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SVANTE E. CORNELL:

Small nations and great powers: a study of ethnopolitical conflict in the Caucasus.

480 pp. Richmond: Curzon Caucasus World, 2001. £50.

The book under review covers a wide range of issues pertaining to the conflicts in the Caucasus. Starting with a general survey of the Caucasus with its multi-ethnic and religious settings, the author proceeds to an evaluation of the Imperial Russian and Soviet legacy and of the nature and roots of the Caucasian conflicts. The following chapters are devoted to concrete cases: the Armenian–Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh, the wars of Georgia with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and Russia’s war with Chechnya. The author also discusses the conflict between the Ingush and Ossetians and the potential conflict situations in Daghestan (in particular, the problem of the divided Lezghi nation). Considerable attention is given to the great powers’ policy towards the Caucasian region: Turkey, Iran, Russia, and the United States. The final chapter discusses the Caucasus from a Eurasian geopolitical perspective.

The time when analysts regarded the conflicts in the Caucasus as clashes of civilizations, with religious differences being given a prominent role, already belongs to history. The author criticizes this approach, proposing a more realistic definition applicable to all conflicts in the Caucasus: ‘The conflicts are primarily political conflicts over territory and ownership thereof. Naturally, the conflicts are all due to the process of politicizing ethnicity’ (p. 18). ‘In a sense, the main determinant of the conflicts is a security dilemma based on fear; or one could say, on the development of nationalisms mirroring each other, fuelling and directed against each other, and scarcely able to develop without each other’ (pp. 55–6). One could continue the analogy by pointing, in particular, to mirroring separatisms of Georgians and Azeris seeking secession from the Soviet Union as opposed to Abkhazians, South Ossetians and Karabakh Armenians seeking separation from, respectively, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

The book contains many precise and insightful observations, for instance the author’s remark that ‘the primary reason for the increasingly conflictual attitude of minorities in the late 1980s was not discrimination but the strengthening of group identity’ (p. 51). The post-Soviet minorities’ rejection of the notion of ‘autonomy’ is explained by the purely decorative nature of this term in the Soviet totalitarian ‘federal’ structure. The minorities seek secession or confederal solutions as ‘the only safe perceived way for national survival and development’ (p. 46). Equally justified are a positive evaluation of the role of the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus and a negative assessment of the great powers’ rivalry over the Caucasus, which, ‘has delayed rather than hastened the resolutions of these conflicts’. Moreover, ‘all four interested states are pursuing their own interests in the region rather than working impartially and unselfishly for the resolution of the conflicts’ (p. 54).

The descriptions of concrete cases vary in their scope and depth. Thus, the discussion of the Azeri–Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, based on balanced use of relevant sources and personal interviews, is probably among the best chapters in the book. The author emphasizes that, unlike other Caucasian wars, this conflict is the only inter-state one. Though its resolution is not impossible, it will remain a very difficult task for the

international community and will continue to destabilize the region for a long time to come.

The chapter on Georgia/Abkhazia/South Ossetia, by contrast, gives the impression of being a more arbitrary compilation of facts. Russia's deportation of Abkhazians to Ottoman Turkey is explained by the Abkhazians' closeness to Circassians (p. 146), not, as it were, by a series of anti-Russian rebellions, after which the Abkhazians were labelled as a 'guilty population'. Georgian was never a second language for Abkhazians (as claimed on p. 146): at the time the Abkhazian Principality was incorporated into Russia (in 1810), the majority of Abkhazians were monolingual, only some southern Abkhazians having knowledge of Mingrelian. On p. 178 the author asserts that in 1979 Armenians outnumbered Abkhazians in Abkhazia, this in stark contradiction to the census data provided on p. 156! Few will believe Cornell's assertion that the Georgian 'guerrillas' operate in Abkhazia 'outside the control of the state' (p. 186) in contrast to the assessment of Amnesty International. Given that the number of Abkhaz troops over the whole war period (1992–3) is estimated at roughly 5,000, some 70 to 80 per cent of them being ethnic Abkhazians, the information about the arrival in Abkhazia of 2,000 troops from Transdnestria will only bewilder any expert observer.

Speaking of proposals on political solutions, the author dismisses the idea of a 'common state' as a Russian ploy and regards instead the asymmetric federation (whatever this may mean), proposed by Shevardnadze, as 'the right model for the future of the Georgian state' (p. 196). The problem is that the three Caucasian *de facto* states (Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Karabakh), which managed to defend themselves militarily and survive economic blockades, will not be easily persuaded to give up their independence in exchange for vague promises of even the 'highest level of autonomy' and to return to the control of the very same governments which waged full-scale wars against them. The tentative conclusion will be that these *de facto* states will continue to exist for a considerable period of time, even without recognition *de jure* (cf. analogues such as Taiwan and Northern Cyprus), which renders the insistence on 'asymmetric federation' remote from political reality.

The war in Chechnya, the most destructive and tragic conflict on the territory of the former USSR, is also the best documented of all Caucasian wars. The author follows the conflict from its inception through to its tragic outcomes. The sad conclusion is that 'Chechnya had lost the peace when it, not unpredictably, failed to create a functional society and state' (p. 250). Interestingly, the terms 'separatism' and 'secessionism', abundantly used when referring to former autonomies within Georgia and Azerbaijan, disappear altogether in the discourse over Chechnya, the Chechen war being portrayed primarily in terms of the Russian 'invasion' and the Chechen struggle for the 'ideals of independence'. Since the wars over Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia did not differ substantially in character from that of Chechnya, all being wars for national liberation, the only discernible difference is Chechnya's anti-Russian stance; one wonders whether this factor can explain the author's obviously more benevolent attitude towards the Chechen cause.

The final chapter discusses the Caucasus as a security complex and examines the appearance of the two 'Caucasian strategic alignments', namely a west-east axis, including the USA, Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan plus Uzbekistan, and a north-south axis, involving Russia, Armenia and Iran. The author emphasizes that the geo-strategic importance of the Caucasus has so far been a complicating rather than a facilitating factor. Though regional

integration could bring great benefits to the population of Caucasian states, the deep mistrust and unresolved political-territorial problems, exacerbated by the issue of refugees, are obstacles along the way of peace and integration, the achievement of which, as the author predicts, will not be easy. Despite some imbalances and inaccuracies (not to mention quite a few typos), on the whole Cornell's book presents a useful source for Western readers' knowledge about the Caucasus and its present political problems.

VIACHESLAV A. CHIRIKBA

AMJAD JAIMOUKHA:

The Circassians: a handbook.

(Peoples of the Caucasus.) 384 pp. Richmond: Curzon Caucasus World, 2001.

This is the first modern account of the Circassians, once the largest North Caucasian people, whose ancestry lies lost in the mists of time and whose territory presently makes up part of the Russian Federation. The Circassians were known to Europe and the East in the past principally because of the beauty of their women ('a fair Circassian') and the legendary bravery of their men. The Circassian Mamluks had a lasting and significant impact on Egypt's history. But since the brutal decimation of Circassia by Imperial Russia and the forced emigration of the majority of its population to the Ottoman Empire, this nation has been mostly forgotten and neglected. One of the few works on the Circassians which appeared in the twentieth century is Aytek Namitok's *Origines des Circassiens*, (Paris, 1939). The book under review, by Amjad Jaimoukha, fills a substantial gap in Western readers' knowledge of this Caucasian nation.

The book encompasses nearly all aspects of Circassian history and life (people and land; history; politics and current affairs; the diaspora; economy; religion and beliefs; social structure; folklore; arts, crafts and architecture; music and dance; language and linguistic policy; literature; theatre, media and film). The useful appendices include Circassian proverbs and sayings, chronology, the Circassian pantheon and caste system, latinized Kabardian alphabet, extensive bibliography and index.

In the nineteenth century the territory of Circassia became a bone of contention between its two rival neighbours, Turkey and Russia. Eventually Turkey ceded Circassia, which it possessed only nominally, to Russia, thus presenting the latter with the uneasy task of conquering the Circassian territory. This period is among the most tragic chapters in the history of the Circassians; many were exterminated or forced to flee their homeland. The author justly mentions yet another aspect of that sad situation—the uncompromising and disastrous decisions taken by Circassian leaders, who preferred to lead their people to wholesale emigration, thus effectively giving up their homeland. If it were not for the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous population of the Western Caucasus (Circassians, Ubykhs, Abkhazians) in the nineteenth century, the recent history of this region, and indeed of the entire Caucasus, would have been quite different from what it is today.

There are still many gaps in our knowledge of Circassian history, even of the relatively recent Soviet period, such as the Baksan revolt of 1928 (p. 80). No less revealing is the fresh look at the question of Kabarda's 'voluntary' incorporation into the Russian Empire which, as the author argues, became