A New Line in Russian Strategic Thinking and in North Caucasia

Sean Pollock
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> "The fortification of the borders of our Fatherland between the Terek River and the Azov Sea against the groups living by the Caucasus Mountains is among the most memorable, and for the Russian State, beneficial events to occur during the glorious reign of wise CATHERINE."
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> --Johann Anton Güldenstädt, *Mesiatsoslov na 1779 g.*[1]

> "The newly built forts on the Mozdok Line are the main cause of all the disturbances and raids that we have carried out on Russia's borders…."
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> --Kabardian chiefs, in a letter to Catherine II, 1782[2]

As we saw in chapter 2, Russian foreign policy in the first decade of Catherine's reign was chiefly concerned with events in Europe. The government's strategic priorities found their fullest reflection in the Northern System, which aimed at projecting Russian power into Poland and across the Baltic Sea. The system seemed to work reasonably well, at least initially. But the experience of the Russo-Ottoman war of 1768-74 showcased its limitations. During the war, Russia lost ground to Prussia and Austria in Poland and to France in Sweden—the two outcomes the system had been specifically designed to avoid. Perhaps more egregiously, the system left the empire vulnerable to attack in the South and without fighting allies in case of war with its traditional enemies, the Ottoman Porte and the Crimean Khanate. Although the Ottoman military machine was no longer the dominant force it had once been, it was still capable, when combined with Crimean auxiliaries, of wreaking havoc in Russia's southern borderlands, as the events of January 1769 amply demonstrated.[3] The war years brought to light other chinks in the

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[1] I. A. Gil'denshtedt, "Geograficheskiia i istoricheskiia izvestiia o novoi pogranichnoi linii Rossiiskoi imperii, provedennoi mezhdu rekoiu Terekom i Azovskim morem," in *Sobranie sochinenii, vybrannykh iz Mesiatsoslovov na raznye gody*, vol. 4 (St. Petersburg: Imp. Akademii Nauk, 1790), 149.

[2] *KRO*, 2: 340.

[3] Fisher, *Russian Annexation*, 31-2; Aksan, *Ottoman Statesman*, 119.

Imperial strategic armor. In North Caucasia, Kabardian and other native groups were determined to resist Russian attempts to subjugate them; that they had ties to the Porte and Crimea only made them appear more dangerous in the eyes of Russian policy-makers. Further east, the success of Pugachev and his cohorts exposed the tenuousness of central authority in the Volga basin. These events forced the central government to divert precious resources away from the main theater of military operations and thus served to underscore the relative weakness of Imperial defenses in the South.

Clearly, Russia required a new strategy capable of addressing both the problems and promise of its southern periphery. But who in Catherine's government had the cast of mind and experience to understand that the greatest threats to Russian security, and the greatest prospects for Russian prosperity, were in the South and not the North? The head of the College of Foreign Affairs, Nikita Panin, who remained committed to the Northern System even after 1774? The president of the War College, Zakhar Chernyshev, who was being blamed by his enemies for Cossack unrest? Or perhaps the fallen favorite, Grigorii Orlov, who proved during the war that he could bring neither peace to Russia nor peace of mind to Catherine?[4] None of these would do. Russia needed visionary statesman ready to embrace and elaborate on the promise of the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji, and Catherine—a partner worthy of sharing the burden of rule. She found both in Grigorii Aleksandrovich Potemkin.

The rise of Potemkin in 1774 marked a new phase in Catherine's personal life and the political history of her reign. The empress had at last found a man who possessed, in her words, "all the qualities I love."[5] He seemed to her "utterly uncommon, quite distinct from others,"[6] not least because his understanding of Russian interests, forged in the crucible of war, was at odds with the reigning strategic thinking. According to his nephew and trusted aide, during the war Potemkin conceived a plan aimed at establishing Russia as the dominant force in the Black Sea basin and eliminating Ottoman influence there.[7] The plan, which was known to

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[4] I discuss each of these statesmen in detail below.

[5] Catherine to Potemkin, [10 April 1774], *Ekaterina II i G. A. Potemkin: Lichnaia perepiska, 1769-1791*, comp. and ed. Viacheslav S. Lopatin (Moscow: "Nauka," 1997), 22 [hereafter cited as *Perepiska*].

[6] Catherine to Potemkin, [28 Feb. 1774], Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 12.

[7] A. N. Samoilov, "Zizhn' i deianiia general-fel'dmarshala kniazia Grigoriia Aleksandrovicha Potemkina-Tavricheskago," *Russkii arkhiv*, no. 7 (1867): 1010.

contemporaries as the "Eastern System" and referred to by Catherine, in her correspondence with Potemkin, simply as "your work,"[8] envisioned among other things the radical transformation of the political and social landscape in North Caucasia. In order to carry out the plan, which would continue to evolve in response to events taking place on Russia's frontiers and beyond its borders, Catherine concentrated immense power in her colleague's hands. By 1776 Potemkin had become much more than a royal favorite: he was adjutant general to Her Imperial Majesty; lieutenant colonel of the elite Preobrazhenskii Regiment; *général en chef* and vice-president and de facto head of the War College; governor-general of New Russia, Azov and Astrakhan Provinces; commander-in-chief of all light cavalry, the Don Host, and all irregular (i.e., Cossack) troops; Count of the Russian Empire; Prince of the Holy Roman Empire; and cavalier of the orders of St. Aleskandr Nevskii, St. Andrei the First-Called, and St. George, among others. He had fully justified the empress's confidence in him by helping to secure Russia against its external and internal enemies and artfully negotiating the political maelstrom caused by his own meteoric rise. In the process, he established a party of loyal clients at Court that could protect his interests in the capital while he concentrated on the business of building Russia's empire in the South.

Historians have thrown considerable light on Potemkin's activities in the Black Sea basin. His initiatives in New Russia and Azov, and in connection with the integration of Cossack Hosts into the fabric of the empire, have been particularly well studied.[9] That he also made original and important contributions to Russian foreign policy has been recently demonstrated by Ol'ga Eliseeva.[10] But whether dealing with the reign in general or Potemkin in particular, much of the best work on Catherinian Russia has left largely unexplored the question of Potemkin's involvement in Caucasian affairs.[11] This has made it difficult for historians to provide a

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[8] Catherine to Potemkin, 23 November 1787, Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 254.

[9] The most detailed account is in E. I. Druzhinina, *Severnoe prichernomor'e v 1775—1800 gg.* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1959); see also Marc Raeff, "In the Imperial Manner," in *Catherine the Great: A Profile*, ed. Marc Raeff (New York: **???**), ???; Roger P. Bartlett, *Human Capital: The Settlement of Foreigners in Russia 1762—1804*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 124-34; Madariaga, *Russia*, ch. 23; Kamenskii, *"Pod seniiu*," **ch.?**; Montefiore, *Prince of Princes*, esp. ch. 18.

[10] Ol'ga Eliseeva, *Geopoliticheskie proekty*.

[11] Madariaga (*Russia*, 369), Kamenskii (*"Pod seniiu*," 330); Montefiore (*Prince of Princes*, 291-2, 385, 396, 445), Eliseeva (*Geopoliticheskie proekty*, 179-86), and LeDonne (*Russian Empire*, 107) treat the topic cursorily; Bartlett (*Human Capital*, 118-24) summarizes his settlement policies in North Caucasia.

convincing account of Russian imperial expansion in Caucasia after 1774, for no Russian statesman loomed larger than Potemkin in the life of the region from 1776 until his death in 1791.

In this chapter I examine relations between the Russian government and the native groups of North Caucasia in the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman war of 1768-74. I argue that the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji had little impact on Imperial policy toward the region. To be sure, St. Petersburg intended to use the treaty to press its claims in Kabarda. But there was nothing new in Russian attempts to subjugate Kabardians, a project dating to the sixteenth century. In the war's immediate aftermath, central authorities ordered its agents in the field to assume a defensive posture along the Terek River and explicitly rejected the idea of further southward expansion. After 1776, however, this policy was gradually abandoned as responsibility for the government's Caucasian portfolio passed from the College of Foreign Affairs and into the hands of Prince Potemkin. With Catherine's blessing, Potemkin opened a new era in the military colonization of North Caucasia. In his capacity as head of the War College and governor-general of Astrakhan, he made strengthening Imperial defenses in the region a priority. He proposed building a new fortified line between Mozdok and the Azov Sea, and settling Cossacks, regular troops, and retired soldiers on the lands behind the line. Largely completed by 1780, the so-called Mozdok-Azov (or New Mozdok) Line represented Russia's first attempt to establish a single border across the entire region, thereby turning its vast North Caucasian frontier into an Imperial borderland. At the same time, Potemkin tasked General Aleksandr Suvorov with supervising the construction of forts and redoubts on the right bank of the Kuban River, in violation of Russia's treaties with Crimea and the Porte.[12] Finally, in yet another departure from standing policy, Potemkin encouraged the dependent population of Kabarda to abandon their masters and settle in Russia. In this way he hoped simultaneously to weaken Kabardian headmen by robbing them of their human capital, and to provide Russia with the means to settle, assimilate, and defend its Caucasian borderlands.[13]

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[12] Article 3 of the Treaty of Karasu Bazaar, in *PSZ*, vol. XIX (St. Petersburg, 1830), no. 13943, p. 710, and article 3 of the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji,Hurewitz, ed., *Diplomacy*, 55-6, recognized Crimean suzerainty in the Kuban valley.

[13] Using this same approach Potemkin achieved more famous results in Crimea in 1778. In that year, Suvorov oversaw the resettlement from Crimea to Russia of more that 30,000 Armenian, Greek, Georgian, and other Christian groups. See, for example, A. V. Suvorov, *Pis'ma*, ed. and comp. V. S. Lopatin (Moscow: "Nauka," 1986), 511 n. 3.

On paper it seemed an elegant strategy, one that promised to make Russia both more secure and prosperous. In practice, however, its design made further conflict between Russia and the native groups of North Cauacsia all but inevitable. The stated purpose of the Mozdok-Azov Line, after all, was not only to protect "from raids by neighbors the border between Astrakhan and the Don," but also "to cut off various mountain peoples, in the feeding of their horses and livestock, from those places that ought to be used by our subjects."[14] Potemkin made it clear to Catherine and Panin that the new line would sever Caucasian highlanders from their winter pastures and other vital resources, chief among which was salt. Because they depended on these resources for subsistence, the highlanders viewed the line as a threat to their very existence. Not surprisingly, they reacted to this new round of building and settlement activities much as they had to the founding of Fort Mozdok. When their complaints and raiding activities failed to achieve the desired result, they fought a guerilla war until Russia forces crushed the Kabardian-led insurgency in 1779. That year was a watershed in the history of Russian-Caucasian relations, though historians have generally overlooked this fact. Having suffered massive losses in the fighting, Kabardian chiefs were then forced to agree to humiliating terms that classified them as Russian subjects, established the Malka and Terek Rivers as the southern boundary of Kabarda, and granted to all Kabardians the right to settle in Russia. Thereafter Potemkin continued to push ahead with plans to settle and assimilate Russia's Caucasian borderlands, leaving the region's fiercely independent native groups with little choice but to push back.

The Center-Periphery Dynamic in Post-War North Caucasia

Throughout most of the eighteenth century, the College of Foreign Affairs was the central governmental agency responsible for conducting Russia's relations with the native groups of North Caucasia. Its officials worked closely with the governor of Astrakhan and the commandants of Forts Kizliar and (after 1763) Mozdok. The exigencies of war, however, had caused the central government to grant extraordinary powers to Major General Ivan de Medem, who was appointed Commander-in-Chief of Imperial forces in North Caucasia in 1769. His

[14] "Description of the Line between the Terek and the Don," *SIRIO* 145 (1914): 414.

mission was twofold: to defend the empire's exposed Caucasian frontier and to oversee relations with its neighbors. After the war St. Petersburg continued to rely on Medem to carry out these duties. As far as the central government was concerned, the war and peace had brought about a change in the status of Kabarda. Whereas the Treaty of Belgrade had proclaimed Kabardian independence, the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji marked the end of that experiment and spoke of Kabarda's political destiny in vastly different terms. It fell to Medem to convey his government's interpretation of the treaty to the region's leaders.

Medem was apprised of Russia's post-war policy toward Kabarda in a secret rescript drafted by the College of Foreign Affairs and confirmed by Catherine on 5 September 1774. Officials in St. Petersburg hoped the restoration of peace between Russia and the Porte would "naturally put a stop to the evil deeds of the barbaric peoples neighboring Kizliar and free you from the worry of having constantly to mobilize forces in defense of the lands under your guard." They believed the key to peace in the region was to be found in certain articles of Russia's recent treaties, and were eager for Caucasian highlanders to learn their contents from Imperial authorities. The College therefore provided Medem with copies of the articles in Russian and "Turkish" (i.e., Tatar) "so that Kabardian chiefs would be able to read the exact words used in the treaties."[15] Article 3 of the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji, Medem now learned, announced the independence of the Tatars of the northern Black Sea littoral. The implied message for the tribes of North Caucasia was that the Porte no longer had a political voice in the affairs of Crimea and Kuban. As for Kabarda—that great abstraction—it now belonged to Russia. This was how the government justified its claims in Kabarda:

> The treaty concluded with the Ottoman Porte, specifically article 21, says this about [the Kabardians]: 'Both Kabardas, that is, Great and Little, on account of [their] proximity to the Tatars, have strong ties to the khans of Crimea; thus, their belonging to the Russian Imperial Court must be left to the will of the Crimean Khan, his Council and the elders of the Tatar nation.' The Crimean Khan, for his part, has already recognized the Kabardians' belonging to our scepter by the terms of the treaty of friendship and alliance concluded with our plenipotentiary Lt. General Shcherbinin on 1 November 1772 (in [the negotiation of] which authorized Crimean and Nogai deputies, besides the khan, participated). Article 3 of the treaty with the Tatar region states exactly and precisely: 'All Tatar and Circassian peoples, Tamantsy and Nekrasovtsy, who, prior to the present war, were under the authority of the Crimean Khan, shall remain under the authority of

[15] Imperial rescript to Medem, 5 Sept. 1774, "K istorii Kavkaza i Zakavkaz'ia," *Russkii arkhiv*, no. 4 (1889): 559-60.

> the Crimean Khan as before; Great and Little Kabarda, however, are under the suzerainty of the Russian Empire.'[16]

As if the anticipating the confusion this argument was likely to engender, the authors of the rescript elsewhere stated the policy with greater concision and clarity: "Kabardians, that is, the inhabitants of Great and Little Kabarda, are to remain under our suzerainty." It should be remembered that Kabardians had been among the Caucasian peoples that Medem subjugated in 1769 and 1770, an achievement proudly trumpeted in the newspapers of St. Petersburg.[17] Thus the recent treaties did not cause a change in the status of Kabarda as much as they provided a legal justification, no matter how weak or strong, for maintaining the status quo.

Clearly, the wording of article 21 of the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji left some Russian policy makers feeling uncomfortable. They understood that the article by itself could not settle the Kabardian question in Russia's favor, as it left the final word on Kabarda to the Crimean khan and his advisers. Medem was therefore instructed to refer his Caucasian interlocutors to the Russo-Crimean agreement of 1772, which stated in clear language what the Russo-Ottoman treaty of 1774 did not, namely, that Kabarda was subject to Russia. St. Petersburg viewed the two treaties as complimentary, and so have most historians of Russia ever since.[18] It mattered little to Russian officials at the time (or to historians later) that the Russo-Crimean agreement of 1772 had been reached during the war, with Russian troops occupying Crimea, or that Ottoman officials, on learning of the treaty, had refused to recognize it as binding.[19] Nor did it trouble them greatly when Devlet Giray, having seized the Crimean throne in December 1774, cited the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji in support of *his* claims of suzerainty over Kabarda. Yet few if any in St. Petersburg believed that the Kabardian question had been decisively resolved in 1774.

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[16] Ibid., 560-1.

[17] I discuss Medem's campaign of 1769-70 in chapter 2 of this study; the relevant documents are in *KRO*, 2: no. 207-10; see also Medem's report to the College of Foreign Affairs, 18 Sept. 1770, AVPRI, f. Kabardinskie dela, op. 115/1, 1770, d. 3, ll. 1-8.

[18] See, for example, the maps in Bartlett, *Human Capital*, 123, Montefiore, *Prince of Princes*, 506, and Smith, *Love and Conquest*, 395, where Kabarda is marked annexed to Russia in 1774. Historians of the Ottoman Empire, on the other hand, have generally not accepted the official Russian interpretation of article 21 of the treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji. For example, Aksan (*Ottoman Statesman*, 167), in summarizing the treat's articles, does not include Kabarda among Russia's territorial acquisitions.

[19] Druzhinina, *Kiuchuk-kainardzhiiskii mir*, 206-8.

Such matters, to paraphrase the head of the College of Foreign Affairs, could not be settled by the mere stroke of a pen.[20]

Indeed, the College anticipated difficulties in getting Kabardian chiefs to acknowledge Russian suzerainty. It knew these men to be fiercely independent and tied to Russia's rivals, Crimea and the Porte, "by a common religion, way of life, and to a certain degree, nature itself." Meanwhile, their relationship with the Russian government had become almost exclusively adversarial in nature. Mindful of this, the College instructed Medem to assure Russia's newly minted subjects that their government would not seek retribution for past transgressions. Though deserving of punishment, they would be spared "in the hope that by their future peaceful behavior they will answer for past deeds, and will remain loyal to us on the basis of the oath taken at the beginning of the recent war." Central authorities had no intention of interfering in Kabardians' internal affairs, but desired only to "count them among our subjects, in the same way their ancestors had voluntarily adhered to our empire from the earliest times." Russia was prepared to tolerate Kabardians and other "barbarians and adherents of Islam" in the vicinity of Kizliar as long as they comported themselves peacefully. Finally, Medem was charged with leading the fight for Kabardian hearts and minds. He and his men were instructed to treat Kabardians with "moderation, leniency, and fairness," so that they might acknowledge Russian authority not only out of necessity, but also as a result of reflecting on the benefits of doing so. Dereliction of duty or negligence on the part of Russian officials would be "harshly punished."[21]

The central government adopted a different policy for dealing with leaders who challenged its authority elsewhere in the region. By September, news of the death in Caucasian captivity of Academician Samuel Gottlieb Gmelin had reached the capital. Gmelin, a professor of botany and doctor of medicine, had been part of a team of scientists conducting research and gathering reconnaissance in Caucasia under the auspices of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He was conducting fieldwork in Dagestan when he and his colleagues were taken captive and

[20] "This matter, of course, is not the sort that can be entirely settled by the mere stroke of a pen." Count Panin to Field Marshal Rumiantsev, November 1774, *SIRIO* 135 (1911): 278. Panin was specifically referring to article 3 of the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji.

[21] 5 Sept. rescript to Medem, 561-2.

delivered to Emir Hamza, the *utsmi*, or chief, of the Kara Kaytak of central Dagestan.[22] In commenting on the affair in a letter to authorities in Kizliar, the *utsmi* tied Gmelin's abduction to the refusal of Kumyk chiefs under Russian protection to return Jews and Tatars who, he claimed, rightfully belonged to him. He was prepared to release Gmelin on the condition that Russia use its influence with its Kumyk clients to cause the return of his former dependents, or else pay a ransom of 30,000 rubles.[23] (Russia at the time was paying one such client, Prince Khamurza of Kostek, in northern Dagestan, an annuity of 100 rubles.[24]) In the end, Russia refused to satisfy either demand.

The affair outraged minds in St. Petersburg. The government rehearsed its options in instructions to Medem. It authorized the general to wage what amounted to a public relations campaign beyond Russia's borders aimed at discrediting the leader of the Kara Kaytak. He was to write to regional leaders to request they use their good offices to persuade the *utsmi* to free any survivors of the Gmelin-led expedition and return to Russia the scholar's personal affects. In stating the case against the *utsmi*, the College employed rhetorical strategies designed to appeal to Caucasian sensibilities as well as to Europeans steeped in Enlightenment ideals. In seizing Gmelin "not on the road, but in [the *utsmi*'s] own domicile, where the professor had arrived without any concern for his own safety, but rather in hopes of finding assistance," the *ustmi* had acted "not only in violation of the proper respect due to our Imperial Court, but also [in violation] of the right of hospitality (*prava goshcheniia i strannopriimstva*) held sacred by highlanders themselves." Russian protection, the argument went, should have sufficed to insure Gmelin's safety, but the fact that he was traveling in the region "for the general good, working to acquire and gather hitherto unknown medicinal herbs" meant that he was therefore "deserving of everyone's care."[25]

Medem was also authorized to conduct a punitive military campaign against the the *utsmi* in retaliation for his perceived transgressions. Characteristically, the central government viewed

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[22] According to legend, the *utsmi* was descended from the Arab governors who brought Islam to Caucasia in the eighth century, and the Kaytak were among the first groups in Dagestan to embrace Islam. In the eighteenth century he was one of the strongest rulers in Dagestan. See "Kaytak," c.v. *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new ed., 4: 846-7.

[23] 5 Sept. rescript to Medem, 562-4; the affair is discussed in Butkov, *Materialy*, 2: 13-16.

[24] Gil'denshtedt, *Puteshestvie*, 40.

[25] 5 Sept. rescript to Medem, 563.

the military as the most effective means of projecting its power into the region. It hoped that the rulers of Dagestan and the Caspian littoral would seize the opportunity to take revenge on the *utsmi* for past offenses and join forces with Medem. But officials in the capital were cognizant of the considerable logistical and other challenges that would likely attend a campaign into Dagestan, and they were not willing to commit any resources beyond those Medem already possessed. St. Petersburg was therefore prepared to settle for an apology from the *utsmi* and a pledge to refrain from committing hostile acts against Russia in the future. The final decision was left to Medem. In the meantime, he was ordered to prohibit non-Muslim Russian couriers and merchants from traveling through Kara Kaytak lands (central authorities believed local warlords would be more likely to mistreat Christians than Muslims), and to encourage Russia's Kumyk clients to work out their differences with the *utsmi*.[26] These measures were meant to remove potential sources of conflict between the Russian government and Caucasian highlanders. Unfortunately for Gmelin, they had come too late.

While these instructions were being drawn up in St. Petersburg, Medem was busy conducting military operations in the Terek valley. In summer 1774 his troops were facing an insurgency led by Misost Bamatov and Khamurza Arslanbekov of Great Kabarda. These were the same men who had resisted Russian attempts to subjugate them in 1769. In the interim they had entered into an alliance with former Khan Devlet Giray, whom the Ottomans had sent in 1773 to their fort at Sudzhuk (Soğucuk) to create an uprising against the Russians in the Kuban region.[27] In June their forces laid waste to four Cossack stanitsas near Mozdok before being turned back at the Cossack stronghold of Naur on the Terek.[28] The following month Russia and the Porte made peace, but fighting between Imperial and tribal forces continued throughout the summer in the Terek-Kuban basin, evidence that Russo-Caucasian relations had a dynamic all their own. Medem closed Kizliar and Mozdok to the native groups living south of the Terek, yet Russian subjects and property continued to disappear into the mountains.[29]

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[26] Ibid., 563-5.

[27] Butkov, *Materialy*, 1: 332; Fisher, *Russian Annexation*, 52.

[28] According to Butkov (*Materialy*, 1:333 n. 1), the fighting at Naur was noteworthy "because women no less than men had shown courage in it. They poured onto Tatars hot food, boiling water, burning pitch, oil, sand, etc."

[29] In 1774 the residents of Kizliar and Mozdok were ordered to pay the ransom (not to exceed 150 rubles) for Russian subjects who had fallen into Caucasian captivity. Once freed, a former captive was expected to remain in

In fall Medem tested the hypothesis that Russia's treaties with Crimea and the Porte would bring peace to Caucasia. He convened an assembly of Caucasian headmen at which the relevant articles of the treaties were read in Russian and Tatar. Reaction to the event was apparently mixed. Some Little Kabardian and Kumyk leaders expressed satisfaction, perhaps believing that Russia would now do more to protect them against their rivals in Great Kabarda. Others, however, could hardly have been pleased to learn that their political fate had been decided by outside powers without their knowledge or participation. How would it be possible to reconcile themselves, after years of war, to the suzerainty of their erstwhile enemy? And what assurances did they have that the articles read to them were in fact genuine? Khamurza Arslanbekov may have spoken for many when he announced that he could not acknowledge Russian suzerainty until he received confirmation from Crimea.[30] Did this mean that he considered himself a subject of the Crimean khan? Or was his response merely an attempt to buy time for himself and his supporters? In gesturing to the authority of Crimea in matters Kabardian, Arslanbekov appeared to be acting in concert with article 21 of the treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji. This was precisely the outcome St. Petersburg had feared and taken steps avoid. Any hopes of Crimean acquiescence were dashed in December 1774, when Devlet Giray and his forces entered Crimea and overthrew the khan who had signed the 1772 instrument. Soon thereafter he abrogated that treaty and announced his pretensions in Kabarda. Though the khan could no longer count on the support of reformists within the Ottoman government, he had allies among Circassian and Abaza tribesmen in Kuban and the backing of the Tatar exile community *ulema* in Istanbul.[31] He was therefore very much a force to be reckoned with.

Medem, of course, had not forgotten his orders to launch a punitive campaign against the Kara Kaytak, conditions permitting. But the situation on the Mozdok-Kizliar Line remained dangerous, and winter was no time to march troops through mountainous Dagestan. He also needed time to build alliances, a task made easier by the inter-tribal rivalries that were a dependable feature of the Caucasian political landscape. The picture of Caucasian politics painted by officials in St. Petersburg turned out to be correct: many of the local rulers were

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the service of his liberator until the debt was repaid. On the ransoming of Christian captives in Caucasia, see Butkov, *Materialy*, 1:319-20 n.1.

[30] Butkov, *Materialy*, 1: 338 n.1.

[31] Fisher, *Russian Annexation*, 63; Aksan, *Ottoman Statesman*, 160-1, 173.

indeed "dissatisfied with each other" and only too eager "to use any pretext provided them to exact vengeance for their own particular reasons."[32] Fath Ali Khan, for example, had written to authorities in Kizliar to request military aid against the *utsmi*, whose siege of the khan's prized possession—Derbent—was entering its ninth month. When in March 1775 Imperial troops set out to avenge Gmelin's death, the khan and his allies hastened to join the campaign. Together they forced the *utsmi* to lift his siege of Derbent, which was on the verge of capitulation, and then defeated his forces in battle. Having thus executed his orders, Medem might have been expected to withdraw his forces to the Terek. But the campaign brought in train a series of events that neither the central government nor probably Medem himself had anticipated.[33]

At some point during the campaign, Fath Ali Khan made a formal request for Russian protection. Two of his allies, the *shamkhal* of Tarku and the chief of Buynak, in central Dagestan, followed his example; the latter sent a son and two *uzden*s as diplomatic hostages to Kizliar. According to Medem, the khan proposed placing a Russian garrison in Derbent. He then dispatched an envoy with the keys to the city to the Imperial Court. The envoy was instructed to declare his master's loyalty to the Russian empress and petition her for military aid. The khan was quite frank about the purpose of the aid: to conquer, with Russia's help, Shirvan and its environs all the way to the Kura River in South Caucasia. Any territory thereby acquired, according to the plan, would be annexed to his domains. He was prepared to recognize Russian suzerainty over his lands as long as his authority within them remained unchallenged. He believed Russia had already concluded similar agreements with the Crimean khan and King Erekle.[34]

What was the general to do? Had he been authorized to extend a formal offer of Russian protection to the rulers of Dagestan? Should he accept the khan's invitation to occupy strategically important Derbent, which Peter the Great himself had conquered half a century earlier? To defer taking action might mean passing up an opportunity to project Russian power into South Caucasia. Where were Russia's borders in the region, and was St. Petersburg seeking the ways and means to expand them? To do so bloodlessly and by invitation would bring glory

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[32] 5 Sept. rescript to Medem, 564.

[33] Butkov, *Materialy*, 2: 19-20.

[34] Butkov, *Materialy*, 2: 20-21.

to the empire, but it would also run the risk of provoking an Ottoman government still smarting from the humiliation of the recent war and peace. As for Iran, the general had been told that Russia considered it "a friendly power," and should have known that its treaties placed Dagestan in general and Derbent in particular "in the sphere of the Iranian State."[35]

Above all else, Medem was a man of action. To judge by events, he believed that in cultivating clients in Dagestan and establishing a forward position in Derbent he would be acting in the interests of Russia. He therefore encouraged regional leaders to petition the Russian government for protection and installed a Russian garrison in Derbent. Next he set out to engage the enemies of Fath Ali Khan. (In one of the ensuing campaigns, Imperial troops lost a standard, a drum, and other military paraphernalia—items the general was forced to ransom in order to avoid humiliation). Having defeated the *utsmi* and his allies, he compelled them to swear fealty to the Russian empress and surrender diplomatic hostages. Chechen raiding activity in the Terek valley forced him to cut short the campaign and return to the Line. There he gave orders to punish the "thieving band of Chechens" by setting fire to their villages and crops, a practice apparently embraced by both sides.[36]

News of Medem's adventures in Dagestan must have come as a surprise to officials in Moscow, where the Court spent much of 1775. Who, after all, had authorized him to conquer Dagestan and take its rulers into Russian protection? His instructions had envisioned at most the pacification of a single rogue warlord for specific wrongs, not the occupation of lands and the subjection of groups long viewed by Russian policy makers as belonging to Iran. By April 1775, the central government were more eager than ever to avoid military entanglements on its borders with Iran. New orders instructed Medem to "beware of taking any measures with regard to the Kara Kaytak ruler that might rekindle old passions and lead to frivolous disturbances and

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[35] 5 Sept. rescript to Medem, 563; Treaty of Ganja, 10 March 1735, *PSZ* (1st series), 9: 494.

[36] Butkov, *Materialy* 2: 21-23. In his section on "Kists" (i.e., Chechens), Gil'denshtedt, *Puteshestvie*, 239-40, gives the following account of their *modus operandi*: "They rob Russians not only in their own lands, but also on Russian territory beyond the Terek; they take people captive, rustle cattle, attack independent detachments, rustle horses from Cossacks and kill all who resist [them]; they also burn down *stanitsa*s when they can. For instance, in 1774 they attacked and plundered Naur *stanitsa* and rustled more than one thousand horses from the Cossack regiment. But with the arrival of Russian troops, whose number always exceeds theirs by a factor of ten, they attempt to inflict damage on them and attack them. Should they fail in this, however, they disperse, completely abandon their villages, solemnly promise to be loyal subjects, and surrender the most revered [among them] as hostages to Kizliar. At the first opportunity, however, these faithless people behave just as before."

unrest."[37] Instead of a punitive campaign against the *utsmi*, the government now hoped to achieve its ends by detaining his people or affects should they be discovered on Russian territory. These orders came too late to have an impact on events, however.

On learning the results of the campaign, the central government moved with urgency to reverse them. It recognized the defense of Fath Ali Khan against the *utsmi* as a "good" and the defeat of the *utsmi* as "necessary." These feats, however, made the continued presence of Russian troops in Dagestan "absolutely unnecessary" and even dangerous, since it would be likely to provoke the highlanders and unsettle relations with Iran and the Porte.[38] Medem was reprimanded for exceeding his orders by offering protection to the lords of Dagestan and garrisoning Derbent. Catherine vented her frustration at the general's willfulness in the margins of a report given her by the head of the War College. Opposite the words "Lt. General de Medem was surrounded on all sides by the enemy," Catherine exclaimed: "The devil ordered him to go to Derbent!" Apparently referring to the general, she opined, "The most idiotic of idiocies is better than His Excellency."[39] Because Derbent and its "Persian commander" were subject to Iran, the keys to the city would have to be returned and the Russian garrison ordered back to the Line. Nor would it be possible to maintain any of the lords of Dagestan in Russian protection given that "they live beyond our borders and their lands have always belonged to Persia."[40] Catherine's government, in other words, was not interested in cultivating new clients in the region, and pointed to the Kumyks living near Russia's borders as an example of how little was to be gained by providing their chiefs with grants and other rewards for their quiescence and cooperation. As for the specific "rules" of Russian policy toward Iran, they consisted in this: to maintain that country in its current state—that is, without a strong central government and with little real power in Caucasia, where independent, mutually hostile chiefdoms were the rule. A weak Iran and politically divided Caucasia was "always better and more advantageous" for Russia. Finally, Catherine and her advisers specifically ruled out territorial aggrandizement at

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[37] Imperial rescript to Medem, 26 April 1775, *SIRIO* 135 (1911): 377.

[38] Imperial rescript to Medem, 28 July 1775, *SIRIO* 135 (1911): 436.

[39] "Dve sobstvennoruchnyia rezoliutsii Imp. Ekateriny II na vsepodanneishem doklade G. A. Potemkina o polozhenii del na Kavkaze," *SIRIO* 27 (1880): 60.

[40] 28 July rescript to Medem, 437.

the expense of Iran, which they believed would serve as an invitation for the Ottomans to invade Iranian South Caucasia.[41] This was one of the lessons learned from Peter's Persian campaign.

The Petrine experience in Caucasia had another important lesson to teach. In 1723 the emperor had been forced to cut short the overland campaign primarily for logistical reasons. Despite relatively well-laid contingency plans, he was ultimately unable to deliver, either by land or sea, adequate provisions to troops stationed in Derbent. Half a century later, Medem encountered the same problem. Native groups hostile to the intrusions of uninvited outsiders, and likely tempted by the goods they carried, were frustrating the general's attempts to provision the Derbent garrison. Medem believed brigands operating under the protection of the chiefs of Enderi and Kostek—Russia's sometimes clients—were responsible for losses in Imperial materiel and personnel. He proposed holding these Kumyk headmen responsible for the actions of their dependents. Central authorities, however, saw things differently. Although Kumyks were referred to in official correspondence as Russian subjects, they often disobeyed Imperial orders. The loyalty of their chiefs was superficial in the extreme: "they come to us when they seek some advantage for themselves, or when they observe harsh measures being taken against them."[42] Their cooperation, in other words, was highly contingent and based on calculations of self-interest. As for the power they wielded over their people, it could be quite limited. It therefore made little sense to hold them responsible for the actions of their unruly subordinates. Still, Russia's Kumyk clients could be counted on to guarantee safe passage through northern Dagestan under the right conditions. In order to avoid such problems in the future, Russian commanders needed to do more to coordinate efforts in advance with the empire's local partners.[43]

These events throw interesting light on the center-periphery dynamic of Russian policy making. In the aftermath of the war, the central government took a cautious approach to empire building in North Caucasia. In crafting policy toward the region, it allowed itself to be guided by Russia's treaties. For example, it based Russia's claims in Kabarda on the treaties of Karasu Bazaar and Kuchuk Kainardji, and passed up an opportunity to extend Russian suzerainty over

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[41] Imperial rescript to Medem, 4 October 1775, *SIRIO* 135 (1911): 473.

[42] 28 July rescript to Medem, 437.

[43] Catherine to Medem, 4 October 1775, in *SIRIO* 135 (1911): 474-5; see also Butkov, *Materialy* 2: 28.

Dagestan because such a move would violate its treaties with Iran. That Kabardians had not taken part in the talks that attempted to decide their political future would not have concerned Catherine or her advisers in the least. The notion that a state could decide the political fate of a less powerful state, either unilaterally or by agreement with other powers, was axiomatic for them. Russian policy toward Poland had demonstrated this time and again, most recently in 1772 with the first partition of Poland. The same logic was applied to the stateless world of North Caucasia. The challenge was in getting local communities to adopt the same worldview.

Enter General Medem, the central government's proxy in North Caucasia. It fell to him to implement and communicate official policy to Russia's Caucasian neighbors. In the case of Kabarda, this meant informing its inhabitants of their subject status vis-à-vis the Russian Empire. As for the *utsmi* of the Kara Kaytak, he was to be either diplomatically isolated or militarily punished for his "temerity" (*proderzost'*) and made an example to others who would challenge Russian power in the Caspian basin. These were among Russia's main objectives in Caucasia as defined by the central government. In selecting the means to achieve them, however, Medem was given considerable latitude. To be sure, St. Petersburg might rehearse options (as it did in September 1774) and even urge a specific course of action (as it did in April 1775) in rescripts to its agents operating in the field. But on the implementation side of the policy equation, its orders tended to be prescriptive, not proscriptive. Typically, Medem's instructions enjoined him to "use your own discretion" (*deistvovat' po svoemu usmotreniiu*) and to choose a course of action "in accordance with local circumstances" (*po tamoshnym obstoiatel'stvam*). Commanders like Medem, in other words, were hardly yes-men. They were expected to use restraint and their best judgement in executing the Imperial will, but given the distance separating them from the capital, they were also expected to take initiative and make independent decisions.

St. Petersburg could neither predict nor fully control events in Caucasia. It had authorized the pacification of a single highland chief but received instead the conquest of Dagestan. It was forced to move quickly to nullify the results of this latter-day Persian campaign because they ran contrary to long-standing standing policy. The government's mental map of the political geography of Caucasia had not changed in response to the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji, as Medem's orders clearly demonstrate; the risk-averse system of Russia's "first minister" and head of the College of Foreign Affairs, Nikita Panin, remained in place. Russia's treaties had never specified the exact location of its borders in North Caucasia, but the College had long

since imagined it to run along the Terek. Although the government maintained a handful of Kumyk leaders as clients just south of the river, it viewed Dagestan as part of Iran. Medem's attempt to grow Russia's empire in the region, therefore, cannot be seen as the working out of a grand Imperial strategy. Rather, they reflected one man's understanding of Russian interests in Caucasia—a vision that was clearly at odds with the policies of his own government. In the course of carrying out a punitive campaign against the *utsmi*, Medem had used his discretion in reacting to events. He garrisoned Derbent and took oaths of allegiance from the lords of Dagestan not because his orders instructed him to do so, but because he was presented with an opportunity to do so. What forces or considerations had driven him to conquer Dagestan? Was it a desire to walk in the footsteps of Peter the Great; zeal for the empress; love of country; a quest for personal glory? Most likely, it was a combination of all of these. Catherine and her advisers appreciated the general's dilemma. Russia needed a strong and decisive leader on its congenitally turbulent North Caucasian frontier, so Medem was left in place until 21 May 1777, when he was ordered to hand over command to Major General Ivan Iakobi and report to the War College. His dismissal had less to do with his performance on the periphery than with changes that had taken place in the center. There a sea change in strategic thinking about Russia's mission in the world in general and in Caucasia in particular had taken place. Neither Russia nor its Caucasian periphery would ever be the same thereafter.

The Rise of Grigorii Aleksandrovich Potemkin and His Eastern System

> "Potemkin! Favor is a priceless gift of fate."
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> --Vasilii Petrov, in an ode to Potemkin, 1775[44]
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> "Everything that's best in the world falls to the court chamberlains and the generals."
>
> --Nikolai Gogol, *Diary of a Madman*, 1833[45]

[44] Vasilii Petrov, "Oda ego siiatel'stvu, grafu Grigor'iu Aleksandrovichu Potemkinu," (Moscow: n.p., 1775), 6.

[45] Nikolai Gogol, *The Complete Tales of Nikolai Gogol*, ed. Leonard J. Kent and trans. Constance Garnett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 251.

Fate had a hand in bringing Grigorii Aleksandrovich Potemkin to the attention of St. Petersburg, but it was ambition that drove him to make a brilliant career there. Born near Smolensk in Russia's western borderlands, Potemkin was delivered at an early age from a complicated family situation and provincial obscurity by a well connected relative and enrolled in the gymnasium attached to Moscow University. There he excelled in the study of Greek, theology, and the history of the Church. His intelligence and success in the classroom won him the patronage of university curator and royal favorite Ivan I. Shuvalov, who in 1757 presented the precocious and handsome young man at the Court of Empress Elizabeth. On returning to Moscow, Potemkin apparently lost interest in his formal studies and was famously expelled from the university for "laziness and non-attendance of classes." The splendor of the Imperial Court had apparently turned his head. He soon left behind family and friends in Moscow to join the Imperial Horse Guards in St. Petersburg.[46] The decision to make a career in the Guards was both calculated and fateful.

In Potemkin's day, the Russian ruling class was very much a warrior class and St. Petersburg was their "martial capital."[47] Potemkin and his ilk viewed service in the armed forces as both prestigious and profitable, one of the surest ways to make a brilliant career. Because of their proximity to the Imperial Court, membership in one the elite Guards regiments was highly prized. The Guards wielded considerable political power and were key players in the palace coups that took place between 1725 and 1762. Potemkin himself was among the conspirators who overthrew Peter III in 1762. For his part in the coup, Empress Catherine II rewarded him with promotion and riches. He was soon made a gentleman of the bedchamber, a court rank that gave him access to the palaces where Catherine and her advisers decided affairs of state.[48] Thus began Potemkin's professional liaison with Catherine.

Relatively little is known about Potemkin's activities in the period between the 1762 coup and the Ottoman declaration of war in 1768. But it is clear that Catherine took a special

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[46] A. Loviagin, "Potemkin, Grigorii Aleksandrovich," in *RBS* 14 (1905): 649-50; A. N. Samoilov, "Zhizn' i deianiia," 591-92; S. S. Ilizarov, *Moskovskaia intelligentsiia XVIII veka* (Moscow: "Ianus-K," 1999), 228; Montefiore, *Prince of Princes*, chap. 1.

[47] **Cite Miliukov on Russian ruling class as a warrior class**; I borrow the image of St. Petersburg as a "martial capital" (*voennaia stolitsa*) from Alexander Pushkin, "The Bronze Horseman: A Tale of Petersburg," *Pushkin Threefold*, trans. Walter Arndt (New York: Dutton, 1972), 405.

[48] Loviagin, "Potemkin," 650; Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 499; Montefiore, *Prince of Princes*, ch. 2-3.

interest in the young courtier. Potemkin became a member of Catherine's inner circle at Court, where he impressed her with his learning and entertained her with his wit.[49] In 1763 the empress appointed him to be her eyes and ears at the Holy Synod on the eve of the secularization of Church lands.[50] In 1767 he was made a "guardian" (*opekun*) of the deputies to the Legislative Commission who hailed from Russia's borderlands. It was probably then, if not earlier, that Potemkin developed a special interest in and enthusiasm for the empire's so-called "non-Russian element" (*inorodcheskii element*). These postings made sense given his deep and abiding interest in religious matters and that he was himself an exotic creature of the borderlands. Given Catherine's well-documented skill at matching talent to task, it appears she was playing to Potemkin's intellectual strengths and drawing on his background. By 1768 he held the court rank of actual gentleman of the bedchamber, or the equivalent of major general in the army.[51] During these years, Potemkin became intimately familiar with court politics and the workings of the central government. Contemporaries attributed to him "a strong desire to distinguish himself from others."[52] But there would be few if any opportunities to win glory from behind a bureaucrat's desk or at state banquets and balls. For that a battlefield was needed.

Russia was not prepared for war when it came in 1768, but Potemkin was eager to prove himself in battle and extend his patronage network beyond the confines of the capital. At Court adopted the empress's language of the "general good" (*pol'za obshchaia*) and endeavored to be a "good citizen" (*dobryi grazhdanin*). But he knew that Russian political culture was grounded less in Enlightenment abstractions than in relations between people. What mattered most in Russian politics were the ties that bound client to patron, "most loyal servant" (*vsepoddanneishii rab*) to "Beneficent Sovereign" (*Vsemilostiveishaia Gosudarynia*). In explaining his reasons for joining the war effort to Catherine, Potemkin spoke of the subject's duty before both sovereign and Fatherland, but he placed emphasis on the former. "Royal favor, with which I have been especially rewarded, fills me with excellent zeal for the person of Your Majesty. I am obliged to

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[49] Samoilov, "Zhizn' i deianiia," 604.

[50] On his appointment to the Synod, see the 14 Aug. 1763 *ukaz* and his 4 Sept. 1763 instructions in *SIRIO* 7 (1871): 316, 317.

[51] Loviagin, "Potemkin," 651.

[52] Samoilov, "Zhizn' i deianiia," 592; Catherine is quoted to the same effect in Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 502.

serve the sovereign and my benefactress."[53] Having established his credentials as a loyal client of the empress, Potemkin hoped to win the backing of the Imperial brass as well. During the war he served under Commanders-in-Chief Prince A. M. Golitsyn and Count P. A. Rumiantsev. He turned out to be a brave and able military commander. Rumiantsev recommended Potemkin's initiative and decisiveness to both Catherine and her favorite, Grigorii Orlov. For their part, Orlov referred to Potemkin as "my friend" and Catherine waxed patriotic about his qualities "which can bring benefit to the Fatherland."[54] Battle-tested and with patrons in high places, Potemkin was by the end of 1773 prepared to take the Russian capital by storm.

The former chamberlain returned to St. Petersburg in January 1774 as a general and decorated war hero. It is fair to say that he arrived in the capital at the invitation of the empress. She had written him the previous month to express concern about his situation. "Since for my part I very much desire to preserve zealous, brave, clever, and skillful people, I ask you not to endanger yourself needlessly. Having read this letter, you may ask, why was it written? To this I am able to offer you the following answer: so that you would have confirmation of my opinion of you."[55] This was hardly a direct summons, but Potemkin, reading between the lines, grasped the letter's subtext, freed himself from the business of war, and set out for the capital. The empress wrote to him again in February to confess her feelings for him with stunning frankness.[56] Potemkin seized the opportunity to request a new commission: adjutant general to the empress. "This will offend no one, and I shall take it as the zenith of my happiness, especially since, finding myself under the special patronage of Your Imperial Majesty, I shall be worthy to receive your sage commands and, grasping them thoroughly, to become more capable in the service of Your Imperial Majesty and the Fatherland."[57] Catherine granted the request on 1 March 1774, thereby officially marking Potemkin as the new royal favorite.

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[53] Potemkin to Catherine, 24 May 1769, Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 5.

[54] Loviagin, "Potemkin," 561-62; Orlov and Catherine are quoted in Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 502.

[55] Catherine to Potemkin, 4 December 1773, Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 7.

[56] Catherine to Potemkin, [21 February 1774], ibid., 9, where she also writes that "we had summoned [Potemkin] here, in secret, with a note," which may be a reference to the December letter mentioned above.

[57] Potemkin to Catherine, 27 February 1774, ibid., 11.

As favorite, he sat beside Catherine atop the Russian patronage pyramid: henceforth he would receive his orders only from the empress and was now himself in a position to dispense favor. As adjutant general he became a fixture at court. On 15 March he was promoted to lieutenant colonel of the Preobrazhenskii Regiment, the traditional power base of the brothers Orlov. The following month he occupied apartments in the Winter Palace. His star continued to rise in May, when Catherine made him vice president of the War College and governor-general of strategically important New Russia; he was also given a seat on the Imperial Council. By this time "Potemkin had indeed acquired," opined the British envoy, Sir Robert Gunning, "far more power than any of his predecessors."[58] Finally, there is reason to believe that the two were secretly married in June.[59]

These events came at a difficult time for Russia, which was still at war with the Ottomans and in the throes of the Pugachev Rebellion. Why would Catherine risk upsetting the balance of power at court and dividing the government at a time of national crisis? What considerations had led her to concentrate so much power in Potemkin's hands? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to understand that in elevating Potemkin, Catherine was choosing not so much a favorite as a partner with whom to share the burden of rule. She took action in early 1774 because her place on the Russian throne had never been more secure; because the need to do so was great, for personal and political reasons; and because by that time an ideal candidate for co-ruler had emerged in Potemkin.

In the first decade of her reign, Catherine had faced lingering questions about the legitimacy of her rule. Some of her supporters—Nikita Panin, for example—had backed the 1762 coup in the hope of putting Grand Duke Paul on the throne with Catherine as regent.[60] In order to counterbalance the forces that aimed at limiting her power, the empress promoted men whose loyalty to her was beyond question and whose political fate was inextricably tied to her

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[58] Gunning dispatch, 10 May 1774, *Russkii dvor sto let tomu nazad* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia "Osvobozhdenie," 1907), 199.

[59] For a recent discussion of the evidence for the marriage, see Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 479-86 and esp. 513-15; see also Madariaga, *Russia*, 344, 348; Montefiore, *Prince of Princes*, chap. 9; Douglas Smith, ed. and trans., *Love and Conquest: Personal Correspondence of Catherine the Great and Prince Grigory Potemkin* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004), xxxvii-xxxix.

[60] On the idea of a regency and other projects aimed at limiting Catherine's authority in the early years of her reign, see Madariaga, *Russia*, 28, 38-42; see also David Ransel, "Nikita Panin's Imperial Council Project and the Struggle of Hierarchy Groups at the Court of Catherine II," *Canadian Slavic Studies* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1970): 443-463.

own. The most important of these were the five Orlov brothers. In the end, plots to place the grand duke on the throne failed to materialize: Paul reached his majority in 1772 without incident and was married the following year.[61] Panin's services as tutor to the grand duke were therefore no longer needed, and Catherine seized the opportunity to distance the two. Meanwhile, she had grown weary of her favorite, Grigorii Orlov. During the war he had disappointed the empress both as a lover and a politician: on top of his many infidelities, he had failed at Fokshany to negotiate an end to the war.[62] Catherine replaced him as favorite in summer 1772 and thereby began the process of freeing herself from the guardianship of the Orlovs. Her power continued to grow with every Russian victory over the Ottomans, for as she understood well, the glory of the country was the foundation of her own glory.[63] By the end of 1773, Catherine had greater freedom of action than ever before. But the war was dragging on and the country was facing a fresh threat to its security from the direction of the Volga basin. To whom could Catherine turn for the sound counsel and comfort she would need in the difficult days ahead? Surely not the current favorite, Aleksandr Semenovich Vasil'chikov, a young guardsman and political neophyte whom the empress had chosen to replace Orlov in an act of "desperation."[64] Instead, she decided to tie her fate and that of the empire to a war hero with a bold vision for post-war Russia.

Catherine turned to Potemkin because she saw in him a bold spirit and the makings of a great statesman. He possessed the qualities she valued most: loyalty, initiative, intelligence, and originality. As noted above, Potemkin had served Catherine loyally and zealously from the first days of her reign. During the war, he volunteered for military service and distinguished himself as a brave warrior and an effective leader of men. His intelligence and keen wit, first glimpsed at Court in 1757 and evidenced throughout the 1760s, was known to Russians and foreigners alike: Grigorii Orlov found him "devilishly clever," and Gunning commented on the "liveliness of his

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[61] On plots to put the grand duke on the throne, see David L. Ransel, *The Politics of Catherinian Russia*: *The Panin Party* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1975), 227-48; Madariaga, *Russia*, 259-61.

[62] On Orlov's ham-fisted handling of the 1772 peace talks at Fokshany, see Druzhinina, *Kiuchuk-kainardzhiiskii mir*, ch. 5; on Catherine's awareness of his myriad amorous liaisons, see Madariaga, *Russia*, 259.

[63] Catherine (***Zapiski*, 627)** expressed this view while still a grand duchess: "The glory of the country will establish my own glory."

[64] Catherine to Potemkin, [21 February 1774], Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 9.

mind and his perspicacity."[65] According to one courtier, he could affect a winning public persona, "modest and pleasant."[66] In private with Catherine, however, he was irreverent and always original—"utterly uncommon, quite distinct from others."[67] He was large, he contained multitudes: "Infidel, Muscovite, Cossack, angry, dear, beautiful, clever, brave, courageous, enterprising, merry."[68] He had a plan for dealing with Pugachev and expediting the war's end—two of Russia's most urgent problems.[69] Finally, his vision for a post-war Russia was finding favor with Catherine.[70] All this explains why Catherine was willing, even eager, to entrust him with vast and unprecedented powers. Potemkin's meteoric rise had so upset the balance of power in the capital, however, that he was forced to concentrate on establishing a party capable of protecting his interests at Court before he could devote himself to the problems and promise of Russia's southern periphery.

If Potemkin ever sincerely believed that his rise to power would offend no one, he was proved wrong by events. In a letter to her husband, Field Marshal Petr Rumiantsev, court insider Ekaterina Rumiantseva conveyed a sense of the poisoned atmosphere in the capital. "You would not believe," she wrote, "how much intrigue and deception you'll find in people; one moment sincere friends are kissing and assuring each other, and the next are acting villainously toward one another."[71] Potemkin's portfolio made enemies of the Orlovs, Count Zakhar G. Chernyshev, and Grand Duke Paul Petrovich. As adjutant general to the empress and lieutenant colonel in the

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[65] Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 502; Gunning report, 6 May 1774, *Russkii dvor*, 199.

[66] Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 508.

[67] Catherine to Potemkin, [28 February 1774], ibid., 12.

[68] Catherine to Potemkin, [10 April 1774], ibid., 22.

[69] Samoilov, "Zhizn' i deianiia," 1013-14; Loviagin, "Potemkin," 654; Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 508, 511. With regard to Potemkin's contribution in the final months of the war, Catherine later recalled that "P[rince] G[rigorii] A[leksandrovich] P[otemkin] helped with many ideas and advice. He is boundlessly loyal…. [His] mind is superb, and he was very wise," in A. V. Khrapovitskii, *Dnevnik A. V. Khrapovistago s 18 Ianvaria 1782 po 17 Sentiabria 1793*, comment. Nikolai Barsukov (Moscow: V Universitetskoi tipografii, 1901), 5.

[70] Samoilov, "Zhizn'," 1010; the system's salient features are discussed on 1011-15.

[71] Rumiantseva to Rumiantsev, 20 March 1774, in Ekaterina Rumiantseva, *Pis'ma grafini E. M. Rumiantsovoi k eia muzhu fel'dmarshalu grafu P. A. Rumianstovu-Zadunaiskomu, 1762-1779* (St. Petersburg: Tip. I. N. Skorokhodova, 1888), 181. Ekaterina Mikhailovna Rumiantseva (1714-1779), was the daughter of the Petrine-era field marshal Prince Mikhail Mikhailovich Golitsyn, and served as Lady High Stewardess (*ober-gofmeisterina*, the top court rank for women) to the court of Grand Duke Paul. Her extraordinary letters offer deep insight into Catherinian political culture.

Preobrazhenskii Regiment, Potemkin posed a threat to the power and prerogatives of the brothers Orlov, his erstwhile comrades and patrons.[72] Although Grigorii Orlov had earlier been dismissed as royal favorite, he retained his seat on the Imperial Council. His brother, Aleksei, won a stunning victory over the Ottomans in the battle of Cheshme in 1770, and was the chief of the Preobrazhensty. Catherine advised Potemkin "not to harm, or attempt to harm Pr[ince] Or[lov] in my thoughts…. He loves you, and [the Orlovs] are my friends, and I will not part company with them."[73] Thus the Orlovs were an especially sensitive case, still very much a force to be reckoned with in 1774. Potemkin's elevation also menaced Zakhar Chernyshev, who was reported to be "greatly disturbed" by recent events and was threatening to retire to the provinces.[74] As president of the War College, Chernyshev was responsible for reporting directly to the empress on military affairs, a role usurped by Potemkin in March 1774. As a result, Chernyshev could be expected to support the Orlovs against their common rival, much as he did the last time he perceived a threat to his authority.[75] Finally, Rumiantseva observed that the grand duke did not care much for the new favorite.[76] In other words, powerful forces were arrayed against Potemkin. Even with Catherine's protection, he could not afford to have all of them as enemies. Nor could he ignore the towering figures of Counts Nikita and Petr Panin: the one was Catherine's closest adviser on foreign affairs, the other a celebrated general with strong support in Moscow. In order to secure his position in the capital, Potemkin would need to co-opt at least some of these forces into his own patronage network. At the very least, he would have to devise ways to vitiate attempts by rivals to contain the expansion of his authority. His ability to do so successfully would give the empress a good indication of his political viability and acumen.

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[72] The empress herself held the rank of colonel in the Guards, and was therefore considered supreme commander of all four elite regiments. In practice, however, lieutenant colonels, when in the capital, were considered commanders of their regiments. Grigorii and Aleksei Orlov were lieutenant colonels in the Horse and Preobrazhenskii Guards, respectively. Potemkin's appointment as lieutenant colonel in the Preobrazhentsy was announced while Aleksei was in the capital. Courtiers and informed foreign observers alike would have viewed this move as a clear sign of imperial disfavor for Aleksei Orlov. See Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 509.

[73] Catherine to Potemkin, [28 February 1774], ibid., 12.

[74] E. M. Rumiantseva to P. A. Rumiantsev, 20 March 1774, Rumiantseva, *Pis'ma*, 180.

[75] Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 508; Madariaga, *Russia*, 259.

[76] Rumiantseva, *Pis'ma*, 180: "It is true that [Potemkin] is clever and can effect a winning manner, only he has a problem: the grand prince does have much love for him."

Potemkin took Catherine's words concerning the Orlovs to heart. On assuming command of the Preobrazhentsy, he paid a visit to Aleksei Orlov to discuss regiment-related affairs. Orlov appreciated the gesture and assured Potemkin of his friendship.[77] The empress took the lead in negotiating the withdrawal from the War College of Chernyshev, who was already weakened as a consequence of the Pugachev Rebellion.[78] The grand duke was a harder nut to crack. He had never been well disposed to his mother's lovers, nor was he now inclined to make an exception for Potemkin. Perhaps Nikita Panin, who had long viewed the Orlovs and Chernyshev as rivals, could be persuaded of the merits of using his credit with the grand ducal couple to influence the battle royal underway at court? Indeed, it appears that Panin deserves credit for winning over Grand Duchess Natal'ia Alekseevna to Potemkin's side.[79] Having thus neutralized his enemies, Potemkin was now in a position to build a loyal party at Court and place his clients in positions of authority.

As noted above, Potemkin viewed the political landscape through the lens of patronage. For him, political relations and patron-client relations were one and the same. In establishing a power base in the capital, Potemkin's "method" was to cultivate friendship and kinship networks that he could insinuate into the state apparatus. "He renders services and seeks everyone's friendship," noted Rumiantseva.[80] By "everyone" the perspicacious courtier of course had in mind people of her station. As the Prussian ambassador to Russia observed, "Potemkin has never lived among the people, and therefore will not seek friends among them and will not carouse with soldiers. He has always moved in elite circles; now it seems he intends to befriend them and to form a party of people who belong to the nobility and aristocracy."[81] At court he made allies of Catherine's closest friends and confidantes, Countess Praskov'ia A. Brius and Mar'ia Savishna Perekusikhina, as well as Senator Ivan P. Elagin, with whom Potemkin had briefly lived before moving into his palace apartments.[82] As head of the War College, it was also

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[77] Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 509.

[78] Madariaga, *Russia*, 259, 263.

[79] Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 511.

[80] Rumiantseva, *Pis'ma*, 180.

[81] Quoted in A. P. Barsukov, "Kniaz' Grigorii Girgor'evich Orlov," *Russkii arkhiv*, no. 2 (1873): 126.

[82] P. A. Brius (1729-86), sister to Field Marshal P. A. Rumiantsev, had played a role in bringing Catherine and Potemkin together; M. S. Perekusikhina, Lady of the Bedchamber, was an influential courtier and, according to

imperative for him to have the confidence and support of Russia's military elites. To this end he cultivated friendly relations with two great men of the sword, Count Kirill G. Razumovskii and Field Marshal Petr Rumiantsev. Rumiantsev's wife (whom Potemkin took pains to befriend) advised her husband to write directly to Potemkin, who "renders service to you in everything…pays great attention to me…enters into all [affairs], and shows all letters [to the empress]."[83] As for the brothers Panin, Potemkin endeavored to win their friendship. On his way to the capital in January, he had wisely paid a visit to Count Petr Panin in Moscow, and later honored the revered general by recommending to Catherine that he be put in charge of the government's counteroffensive against Pugachev. [84] According Gunning, Potemkin was on friendly terms with Nikita Panin, whose views he supported whenever opinions diverged during sessions of the Imperial Council.[85] Finally, Potemkin turned to his relatives for loyal support. Among the first to arrive in St. Petersburg were his cousins, brothers Mikhail S. and Pavel S. Potemkin, whose wealthy father had protected Grigorii during his years in Moscow. [86] All three Potemkins had served in Rumiantsev's army during the war, and in June 1774, Catherine put Pavel Potemkin in charge of a commission investigating the causes of the Pugachev Rebellion. Several of Potemkin's nephews and nieces became courtiers the following year, and one, Aleksandr Nikolaevich Samoilov was appointed to the sensitive post of secretary of the Imperial Council.[87] With friends and kin positioned to protect his interests in St. Petersburg, Potemkin now turned his attention to the business of building Russia's empire in the South.

Lopatin (*Perepiska*, 506, 514), one of the witnesses to Catherine and Potemkin's marriage; a personal friend of Catherine's since the 1750s, Ivan Perfil'evich Elagin (1725-93) served as chamberlain, and secretary to the empress, court administrator, senator and, beginning roughly at this time, was grandmaster of Russia's Masons; Rumiansteva (*Pis'ma*, 180) referred to Elagin as Potemkin's "friend."

[83] E. M. Rumiantseva to P. A. Rumiantsev, 8 April 1774, Rumiantseva, *Pis'ma*, 183.

[84] In a letter to Panin, Potemkin credited himself for recommending the general for the post: "I hope that Your Excellency will regard this act of mine as a pleasant service to you." Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 517.

[85] Gunning report, 16/27 May 1774, *Russkii dvor*, 199. Rumiantseva (*Pis'ma*, 181) observed that relations between Potemkin and Nikita Panin were "very good."

[86] "Svedeniia o Kniaze Potemkine," *Russkii vestnik* vol. 2 (1841): 83, 84. Mikhail Sergeevich and Pavel Sergeevich Potemkin (1743-96) were second cousins to G. A. Potemkin. Pavel Potemkin played a major role in Caucasia affairs beginning in 1782, about which more is said below.

[87] Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 522; Montefiore, *Prince of Princes*, chap. 12 Aleksandr Nikolaevich Samoilov (1744-1814) was the son of Potemkin's brother-in-law, Nikolai Borisovich Samoilov (1718-91), who was married to Potemkin's eldest sister, Mar'ia Aleksandrovna; Potemkin had lived briefly in the Samoilov house on his return to St. Petersburg in January 1774.

As noted in Chapter 2, Russia's foreign policy priorities in the first decade of Catherine's reign found their fullest reflection in Nikita Panin's Northern System. Its guiding idea was, in Panin's own words, "to lead Russia out of a state of perpetual dependence and put her in a position, by means of a Northern Alliance, to have the predominate voice in affairs, and especially to be able to preserve inviolably peace and quiet in the North."[88] More specifically, the system aimed at maintaining Russian influence in the areas adjacent to its northern and western borders and eliminating French influence there. It system achieved its ends throughout the 1760s. The key to the system was the Russo-Prussian alliance, which ensured the election of Russia's candidate to the Polish throne in 1764. This outcome pleased Catherine: "Nikita Ivanovich! I congratulate you on the king whom we have made," she wrote.[89] The system was also designed to keep the pro-French king of Sweden weak by supporting a constitution that limited his powers. Finally, Panin hoped that Russia might gain a measure of security against the Porte through the good offices of Prussia, Denmark, and Great Britain, with whom Russia had signed treaties in 1764, 1765, and 1767 respectively. That the system could ultimately guarantee neither Russian predominance in Poland nor a friendly Sweden, to say nothing of security in the Black Sea basin, became evident in the course of the war with the Ottomans.

The war years served to highlight the limitations of the Northern System. In 1772 Russia agreed to the partition of Poland. As a result, its position there was weakened while that of Prussia and Austria was strengthened. The same year witnessed the restoration of the powers of Gustav III in Sweden, where French diplomats had scored a victory over their Russian counterparts. These events "signified the effectual demise of the Northern System, for it had been designed to cope with just these two situations. Once they had been resolved, no matter in what fashion, the System was of little utility."[90] As important in setting the stage for the demise of the old system and the emergence of a new one was the experience of war itself. Panin and Catherine had wrongly assumed that war with the Porte could be avoided; in fact, the Porte proved it could still threaten Russian security along the empire's southern periphery. Russian

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[88] A. V. Gavriushkin, *Graf Nikita Panin*: *iz istorii russkoi diplomatii XVIII veka* (Moscow: "Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia," 1989), 77.

[89] Quoted in V. N. Vinogradov, ed., *Vek Ekateriny*, 39.

[90] David M. Griffiths, "The Rise and Fall of the Northern System: Court Politics and Foreign Policy in the First Half of Catherine's Reign," *Canadian Slavic Studies* 4, 3 (1970): 556.

and Austrian interests clashed there as well; Vienna had threatened war in 1771 over Russia's occupation of the Danubian Principalities. In North Caucasia, meanwhile, the war fueled local resistance to Russian encroachments in the Terek valley. Clearly, the time had come for the government to rethink its strategic priorities.

If the war years underscored Russian weakness in the South, the peace of Kuchuk Kainardji pointed the way to Russian greatness there. The treaty signaled the arrival of Russia as a Black Sea power. Article 3 made the Tatars of the northern Black Sea littoral, whom the Russian government previously viewed as vassals of the sultan, "free and independent." Russia acquired Azov and its environs, the Crimean fortresses of Kerch and Enikale, the castle of Kinburn at the mouth of the Dnieper, and Black Sea frontage between the Dnieper and Bug rivers (articles 20, 19, and 18 respectively). This substantially extended Peter I's conquests in the region, which in any event had been retroceded to the Porte in 1711. It is difficult to overstate the strategic importance of these acquisitions. With control of the estuaries of the Dnieper and the Don, Russia was in a position to challenge Ottoman power in the basin of the Black Sea. Russian economic interests were advanced in article 11, which granted Russia the right to maintain ships in the Black Sea, to trade in Ottoman ports, and to establish consulates throughout the Ottoman empire. Articles 21 and 23 addressed matters Caucasian in language that invited divergent readings, leaving Russia's future in Kabarda and Georgia uncertain. Finally, the treaty did more to confuse than to clarify the question of Russia's borders in North Caucasia. Article 22 provided that the "line of demarcation of the frontier of Kuban" would remain as it had been vaguely defined in the Russo-Ottoman treaty of 1700.[91] Here its authors had confused the treaty of Constantinople, signed in 1700, with a 1704 convention on borders. The truth was that Russia had no meaningful borders or permanent defenses in the Kuban region.

By the time news of the war's end reached St. Petersburg, in July, Potemkin was in charge of the War College. He dashed off a letter to the head of Rumiantsev's secret chancellery, congratulating him on the signing of "a good and glorious peace of a kind that no one had expected."[92] It is known from their letters that Catherine and Potemkin discussed the

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[91] Hurewitz, ed., *Diplomacy*, 59; the treaty of Constantinople is in *Dogovory Rossii s Vostokom: politicheskie i torgovye*, comp. and ed. T. Iuzefovich (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia O. I. Baksta, 1869), 2-11; the relevant provision is article 7. The 1704 convention on borders is discussed below.

[92] Potemkin to P. V. Zavadovskii, 15 July 1774, quoted in Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 516. The letter continues: "Peter Aleksandrovich [Rumiantsev]—the honor of our age, whose name shall not be fade as long as Russia is Russia."

terms of the peace treaty in the months leading up to its signing.[93] But what exactly was his role, if any, in bringing peace to Russia? In August she told a respected correspondent that Potemkin, despite his demanding schedule, remained "devilishly entertaining," and that Russia was "indebted to him more than anyone else for this peace."[94] Looking back on the period, she recalled that Potemkin had helped with "many ideas and advice."[95] If there was hyperbole in this assertion, it nevertheless reflected the extent of the empress's reliance on Potemkin. He had been a constant source of sound counsel and good humor, while other leading statesmen equivocated and groped for a way to end the war. The treaty marked a reversal of fortunes for the Russian and Ottoman empires. Russia had established its military superiority over the Porte and was now preparing to assimilate the lands acquired by the terms of the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji. Catherine entrusted this massive project to her new partner.

As de facto head of the War College, Potemkin was responsible for the security of Russia's borders. He understood better than most that Russia had an enemy in the king of Sweden. But the experience of war and rebellion demonstrated that Russia faced equal or greater threats in the South. Improving the security of Russia's southern borders, and establishing them where none previously existed, now became an urgent priority. At the same time, Potemkin viewed the region, with its rich soils and great rivers—the Dnieper, Don, and Volga—as ideal for agricultural settlement and commerce. He intended to step up efforts to settle and develop the lands that were begun in the early years of Catherine's reign.[96] As governor-general of New Russia, Azov, and Astrakhan Provinces, Potemkin was the ranking civilian administrator in the southern half of the empire. He now set to work on developing a strategy for improving the security and realizing the economic potential of the lands under his jurisdiction.

Catherine referred to the treaty as "good and fair," in a letter to Baron Friedrich Melchior Grimm, 3 August 1774, *SIRIO* 23: 6.

[93] See, for example, Potemkin to Catherine, [prior to 9 April 1774], Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 22.

[94] Catherine to Grimm, 3 August 1774, *SIRIO* 23: 7.

[95] In a conversation with her secretary, A. V. Khrapovitskii. See his *Dnevnik*, 5: "Prince Viazemskii, Count Zakhar Chernyshev and N. I. Panin throughout the war were creating various obstacles and hindrances [to concluding the war]; we needed to decide to give full authority to Count Rumiantsev, and the war was thus concluded. Prince Potemkin assisted with many ideas and advice."

[96] Discussed in Bartlett, *Human Capital*, ch. 1-3.

Gaps in the sources make it extremely difficult to know for certain when Potemkin first conceived the strategy that came to be known as the "Eastern System." No official document or private letter outlining its salient features has survived, assuming such a document ever existed. Instead we have the testimony of Potemkin's nephew and confidante, Aleksandr Samoilov, who traced its origins to the war years: "[Potemkin] used the hours free from military feats in the theater of operations to conceive a sweeping plan to secure Russia's southern borders and to raise the empire to the highest level of greatness."[97] In order to accomplish these ambitious goals, Russia needed to: 1) annex Crimea; 2) clear Ottoman forces from the estuary of the Dnieper and seize the great fort at Ochakov; 3) build a town and shipyard on the Dnieper that could serve as a military and naval depot; 4) encourage co-religionists in Ottoman domains to rebel against their suzerain; and 5) extend the military line in North Caucasia in the direction of the Azov Sea. It is unclear whether Potemkin had all these goals in mind as early as 1774, but it is not difficult to imagine Potemkin sharing his wartime experiences and ideas about Russia's future with his relatives. It is entirely possible that he discussed an early redaction of the Eastern System while residing at the Samoilov home before moving into his palace apartments.[98] According to his nephew-biographer, Potemkin also discussed the plan with Catherine in 1774. In his opinion, it was the empress's desire to see the plan realized that led her to concentrate unprecedented power in Potemkin's hands.[99]

Beginning in late 1775, Potemkin became increasingly involved in the affairs of North Caucasia. Of the many posts he occupied, three focused his mind on the challenges facing Russia in the region. Potemkin was named governor-general of Astrakhan Province in a decree of 3 December 1775.[100] The governor-general was the embodiment of central authority at the provincial level. In theory, he was subordinate to the Senate and the procurator general, the central institutions ultimately responsible for supervising the administration of Russia's provinces. In practice, however, he was a personal friend of the empress and enjoyed her total confidence and therefore was not subordinate to any central agency. This was certainly true of

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[97] A. N. Samoilov, "Zhizn' i deianiia," 1010.

[98] Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 509.

[99] Samoilov, "Zhizn' i deianiia," 1012-1013.

[100] Gubernatorial chancellery of Astrakhan to Potemkin, 29 Dec. 1775, RGADA, f. 16, op. 1, d. 613, l. 148-148 ob.

Potemkin, whose unique relationship with Catherine only served to increase his authority and freedom of action. Legislation defined the duties of the governor-general in the broadest terms; the lands under his stewardship were to be managed "according to his discretion" (*po svoemu usmotreniiu*). His authority was supreme in all civilian and military matters at the provincial level. The governor-general of border provinces was also expected to conduct relations with the native groups living on and beyond Russia's frontiers, and to coordinate his efforts in this regard with the College of Foreign Affairs.[101] As for the location of the southernmost boundaries of Astrakhan province, they had never been clearly demarcated and were always hotly contested by native groups in the Kuban and Terek valleys. In the first half of the eighteenth century, the Russian government unilaterally decided to make the Terek serve as a border in the region and built forts at Kizliar and Mozdok to protect it. The commandants of these forts were subordinate to the governor of Astrakhan, who in turn was subordinate to the governor-general of the province, namely, Potemkin. In his capacity as head of the War College, he was responsible for all military appointments; in this way too the commandants were subordinate to him. Finally, Potemkin was also the supreme commander of all irregular troops, which meant that Cossacks serving on the Terek came under his authority. Thus three administrative hierarchies—one mostly civilian, and two strictly military—connected Potemkin to the life of Caucasia.

The Origins and Impact of the Mozdok-Azov Line

Russia's North Caucasian frontier became increasingly turbulent in the years after the founding of Mozdok in 1763. The situation there worsened during the 1768-74 war, which caused some Caucasian highlanders and steppe nomads to turn to the Porte for aid. As we have seen, the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji did nothing in practice to resolve the Kabardian question in Russia's

[101] The "Institution of the Administration of the Provinces of the Russian Empire," promulgated on 7 November 1775, is in *PSZ* (1st series), vol. 20, doc. 14, 392; for a synopsis, see *Russia under Catherine the Great, Volume One: Select Documents on Government and Society*, trans. and intro. Paul Dukes (Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, 1978), 140-57. On the history of institution of governor-general, or viceroy (*namestnik*), see Aleksandr D. Gradovskii, "Istoricheskii ocherk uchrezhdeniia general-gubernatorstv v Rossii," *Sobranie sochinenii A. D. Gradovskago*, 9 vols. (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia M. M. Stasiulevicha, 1899), 1: 301-38; and more recently, L. M. Lysenko, *Gubernatory i general-gubernatory Rossiiskoi imperii (XVIII-nachalo XX veka)* 2nd ed., (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo MPGU, 2001); finally, there is V. V. Cherkesov, ed., *Institut general-gubernatorstva i namestnichestva v Rossiiskoi imperii*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo universiteta, 2001), chapter 2 (on Catherine's provincial reform) and 201-20 (on the history of the institution in Caucasia).

favor. In 1775, neither the Crimean khan nor the Porte recognized Russia's claims in Kabarda. In addition, Russian policy toward Kabarda was causing some of its chiefs to enlist neighboring Circassian and Tatar tribesmen, who had their own reasons to resist Russian encroachments, in a broad-based struggle for independence. These facts forced Potemkin, now in charge of the southern half of the empire, to think long and hard about the nature and extent of Russian defenses in the region.

Where were Russia's borders in North Caucasia? In reacting to Medem's occupation of Dagestan, Catherine and her advisers at the College of Foreign Affairs made it clear that they considered the Terek as the southernmost boundary of Russian domains in eastern North Caucasia. It must be remembered, however, that the decision to view the Terek as border had been taken unilaterally by the Russian government, and found no support in Russia's treaties or other agreements, either with local groups or outside powers. The question of Imperial borders in western North Caucasia was even more vexed. The Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji returned to Russia "the town of Azov, with its district, and the boundaries laid down in the conventions made in 1700…between Governor Tolstoi and Achuev Governor Hassan Pasha" (article 20); elsewhere it stated that "the line of demarcation of the frontier of Kuban…shall remain invariably such as it has heretofore been" (article 22). In referring to the "conventions" of 1700, the authors had confused it with the 1704 Russo-Ottoman convention on borders. The Treaty of Constantinople, signed in 1700, stipulated that "the town of Azov…shall be given a district in the Kuban frontier, whose distance shall be measured by riding on horseback for ten hours from Azov toward the Kuban [River?]."[102] Not surprisingly, this rather imprecise formulation, though typical of such border conventions, led to disputes over how far a rider could travel in ten hours. The sides finally agreed in 1704 that the boundaries of the Azov district would extend 1660 *sazhen*s south of the estuary of the River Ei; its boundaries in the east, however, were left undetermined, as both governments were chiefly concerned with coastal territories for strategic reasons.[103] All this was mooted, however, when Russia was forced to return Azov to the Porte in 1711; the town became a neutral "barrier" between the two empires after 1739.[104] Thus Russia

[102] *PSZ*, vol. 4, no. 1804, article 7, 69.

[103] Druzhinina, *Kiuchuk-kainardzhiiskii mir*, 283.

[104] See article 1 of the Pruth Treaty (1711) and article 3 of the Treaty of Belgrade (1739). **Cite.**

had no claim to lands south of Azov between 1711 and 1774, when it regained Azov and its environs. Yet because the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji had confused the diplomatic instruments of 1700 and 1704, the question of Russia's borders in the region remained open to debate. This much at least is clear: the treaty did not grant to Russia any territory in the Kuban valley, as historians have often claimed.[105] According to the 1776 "General Map of the Russian Empire," the border proceeded from the headwaters of the Ei, which was placed within the empire's boundaries, to those of the Egorlyk River.[106] But this border existed only in the mapmaker's mind and on paper, as the government maintained no permanent defenses between the two rivers. From the perspective of military and civilian planners alike, the situation of Russia's borders in North Caucasia left something to be desired.

As governor-general of Astrakhan, Potemkin considered it his "first duty" to study the question of the province's borders. In May 1776, he reported his findings to Catherine in 1776, two of which touched directly on matters Caucasian. First, he found Russian defenses in the vicinity of Mozdok to be "extremely weak." They amounted to 1640 Cossacks settled in thirteen *stanitsa*s on the left bank of the Terek across a distance of some 200 *verst*s between Forts Kizliar and Mozdok. Second, the 500-*verst* "border" (*granitsa*) between Mozdok and Azov was "completely unprotected against Circassians and Kubantsy."[107] In other words, Potemkin acknowledged that Russia had no meaningful borders in the Kuban steppe, only an open frontier. True, Johann Anton Güldenstädt had survyed the region in the summer months of 1773 under the auspices of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, and had composed a rudimentary map on which he projected an ideal border from the Terek to the Azov Sea.[108] Perhaps it was this imagined "border" that Potemkin spoke of in his report. Russian weakness in North Caucasia, however, was very real. He wanted to strengthen the Russian position in the Terek basin and facilitate communications between Mozdok and Azov. He therefore proposed building a new fortified

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[105] Cf. "O kavkazskikh praviteliakh," *Russkii arkhiv*, no. 5 (1873): 744; V. M. Kabuzan, *Naselenie Severnogo Kavkaza v XIX-XX vekakh: etnostatisticheskoe issledovanie* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo "Russko-Baltiiskii informatsionnyi tsentr BLITs," 1996), 30; Eliseeva, *Geopoliticheskie*, 91.

[106] Druzhinina, *Kiuchuk-kainardzhiiskii mir*, 284.

[107] "Kubantsy" was a generic term used by Russian officials to denote the various Tatar groups living in the Kuban basin. "Zakubantsy" was another generic term denoting Tatar groups and Caucasian highlanders living beyond, i.e., west and south of, the Kuban River.

[108] I. A. Gil'denshtedt, "Geograficheskiia," 154.

line across this space and settling the Volga Cossack Host and retired soldiers on lands adjacent to it. These new arrivals, supplemented by regular troops already stationed in Astrakhan and other forces taken from Azov Province, would be enough, he argued, to guarantee the security of Russia's borders in the region.[109] He could not have known that subsequent events would prove him wrong.

Güldenstädt's map, which had been composed "by compass and duration of travel" (*po kompasu po chasam ezdy*), was too imprecise to serve as a blueprint for building fortifications and settlements in the Kuban steppe. Nor was the Russian government in possession of more accurate information concerning the region's geography. The lands between Mozdok and Azov would first have to be properly surveyed before building activities could commence. Potemkin was too busy with other matters in 1776 to undertake the project himself. Instead, he instructed his subordinate, Astrakhan Governor Ivan Varfolomeevich Iakobi, to survey the land between the Don and Terek and make recommendations. Like Potemkin, Iakobi was a military man who was "already experienced in borderland affairs."[110] He was experienced in diplomacy as well, having represented Russia more than once in negotiations with China.[111] It was probably with these qualities in mind that Potemkin appointed him governor of Astrakhan in April 1776. That year he and a team of military engineers surveyed the land between Mozdok and Azov and drew up detailed plans for building a fortified line that would connect the two forts. In early 1777 he met with Potemkin in St. Petersburg to discuss his findings.[112]

Potemkin was now prepared to open a new era of empire building in North Caucasia. In April he submitted a proposal that promised to radically transform the region's social and political landscape. The project envisioned the building of a fortified line between Mozdok and Azov; the settling of thousands of military personnel in this space; and the agricultural assimilation of the lands behind the new line. Potemkin made Governor Iakobi responsible for seeing the project through to completion. Iakobi was also given command of all troops in the region and tasked with conducting relations with Russia's Caucasian neighbors. This made

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[109] Potemkin's proposal was confirmed on 5 May 1776, *PSZ* (1st series), vol. 20: no. 14,464. The Senate backed the project in a 28 Oct. 1776 report to Catherine, RGADA, f. 16, op. 1, 613, ch. 1, ll. 67-69 ob.

[110] Potemkin proposal, 24 April 1777, *SIRIO* 145 (1914): 414.

[111] Cherkesov, ed., *Institut*, 445-46.

[112] "O kavkazskikh praviteliakh," 744-45.

General Medem redundant, so the War College recalled him. Potemkin informed Nikita Panin of his plans in a May letter, to which he attached a copy of the project, a description of the new line, and a map of Russia's borders.[113] It does not appear that the College of Foreign Affairs had been consulted on the question of Russia's borders in North Caucasia.

The proposal was a tour de force in strategic thinking about North Caucasia, and anticipated in certain respects Potemkin's famous letter urging the annexation of Crimea.[114] Potemkin proposed building ten "new fortified settlements" in the space between Mozdok and Azov. Two new fortresses would anchor the Mozdok-Azov Line: one on the Podkumok River, in the vicinity of the Beshtomak (near today's Piatigorsk), and the other near the Black Forest and the headwaters of the Egorlyk, where Stavropol is located today. The fort at Beshtomak would serve to "restrain the people of Little Kabarda" and mark Russia's forward position in the region. Mozdok had formerly performed this function; now it was slated to become a "commercial town." Potemkin's population politics consisted of a plan to people the line primarily with Volga and Khoper Cossacks, whose hosts would be resettled en masse and joined by a contingent of retired soldiers and some Don Cossack auxiliaries. These would be the first Russian subjects to settle in the Kuban steppe. "And thus by these measures [movement across] the Kuban steppe shall be obstructed," putting Russia in a position to observe all roads into Russia and providing cover for Russian subjects like the Kalmyks and Don Cossacks to profit from the use of lands located behind the new line.[115]

As for the impact the new line was likely to have on local native groups, those under Russian protection were expected to thrive, while others would be cut off from trading partners and traditional pasturelands. The stated purpose of the Mozdok-Azov Line was to "protect from neighbors' raids the border between Astrakhan and the Don and the lands of our Kalmyks and Tatars, giving them the means to spread out all the way to the Black Forest and the Egorlyk and thus access to better means of subsistence." Potemkin acknowledged that the Line would "cut off various highland peoples"—Circassian, Abaza, and Kabardian tribes were specifically mentioned—"from lands used for provisioning their livestock and herds," lands that "ought to be

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[113] These documents were published without the map in *SIRIO* 145 (1914): 412-16.

[114] Potemkin to Catherine, [prior to 14 December 1782], Lopatin, *Perepiska*, 154-55.

[115] Potemkin proposal, 27 April 1777, 412-14.

used by our subjects." He underscored the economic potential of the region, which he presented as a farmer's paradise, ideal for viticulture, the production silk and paper, animal husbandry, horse-breeding, horticulture, and arable farming.[116] The line would make it easier to bring an end to the secret import of goods into Russia and facilitate the collection of customs duties, thereby increasing state revenues. Potemkin also emphasized the strategic and military importance of the line. It would protect Russia against invasion, facilitate the reinforcement of troops in Crimea and elsewhere, and open the road into the Caucasus Mountains, where some Ossetian leaders were encouraging the Russian the government to exploit mountain resources, ores and minerals in particular, in return for Imperial protection. Finally, the line promised to improve communications between center and periphery by shorting the route from Mozdok to Moscow by more than 500 *verst*s and by serving as a road to Azov.[117] Here was a plan to improve Russian security and encourage economic prosperity in a region St. Petersburg had traditionally viewed as an empty desert ringed by barbaric tribes. It was as bold, original, and optimistic as its author—qualities that surely recommended it to Catherine.

Potemkin approached the problem of Russian weakness in North Caucasia from yet another angle. In late May he received a report from Don Cossack *ataman* A. I. Ilovoiskii concerning the Nekrasov Cossacks. The Nekrasovs were descendants of the Don Cossacks who had taken part in the Bulavin uprising of 1707-09 and then fled with their leader, *ataman* Ignat'ev F. Nekrasov, to the Kuban region where they were received into Ottoman protection. In 1775 the Nekrasovs were considering returning to the Russian fold, but the Imperial Council refused to take action for lack of adequate information about their situation.[118] According to Ilovoiskii, "the traitorous Nekrasov Cossacks" were prepared to "leave the protection of the Turkish sultan and enter as a group into the suzerainty of Her Imperial Majesty, should the act

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[116] Here Potemkin seems to be drawing on a report he received from Astrakhan Governor Petr Krechetnikov, probably in 1776, concerning the site of the ancient town of Madzhar. RGADA, f. 16, op. 1, d. 613, ch. 4, ll. 181-182, 190-190 ob. The author urged the occupation of Madzhar, stressing its great strategic value. Located near the confluence of the Kuma, Bibula, and Tuzlova Rivers, Madzhar was 240 *verst*s from Mozdok, a four-day ride by horse to the Don, and five days to Tsaritsyn. "The Kuban Tatars will not be able to pass through here, while the Kabardians are in [our] hands." The author also highlighted the land's fertility and noted that the climate made it suitable for the production of wine, silk, and paper.

[117] "Description of the line between the Terek and the Don," attached to Potemkin's proposal of 27 April 1777, *SIRIO* 145 (1914): 414-16.

[118] *Arkhiv gosudarstvennago Soveta*, vol. 1, pt. 2: 221.

committed by their ancestors be mercifully forgiven and should they be allowed to serve as Don Cossacks."[119] Potemkin urged Catherine to act favorably on their request. The empress, however, was unwilling to risk war with the Porte over these Cossacks. Nor did she want to offend Russia's Crimean client, Shahin Giray, who had reason to call them his subjects. "The Nekrasovs," Potemkin opined, "in no way belong to the Porte, and even if they did, we should be allowed to receive them in Russia in exchange for the greater number of Zaporozhians the Turks received even after the conclusion of the peace." As for Shahin Giray, Potemkin believed he could be given "convincing reasons" to agree to yield them to Russia. Potemkin ordered his proxies to conduct talks with the Nekrasovs in 1778. But with the prospect of another Russo-Ottoman war looming, the central government was unwilling to support the plan until 1784, that is, until after the annexation of Crimea.[120]

Meanwhile the construction of the new line was begun in September 1777. As punishment for their part in the Pugachev Rebellion, the Volga Host was resettled from the Tsaritsyn Line (now abandoned) on lands located west of Mozdok and claimed by forces hostile to Russia.[121] Their struggle for survival, Potemkin likely reasoned, would benefit the cause of Russian security. They laid the foundations for Forts Ekaterinsk (later renamed Ekaterinogradsk), Pavlovsk, Mar'insk, Georgievsk, and Aleksandrovsk, all located between Mozdok and the Tomuzlovka River and completed by the end of 1777.[122] Each household was given a grant of 20 rubles to cover start-up expenses; by 1781 some 4,637 people (of both sexes) resided in their *stanitsa*s.[123] Further to the northwest, the Khoper Cossack Host was settled on lands between the Tomuzlovka and Egorlyk, where they built Forts Andreevsk (later renamed

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[119] Quoted in Eliseeva, *Geopoliticheskie proekty*, 94.

[120] Ibid., 95-96. On 6 November 1777 the Russian minister in Istanbul was sent instructions to avoid war by all means. On the same day Potemkin spoke at a session of the Imperial Council about the absolute necessity of making "all necessary preparations for war with Turkey." Catherine was also preparing for war. She told Potemkin that in the event of war, Russia would fight a defensive war in Crimea; should the war continue, Russia would take the offensive and set its sights on Ochakov, the strategic importance of which see compared to Kronshtadt. For Russian policy makers, Ochakov was viewed as key to establishing Russian dominance in the Black Sea basin. Ibid., 103.

[121] **Malakhova,**

[122] Iakobi to CFA, 19 Dec. 1777, *KRO*, 2: 324; Iakobi to Potemkin, 19 Dec. 1777, RGADA, f. 16, op. 1, d. 613, ch. 1, l. 253-53 ob; Iakobi to Potemkin, 18 Jan. 1778, RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, d. 161, l. 3.

[123] *PSZ*, vol. 20: no. 14,464, 374; Butkov, *Materialy*, 2: 49.

Severnaia) and Stavropol'sk in 1778, and Forts Moskovsk and Donsk the following year. Fort Konstantinogorsk, on the Podkumok, was erected in 1780.[124] **[Insert map]** To improve defenses, palisades and earthen ramparts were built around the forts, and redoubts and observation posts were placed between the forts to facilitate communications. The settlement of these lands by Russian subjects was unprecedented in the history of the empire, and marked the beginning of a new phase in the military colonization of North Caucasia.

There was nothing in Potemkin's officially sanctioned proposals of 1776-7 to suggest that he planned to extend the line toward the Kuban valley. There were compelling reasons not to do so. First, the Russo-Crimean agreement of 1772 stipulated Crimean suzerainty over the Circassian and Tatar tribes of the Kuban region, and the so-called Tamantsy and Nekrasov Cossacks living near the river's mouth. Second, given the current crisis in relations between Russia and the Porte, Catherine was loath to provoke her rivals in Crimea and Istanbul. Potemkin likely understood that neither Catherine nor the Imperial Council would be willing to give official sanction to measures that would expand Russia's borders in the direction of the Kuban River. So Potemkin himself seized the initiative. While Iakobi was supervising the construction of the Mozdok-Azov Line, General Aleksandr Suvorov led troops into the Kuban valley. Suvorov had landed in Caucasia "entirely by accident."[125] In 1777 relations between the talented if prickly general and his immediate superiors were strained, so in July and November he wrote to War College to request reassignment. Potemkin satisfied Suvorov's request for "protection" (*pokrovitel'stvo*) and gave him command of the Kuban Corps, thereby removing him from Field Marshal Rumianstev's direct command. In late 1777 and early 1778, Suvorov's army occupied the right bank of the Kuban River, where he had some 3,000 workers build four forts and twenty redoubts. According to Butkov, Suvorov did not have orders to build these fortresses, nor was he authorized to carry out punitive expeditions south of the Kuban.[126] If this was the case, the situation recalled Medem's actions in Dagestan; another Russian general had taken it upon himself to redraw the empire's borders, this time in western North Caucasia. But there are reasons to believe that Suvorov was acting on Potemkin's orders. First, Potemkin

[124] Butkov, *Materialy*, 2: 48.

[125] "O kavkazskikh praviteliakh," 742.

[126] Butkov, *Materialy*, 2: 45 n. 2.

himself had sent Suvorov to the Kuban region; he must have assumed that the general would take steps to fortify the Russian position there. Second, Suvorov corresponded with Iakobi concerning the construction of fortifications along the Kuban, and attempted to coordinate his efforts with those of Iakobi. Clearly, these men were working on two aspects of the same problem.

This massive undertaking did not go unnoticed by the native groups of the region. Although Russian officials often used terms like "empty," "uninhabited," and "desert" to describe the North Caucasian steppe, it in fact constituted a vital ecosystem for local populations. Potemkin's May proposal acknowledged that Caucasian highlanders, Tatars, and Kalmyks pastured their herds along the rivers watering the steppe.[127] Equally important, these groups traveled north of the Terek-Kuban basin to farm the salt their herds required in great quantities.[128] The Mozdok-Azov Line now threatened to cut them off from these vital resources, frustrate commerce with their traditional trading partners, and generally circumscribe their freedom of movement between the highlands and the steppe, where they took refuge from the harsh winters encountered in the Caucasus Mountains. At first Kabardian and other groups gave no indication of their displeasure concerning the construction of the new fortifications.[129] But once the scope of the project became apparent to them, they took energetic steps to protect their interests.

Russian officials in the center and on the frontier had every reason to expect that North Caucasian native groups would resist their attempts to establish a military presence in the region. In April 1777, Panin had explained to Potemkin that although "the Kabardian people have been considered Russian subjects since time immemorial, as soon as Mozdok was founded, their chiefs began to suspect that in time their natural freedoms and way of life would be oppressed as a result of [Russia's] proximity, and so became openly hostile."[130] This was how Iakobi understood Kabardian society:

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[127] *SIRIO* 145 (1914): 415.

[128] Gil'denshtedt, "Geograficheskiia," 168-9.

[129] Iakobi to Potemkin, 26 Dec. 1777, RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, d. 144, l. 30.

[130] Panin to Potemkin, 4 April 1777, AVPRI, f. Kabardinskie dela, op. 115/4, 1777-78, d. 2, l. 2 ob.

> There is a strong bond between lord and subject: the one listens while the other commands. I assure Your Serene Highness that nothing can satisfy and calm this ignoble and insensitive nation. Nothing can restrain them from their beastly urges, for in them there is no shame, no fear, no conscience. It follows that there is nothing to distinguish them from animals, and that this wild nation is unable to appreciate good deeds. However, circumstances demand that they be pacified. As soon as it becomes apparent that Crimea and especially the Ottoman Porte are preparing for war [with Russia], Kabardians will support the Crimeans….[131]

Not that Iakobi considered Kabardians a serious threat to Russian defenses. He told Potemkin that while the new fortifications were not yet fully armed, those weapons he had at his disposal would be sufficient to defeat the modestly armed natives. Moreover, he was confident that Kabardian leaders would find no support among the common people for a military campaign against Russia.[132] In his opinion, the lords of Kabarda were capable of little more than rustling horses. He attributed their actions to "their fickleness and crudeness" and the "thieving ways" to which their nature and upbringing disposed them.[133] He was unable to understand the real interests that motivated their actions because he believed this "wild nation," these "animals" had no interests, only instincts. Not surprisingly, such assumptions made it difficult for him to come to terms with the true source of Kabardian unrest.

Native resistance to the growing Russian presence in North Caucasia was already apparent in October 1777. Soon after breaking ground for the new line, Iakobi received word that Beslenei and Temirgoi Circassians had gathered in the vicinity of the Five Mountains for the purpose of rustling livestock belonging to Russian subjects, and that unidentified Circassians had attacked Cossacks near Madzhar.[134] His army's rear, in other words, was far from secure. Reporting from Kabarda was the former diplomatic hostage and now Lt. Colonel Dmitrii Taganov, Russia's bailiff (*pristav*) among the Kabardians. According to Taganov, as many as 800 Beslenei, Temirgoi, and Abaza tribesmen, under the command of Kazy Giray Sultan, had joined up with some 4000 Kabardians with the intent of attacking Russian positions along the

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[131] Iakobi to Potemkin, 26 Dec. 1777, RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, d. 144, ll. 29 ob.-30.

[132] Iakobi to Potemkin, 19 Dec. 1777, RGADA, f. 16, op. 1, d. 613, ch. 1, l. 253 ob.

[133] Iakobi to CFA, 19 Dec. 1777, *KRO*, 2: 324.

[134] Iakobi to Colonel Ladyzhenskii, 7 Oct. 1777, and an unspecified lieutenant to Ladyzhenskii, 29 Oct. 1777, RGADA, f. 23, op. 1, d. 5 ch. 1, ll. 47-47 ob., 165-165 ob.

new line.[135] "I have tried in every way to learn the cause of their dissatisfaction," Iakobi wrote, somewhat obtusely, to Potemkin. He concluded that outside forces—he cited the troubles in Crimea and provocations by Tatar neighbors—were responsible for this latest round of Kabardian unrest. In support of his thesis, he pointed to a Tatar letter that Taganov had obtained in Kabarda at great cost. In the letter, which allegedly had arrived from St. Petersburg, a certain Mr. Gorichei urged the Kabardian lord Misost Bamatov to destroy the new forts, as these were being built contrary to the wishes of the Russian empress. Iakobi later learned that the true authors of the letter, which caused a great commotion in Kabarda, were Kuban Tatars opposed to Russia's colonization activities in the region.[136]

How did Kabardian chiefs view the line? In his reports of 1777, Iakobi frequently emphasized that Kabardians had not lodged any complaints about the construction work underway.[137] This left the impression that Kabardians were indifferent to Russian building and settlement activities. But Iakobi knew better than this. He was aware that in winter their herds required access to pasturelands lands located behind the Russian forts, and that their livestock was their livelihood. "Should they be robbed of [their livestock], they would be robbed of all their property, for it consists in this alone."[138] Yet in spite of this, Iakobi refused to entertain the idea that the line itself might be a chief cause of Kabardian belligerence. Meanwhile, in the Kuban valley, Suvorov's army was engaged in "frequent skirmishes" with "bandits" (*vory*)—that is, local tribesmen. When events in Crimea forced him to quit the region in April 1778, his replacement wrote Iakobi to request reinforcements as the situation there was becoming more dangerous by the day.[139]

Yet not everyone in North Caucasia viewed Russian expansion in the region with apprehension. On the contrary, some elements actively encouraged it. Let us take a closer look at the situation in Kabarda. As Iakobi explained to Potemkin, Kabardian society was divided

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[135] Iakobi to CFA, 19 Dec. 1777, *KRO*, 2: 324; Iakobi to Potemkin, 14 Jan. 1778, RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, d, 161, l. 2.

[136] Iakobi to Potemkin, 19 Jan. 1778, RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, d. 161, l. 3-3 ob.

[137] In one report, he even claimed that Kabardians were grateful to Catherine for building the new line; see Iakobi to CFA, 19 Dec. 1777, *KRO*, 2: 324.

[138] Ibid., 325.

[139] Suvorov to Iakobi, 10 March, and Odoevskii to Iakobi, 30 April, in "O kavkazskikh praviteliakh," 747, 748-50 n. 8.

into two categories: lord (*vladelets*) and subject (*poddannyi*). Russia occasionally found friends among the lords, but there were precious few Korgoka Konchokins in Kabarda.[140] Among the lords' subjects, the peasantry (referred to in Russian sources as *chernyi narod*) particularly interested Russian officials like Iakobi. As the Mozdok-Kizliar Line began to take shape after 1763, it was not uncommon for hard-pressed Kabardian peasants to seek asylum behind it. And as we have seen, between 1763 and 1771 it was official policy to encourage the flight to Russia of Kabardian commoners willing to embrace Christianity and settle on the line. Naturally, the lords of Kabarda were none too pleased by this loss of human capital. With the country at war, the Russian government in 1771 satisfied their request to return Kabardian fugitives on demand. Now Potemkin wanted to revisit the question.

While traveling through Kabarda in 1776, Iakobi gathered reconnaissance on relations between the lords of Kabarda and their dependents. He reported that some Kabardians were prepared to resettle in Russian domains were they to receive firm assurances from the government that they would not be returned to their masters. Potemkin greeted the idea with enthusiasm. In a letter to Panin, he asked whether it would be possible to allow these individuals to settle in Russia. He underscored the potential "benefit in terms of settling empty lands with people."[141] In reply, Panin explained that the relationship between a Kabardian lord and his subject was equivalent to that between "master and slave." This fact alone, he argued, should protect the lords from any attempt by Russia to take what "with such solid foundation" belongs to them. But there were also "political reasons" to avoid doing so. Russia desperately required their friendship, or at least their quiescence. "Because of their location, their power and prestige among highlanders, their enterprising nature, and finally, because of their close ties to Crimea and by extension to the Ottoman Porte, Kabardians are deserving of efforts not to repulse them from Russia, but rather to attract them." It was in Russia's interests, therefore, to do everything in its power to avoid antagonizing them. Panin cited two reasons behind the government's 1771 decision to refuse refuge to the dependent population of Kabarda: first, so as not to cause their masters to suffer the economic pain that would attend the loss of human capital; and second,

[140] For Konchokin's story, see chapter 2 of the present study.

[141] Potemkin to Panin, 19 March 1777, AVPRI, f. Kabardinskie dela, op. 115/ 4, 1777-78, d. 2, l. 1.

because the newcomers were in any event embracing Christianity "not out of internal conviction but only in order to receive freedom."[142]

Potemkin could no longer claim ignorance of the government's obligations before the lords of Kabarda. Yet he still needed warm bodies to settle on Russia's sparsely populated borderlands. Iakobi continued to report being approached by Kabardian peasants requesting permission to resettle in Russia. "They complain to me inconsolably that their princes and nobles not only bring them to ruin, but also seize their wives and children and sell them to distant highland settlements, to Crimea, and even to Turkey, thereby compelling [families] to part forever. Besides this, they are subject to utterly excessive taxation: [the lords] take as much as they want."[143] Having thus painted a picture of Kabardian tyranny, Iakobi went on to take issue with the claim that Kabardian peasants ought to be considered the hereditary property of their masters. "I consider it necessary to inform the College of Foreign Affairs that although according to the chronicles (*po letopistsam*) of the lords of Kabarda their subjects are considered enserfed (*krepkimi*), as is the case in the Russian state, on the contrary, only the smallest portion of them are in fact so [enserfed]. Peasant elders have declared to me that others are considered the lords' subjects only by being tied to the land. There are no landowners among them and they are therefore free to move from one prince to another for patronage and protection."[144] He made one final point in support of the case for receiving them into Imperial protection: Kabardian peasants were already settled along rivers where Russia was building its new forts. "The peasantry is not at all enserfed to Kabardian princes, but rather more properly belong to Russia according to geography (*po zemliam*)."[145] Iakobi urged Potemkin to press the College of Foreign Affairs for a firm decision.

The College issued its opinion in the first month of 1778. Framing the discussion was the question, "What true and solid benefit will follow from assisting this group," that is, the Kabardian peasantry, "in freeing itself from their lords?" The College began by acknowledging two compelling reasons to take Kabardian peasants into Russian protection. First, their flight

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[142] Panin to Potemkin, 4 April 1777, AVPRI, f. Kabardinskie dela, op. 115/4, 1777-78, d. 2, ll. 2-5.

[143] Iakobi to CFA, 20 Nov. 1777, *KRO*, 2: 323; around this time he sent a similar report to Potemkin, AVPRI, f. Kabardinskie dela, op. 115/4, 1777-78, d. 2, ll. 7-8 ob.

[144] Iakobi to CFA, 19 Dec. 1777, *KRO*: 2: 325

[145] Ibid., 326.

from Kabarda would lead to the "weakness and powerlessness of their enterprising barbarian masters." This would make it easier for Russia to deal with them. Second, by allowing Kabardians to resettle in Russia, the government would acquire the means to grow its population. The College then inventoried the proposal's many drawbacks. The project would likely prove to be a financial burden, as the resettlement of Kabardians would require the permanent stationing of Imperial troops in Kabarda since its leaders could not be expected to part willingly with their subjects, which they viewed as their property. Also, it would be too costly to resettle them in Siberia (as Iakobi had originally, and perhaps disingenuously, suggested), where they would be unlikely to thrive in any event. By harboring their dependents, Russia would give the lords of Kabarda cause to seek retribution. Finally, the College saw no basis for the claim that Kabardian peasants belonged to Russia based on its new border. On the contrary, it underscored the "blatant injustice" of insisting that Kabardians no longer had the right to use the pastures and waters located behind the new line "merely because our settlements have approached them." The College viewed those lands as "places where precise borders had never been designated, and therefore may be considered as belonging to Kabardians in particular and highlanders in general as much as they belong to [Russia]." In the end, it did not matter on what basis the lords of Kabarda claimed dominion over their subjects, for the question was "extraneous" (*postoronnee*) to Russia. Interference in the internal affairs of Kabarda would "completely violate Her Imperial Majesty's word, given to Kabardian lords in 1771." Iakobi was advised to take no action should the peasants rebel against their masters as they were threatening to do: "let it happen, here there is nothing to lose but on the contrary something to gain." He was also instructed to communicate to the peasant supplicants—not in writing but orally—that the Russian government had promised their masters not to interfere in the internal affairs of Kabarda. However, he could also remind them that the "Kabardian people may find reliable means of improving their lot in their great numbers, single-mindedness, and collective action. No matter what good consequences might come of [such action], Russia would not take action on behalf of the lords." This sent a mixed message. On the one hand the College was arguing for a hands-off approach when it came to the internal affairs of Kabarda. On the other hand it was instructing its agents in the field to encourage intra-Kabardian strife. In the final analysis, the College cared little about the plight of the Kabardian peasantry, and wanted desperately to avoid having to fight another fierce "cold

war" (*ostudu*) with their masters.[146] The construction of the Mozdok-Azov Line, however, made war all but inevitable.

The Kabardian Insurgency of 1779

"This is my proper ground, / Here I shall stay."

--"Places, Loved Ones," Philip Larkin

The Kabardian-led insurgency of 1779 was one of the most important events to take place in post-war North Caucasia. That this fact has escaped the attention of historians can be easily explained. That the events of 1779 find almost no reflection in the published sources has made it difficult for historians to come to terms with them.[147] During the Soviet period the topic was taboo because it contradicted the "friendship of peoples" thesis to which academic historical writing had to conform from the 1950s on.[148] Even the authors of the respected *glasnost'*-era publication *The History of the Peoples of North Caucasia* had only this to say about that fateful year: "In 1779 the princes of Kabarda swore fealty to the Russia."[149] Fortunately, Pavel Butkov, writing in the nineteenth century, provided a narrative account of the events in the second volume of his classic *Materials for a New History of Caucasia, from 1722 to 1803.* Thanks to better access to materials preserved in Russian archives, it is now possible to throw fresh light on this crucial episode in the history Russian-Caucasian relations.

The oaths and diplomatic hostages that Medem had taken from Kabardian men of power in spring 1777 proved only months later to be empty tokens. Many leaders in Kabarda had never reconciled themselves to the growing Russian presence in North Caucasia. Nor did they now

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[146] *KRO*, 2: 327-31

[147] The exception to this rule are the neglected memoirs of Colonel Gustav Ernest von Shtrandman, originally published in *Russkaia starina* between 1882 and 1884, and recently republished in abbreviated form as "Zapiski Gustava fon Shtrandmana," in *Kavkazskaia voina: istoki i nachalo 1770—1820 gody*, eds. Iakov A. Gordin and B. P. Milovidov (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo zhurnala "Zvezda," 2002), 19-36. The memoirs open a fascinating window onto the dramatic events of November-December 1779 in particular and the peculiarities of Russian military service in North Caucasia more generally.

[148] Volume 2 of *Kabardino-russkie otnosheniia*, which covers the entire eighteenth century, does not contain a single document for 1779.

[149] *Istoriia narodov*, 452.

accept the government's claim that the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji made them Russian subjects. They insisted that their ancestors had always considered themselves as *kunak*s of Russia, a status that obligated the latter to preserve and protect the former from enemies without demanding any sacrifices in return.[150] It was clear from Taganov's reports in 1778 that many Kabardians were renouncing their oaths en masse and plotting the destruction of the new forts.[151] Later that year word reached Potemkin of Ottoman efforts to recruit North Caucasian highlanders for a war with Russia. Reporting from Kabarda, Taganov noted the appearance of Ottoman ships and troops near Crimea, and he was made aware of attempts by Ottoman sympathizers to buy provisions in Kuban. Leaders there and in Kabarda were receiving letters written in the name of the Ottoman sultan thanking them for remaining firm in the faith and instructing them to attack Russian positions in the region. Kabardian lords reciprocated by sending one of their peers, Islam Dzhanbulat, with 200 horses as a gift for Salam Giray Sultan, who was operating in Kuban. Then there was the story of the Kabardian Adzhikei Adzhi, who had recently returned from Mecca via Constantinople on an Ottoman warship and disembarked near Taman, where Circassians and Nekrasov Cossacks were preparing to march against Azov. Lack of provisions, however, was frustrating these efforts.[152]

Potemkin had other reasons to believe North Caucasia was inching toward anarchy. During the construction of the new line, it was not uncommon for sizeable groups (sometimes numbering in the thousands) to appear with hostile intentions before the walls of the new forts. The first sorties, carried out in the vicinity of the Malka River, bore little fruit. Undeterred, the Kabardian chiefs sought and found allies among the region's highlanders, including the Temirgoi and Beslenei tribes of western Circassia and Chechens and Kumyks to their east.[153] Their fortunes began to improve in spring 1779, when an army of highlanders crossed the Malka and set up camp on the Zolka River not far from Fort Mar'insk. Their demands were straightforward: the demolition of Russian forts in the Terek-Kuban basin. They attempted to sever communications between Mar'insk and Ekaterinsk, killing dozens of imperial troops and

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[150] Butkov, *Materialy*, 2: 51 n.1.

[151] Iakobi to Potemkin, 14 and 19 Jan. 1778, RGVIA, f. 52., op. 1, d. 161, ll. 2, 4.

[152] Iakobi to Potemkin, 11 Sept. 1778, RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, d. 161, ll. 7 ob., 8; trans. of "Turkish letter" from Prince Tumakai to Kabardian lords, *KRO*, 2: 332, and Iakobi to CFA, 11 Oct. 1778, ibid., 332-4.

[153] Butkov, *Materialy*, 2: 52-3.

driving off several thousand head of livestock in the process. Further north, Andreevsk and Stavropol'sk came under attack. At first Russian forces were hesitant to engage the enemy; Potemkin had ordered Iakobi to assume a defensive position at least until September.[154] Iakobi decided to await the arrival of reinforcements before mounting a robust defense.[155] Meanwhile, he authorized officials in Kizliar to imprison the town's Kabardian population, and to place the adult diplomatic hostages in iron shackles, "so that they might feel their fathers' impertinence."[156] This desperate measure did nothing to improve the situation in Kabarda. In June as many as 15,000 highlanders laid siege to Mar'insk, forcing Iakobi to take action. On June 10, after six hours of fierce fighting, his forces managed to repulse the attackers. The battle had been a lopsided affair, with the highlanders suffering far great losses. After a month of relative tranquility they returned to the line to demand an end to the Russian occupation of lands between Mozdok and Stavropolsk. They complained that the new forts had been built on lands where they pastured their herds in winter, when cold and snow forced them down from the mountains and onto the grassy steppe. Iakobi had neither the inclination nor the authority to satisfy their demands. So the cycle of violence continued through the summer.[157]

Potemkin had no intention of abandoning the Mozdok-Azov Line, but neither did he fail to notice that the situation North Caucasia had become considerably more dangerous. In May he ordered the immediate dispatch of several Don Cossack regiments to the line, and in June he instructed Major General Fabritsiani, stationed in Ukraine, to make haste for the line, and then moved the troops under his cousin, Major General Pavel Potemkin, from Poland to the Don.[158] In July Catherine secretly authorized Potemkin to send troops to punish the Kabardians for their perceived transgressions and to bring order in the region. "Your prudence," she wrote, "persuades us that this [action] will be carried out with the same love of humanity

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[154] Shtrandman, "Zapiski," 25; Potemkin confirmed this in a 28 Dec. 1779 letter to Catherine, RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, d. 58, ch. 9, l. 65.

[155] Iakobi to Potemkin, 8 May 1779, RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, d. 183, ch. 3, l. 115.

[156] Butkov, *Materialy*, 2: 53.

[157] Ibid., 2: 52-56. For the battle that took place on 10 June, Butkov the number of casualties as follows: the highlanders lost as many as 50 of their leaders and upwards of 500 commoners; Russia lost 8 troops and counted 34 wounded.

[158] Secret journal of War College directives for 1779 and 1780, RGVIA, f. 52., op. 1, d. 72, ll. 286 ob., 288 ob., 289.

(*chelovekoliubiem*) by which we always conquer severity of manners, and in doing so you will achieve the desired outcome without further bloodshed."[159] Every bit the physiocrat and enlightened despot, Catherine believed state power was the only way to cope with particularistic resistance. To rule a people meant also to reform them: she was sending the Russian army to teach "love of humanity" and to conquer Kabardians' rudeness and savagery. If there was an inherent tension between these ends and means, it was not acknowledged by either Catherine or Potemkin.

Potemkin's choice to lead the civilizing mission fell on Major General Fabritsiani, a battle-tested commander who had served with distinction in the Russo-Ottoman war and in Poland. He arrived on the line in September to find Russian officers and soldiers exhausted by the constant state of alarm in which they lived. Thanks to the memoirs Colonel Gustav Ernest von Shtrandman, a Baltic German who served under Iakobi in North Caucasia in 1779-80, we know that Russian soldiers were not allowed to shed their uniforms at night and were supposed to sleep on the front alongside their riffles. Their plight was especially lamentable in foul weather. By this point some of the officers, Shtrandman among them, had lost confidence in Iakobi's abilities as a military commander. They found "laughable" his interpretation of Potemkin's orders to assume a defensive posture in Kabarda. "This expression—'a defensive posture'—our clever commander explained as though it meant constantly being on the defensive, as if the Prince had given him to understand that under no circumstances was he authorized to take the offensive." So many of them were relieved when he handed over command to "brave General Fabritsiani."[160] Soon news arrived of fighting between Russian and Kabardian forces near Ekaterinsk. Kabardians had attacked a detachment of foragers, killing an officer and 50 soldiers and capturing a cannon in the process. Fabritsiani urged decisive retaliatory action; he proposed hitting the adversary with the full force of Russian arms. Initially hesitant, the Iakobi finally ordered Russian forces on the offensive.[161]

Several thousand strong, the Russian army was encamped on the Kura River not far from Fort Pavlovsk. The highlanders were preparing for battle some 12 *versts* away on the right bank

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[159] Catherine to Potemkin, 8 July 1779, *SIRIO* 27 (1880): 178.

[160] Shtrandman, "Zapiski," 25.

[161] Ibid.; Butkov, *Materialy*, 2: 56.

of the Malka; Shtrandman put their numbers at 6,000.[162] The ensuing clash, which took place on 29 September and lasted several hours, had the look of a massacre. Fabritsiani's maneuvers seem to have caught the enemy unawares. Under heavy fire from all sides, "they became so frenzied that they were unable to surrender. Fabritsiani was forced to give them a hostile reception and slaughter them. With this the battle ended. Few managed to escape. Here there were only princes and *uzden*s; the commoners, located some 6 *verst*s away, fled."[163] The highlanders lost as many as 500 warriors; Russia, in contrast, lost approximately 20 troops.[164] Those who had managed to escape what must have been a harrowing scene sought refuge in the Baksan valley. Fabritsiani wanted to pursue them into the mountains in order to finish the job, but Iakobi had other ideas. He ordered the troops back to Fort Pavlovsk, believing he had taught the Kabardians and their allies an object lesson in Russian power.[165] But at least one officer considered the move a "capital mistake." Shtrandman was critical of Iakobi's decision to pass up the opportunity to follow up the victory with a campaign to force the enemy to conclude a peace on Russia's terms. When Kabardian chiefs later returned unabashed to negotiate a settlement, it became clear that recent events had done nothing to soften their demands.[166] The officers took this as evidence that Iakobi had miscalculated. Iakobi himself seemed to acknowledge as much in November, when he announced plans for a new campaign.

Now Iakobi led his army of several thousand troops up the valley of the Baksan. The conditions were far from ideal; heavy snow and a strong frost made for tough going. Iakobi ordered his men to ford rivers 10-20 *sazhen*s wide in freezing weather. As a result, severe frostbite struck as many as 1,500 men, infantry and officers alike. Along the way the army stopped in recently abandoned villages, where the soldiers must have been relieved to find hay and sheep in abundance. On 30 November the army reached the mountains where Kabardian forces were encamped. There Iakobi received a deputation from "princes" Misost and Shamgar,

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[162] Shtrandman, "Zapiski," 26.

[163] Butkov, *Materialy*, 2: 56; for a "plan of the battle on the Malka River, 29 September 1779," see ibid., 593-4.

[164] Ibid.; according to Butkov (*Materialy*, 2: 57), 16 Russian troops perished and 34 were injured in the fighting, while Kabarda lost as many as 300 of its "young princes and nobles."

[165] Iakobi to Potemkin, 5 Oct. 1779, RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, d. 183, ch. 3, l. 113.

[166] Shtrandman, "Zapsiki," 26, 27.

who were prepared to surrender. "When we arrived, they began to plead insistently [for mercy], promising to sign anything we liked and swear fealty. Negotiations concluded with the signing of a peace. All the princes swore fealty in the presence of the troops and signed, although reluctantly, an agreement that was not at all to their advantage."[167]

The instrument obliged Kabardians to return livestock, money and captives taken by various highland groups over the past few years (articles 1-2). Article 4 provided that the Malka River serve as the border between Kabarda and Russia, and enjoined Kabardians from pasturing their herds or cultivating lands north of the river. Other articles attempted to restrict Kabardians' access to the line and the lands beyond it; to oblige them, as "eternal subjects of Her Majesty," to execute all Imperial orders; and to circumscribe their relations with the Tatars of the Kuban and the Temirgoi and Beslenei of western Circassia (articles 5-8). Articles 9 and 10 granted to Kabardian peasants and Ossetians the right to seek "refuge and protection" on the line, should either persecution by their masters or a desire to be received into the Christian faith motivate their flight from Kabarda. Finally, Kabardian leaders had recourse for wrongs committed against them to their elder chief Dzhankhot Tatarkhanov and the Imperial bailiff for Kabardian affairs, Dmitrii Taganov (article 11).[168] Days later a similar agreement was reached with the chiefs of Little Kabarda, which stipulated that the Terek serve as the border between Russia and their domains.[169] The leaders of both Kabardas swore to uphold the articles of the agreements, which defined them as Russian subjects, "before the holy Koran, almighty God, and his Prophet Mohammed" (article 13)

In the oath of fealty they were forced to sign, the people of Little Kabarda repented for having participated in the "revolt and mutiny" (*miatezh i bunt*) of the previous summer; stealing Imperial property; demanding the destruction of Russia's forts; and refusing to acknowledge their status as Russian subjects.[170] Future transgressions would have the gravest consequences. "Should we violate in any way this sworn oath, then we renounce forever almighty God and our Prophet Mohammed, and as unbelievers, lose for now and forever the favor of almighty God and

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[167] Ibid., 29.

[168] For a Russian version of the December 1779 agreement, see **Appendix**.

[169] Butkov, *Materialy*, 2: 59; Shtrandman, "Zapiski," 29.

[170] RGADA, f. 23, op. 1, d. 5, ch. 10, l. 536 ob.

the Great Prophet Mohammed, and subject ourselves to eternal damnation, as well as to the punishment of the invincible arms of Her Imperial Majesty."[171] To fail before the Russian monarch, in other words, was to fail before God; to renounce their connection to the Russian Empire was to renounce their connection to Islam.

Catherine learned of these events on the eve of the New Year. In a letter to the empress, Potemkin summarized the recent "crimes" and punishment of Russia's restive Kabardian subjects. Their transgressions were many: they had refused to recognize Russia's suzerainty over them; conducted raids against Russian positions in North Caucasia; rustled livestock; killed Russian subjects and led others into captivity. This had led to clashes between Russian and Kabardian forces, in which as many as 2,000 of Kabarda's "best horsemen…entire clans of *uzden*s" had been "extirpated" (*na golovu pobity*). If the bloodshed was regrettable, in the end the desired result was achieved. "The leaders and people of Kabarda have given themselves over to Your Imperial Majesty's Royal will and, having sworn fealty, designated borders, promised to compensate [Russia] for what they have stolen, and called themselves [Russian] subjects, are prepared to serve wherever ordered and to surrender diplomatic hostages." Potemkin presented the defeat of the Kabardians as further indication of Catherine's sage rule. "I consider myself lucky to be the executor of Your Royal Will in the fate of such a brave if wild people, where I am afforded the happy opportunity to demonstrate far and wide your intentions concerning the good of the subjects. Your name shall be remembered for ages, much as the builders of societies in antiquity were praised."[172]

What impact did this most recent round of carnage, oath-swearing and hostage-taking have on Russian-Kabardian relations? Russian administrators on the line enjoyed a couple months of relative quiet until February 1780, when some of the chiefs of Little Kabarda attempted to stop the flight of their dependents to Russia. "The cause of this uprising," Shtrandman understood correctly, "was that the princes did not wish to acknowledge, by the terms of the recent agreement, the freedom of the people, but rather treated them as before, that is, as serfs and slaves."[173] Soon as many as 800 Kabardian commoners left their wives and

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[171] RGADA, f. 23, op. 1, d. 5, ch. 10, l. 537 ob.

[172] Potemkin to Catherine, 28 Dec. 1779, RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, d. 58, ch. 9, ll. 65-6.

[173] Shtrandman, "Zapiski," 32.

children in Kabarda and appeared before the walls of Mozdok to petition its commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Fromgol'dt,[174] to be taken into Russian protection. Before leaving North Caucasia in spring 1780, Iakobi left orders with Fabritsiani to settle the new arrivals in Mozdok and Kizliar "in order to make other [Kabardian] lords feel what they stand to lose should they attempt anything rash."[175] He also authorized Fabritsiani to conduct another campaign to punish the "rebels." As a result, Russian troops compelled thousands of insurgents to lay down their arms, and arrested two of their leaders. By the middle of June the leaders of Great Kabarda had paid the 10,000-ruble indemnity required by the terms of the December agreement. Fabritsiani met with them to discuss a schedule for fulfilling the remaining obligations. Relative quiet reigned in central North Caucasia for the rest of the year; as usual, the situation in the west was more fluid. Iakobi presented Shtrandman to Potemkin in December 1780.[176] Unfortunately, no record of their discussions appears to have survived.

Despite these setbacks, Potemkin continued to think about ways to make productive use of the lands behind the Line. He had written to Iakobi in 1779 to ask how much land had been allotted "to inhabitants, colonists (*kolonistov*), and troops," and how much remained "empty for distribution to those who desire to set up settlements there."[177] He believed the region needed farmer-settlers in order to thrive. His settlement policies in New Russia and Azov had led to "abundance and prosperity," he told Catherine. He now proposed extending them to Astrakhan Province. "The environs around the Mozdok Line are no less endowed with the gifts of nature. But since they have not yet been settled, these places, which are so fertile but which have not yet been touched by the hand of the farmer, lack the necessary stores for subsistence, and the delivery of them to the Line from afar is achieved with great difficulty and expense." Catherine was always eager to maximize the productive potential of the empire's lands by settling people on them. But in her response to Potemkin, she noted that the proposal failed to mention whether the Senate had already undertaken the delimitation of the lands in question. She advised

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[174] According to Shtrandman (ibid.), Fromgol'dt was respected for his integrity and valued for his expert knowledge of the local mountainous terrain. Originally from Riga, the officer died in Mozdok on 30 April 1780, having recently been married, in a Catholic ceremony, to a woman with whom he had been living for 15 years.

[175] Iakobi to Potemkin, 11 April 1780, *KRO*, 2: 335-6.

[176] Iakobi to Potemkin, 6 June and Dec. 1780, *KRO*, 2: 337-9; Shtrandman, "Zapiski," 33, 34, 36.

[177] Potemkin's order to Iakobi is quoted in "O kavkazskikh praviteliakh," 751 n.12.

Potemkin to have the War College coordinate its efforts with the Senate, the Office for the Guardianship of Foreigners, and General Pavel Sergeevich Potemkin.[178] That General Potemkin, and not Iakobi, was mentioned in connection with the colonization of North Caucasia was significant. Having officially opened the Saratov governor-generalship (*namestnichestvo*) in 1780, Iakobi returned to the capital, where he was rewarded for his efforts with appointment to the governor-generalship first of Ufa and Simbirsk, and then of Irkutsk and Kolyvasnk.[179] Prince Potemkin appointed his nephew-in-law, Mikhail Mikhailovich Zhukov, to replace Iakobi as governor of Astrakhan. The nature of this post was changing. Actual Privy Councilor Zhukov was a civilian administrator who had no authority over troops in the region. Instead, responsibility for them passed to the commander of the Caucasian Corps, Major General Fabritsiani, who was soon recalled and died en route to St. Petersburg.[180] It appears that by this time Prince Potemkin had decided to entrust the region's affairs to his cousin and trusted lieutenant, Pavel Sergeevich Potemkin. General Potemkin was now instructed to draw up a preliminary plan for the settlement of *odnodvortsy*, state, and other peasants on these lands. He would then travel to the region to inspect the new line, identify places for new settlements, prepare the ground for the creation of a separate civil administration, and submit recommendations for Imperial confirmation. In September he was appointed commander of all troops in Caucasia in September 1782 and had arrived on the line by 4 November.[181] His appointment marked the beginning of new stage in the history of Russian empire building in Caucasia.

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[178] RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, ch. 1, d. 21, ll. 58-58ob. Both Potemkin's proposal and Catherine's response are in "Sobstvennoruchnaia zametka Imperatritsy Ekateriny II-oi," *Russkii arkhiv*, no. 1 (1876): 70. The documents, which are undated, were found among Potemkin's papers dating to the 1770s, leading their publisher to believe they were written in the second half of the decade. The fact that Potemkin was by this time governor-general of New Russia, Azov, Astrakhan, and Saratov, and that his cousin Pavel is mentioned in connection with Caucasian affairs, suggests they were written no earlier than 1780.

[179] As governor-general of Irkutsk and Kolyvansk, Iakobi had come full circle and was again taking active part in Russo-Chinese relations. See Cherkesov, ed., *Institut*, 56.

[180] "O kavkazskikh praviteliakh," 752-53.

[181] Pavel Sergeevich Potemkin (PSP) to Grigorii Aleksandrovich Potemkin (GAP), 8 Nov. 1782, RGVIA, f. 52, op. 1, (ch. 2), d. 264, l. 1. Cf. "O kavkazskikh praviteliakh," 753, which places Potemkin in Fort Georgievsk on 26 Oct.

Conclusions

In the immediate aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman war of 1768-74, the Russian government assumed a defensive posture in Caucasia. Russia's armed forces, though victorious, were exhausted, and so was its treasury. The country needed time to heal its war wounds and digest the terms of the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji. The government was also forced simultaneously to contend with the Pugachev Rebellion, which posed a serious threat to the economic interests of the Russian ruling class and, because it was taking place on Russia's southern frontier, to the security of the Russian state as well. Under these circumstances, few governments would be foolish enough to embark on a policy of expansion in a region whose social and geographic profile made any attempt to tame it problematic in the extreme.

It should not be assumed, however, that given fewer distractions, Catherine's government would have been eager to pursue a forward policy in Caucasia. On the contrary, Russian policy makers demonstrated little interest in matters Caucasian in the first years of her reign. The government's strategic priorities and alliances, as embodied in Northern System, gave the empire a northern and western orientation. In 1775, when the central government was presented with an opportunity to project Russian power south of the Terek basin, it rejected the idea as anathema to Russian interests in the region. Catherine and her advisers at the College of Foreign Affairs had come to accept the Terek River as Russia's natural boundary in eastern North Caucasia. As for Russia's interests in the Kuban region, the government had never bothered to define them.

The emergence of Grigorii Potemkin as a leading statesman caused a revolution in Russian strategic thinking. In his capacity as head of the War College and governor-general of Azov and Astrakhan Provinces, Potemkin conceived a bold plan to build Russia's empire in North Caucasia. He understood that Russia lacked meaningful borders in much of the region. His solution to this unacceptable security breach was to build a new fortified line across the Kuban steppe, thereby closing Russia's open and often perilous Caucasian frontier. Behind the Mozdok-Azov Line Potemkin imagined a farmer's paradise, and took steps to realize his vision.

Academician Johann Anton Güldenstädt provided a map and description of the Modok-Azov Line, as well as its justification, for the empire's literate subjects in an article entitled "Geographic and Historical Information Concerning the New Border of the Russian Empire

Extending between the Terek River and the Sea of Azov."[182] Stressing the defensive nature of the new line, the author treated its construction as a logical extension of Peter the Great's efforts to improve the security of Russia's borders south of the Tsaritsyn Line. He regarded the Terek River as the empire's natural border in North Caucasia, "for by means of this river, the perfect fortification of the Russian State against the inhabitants of Caucasia is not only possible, but is even a quite simple affair." The Terek, however, did not provide protection against the tribes living beyond the Kuban River, whose raiding activities were alleged to pose a serious threat to merchants and others traveling through the region. Güldenstädt argued that it was imperative to secure Russia's borders in the space between the Mozdok and the Azov Sea, where the Kuban River served as Russia's other "natural border" in North Caucasia. On what authority was Russia building its empire in the Kuban region? In answering this question, Güldenstädt turned for justification to a view of Russia's historical development then current. According this view, Russia had established its claim to the lands between the Don and Kuban rivers in the last years of the tenth century, during the reign of Grand Prince Vladimir Sviatoslavich. Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries a succession of Tatar overlords claimed dominion over them: first the khans of the Golden Horde and later, in the fifteenth century, the khan of Astrakhan. With the Muscovite conquest of Astrakhan, however, they should have been returned to the Russian fold, but Ivan IV "neglected these distant lands," which passed instead into the hands of the Crimean khan. In building forts and settling subjects in the Kuban-Terek basin, Catherine was merely reasserting "the fundamental right of Grand Prince Vladimir Sviatoslavich and Tsar Ivan Vasil'evich to the possession of these lands by the Russian State…not from a desire to expand [its] borders, but from a love of humanity (*chelovekoliubiia*), in order to provide for the security and prosperity not only of Russian subjects trading and living on the border, but also that of neighboring peoples." Güldenstädt assured his readers that the new line in no way threatened the native groups of North Caucasia; on the contrary, they stood to benefit from it.[183]

But as is often the case with borders, this one was highly controversial and, as we have seen, even had its detractors in the College of Foreign Affairs. Because Mozdok-Azov Line

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[182] The article was originally published with a map in *Mesiatsoslov na 1779 g.* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk, n.d.), and was republished, unfortunately without the map, in *Sobranie sochinenii, vybrannykh iz Mesiatsoslovov na raznye gody* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk, 1790), 4: 149-192.

[183] Ibid., 151, 153, 163-64, 166, 167, 168.

served to cut them off from vital resources, Caucasian highlanders and the Tatars of the Kuban steppe had compelling reasons to seek its destruction. They lodged complaints with Russian administrators, and when these failed to achieve the desired result, formed alliances among themselves and with outside powers and launched campaigns to defend their interests. Because the Russian government tended to view these people as barbarians and likened them to animals, it was unable not come to terms with the true nature of their hostility. Once the decision was taken in St. Petersburg to view them as subjects, their transgressions against Russian authority could only be viewed crimes.