

The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus. Bruce Grant. Cornell University Press. 2009. 216 pp. (ISBN-13: 9780801475412)

As a researcher of Russia who started the active phase of his academic career on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Bruce Grant could not stay indifferent to some of the catastrophic consequences that followed this seminal event. A series of bloody clashes in the Caucasus in the early 1990s – the Armenian-Azerbaijani war, the Georgian-Abkhaz war, and the Chechen war for independence – were the most severe and violent manifestations of that process. The study of Russia's penetration of the Caucasus required the knowledge of local languages, familiarity with vernacular traditions and life style and creative imagination – the skills the author of the book possessed. Consequently, the topic of Russia's penetration of the Caucasus and the perception of the new dominance by local nations was an attractive field to which he could apply his research skills.

Grant dedicated his book to the problem as old as the world is - the right of more powerful states to subjugate weaker polities. It was the era of colonialism that highlighted this problem in a new perspective, putting forward the concept of Kulturtrager mission, which was called a “civilizing mission” in Europe after Montesquieu, and the “cultural mission” in Russia. In other words, the conquest and establishment of political domination offered not only political power, but also imposed an equally heavy burden articulated as a “gift of civilization,” or in the Russian case, the “gift of empire” (p. X). The issues that Grant placed at the heart of his book are the way in which Russian political and artistic culture viewed the relationship between Russia and the Caucasus, and how the local peoples perceived their subordination to the empire.

First of all, the author ponders “how Russians gave of their own in a civilizing cause to legitimate imperial, colonial, and later communist interventions” (p. XV). As an anthropologist, he tried to analyze these basic concepts in several, sometimes rather unexpected foreshortenings. The very name of the book shows that the author decided to search for answers to the questions posed through the discourse of recognized archetypes of Caucasian life, namely, the models of the captivity and the gift. He admits that “the case of Russian relations with the Caucasus is remarkable for both the length and consistency of popular Russian acknowledgment of and interest in the gifts and sacrifices made toward its stewardship” (p. 62).

Indeed, Russian literature from Pushkin to Tolstoy romanticized the Caucasian mountains and the glittering of highlanders' daggers as being an inexhaustible source of inspiration for poets. Many scenes praise the selfless love of proud and beautiful Circassian girls and noble Russian officers, who sometimes fell captive to the owners of independent high-mountainous villages. Grant makes abundant use of examples from Russian classical literature to reflect the key moments of the "early Russian ideology of rule in the Caucasus".

The author found a successful canvas in the myth of Prometheus for the generalization of sometimes too diverse material, sometimes not too proportionally scattered in a fairly wide chronological framework. After all, the author wrote his book as a combination of several disciplines – history, mythology, anthropology, history of cinema, and literature. In fact, Grant's book can be called a collection of essays that are not always organically interlinked: a review of the history of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus is followed by the presentation of some rituals and legends of various Caucasian people associated with captivity and gift-giving, and an essay of the Caucasian theme in Soviet cinema.

A short excursion into the history of the conquest of the Caucasus by the Russians is made against the backdrop of a number of vivid quotes from the statements and memoirs of Russian military leaders like Ermolov and Madatov, and historians and writers like Romanovsky, Dostoevsky, and Velichko, that perfectly reflect "famous archetypes of Russian character" (p. 50). Grant argues rather convincingly that their stories about the Russian captivity reflected a rather wide range of political positions. However, it more often reflected a vision of the Caucasian peoples as some ungrateful and belligerent subjects who could not appreciate the benefits that the Russian Empire generously granted them. At the same time, he notes that although there has been a rather violent historical relationship between these two regions, they have also benefitted from each other in many ways.

No less interesting is the last chapter of the book, in which the author enthusiastically and knowingly introduces the reader to the wonderful world of Soviet cinema, in which no less attention is given to the topic of the Caucasus than in classical Russian literature.

On the other hand, a couple of annoying blunders in the book are hard to explain for such a connoisseur of Caucasian life as Grant is. In particular, the author's remark that the *Molla Nasreddin* magazine was published in Baku (p. 129) is surprising, as it is well known that the bulk of this satirical Azerbaijani journal was published in Tiflis, which by the early 20th century was the number two cosmopolitan center of the Caucasus along with Baku. In addition, the dedicated reader should bear in mind that the author's comments that Adler is located on the Crimean Peninsula (p. 110, 120) are not accurate.

In general, Grant's book is a cognitive and vivid work, written in bright and lively language. It is quite easy to read, and illuminates the history of Russian-Caucasian relations from a new angle.

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