought the modern ideas of ethnicity, philology, and historiography to the North Caucasus. In other words, modernity arrived in a form of ethnicity nurtured within the Russian colonial empire. It seems

The affirmative-action empire had been born long before the Soviet policies of indigenization were put into practice.

The British Experience

At different times the government officials suggested to consider the Russian imperial experience in comparison with those of the British in India and France in Algeria. In 1842, the supreme commander of the Russian troop in the Caucasus, E. A. Golovin, and the War Minister A. I. Chernyshev were both suggesting to the emperor that the British and French experiences in India and Algeria might be usefully applied in the Caucasus.

They were not! The British in particular had different concerns and priorities in India. The British East India Co. was content to rely on the British residents at the courts of the largely autonomous maharajas, use wealthy Indian agents as intermediaries, and rely on the local courts in order to retain its control over commerce and taxes. There were simply too few British in India to do anything else. Unlike the Russians, the British early on set out to collect knowledge, to create laws, to found local schools and colleges, to translate from Sanskrit into the local vernaculars and English, and to develop local expertise among the British. After all, when in 1888, Gandhi arrived to study at the University College in London, he came to study the Indian law.

Sanskrit Colleges in Delhi, Benares, and other places were employing local pundits on government payroll who were translating scientific texts from English, while the British were studying Sanskrit and Hindu texts at Oxbridge. In 1834, the British politician and historian Thomas Babington Macaulay suggested a new approach to promote the British interests in India: “It is impossible for us, with our limited means, to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” Indeed, as a result of the new policies articulated by Macaulay between 1830–1850, a new type of the musulim—a title of a native secretary, clerk—had emerged in India. They were well educated and spoke and read English. Many of them were educated at the English department of the Delhi College and were fluent in Persian, Hindi, Sanskrit, and English.

Governing through the Colonial Elite

But if Russia was far behind in collecting knowledge, developing expertise, and training its own Slavic Orientalists, it was ahead of Britain in specific policies and tools of governing. By the time Macaulay was calling upon a greater reliance on the British-educated Indian elite to govern India, the Russians had already a long experience on integrating and using the local elite to promote the imperial agenda. Above were mentioned two of them, Shora Nogma and Khan-Girai in the North Caucasus. But there were hundreds of similar acculturated natives in the service of the Russian empire.

Among the more visible figures was a Kazakh noble, Chokan Valikhanov (Muhammad Khanfali Vali Khan (Chokan Chingsijsonev Valikhanov). His father Chingis was educated at the school of the Siberian Frontier Cossack Host, reached the rank of a major, and became an indispensable aid to the Russian scholars interested in Kazakh folklore and customary laws. At the age of 12 Chokan was sent to study at the Omsk Cadet corps. After his graduation in 1853 at the age of 18, Chokan became an expert on Central Asia serving in Russia’s Asiatic Department in St. Petersburg as well as collecting information about the region and its peoples.

Another example was Katti Giray, a Circassian descendent of the royal Crimean lineage, who grew up at the Scottish Mission in the North Caucasus, traveled to Scotland to study theology, married an English woman, and returned to Russia to become an active Presbyterian missionary and educator in the Crimea. Muhammed Ali Kazem-Bek, later known as Aleksandr Kasimovich Kazem-Bek, was another such neophyte. An offspring of the noble and learned Azeri family from Derbent, an erudite and a brilliant scholar, Kazem-Bek became the pride of the Scottish Mission in Astrakhan. But much to their chagrin, the Russian government was determined to extricate him from the influence of the Scottish missionaries. He was banned from traveling to Scotland and was inducted into the Russian service. In 1825, Kazem-Bek was sent to Siberia to become a teacher at the Omsk Asiatic School. In the end, Kazem-Bek's enormous talents proved to be so obvious that instead of becoming another exile in Siberia, he went on to become a professor at Kazan and St. Petersburg Universities and Russia's first and foremost Orientalist.

One striking example was Musa Kundukh (Kundukhov). Born to a family of the Ossetin nobles, he joined the Russian army as an officer and rose through the ranks to become a highly decorated major general. After Shamal had been defeated, however,

---

Kundukh's disgust with Russia's policies toward the local population led him to organize a massive immigration to the Ottoman empire. In 1865, his ship with hundreds of fellow highlanders docked at an Ottoman port on the Black Sea. Later, Musa Kundukh was given the Ottoman title of pasha-general, and served with distinction in the Ottoman wars against the Russians.\footnote{Memuary genera Musa-pashi Kundukhova (1837-1865). In: Zvezda 8 (2001), pp. 100–123.}

\section*{The Colonial Empire}

The Russian empire in Asia included a vast expanse of land populated by very different peoples and societies, inevitably resulting in different regional dynamics of the imperial rule. Despite the differences between the regions of Asiatic Russia, what Russia's Asian territories had in common was a lack of sovereign monarchies and states with defined boundaries. The reality was somewhat more complex than Moscow assumed, but this was how Moscow perceived the world east and south of its capital, and the perceptions, of course, are known to create a reality of their own.

If the lack of sovereign states and monarchs in Asiatic Russia helped to articulate Russia's civilizing mission, it did not explain how to rule different regions, peoples, and religions. The Russian authorities refused to concede that theirs too was a colonial empire. Instead, the imperial sub-consciousness continued to revolve around the ideas of a universal monarch and civilization, and a belief that some day the colonial empire would become Russian. The myth and reality could not be easily reconciled, however, and resulted in that particular Russian hybrid of the hyper accentuated empire and underemphasized colonialism.\footnote{Michael Khodarkovsky: Bitter Choices: Loyalty and Betrayal in the Russian Conquest of the North Caucasus. Ithaca 2011, pp. 164–171.}

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the grand imperial ambition demanded an ultimate integration of the empire's diverse human landscape into the Russian Christian imperial identity. But the reality on the ground defied this long-term vision, requiring instead the tactics and policies that could be adapted to the specific circumstances. The imperial authorities preferred to rely on the local secular elite, and, when necessary, religious as well. Economic and political carrots and sticks were intended to ensure the cooperation and loyalty of the elite, while the courts, administration, schools, and missionary work were meant to pave the road towards a broader integration of the non-Russians into the empire.

Among the variety of the specific policy tools used in ruling Russia's non-Russian subjects, one remained constant throughout the time: to govern the multitudes of the empire's peoples, tongues, and religions, Russia depended on the individuals who possessed an intimate knowledge of both Russian and their own society and were thus able to serve as intermediaries between the imperial authorities and the native peoples.

In the Muscovite empire, such go-betweens were usually employed as the interpreters. Some of them were the new converts, but most were former Slavic captives who claimed to have learned the native language and mores during their long captivity. But because almost all of them were illiterate, they knew little of the language and culture in which they claimed the expertise.

As Russia's involvement with the various non-Russian peoples deepened, the authorities increasingly relied on the natives who, for various reasons, became exposed to the Russian way of life. Only in the middle of the nineteenth century, a slowly modernizing Russia began to train its own small groups of Slavic experts, who studied the native languages, societies, and religions. Russia never had an equivalent of the British Colonial Service, but the Russian universities offered limited courses in the non-Russian languages of the empire for the benefit of scholars and future government officials alike.

Throughout the entire period of Russia's imperial past, the great majority of the empire's cultural interlocutors came from the native societies. From the late eighteenth century onward, the Russian authorities began to demand that the members of the native elite send their sons to the imperial capital to be educated at the emperor's court and later at Russia's prestigious military schools. The government's goal was to educate and acculturate the young men from the distinguished indigenous families who could become a conduit of the Russian influences after returning to their kins. In other words, the former hostages were to become a colonial elite.

Hundreds of them would come from the different parts of the empire and return to their own people different men: in Russian officer's uniform, with a strange accent in their native tongue, with the outlandish ideas in their heads, and often, with a tiny cross on their necklaces. They followed an uneasy path in negotiating the space of the indigenous societies within the Russian empire and by extension searching for their own place and identity. All of them remained liminal personalities, who remained torn between two different cultures and identities, the traditional society into which they were born and the modern society in which they were schooled.

In time, they came to realize that the empire they served left little room for them to reconcile their multiple identities. If they thought of themselves as being the intermediaries between the empire and their own peoples, they were bitterly disappointed. The imperial authorities were only interested in using them as a tool of the government policies. If they hoped to make the Russians more aware of the needs and practices of their own peoples, they quickly discovered that the information flow was a one-way street, from the center to the periphery. Khan-Giray's treatise on the Circassians was banned, Shora Nogma's recommendations ignored, and Chokan Valikhanov's calls for justice for the Kazakhs dismissed. The native elite had either to succumb to the imperial needs or get out of the way by retiring into anonymity or leaving the empire, as Musa Kundukh did.
These were the paths charted by these native interlocutors, who in different ways tried to bridge the space between the world of their homelands and that of imperial Russia. The push and pull between the two was a tormented experience in all empires, but in contrast to British India, the Russian policies and expectations exerted far more pressure on the native intermediaries to take sides and left little room for a compromise.

Russia's newly formed indigenous elites were typical marginal social groups searching for their identity between the old and new, traditional and modern, Asia and Europe. Perhaps, in the end, they were not so different from the Russian elites, who uncertain of their own identity, had searched for centuries to locate Russia's own place between the modern and traditional, the nation-state and colonial empire.

Michael Khodarkovsky