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Michael Khodarkovsky, Bitter Choices, Loyalty and Betrayal in the Russian Conquest of the North Caucasus

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REFERENCES

Michael KHODARKOVSKY, ***Bitter Choices, Loyalty and Betrayal in the Russian Conquest of the North Caucasus***. Ithaca – London : Cornell University Press, 2011, xii + 200 p.

- 1 Readers familiar with Michael Khodarkovsky's two previous books on the Kalmyks and the Steppe Frontier will look forward to reading *Bitter Choices*. It is the story of Semën Atarshchikov, born a Chechen, who followed in his father's footsteps to become a Cossack, an interpreter in at least two languages of North Caucasus highlanders, was sent to Petersburg to join Nicholas I's Circassian Guard (which took part in the crushing of the Polish uprising), became an officer, returned to the North Caucasus to serve under General von Zass, the commander of the Russian forces in the northwest Caucasus, but then deserted, returned to the Russians, deserted again, only to be killed by his Cossack servant in 1845 at the age of thirty-eight. It is a simple story, but one made poignant by Khodarkovsky's skill, his empathy for the highlanders – like the one he felt for and transmitted to this reviewer for the Kalmyks – his love of the Caucasus, his growing attachment to Cossack Atarshchikov.
- 2 The narrative is woven on a rich tapestry of the highlanders' environment. We are taken on an entire tour of the northeastern Caucasus in the company of the boy's atalyk – a kind of guardian – to visit the headquarters of various chieftains of the valley of the Terek to Derbend, the Gate of Gates, on the northern border of what had become by the late eighteenth century a Russo-Persian frontier. From there, he returned to the valley of the

Terek, where he was born, across Daghestan and Chechnia; the bitterest fighting would later take place there between the Russians and the highlanders. We are then introduced to General Ermolov, who would leave an indelible imprint on Russia's treatment of the population, given an overview of the rebellions of the 1820s, told about Nicholas I's visit to the Caucasus in 1837, the disagreements over the best way to deal with the unrest, the prevalent view that brutality and terror were the best way to cow the highlanders into submission, and the arrival of Viceroy Vorontsov in 1845, who saw things differently. In his conclusion Khodarkovsky seeks to explain why the Russians have failed until the present day to bring peace to the region. All this makes a fascinating story, and we must be grateful to the author for telling it so well.

- 3 Unfortunately, it is also a one-sided book. It is an indictment of Russia's brutal policies, and the point is well taken, but it overlooks many crucial elements. Khodarkovsky conveys to his readers his considerable knowledge of the ethnic diversity of the region. It will be very useful to readers, including this reviewer, but he strangely overlooks the geographical context. There were at least four regions in the Caucasus: the north Caucasus plain stretching to the Manych; the foothills and mountains on both sides of the mountains, with Daghestan and Chechnia occupying the valleys and forests of the widest spread of the eastern Caucasus; and the valleys of Transcaucasia. The fight with the Russians was guerilla warfare of the worst kind, in the mountains, with brutality on both sides. One is reminded of the Balkans and Afghanistan, and the traditional hatred of the men of the plain for those of the highlands. The Russians hated them, but so did the Georgians, who had seen for generations of their fields devastated and their women and children taken into slavery by parties of highlanders swooping down into the plain. A Turkish document of the 1780s could have been written by a Russian, and there was a Persian proverb that "the shah is a fool who wants to fight the Lezgins."
- 4 Brutality and terror were the hallmarks of Russian rule, but who were the "Russians"? At the highest level, Ermolov was a Russian, but not Rosen and Neidhardt; nor von Grabbe, Pullo, von Stahl, Tornau. Von Zass, described by Khodarkovsky as the most brutal of them all, was a Baltic German, who probably remembered how his ancestors in the Livonian Order had slaughtered Estonians and Latvians in the Middle Ages in the name of Christian civilization. He kept heads of defeated enemies for scientific studies. Khodarkovsky is appalled. But the Georgians who abounded in the Caucasian Corps remembered how General Tsitsianov (Tsitsishvili), the military governor of Tiflis and a member of the former Bagratid dynasty, had been treacherously murdered under the walls of Baku in 1806, and his stuffed head sent to the shah in Tehran. Bekovich-Cherkassky, a Kabardin, whom Khodarkovsky singles out for his murdering three hundred families in an aul, surely remembered his ancestor who was offered hospitality by the khan of Khiva and killed in 1717 with his three thousand men; his stuffed head was sent to the emir in Bukhara. How many "Russian" punitive expeditions were carried out to avenge soldiers whose throats had been slit, like those of vulgar sheep? Many of the "Russians" were in fact Ukrainian Cossacks, already well known on the battlefields of Europe for their brutality and rapacity. In 1743, a Cossack commander in Finland, told the Finns that, if they did not surrender, they would be subjected to "the methods of steppe warfare," of which Khodarkovsky gives a good example on p.141. Many of the Cossacks were Ukrainians from the Left Bank Ukraine, or Turks and Persians among the Don Cossacks. They had learned "the methods of steppe warfare," from the Crimean Tatars. All this should be mentioned in a discussion of Russian warfare in the Caucasus.

- 5 Khodarkovsky's conclusion is puzzling. To this reviewer, the Russians failed, and continue to fail, because they are fighting a guerilla war in the mountains. They failed in Afghanistan, and the United States is failing there as well for the same reason. Guerilla warfare in the mountains is not winnable, even with sophisticated weapons. Khodarkovsky neglects this crucial factor. His explanation is that the Russians refused to see the North Caucasus as a colony and saw it as the inseparable part of an empire. Does not an empire have colonies? Or is it that the Russians were building, not an empire, but a unitary state which became an empire with the incorporation of colonies, and that they wanted to rule them as if they were part of a unitary state? In the final analysis the importance of the mountainous environment is crucial. The Georgians and Armenians (and the Baltic Germans) did very well in the Russian Empire, and did not seem to have a major problem reconciling the two identities of which Khodarkovsky makes so much. He refers to several highlanders who found a respectable place in the political and cultural establishment. He gives a convincing explanation of Atarshchikov's desertion, but, by reducing it to jealousy and despondency over his slow promotion, he robs his hero of a tragic halo.
- 6 Could Russian expansion have stopped at Manych? Certainly not. After reaching the foothills of the Caucasus, could it refrain from leaping over it to settle in Transcaucasia? How were the Russians to treat the highlanders, for whom "brigandage was not a crime," slave trading was "the most profitable business" (p. 35, 37), and "raiding was a new way of life"? How else could the Russians (or anyone else) continue to live in the shadow of a climate of endemic violence centered in the mountains? There may have been other solutions than terror warfare, but we are not told what they could have been, and the failure of the Raevsky policy was not encouraging. A final remark: other readers will also miss at least a mention of the magnanimous treatment of Shamil, who was allowed to retire under house arrest in Kaluga and leave for a pilgrimage to Mecca soon before his death. How would the United States Army have treated a Sioux chieftain surrendering after thirty years of bloody warfare?