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The Caucasus, Its Peoples, and Its History

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Abstract

Caucasia is a broad isthmus between the Black Sea and the Caspian, traversed by a great chain of mountains rising to a height of 18,000 feet. Caucasian peoples, various ethnic groups living in the Caucasus, a geographically complex area of mountain ranges, plateaus, foothills, plains, rivers, and lakes, with grasslands, forests, marshes and dry steppes. The complex of regions harbours more than 50 separate peoples, ranging from language communities with only a few hundred speakers to large national groups numbering millions. This diversity is not of recent date. In no other region of its size in the world are there so many different races and languages.

Key Words: *The Caucasus, peoples, History, Folklore.*

Introduction: The Caucasus /'kɔ:kəsəs/ or Caucasia /kɔ:'kerzə/ (for endonyms, see below), is a region at the border of Europe and Asia, situated between the Black and the Caspian seas. It is home to the Caucasus Mountains, which contain Europe's highest mountain, Mount Elbrus. Politically, the Caucasus region is separated between northern and southern parts. The southern parts consist of independent sovereign states. The northern parts are under the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation [19]. The northern portion of the Caucasus is known as the Ciscaucasus and the southern portion as the Transcaucasus. The Ciscaucasus contains the larger majority of the Greater Caucasus Mountain range, also known as the Major Caucasus mountains. It includes Southwestern Russia and northern parts of Georgia and Azerbaijan. The Transcaucasus is bordered on the north by Russia, on the west by the Black Sea and Turkey on the east by the Caspian Sea, and on the south by Iran. It includes the Caucasus Mountains and surrounding lowlands. All of Armenia, Azerbaijan (excluding the northern parts) and Georgia (excluding the northern parts) are in South Caucasus. The main Greater Caucasus range is generally perceived to be the dividing line between Asia and Europe[4]. The highest peak in the Caucasus is Mount Elbrus (5,642 m) in the western Ciscaucasus in Russia and is generally considered as the highest point in Europe. The Caucasus is one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse regions on Earth. The nation states that comprise the Caucasus today are the post-Soviet states Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The Russian divisions include Krasnodar Krai, Stavropol Krai, and the autonomous republics of Adygea, Karachay–Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. Three territories in the region claim independence but are recognized as such by only a handful or by no independent states: Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia. The Caucasus is an area of great ecological importance. The region is included in the list of 34 world biodiversity hotspots[16].

History of the Caucasus: One can divide the history of the Caucasus region into the history of the Northern Caucasus (Ciscaucasia), historically in the sphere of influence of Scythia and of Southern Russia (Eastern Europe) and that of the Southern Caucasus (Transcaucasia, Caucasian Albania, Georgia, Armenia), in the sphere of influence of Persia, Anatolia and Assyria[1]. In modern times, the Southern Caucasus formed part of the Persian Empire, while the Russian Empire conquered and annexed the Northern Caucasus in the 19th century in the Caucasian Wars (1817-1864). In 1828 by the Treaty of Turkmenchay the Persians conceded sovereignty over the Southern Caucasus to Russia[17]. The Northern Caucasus became the scene of intense fighting during the Second World War. Nazi Germany attempted to capture the Caucasus region from Soviet control in 1942 by a two-

pronged attack towards both the western bank of the Volga (intending to seize the city of Stalingrad) and by a drive southeast towards Baku, a major center of oil production. The Nazis intended to establish a Reichskommissariat Kaukasus to control the Caucasian territories of the Soviet Union. Considerable parts of the northern Caucasus fell under German occupation, but the invasion eventually faltered as it failed to accomplish either goal and Soviet soldiers drove the Germans back west following the Battle of Stalingrad (1942-1943) [11]. Following the end of the Soviet Union, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia became independent in 1991. The Caucasus region has become the setting for various territorial disputes since the collapse of the Soviet Union, leading to the Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–1994), the Ossetian-Ingush conflict (1989–1991), the War in Abkhazia (1992–1993), the First Chechen War (1994–1996) and the Second Chechen War (1999–2009)[8].

North Caucasus: The North Caucasus (or Ciscaucasia, Russian, Северный Кавказ) is the northern part of the Caucasus region between the Black and Caspian Seas and within European Russia. The term is also used as a synonym for the North Caucasus economic region of Russia. Politically, the Northern Caucasus (territory north of the Greater Caucasus Range) includes the Russian Republics of the North Caucasus[11]. As part of the Russian Federation, the Northern Caucasus region is included in the North Caucasian and Southern Federal Districts and consists of Krasnodar Krai, Stavropol Krai and the constituent republics, approximately from west to east. Republic of Adygea, Karachay–Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia–Alania, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Republic of Dagestan. Since October 2007, separatists and Caucasus Front soldiers led by Dokka Umarov and Akhmed Yevloyev have claimed all of the North Caucasian regions from Karachay–Cherkessia to the Caspian Sea as part of their territory invaded by Russia during the 18th century that expelled most of the Caucasians towards Turkey, Iran, Bulgaria, Syria and Jordan. This proclaimed Caucasus Emirate has been met with opposition within the Caucasus region from the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria[16]. Geographically, the term North Caucasus comprises the northern slope and western extremity of the Caucasus Major mountain range, as well as a part of its southern slope to the West (until the Psou River). The Forecaucasus steppe area is often also encompassed under the notion of North Caucasus, thus the northern boundary of the geographical region is generally considered to be the Kuma-Manych Depression. It is bounded by the Sea of Azov and Kerch Strait on the west, and the Caspian Sea on the east. According to the Concise Atlas of the World, Second Edition (2008), most of the Ciscaucasian region lies on the European side of the commonly accepted division that separates Europe from Asia. In 2011, the Russian government has put forward plans to create a Caucasian version of Silicon Valley, at a cost of 32 billion rubles (\$1.1 billion) as part of on-going efforts to generate opportunities in the troubled Russian region[6].

South Caucasus: The South Caucasus is a geopolitical region located on the border of Eastern Europe and Southwest Asia. It is also referred to as Transcaucasia, the Trans-Caucasus or the Transcaucasus. More specifically, the South Caucasus area spans the southern portion of the Caucasus Mountains and its lowlands, straddling the border between the continents of Europe and Asia and extending from the southern part of the Greater Caucasus mountain range of southwestern Russia southerly to the Turkish and Armenian borders and from the Black Sea in the west to the Caspian Sea coast of Iran in the east[18]. The area includes the southern part of the Greater Caucasus mountain range, the entire Lesser Caucasus mountain range, the Colchis Lowlands, the Kura-Aras Lowlands, the Talysh Mountains, the Lenkoran Lowlands, Javakheti and the eastern portion of the Armenian Highland. The South Caucasus area is a part of the entire Caucasus geographical region that essentially divides the Eurasian transcontinent into two [14].

All of Armenia is in the Southern Caucasus, the majority of Georgia and Azerbaijan, including the exclave of Nakhchivan, fall within this area. The countries of the region are producers of oil, manganese ore, tea, citrus fruits, and wine. In Western languages, the terms Transcaucasus and Transcaucasia are translations of the Russian *zakavkazie*, meaning the area beyond the Caucasus Mountains, as seen from the Russian capital (analogous to the Roman terms *Transalpine* and *Transpadana*)[5]. The region remains one of the most complicated places in the post-Soviet area, and contains three heavily disputed areas – Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Located on the peripheries of Turkey, Iran and Russia, the region has been an arena for political, military, religious and cultural rivalries and expansionism for centuries. Throughout its history, the region has come under control of various empires, including the Roman, Byzantine, Mongol, Persian, Ottoman

and Russian Empires, all of which introduced their faiths and cultures. Ancient kingdoms of the region included Armenia, Albania and Iberia, among others. These kingdoms were later incorporated into various Iranian empires, including the Achaemenid Empire, the Parthian Empire and the Sassanid Empire, during which Zoroastrianism became the dominant religion in the region. However after the rise of Christianity and conversion of Caucasian kingdoms to the new religion, Zoroastrianism lost its prevalence and only survived because of Persian power and influence still lingering in the region. Thus, the South Caucasus became the area of not only military but also religious convergence, which often led to bitter conflicts with successive Persian Empires (and later Muslim-ruled empires) on the one side and the Roman Empire (and later the Byzantine Empire) on the other side. In the middle of the 8th century, with the capture of Derbend by the Umayyad armies, most of the South Caucasus became part of the Caliphate and Islam spread throughout the region. Later, the Orthodox Christian Kingdom of Georgia dominated most of the South Caucasus. The region was then conquered by the Seljuk, Mongol, Turkic, Safavid, Ottoman, Afsharid and Qajar dynasties [13]. After two wars in the beginning of 19th century, the Russian Empire finally conquered the South Caucasus from the Qajars, severing historic regional ties with Iran. In 1801, what is now Georgia was formally incorporated into the Russian Empire. Following the 1877-78 Russo-Turkish War, Russia annexed Kars, Ardahan, Agri and Batumi from the Ottomans and established the province of Kars Oblast as its most southwesterly territory in the Transcaucasus. After the fall of Russian Empire in 1918, the South Caucasus region was unified into a single political entity twice, as Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic from 9 April 1918 to 26 May 1918 and as Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic from 12 March 1922 to 5 December 1936[12].

Caucasian peoples: Caucasian peoples, various ethnic groups living in the Caucasus, a geographically complex area of mountain ranges, plateaus, foothills, plains, rivers and lakes, with grasslands, forests, marshes and dry steppes. The complex of regions harbours more than 50 separate peoples, ranging from language communities with only a few hundred speakers to large national groups numbering millions. This diversity is not of recent date. Pliny the Elder related that the Romans carried on their business there through 80 interpreters. Arab geographers called the Caucasus *Jabal al-Aslame*, Mountain of Languages [15].

The Caucasian peoples are subdivided, like the Caucasian languages, into two northern branches and a southern branch. The southerners, comprising the Georgians, the closely related Mingrelians and Laz and the Svan, make up the Republic of Georgia and live in western Transcaucasia (the Laz live in Turkish territory)[7]. Among the many peoples that make up the two smaller northern groups, the Chechens, who constitute the majority of the population of Chechnya republic in southwestern Russia and the Kabardians, settled along the Kuban and upper Terek river basins, are the most populous. Among other northern Caucasian peoples are the Abkhaz, the Ingush and the Lezgi. There are a vast number of less populous groups. Of the Indo-European peoples, the ancestors of the Armenians entered Transcaucasia from Anatolia in the early 1st millennium bc. Armenians number 3,215,800 in their native Armenia, though approximately 8 million live outside the republic, forming the Armenian diaspora. Elsewhere in the region, they reside in Nagorno-Karabakh (which is de facto independent, but de jure is part of Azerbaijan), Georgia (primarily Samtskhe-Javakheti, Tbilisi, and Abkhazia) and the Russian North Caucasus. The Ossetians live in North Ossetia–Alania (autonomous republic within Russia) and in South Ossetia, which is de facto independent, but de jure is part of Georgia[3]. The Yazidi Kurds reside in the western areas of Armenia, mostly in the Aragatsotn marz. An autonomous Kurdish region was created in 1923 in Soviet Azerbaijan but was later abolished in 1929. Pontic Greeks reside in Armenia (Lori Province, especially in Alaverdi) and Georgia (Kvemo Kartli, Adjara, the Tsalka, and Abkhazia). Pontic Greeks had also made up a significant component of the southern Caucasus region acquired from the Ottoman Turkish Empire (following the 1878 Treaty of San Stefano) that centred on the town of Kars (ceded back to Turkey in 1916). Russians mostly live in the Russian North Caucasus and their largest concentration is in Stavropol Krai, Krasnodar Krai, and in Adygea. Georgia and the former south Russian Caucasus province of Kars Oblast was also home to a significant minority of ethnic (Swabian) Germans, although their numbers have become depleted as a result of deportations (to Kazakhstan following WWII), immigration to Germany, and assimilation into indigenous Christian Orthodox communities[10].

A second ancient Indo-European group is the Ossetes, or Ossetians, in the central Greater Caucasus, they are a remnant of the eastern Iranian nomads who roamed the south Western Steppe from the 7th century bc until the 4th century ad (when they were dispelled by the Huns) and who were successively known as Scythians, Sarmatians and Alans. Slavic groups account for more than one-third of the total population of the Caucasus, they live in the north and consist mainly of Russians and Ukrainians. Finally, there are such Indo-European groups as Kurds, Talysh, Tats, Greeks, and Roma (Gypsies) distributed in various areas of the Caucasus. Among the Turkic peoples are the Azerbaijani (Azerbaijanians) in the southwest and the Kipchak Turks in the north. Of mixed ethnic origin, the Azerbaijani are at least in part composed of the indigenous population of eastern Transcaucasia and possibly an admixture of the Medians of northern Persia. They were in turn Persianized during the rule of the Sasanians (3rd-7th century ad) and after conquest by Seljuq Turks in the 11th century, Turkicized. The Turkic influence remained strong throughout the following centuries. The Kipchak Turks are a group of small, but distinct peoples including the Kumyk, Nogay, Karachay, and Balkar. The indigenous Kumyk, like the other Kipchak Turks, are largely Muslim. Their language was for some three centuries the lingua franca of the region, but in the 20th century it was supplanted by Russian. The Nogay are thought to have become a distinct group formed after the disintegration of the Golden Horde. Most were nomads until the early 20th century. Both the Karachay and the Balkar are of unknown origins. The Kalmyk people or Kalmyks is the name given to the Oirats, western Mongols in Russia, whose ancestors migrated from Dzhungaria in 1607. Today they form a majority in the autonomous Republic of Kalmykia on the western shore of the Caspian Sea. Kalmykia has Europe's only Buddhist government.

The only Semitic peoples in the Caucasus are the Assyrians, who fled to Russian territory from Turkish persecution at the end of World War I and live mainly in the cities. Assyrians in the Caucasus number approximately 35,000 people, and live in Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Southern Russia. There are up to 15,000 in Georgia, 3500 in Armenia, up to 15,000 in southern Russia and 1400 in Azerbaijan. They are an ancient Semitic people, descendant from the ancient Mesopotamians. They are Eastern Rite Christians, mainly followers of the Assyrian Church of the East, and speak and write Mesopotamian Eastern Aramaic dialects [9].

The traditional economy of the peoples of the Caucasus is based on agriculture, cattle and sheep herding and cottage industries. The main crops are millet, barley, wheat, and corn (maize). Wine production is highly developed in Transcaucasia, especially in Georgia. Crafts, such as rug weaving, are developed in Dagestan republic, Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In the treeless highlands, villages consist of stone houses clustered together and built into the mountain slope. In the western Caucasus, villages consist of individual homesteads surrounded by fences. The buildings are made of wood or of wattles coated with clay. In central and eastern Transcaucasia, houses have a cupola-shaped vault on pillars, with an opening at the top that serves as a window and smoke vent. Everywhere in the Caucasus are traces of a patriarchal clan system and a tribal organization of society. These features have been best preserved among the mountaineers. In general, however, the tribal system gradually gave way to a system of village communities. Feudal relations developed especially in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan and in some parts of the northern Caucasus. During the Soviet period all areas were subjected to heavy Russian influence. Traditionally, the major religions in the Caucasus have been Islam (notably the Turkic groups), the Eastern Orthodox church (chiefly Georgians), the Armenian Gregorian church, and Judaism. There are also numerous minority sects [2].

Folklore: The Caucasus is rich in folklore. In the southern highlands tales of a mountain sorceress, Dal is widespread. She is beautiful and glowing and is a protectress of the alpine wildlife, but she can also lure hunters to their doom. Other tales show strong Zoroastrian influences from Ancient Iran. In the North there are tales that recount battles with the ancient Goths, Huns and Khazars, the last a Turkic people who ruled the Caucasus and adopted Judaism wholesale. One of the most noteworthy traditions is that of the Nart sagas, dramatic tales of a race of ancient heroes in which the figure of the all wise and all fertile Lady Satanaya is pivotal. She is mother to all the heroes and in many ways resembles the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite. Other figures include a shape changer and trickster, Sosruquo. He is magically conceived by Satanaya when a shepherd lusts after her and is born aflame from a rock. The god of the forge, Tlepsh, seizes him with tongs and quenches him in a vat of water,

thus hardening him and making him invulnerable everywhere but at his knees (much like the Greek hero Achilles) where the tongs held him. The mightiest and purest hero is Pataraz or Batradz, in some ways resembling Sir Lancelot of the Arthurian Romance. His father, Khimish, is murdered by the Narts for marrying a water sprite without their approval. They commit this murder in front of Khimish's mother, the worst possible atrocity in Caucasian eyes. Pataraz, still in his mother's womb, swears vengeance for his father's blood. When he is born the Narts abduct him and throw him into a torrent. He is washed away, found by a little old man and woman, and is raised in a burial mound. He quickly grows to maturity underground and is in effect resurrected from the dead. He returns and first encounters a Nart ruler, Pshimaruquo, whose name means Prince of Death. He triumphs over him and goes on to annihilate his enemies[4]. There is also a giant or hero, Nasran who, like the Greek Prometheus, is chained to a mountain top as a punishment for trying to return fire to humankind. There is a cyclopean giant, Yinizh, who traps some men in a cave just as the Greek cyclops Polyphemus did. He is blinded by the trickster Sosruquo, who thrusts a stake into the giant's one eye and escapes along with his men. These numerous links to the myths of Ancient Greece are matched by many to Ancient India and to Norse Scandinavia as well. There is even a sort of Christmas tree figure, Lady Tree and a warrior Forest-Mother, Amaz-an from which the Greeks took the figure of their women warriors, the Amazons. There is also a wide spread belief in the western Caucasus in a wild man of the high mountain forests, especially among people who dwell in the upper villages. These hairy sub-humans are reputed to be about five feet tall and to travel in small family groups. Occasionally they are said to come into the lowland fields at harvest time and feed on the ripening ears of corn. Men are said to be very brave if they can go into the high forests and trade with these wild men, because after having met with one or two of them in a clearing to offer trinkets they run the risk of being ambushed by the whole band as they return through the high, dense rhododendron forests.

Religion: The nation states of Georgia (Georgian Orthodox Christian), Armenia (Armenian Orthodox Christian) and Azerbaijan use religion as central components in their identity. The first two claim to be the oldest Christian nations and have nationalist churches. Azerbaijan is Shi'ite Muslim (Azeri Turks and Georgian speaking Ingiloi), Sunni Muslim (southern Lezgi Daghestani peoples) and Albanian Christian Orthodox Christian, now a branch of the Georgian patriarchate, (the small Udi community)[20]. These nation states feel a sense of privilege in comparison with the smaller peoples of the Caucasus and have used their religion as a part of their pride. The Nagorno-Karabagh war, 1989- 1995, was triggered by and accompanied by serious ethnic clashes between Azeris and Armenians that resonated with religious and ethnic hatred. By contrast religious tolerance is one of the strongest features of the North Caucasus and so Christians (Orthodox), Muslims (Sunni), Jews and pagans can be found living side by side. Even during the recent wars in the North, religious hatred never emerged as a motive. The highlands also had mystical traditions of meditation and martial arts which in the east have become Sufi practices. In Daghestan holy men often have shrines, usually placed at the highest point of the village. Pagan elements persist throughout the Caucasus and many Abkhaz are avowedly pagan. Religion is always socially and conceptually subordinated to ethnic identity throughout the Caucasus. There are enigmatic relics of older beliefs. For example, Ossetia preserves beehive mortuaries made of flat stones that must reflect an older, local religion of unknown character. Most skulls from these mortuaries show deformation due to head binding practices. Daghestan shows many old beliefs surrounding animals, such as snakes, horses and especially the bear. This last totemistic animal is associated with sacred rocks and even a half-bear half-man creature. Sacred rocks of heaven are also mentioned in some of the Nart sagas of the Northwest Caucasian Abazas. These are considered the heaviest stones and might even have been nickle-iron meteorites [6].

Conclusion: More interesting than its geographical features and material resources are the peoples of the Caucasus. In no other region of its size in the world are there so many different races and languages. Macedonia contains seven or eight nationalities, but in comparison with the Caucasus, with its fifty or sixty, it is but a poorly-stocked ethnographical museum. Since the earliest times this country has been famous as a meeting-place of many races and many tongues. Strabo tells us that there were seventy different peoples in the Caucasus; Pliny, with greater exaggeration, says that three hundred languages were spoken in the markets of Colchis. For over two thousand years the Caucasus

has been in the pathway of numberless migrations of peoples; but the nature of the land was such that each people that passed left some of its members behind, some fragment which survived unchanged in secluded valleys and rocky fastnesses. Once a community was settled here it was very difficult for a new invader to expel it totally; some small part was sure to remain behind resisting all assaults, until the second invader in his turn was forced to defend him against a third.

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Ethnolinguistic Groups in the Caucasus Region


