

“Claiming the Caucasus: The Evolution of Russian Imperialism in Armenia, 1801-1894”

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Abstract

American Councils Title VIII funding allowed me to conduct nine months of dissertation research in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russia. My dissertation traces the transformation of Russo-Armenian relations throughout the nineteenth century. Organized as a case study that analyzes how Russia’s strategies of imperialism adapted to the myriad changes that characterized the nineteenth century, my work provides the first full-scale academic history of Russia’s incorporation of Armenia into the empire. Armenians make a compelling example because they experienced the full spectrum of imperial identities that Russian officials ascribed to them: initially recognized as distant Persian vassals known for their economic prowess, they were transformed into loyal Russian subjects crucial for imperial rule of the South Caucasus, only to find themselves a half century later labeled suspect nationalists. My research during the past academic year has allowed me to begin unwrapping this story by accessing underutilized archival sources in Russia.

I hypothesize that, during the nineteenth century, the basis of the Russo-Armenian relationship evolved from implicitly ecumenical solidarity between two Christian peoples into an explicitly political opposition between an imperial power and its subject. I argue that, by analyzing the transformation of the Russian administrative approach to Armenia, driven by Armenia’s distinctive role in the Russian imperial experience, we can expand our understanding of the methods and nature of Russian imperialism. Because Armenia initially embraced St.

Petersburg's patronage, unlike the other imperial properties in the Caucasus, it makes an especially valuable case study for understanding Russian expansionism. In addition to highlighting Russia's pliable and ever-changing relations with its imperial subjects, my dissertation places this Armenian case study into the broader context of European imperialism.

Research Goals

My research objective was to utilize the archives of Moscow and St. Petersburg to answer several key questions about the Russian approach toward Armenia and Armenians. How did Russia conceive of Armenia administratively, and why? What role did Armenia occupy in the Russian political imagination? How did religion and education affect the cultural adaptation and political absorption of Armenia into the Russian empire? What role did the Armenian and Russian churches play in swaying political developments? To what degree and how did imperial officials co-opt the Armenian elite, and how did this process differ from other cases of Russian imperialism, including in Central Asia, Finland, Poland, and Georgia? What were the responses of these Armenian elites to co-optation? What does this case study tell us about the development of local, national, and imperial identities?

I sought answers to these questions by analyzing the evolution of Russia's imperial encounter with Armenians. A Christian people long seeking the protection of their powerful Orthodox neighbor from their Muslim overlords, Armenians had earned Russian gratitude for fighting alongside them in the Russo-Persian War of 1826-28. After welcoming Russia's absorption of their homeland in 1828, Armenians acquired a reputation for political reliability among Russian officials. With the sustained insurgency against Russian rule in the North Caucasus (in Chechnya and Dagestan, for example) and lingering unease among Georgian elites

at the method of Russia's annexation of their state in 1801, St. Petersburg had valid reason to view Armenia as the stronghold to Russia's grip on the region.

The amicable bond between Russia and Armenia, however, faded in this century of nationalism. Paradoxically, Russia's drive to modernize its periphery contributed to the evolution of a variety of Armenian identities. For example, the proliferation of an Armenian periodical press facilitated a growing Armenian national awakening, which, coupled with such imperial policies as the compulsory teaching of Russian in Armenian schools, gradually led to the formation of a diverse Armenian nationalist movement. The blossoming of Armenian nationalism in the 1880s turned Russian admiration and respect for Armenians into suspicion and distrust, leading officials increasingly to question the reliability of their heretofore-loyal subjects. Diverse Armenian nationalist organizations, based in various Russian cities and composed of Armenians from all walks of life, pursued a spectrum of aims.

Despite these developments, Armenians continued to play an important role in Russia's political and social fabric. My dissertation looks to scholarship that treats another ethnic minority of the Russian empire, Jews, to examine what Benjamin Nathans calls "selective integration," a process through which Russia absorbed individuals and groups of a given minority into its state and society. Prominent Armenians in Russian political and military service, such as Minister of the Interior Mikhail Loris-Melikov and the Lazarev family, exemplify this process of selective integration within the context of the Russian-Armenian encounter. St. Petersburg reacted to brewing Armenian nationalism by minimizing Armenians' real and perceived political influence in the region, monitoring and arresting Armenian elites in Erevan, censoring the press, and closing parish schools. At the same time, the imperial metropole maintained mutually advantageous relations with select few Armenian elites, such as representatives of the nascent

Armenian press in Tiflis and Armenian academics in the universities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, thereby underscoring the complexities of changing imperial dynamics.

Research Activities

I spent six months in Moscow and three in St. Petersburg. In the former city, I worked in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Russian State Military History Archive (RGVIA), the Central Historical Archive of Moscow (TsIAM), and the Russian State Library. In the latter city, I worked mainly in the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) and the Russian National Library.

At GARF, I focused on the records of the Third Section of His Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery, the secret imperial police active from 1826 through 1880 (f. 109), and the files of its successor, the Department of Police of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, or *Okhranka* (f. 102). These collections yielded an intimate view of the state's pursuit of Armenian nationalism, and also demonstrated the mechanisms of imperial nationalities policy. Dozens of reports, investigative summaries, and letters elucidate not only Russian officials' response to the real and imagined threat of Armenian nationalism, but also the fascinating diversity—not only in terms of social and class composition, but also with regard to divergent aims—of the Armenian groups. I also accessed documents for the tsarist government's broader struggle against rising social revolutionary movements in the latter nineteenth century. One particularly useful collection focused on the records of a committee organized in the early 1870s to investigate the rise of youth discontent in the Russian empire. These documents will provide a rich contextual framework into which to place my Armenian protagonists. Moreover, to understand the execution of the Great Reforms in the South Caucasus in the 1860s, I uncovered material

showing how the state maneuvered to satisfy both landowners and newly freed peasants through compromises (f. 678).

At RGVIA, my work targeted the records for the two Russo-Persian wars of the early nineteenth century. During the first war (1804-13), Armenians, then Persian subjects, sympathized with Russian expansion, seeing in their northern Christian neighbor a powerful defender against Persian abuses (f. 475). I retrieved multiple reports, orders, and correspondence pertaining to Russian Generals Tsitsianov, Ermolov, and Paskevich, who often relied on Armenians in their conquest of Persian territories. During the second Russo-Persian war, in 1826-28, when Russia finally wrested Armenian-populated Erivan khanate from Persia, Armenians played a prominent role in the Russian war effort, volunteering for military service and providing intelligence (f. 476). I also examined the records for the 1877-78 Russo-Turkish War, as well as files for the Russian administration of Kars province (f. 485 and f. 15322). I focused in particular on tsarist officials' efforts to relocate Ottoman Armenians from Anatolia to the Russian South Caucasus in the wake of the war.

TsIAM, a comparatively smaller depository for my purposes than the other archives, houses documents pertaining to the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages in Moscow. Established in 1815 as the Lazarev Armenian Academy by Russian statesmen and entrepreneurs of Armenian heritage, this institution became an important center of language and cultural training in imperial Russia. The institute trained many Russian specialists of Orientology (*vostokovedenie*) and related languages, including Armenian. Even in its early days, the institute admitted Armenian students from penurious backgrounds, granting them full tuition and housing at the expense of the academy (f. 213).

At the Russian State Library in Moscow, I mined the massive, thirteen-volume *Akty, sobrannye Kavkazskoiu Arkheograficheskoiu Kommissieiu* (Documents Collected by the Caucasus Archeographical Commission). This rare published collection of primary sources contains thousands of official correspondence, royal decrees, orders, petitions, and so forth regarding the Russian administration of its Caucasus territories. I focused on material pertaining to the Armenian province and Georgia, where many Armenian communities engaged in regional and cross-imperial trade. Among the many strengths of this collection are the thorough statistical data that are often elusive in the archives, and a more comprehensive record of correspondence between local officials and their superiors in St. Petersburg, including the tsar and his ministers. I have also located documents demonstrating the complex ties between the Armenian Church—the spiritual as well as the political leader of the stateless Armenians—and various Russian governors, generals, and bureaucrats.

In St. Petersburg, my research at RGIA revolved around the records of the Lazarev family (f. 880), the Caucasus Committee (f. 1268), the Ministry of Internal Affairs Department of Foreign Faiths (f. 821), and other collections. This work illustrated the extent of the Lazarevs' efforts to promote Armenian interests within tsarist society. From establishing churches and academies to petitioning government officials and mediating between the Armenian Church and the state, the Lazarevs' impact on Russo-Armenian ties in the nineteenth century cannot be overstated. Correspondence between them and the Armenian patriarchs in Echmiadzin reveal the social and political clout endowed to the successive heads of the Lazarev clan. Moreover, material from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) files elucidates Russian difficulties in governing a stateless nation whose compatriots lived in three adjacent empires. The tsar, shah, and sultan each ruled over large Armenian communities, whose cultural and economic links

survived periodic wars. In the Russian case, officials sought, and often failed, to delineate the sphere of influence and interaction of Russian Armenians, aiming to prevent the development of a sense of a cohesive multi-state nation that transcended imperial boundaries. Such a development would jeopardize Russia's political borders in the South Caucasus: Armenians could not be allowed to place national ties above their political subject-hood to the tsarist state. Indeed, to cite one case from 1873, the MVD made clear to the Armenian Church that its collection of donations in the South Caucasus for the benefit of Ottoman Armenians ran amok of imperial law, for it benefitted foreign subjects and portended “international consequence.” Finally, RGIA yielded documents elucidating the evolution of Armenian tax obligations (f. 1152).

At the Russian National Library, I used the three-volume *Sobranie aktov, otnosiashchikhsia k obozreniiu armianskogo naroda* to explore early Armenian immigration and settlement in Russia. Long recognized by Russians for their economic prowess, Armenians in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries made their way from Persia and other southern peripheries to such Russian trading centers as Moscow, Astrakhan, and Rostov. These communities became in the latter nineteenth century important hubs of Armenian life in Russian space, eliciting different responses from regional and state authorities. Additionally, the diary of Mikhail Vorontsov, the Caucasus viceroy at mid-century, provided a more detailed view of the local Russian administration than official documents from the archives. I also spent time in the newspaper department of the Russian National Library, where I investigated several important St. Petersburg dailies. Particularly useful proved the newspaper *Golos* (The Voice), which in the late 1870s published recurring front-page articles in support of Ottoman Armenians.

Important Research Findings

My research has uncovered the degree to which early nineteenth-century Russo-Armenian ties benefited from the symbiotic demands of each side. For Christian Armenians struggling under Muslim subjugation, the Russian annexation in 1828 of their traditional homeland heralded cultural and social revitalization. For Russians, the absorption of Erivan khanate expanded the tsar's domains closer to the coveted trade routes linking Europe, the Middle East, and India. Russia's strategic incentives for expansion into the South Caucasus were overshadowed only by its pursuit of economic fruits. Armenian merchants, now under Russian aegis, were key to realizing this aim. From granting exclusive economic rights, including entire industrial monopolies and tax exemptions, to permitting the spread of Armenian-owned and operated factories and mills throughout Russia proper, St. Petersburg looked to its new Armenian subjects to secure the economic vitality of the empire.

The institutionalization of the early Russo-Armenian dynamic took place with the establishment of the Lazarev Institute of Oriental Languages in 1815. Financed by the Lazarev family, the academy's sprawling campus in central Moscow educated Armenian and other youths from diverse social and geographic backgrounds. The scions of St. Petersburg and Moscow's wealthiest Armenian families learned alongside their compatriots from penurious Caucasus villages. The institute's emphasis on Armenian language and culture training, boosted by the state's support for a unique entity that trained cadres of Orientology experts, yielded alumni who reached the highest rungs of the tsarist government. Even expulsion from the strictly administered academy did not ruin a student's future. When in the late 1830s, for example, a young pupil named Mikhail smothered his teacher's chair with enough glue that the hapless educator had to be rescued by his colleagues, the Armenian prankster was expelled. The future

looked bleak for young Mikhail, and few could have imagined that within four decades this mischievous Armenian teenager would become the second-most powerful man in the empire, Minister of Internal Affairs Mikhail Loris-Melikov.

Another telling example of early Russo-Armenian cooperation is the participation of Armenian volunteers in the Russian war effort during the Second Russo-Persian War of 1826-28. Military records from RGVA illustrate the systematic engagement of South Caucasus Armenians with the Russian push into Persian territory. Armenians collected military intelligence about Persian troop movements and encampments, strength and composition of enemy forces, and provided Russian commanders with suggestions for best routes. Russian generals also looked to Armenians to serve as translators, periodically employing local Armenians to facilitate negotiations and correspondence with Persian officials. Perhaps more significantly, volunteer brigades of Armenians, sometimes several thousand strong, fought alongside the tsarist army.

The evolution of Russo-Armenian relations in the nineteenth century cannot be divorced from Russia's conquest of the Caucasus. For much of the century, Russia had few allies in the region except Armenians. Anti-tsarist insurgency raged in the Muslim-populated North Caucasus, reaching its apex in the 1840s under the able leadership of Shamil, an Avar warlord who united Chechen and Dagestani tribes into a cohesive anti-Russian resistance. My research at the Russian State Library revealed the details of this important development. In the South Caucasus, too, Georgian nobles remained wary of Russia's unilateral annexation of traditional Georgian homelands and the removal from the throne of the ancient Bagratid dynasty, contradicting earlier agreements reached between the Russian and Georgian monarchs. Correspondence between Russian officials and Georgian Prince Alexander, who fled Georgia and joined North Caucasus

highlanders (*gortsy*) in an anti-tsarist revolt, demonstrate the strife between the two sides. Indeed, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Russia was up against an unenviable amalgamation of foes: the Persian and Ottoman empires, the Muslim insurgency in the North Caucasus, and Georgian elite resistance in the South Caucasus.

Russia's pacification of the North Caucasus moved closer to success in 1859 with the capture of Shamil. With the threat of the Muslim *gortsy* alleviated, and less active confrontation with Persia and Turkey, Russia's approach to the region and its inhabitants evolved. By the second half of the nineteenth century, with its grip on the Caucasus tightly in place, the tsarist state had fewer incentives to provide economic and social privileges to Armenians. The rise of Armenian nationalisms coincided with Russia's total conquest of the Caucasus and the pacification of the *gortsy*. Less concerned about the Dagestani and Chechen insurrections or territorial disputes with Persia and Turkey, the Russian empire not only had fewer reasons to continue its privileged treatment of Armenians, but with the development of Armenian nationalism it found justification to spread the full force of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality" on Armenians. Records from RGIA and GARF, for example, demonstrate the gradual abatement in the latter nineteenth century of the early tax breaks granted to the Armenian communities of Astrakhan, Rostov, and other major Russian cities. When Armenians resisted, the Lazarevs and other prominent Russian-Armenians petitioned the state—often successfully—thereby challenging the notion of a repressive and omnipotent tsarist nationality policy.

The souring of the Russo-Armenian encounter accompanied a growing Armenian national awakening, which, compounded by such imperial policies as the compulsory teaching of Russian in Armenian schools, gradually led to the formation of a diverse Armenian nationalist movement. I have accessed a large volume of fruitful documents from the Ministry of Internal

Affairs and other state organs that pursued Armenian nationalists in the latter nineteenth century. These investigations evince the state's growing concern with their hitherto loyal subjects, exposing the methods and aims of late imperial nationalities policy. This development's most salient manifestation came with the closing of the Armenian parish schools, an attack not just on the Armenian nation's cultural and social heart, but also its sacrosanct religious identity. Whereas the zenith of Russo-Armenian ties was reached during the 1826-28 Russo-Persian war and the subsequent relocation of Persian Armenians into the Russian South Caucasus, the nadir of this imperial relationship arrived with the closing of the parish schools in the last two decades of the century.

Yet Armenian nationalist organizations pursued a spectrum of aims, not easily discernable to Russian police and bureaucrats. I collected documents illustrating the multiplicity of Armenian nationalisms, and the attendant variety of Russian responses. Some (Eastern) Armenians sought the protection of neighboring Ottoman Armenians from the real and imagined abuses at the hands of the local Turkish authorities and civilians. Others advocated the establishment of an autonomous republic within the Russian Empire, one that would enjoy the contours of statehood, but would also benefit from the protection of the imperial order. The most radical faction of Armenian irredentists strove to unite Western and Eastern Armenia to establish a sovereign nation-state.

What does this distinct arc of nineteenth-century Russo-Armenian ties tell us? First, it supports an argument that Russia was at once Armenians' closest ally and the greatest threat to their national identity. Transitioning from the rescue of Armenians from the real and imagined dangers of Muslim subjugation to attempted Russification, this dynamic reveals the myriad ways in which the tsarist empire adapted to changing circumstances. Second, just as this research will

contribute to a growing body of scholarship that emphasizes the multiplicity of Russian imperialisms, it will contribute to an understanding of the various Armenian nationalisms of the pre-Soviet era. My work will demonstrate that tensions between nationalism and imperialism are multivalent: no static “Russian imperialism” or “Armenian nationalism” guided the evolution of the nineteenth-century Russo-Armenian encounter.

Policy Implications

This dissertation provides several implications for United States foreign policy. First, Russia’s complex encounter with the Caucasus remains largely obscure to American decision makers, although a few recent publications have begun to fill this important lacuna.¹ Russia’s two wars in the breakaway republic of Chechnya in the 1990s, as well as the subsequent instability in the neighboring republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia, have elicited the US government’s concerns regarding human rights and terrorism. The acute need for a thorough understanding of these conflicts became especially salient after the April 2013 bombings at the Boston Marathon, carried out by two Chechen immigrants.

Second, throughout the South Caucasus, major intercontinental pipelines carry millions of barrels and cubic meters of crude oil and natural gas, linking the energy producing states of the Middle East and Azerbaijan with European markets. Echoing their vicious rivalries of yesteryear, modern Russia, Turkey, and Iran continue to vie for economic and political influence in the South Caucasus. It is therefore crucial to gain a more thorough understanding of this region’s development and Russia’s role in its evolution. As the historical nucleus of Russian rule in the region, Armenia holds the key to this story. Analyzing the genesis of Russia’s role in the

¹ Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

South Caucasus gives insight into its geopolitical interests—both historical and contemporary—in that region and beyond.

Third, the current Ukrainian crisis provides another jarring reminder of the need for understanding modern Russia's deep involvement with its former imperial and Soviet domains. It is fair to argue that Moscow's view of Armenia is analogous to its claims for Ukraine constituting Russia's "historical sphere of influence," although there are important cultural distinctions between Ukraine and Armenia. Just as President Putin and Russia's political elite cite their state's centuries-old engagement with Ukraine to justify today's events, contemporary Russian-Armenian relations are based on two centuries of political, social, and cultural interaction. This fact is particularly conspicuous in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which Russia helps mediate, as well as Putin's Customs Union alternative to the European Union. Through its emphasis on how Russian imperialism functioned in Armenia, my research serves as more than a narrative of the past. Rather, it provides clarification and lessons for American officials who weigh the ever-present Russian factor in formulating US policy for the region.

Plans for Future

The research I conducted with the support of American Councils will constitute the backbone of my doctoral dissertation. Over the next two academic years I will collect additional material and produce dissertation chapters, aiming to defend in spring 2016. During the writing process, I will submit articles for publication in peer-reviewed academic journals and present my research at conferences. My aim is to engage a broad community of Western, Russian, and Armenian audiences. To this end, I will build upon the professional connections I fostered over the past nine months in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In the former city, I met several Russian graduate

students, some of whom work on related projects. In the latter city, I met faculty members from two local universities, the Higher School of Economics and the European University of St. Petersburg, who have invited me to present my research at these institutions in the fall. I have also made contacts with scholars in Yerevan, Armenia, where I hope to conduct supplemental research in the coming months. The financial and logistical support of the American Councils Title VIII Research Scholar Program, not only for my dissertation, but also for my broader professional goals, cannot be overstated. Thank you very much!

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