

On publishing *Twenty-Five Years in the Caucasus, 1842-1867*, by Arnold L. Zisserman

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The English-language reader interested in life and events in the Caucasus and Georgia during the Russian-Muslim wars of the 1820s-1860s will find that comprehensive resources are relatively few. John Baddeley, Moshe Gammer and the collaborative trio of Thomas Sanders, Ernest Tucker and Gary Hamburg (see bibliography) have provided substantive accounts of military operations, with the above-named trio also providing valuable excerpts from the Muslim-viewpoint account of Muhammad Tahir al-Qarakhi. A few senior officers, notably General Tornau and the commanders-in-chief Vorontsov and Bariatinski, wrote memoirs which addressed the conflict, while Tolstoy's *The Cossacks* and *Hadji Murad* skillfully present the war environment, participants and scenes of action. Finally, Lesley Blanch provides a far-ranging account of Shamil and the war in her book, *The Sabres of Paradise*. However, what are noticeably lacking are any English translations of long-span memoirs by civilians and military men who lived through the war years. Thus, it is hoped that publication in English of Arnold L. Zisserman's Russian-language *Twenty-Five Years in the Caucasus, 1842-1867* will prove to be a positive step in improving the situation.

Publication has two immediate aims. First, to make accessible to an English-language readership an observer-participant's memoir of men, situations, events and outcomes during the troubled period when Shamil's war against Russia – so often involving Georgia – was in full swing. Second, by so doing, to encourage others, whether Georgian, Russian or other, to take on similar translating and publishing ventures. The quarry of untranslated texts is huge. In his *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar*, M. Gammer notes that The Central Asian Survey, Vol. X, Nos. 1 and 2 (1991) “provides an extensive bibliography” for the Russian-Muslim war. However, of the 600+ books and articles that are listed, only two are in English. By way of contrast, the English-language literature on the Napoleonic wars, the Crimean War, and the Anglo-Indian conflicts on India's Northwest Frontier runs to hundreds of

items – general histories, military histories, memoirs, and special-topic studies. In addition, many films have been made.

But who was Zisserman and why do we choose his memoir for translation and publication? In brief, Arnold L. Zisserman (5 December 1824-16 September 1897) was a mere 17-year-old in 1842, when he left the small town of Kamianets-Podilskyi in western Ukraine and crossed the Greater Caucasus range for what became a 25-year-long active career in the Caucasus. He was too young to have had any higher education or formal training; he lacked the family background that might have secured him a first step up the established career ladder for the civil or military side of government. He was, in fact, by any assessment an outsider in a region that Imperial Russia sought to rule through almost closed and self-serving civilian and military castes that adhered to established regulation-from-the-top bureaucratic procedures.

Though denied formal advantages, Zisserman possessed many positive personal characteristics. He was a highly intelligent and curious young man, determined to escape from a boring, limited, small-town life on Russia's bleak southern steppes. He eagerly read Marlinsky's exotic novels *Ammalet Bek* and *Mullah Nur* with their colorful and detailed backgrounds and over-heated passions that (for the Western reader and many Russians of his Marlinsky's day) call to mind Scott and Byron. Zisserman recognized that the Caucasus offered everything his imagination pictured. Its snow-capped mountain ranges – the Greater Caucasus to the north, the Lesser Caucasus to the south – and its seas – the Black Sea to the west, the Caspian Sea to the east – encompassed every type of climate from high alpine to low-lying subtropical. Above all, the exotic region offered the chance of adventure that the Ukrainian steppes could not provide.

Zisserman never had the benefit any official upward-bound escalator to bear him forward; he had to make his own way onward and upward by his own efforts, and did so with admirable ability and tenacity. He rose from the lowly position of an office clerk in Tbilisi to the highly responsible and demanding position of deputy district administrator of Kakheti, serving under Prince Mikheil Cholokashvili, who in turn was serving under the Russian authorities. Zisserman did not let himself become a chair-bound bureaucrat mired in paperwork; he was intensively active in the field, traveling throughout Kakheti from Khevsureti in the north to Kvareli and the Lezgin Line in the south. At 20 years of age, having learned Georgian, he was settling disputes, managing road-building projects, and strengthening local militias that were often a first defense against Shamil's Muslim warriors. Despite these demands, Zisserman managed to make numerous notes on the lives and customs of remote mountain-dwelling communities. Before he was 22, Zisserman had met Prince Mikhail Vorontsov, Viceroy of the Caucasus, who recognized and drew upon the young

man's hands-on experience of conditions in the field and always remained well-disposed toward him, to the extent of frequently extending dinner invitations to the young man, in which he met the leading men and women of the day.

A second major experience in Zisserman's life was his service as police chief in the guerilla-ridden district of Elis, in southern Dagestan. Though the once pro- but now anti-Russian Sultan Daniel Bek had been forced out, the mountainous district remained intensely hostile to Russia, with Muslim groups launching deadly raids against Russian garrisons. Punitive expeditions posed severe challenges for Russian troops; terrain and weather were often intensely challenging while the enemy remained elusive. Though not a commissioned army officer, Zisserman frequently led the local Georgian militias in field operations. On a number of occasions he accompanied Russian troops in the field, and did not hesitate to criticize in his memoir poor leadership, excessive brutality, and deficiencies in materiel, medical and food supplies. Zisserman's vignettes of self-important officers and their underlying characteristics are extremely incisive; equally informative are his analyses of the ordinary soldier's endurance, cheerfulness, resilience and even fatalism - in the face of every hardship. In fact, Zisserman remains a significant source of information on the arduous and ever-dangerous lives of soldiers in the field and is particularly in describing and recording their feelings about themselves and their officers.

After a two-year stint of constant hardship, danger and action in Elis Zisserman returned to Georgia, now determined to secure a commission as a regular army officer. Despite meetings with senior officers - Generals Orbeliani and Argutinski among them - and with well-placed friends such as the Polish exile Colonel Potocki (a member of Viceroy Vorontsov's inner circle) the hoped-for but highly unorthodox change of career paths did not occur until a couple of years later, and then only by direct request of the Viceroy to Emperor Nicholas. Meanwhile, Zisserman took service in Kutaisi, under Prince Alexander Gagarin, governor of Imereti. In 1850, during his time in Western Georgia, Zisserman met and escorted HRH Alexander, the heir to the imperial throne, on his tour of the district. Finally, in mid-1851, with his commission now granted, Zisserman departed for military service in Dagestan. (Zisserman's account of his years in Dagestan forms Volume II of his memoir - to be published by Narikala in late 2018.)

The efficient and focused "official" Zisserman, ever involved in public affairs, security and local defense against Shamil's Muslim warriors, should not be allowed to overshadow the very engaging and thoughtful "personal" Zisserman, the social commentator, the amateur ethnographer and keen-eyed traveler. In this first capacity, he was an acute observer and provides telling notes on the Viceroy and Vicereine and court life; he reports on generals and their aides,

on field commanders and soldiers – often criticizing the self-indulgence of the former while praising the fortitude of the latter. Zisserman's notes on the lives and customs of highland communities living in the most remote and challenging regions of the Caucasus are of particular value; he recorded ways of life still rooted in archaic beliefs and traditions. M. Makalatia cites him in his pioneering ethnographic works on Tusheti, Pshavi and Khevsureti, and Alexander Grigolia frequently references Zisserman's findings in his *Custom and Justice in the Caucasus*. Zisserman's interests also extended to Shamil's Muslim followers and their leaders, in particular Sultan Daniel-Bek and Hadji Murad. In his novel *Hadji Murad*, Tolstoy drew directly upon Zisserman's account of the death of this troubled and tragic leader.

Zisserman's travels make him an important primary source on daily life in the Caucasus. Most Russians were assigned to service in a single or only two or three locations, and saw relatively little of Georgia and the Caucasus, while most Georgians remained close to their birthplace and local district. In contrast, Zisserman's postings launched him on journeys throughout the Caucasus – from Shatili to Shemakha, from Kakh to Kutaisi, from Abkhazia to Akhaltsikhe – and he spent lengthy periods in the region's key cities and fortresses; Tiflis, Tianeti, Kvareli, Zakatala, Elisli, Akhti, and Nukha among many more.

For reasons unknown to us – but most likely determined by cost factors – Zisserman's *Twenty-Five Years in the Caucasus, 1842-1867*, when published in 1879, consisted of a single unbroken runway of text, with chapter numbers set where they fell. None of the expected basic elements – introduction, contents listing, chapter subheads, index – were present. Maps, illustrations, notes, needed appendixes and an index were also entirely lacking. All these defects have been remedied in offering the present translation of Zisserman's memoir – unrivaled in range, depth, detail, color and value – to a new generation of readers.

Books mentioned – an extended bibliography will be found in *Twenty-Five Years*: Baddeley, J. *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus* (London, 1908); Bestushev-Marlinsky, A. *Ammalat-Bek* (1832) and *Mullah Nur* (1836); Blanch, L. *The Sabres of Paradise* (London, 1960); Gammer, M. *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar* (London, 1994); Grigolia, A. *Custom and Justice in the Caucasus* (Philadelphia, 1939); Makalatia, M. *Mesak'onleoba agmosavlet' Sak'art'velos mt'ianet'si: T'uš-P'šav-Xevsuret'i* (Tbilisi, 1938); Sanders, T., Tucker, E. and Hamburg, G. *Russian-Muslim Confrontation in the Caucasus, 1830-59* (London, 2004); Peter F. Skinner is the author of *Georgia: The Land Below The Caucasus – A Narrative History* (Narikala, 2014) and editor of *Excursions in the Caucasus, 1875-1881*, by Madame Carla Serena, (translated from French; Narikala, 2015)

At all times he sought involvement, experiencing life in remote mountain villages, on the dangerous Lezgin Line, at the banquets of native princes, at the luxurious Viceregal palace, in deadly raids against rebellious highlanders or hunting in the wilds – Zisserman met with every experience and challenge. More than a lively writer-reporter who moved among princes and peasants and among soldiers and civilians, he was an acute commentator on policy and governance, on military strategy and tactics, and on the age-old traditions of remote native peoples. Tolstoy recognized the value of Zisserman's work and drew upon it; Georgian scholars likewise cite his observations in their publications.

In *Twenty-Five Years in the Caucasus: 1842-1867*, Arnold Zisserman (1824-1897) presents a vivid portrait of life, society, travel and adventure in the ever-troubled region at the cross-roads of Europe and Asia. Zisserman also wrote *The History of the 80th Regiment, Prince Bariatinsky Kabardan Infantry* (1881) and *The Biography of Field-Marshal Prince A.I. Bariatinsky* (1891). He was also a contributor to various reviews. (307 words vs 253)

Historical sources Baddeley and Gammer: only 2 major sources; Blanche; Biblio sources Gammer (600 2 in English); Literary sources Pushkin, B-M, Lermontov, Tolstoy,

1829-1859: 30-year duration; High, exotic drama: Scott, Byron; Changes in military strategy; Huge human and environmental cost Yermolov, Paskevich, Tornau, Veliaminov, Voronstov, Potto not translated

Yet every campaign of the Napoleonic wars has been written up.

No one has a primary interest in translating first-hand accounts into English: Russians had the capabilities (with so much to be left unsaid) and, in governing Caucasia, could do much to control, censor or quash any Georgian, Chechnyan, Dagestani or Azeri versions; though the last three had only limited book publication possibilities.

No fully comprehensive Russian histories of the Caucasian Wars have yet been translated into English. However, three young Russians exiled to the Caucasus in the early – 1820s-30s wrote valuable works in their tragically short lives. Pushkin (1799-1837) – a temporary exile – left poems and a travel journal; Bestuzhev-Marlinsky (1797-1837), a permanent exile, wrote highly popular and ethnographically significant articles, stories and novels; and Lermontov (1814-41), also often in exile, wrote much ne poetry and an acclaimed novel. Later, in the 1850s, Leo Tolstoy saw publication of three short stories based on his own experiences in the Caucasian Wars, followed by *The Cossacks* (1863), a novel presenting an *alter ego's* temporary escape to live among the warring Russians, Cossacks and Chechens. Finally, in his last years Tolstoy, looking back more than half a century, wrote his much admired *Hadji Murad* (published posthumously in 1912),

which retells – with powerful moral implications – a tragic wartime incident that shook even Emperor Nicholas I. In his text, Tolstoy directly draws upon Zisserman's memoirs. The Russian publication of *Twenty-Five Years* is listed in the bibliographies of a few English-language works on the Caucasus and on the Russo-Caucasian War, but direct quotation from it is very rarely found – and only one English historian appears to have discovered that a final section of the memoir did not see publication. This first English-language translation is long overdue: Zisserman, as a lively observer who spoke fluent Georgian and Azeri, who traveled extensively, who fought in many engagements, and whom Prince Vorontsov, Viceroy of the Caucasus, welcomed to his table, has much to tell us on a wide range of Georgian and Caucasian topics.

In his *Twenty-Five Years in the Caucasus: 1842-1867* Zisserman made no claims to being a military historian or an analyst of Russia's geopolitical strategies. However, he participated in many "expeditions," as local campaigns were termed, and he moved among policymakers and military commanders from Viceroy Vorontsov on down, frequently contributing opinions (not always welcomed) based on personal experience in the field. He was at all times an acute observer of what was actually said and done, and his value lies in the sheer range of his experiences – and the verve and vivid detail with which he presents them. He was by turn an administrator, police official and military officer; he worked with in the field with Georgian princes and Russian generals and with local Muslim headmen; he acted as guide-interpreter to Russia's future emperor Alexander II during part of the heir's visit to the Western Caucasus in 1850. The great Prince Vorontsov valued Zisserman for his knowledge of Caucasian languages and familiarity with civil and military manners, and made him a frequent dinner guest. The young Russian rendered justice, built roads, and survived life-threatening military encounters and adventures in Georgia, Chechnya and Dagestan. Much of interest derives from Zisserman's uninhibited comments on the rigors of military camps and field expeditions and his sketches of daily life, whether among remote mountain communities or in the Viceroy's palace. Also valuable are his descriptions of social and civic changes in the Caucasus and the role of the great magnates, as are his passing mentions of army medicine, military photography, and even scandals in the Viceroy's palace.

Zisserman well deserves translation into English: he was a participant in history – shaping events, not a distant observer, and his comments are often very perceptive. It is hoped that this first presentation of his memoirs will lead to further English-language studies of the man, his contemporaries, his writings and the era.