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The Russian War in the Caucasus.

Europe owes a great deal to the Kabyles of Algeria and the mountaineers of the Caucasus. It is to their determined spirit of independence that is due the profound peace which has, of late years, prevailed among all the greater powers of Christendom. The two most warlike and aggressive nations of the continent have found ample employment for their arms in the vain attempt to reduce a few myriads of semi-barbarians to the condition of submissive subjects. How truly this has been the case with France is sufficiently notorious. But it is not generally known the assertion is even more applicable to the contest which Russia is now waging with the tribes of the Caucasian mountains. How many are aware that 30,000 Muscovite soldiers perish every year in this inglorious strife—either slain in actual conflict or carried off by disease? Most persons in this country will probably be surprised to learn that the Russian army at present engaged in the prosecution of this war amounts to the enormous total of more than 150,000 men. A work recently published in Germany (Travels in Georgia, along the Caspian Sea, and in the Caucasus, by Professor Koch) gives us a detailed statement of all the divisions & corps employed in that quarter during the last year (1847). The list comprises, of regular troops, fourteen regiments of infantry, three brigades of artillery, fifty-four battalions of Georgians, Caucasians, and Cossacks, one regiment of dragoons, and several battalions and companies of sappers and miners, sharpshooters, &c.; of irregulars, nineteen regiments of Cossacks of the line, with three brigades, of the horse artillery, forty three regiments of Tchernomorsky, Don, and Ural Cossacks, with a numerous militia raised in the provinces contiguous to the theatre of war. This immense force is under the sole direction of the governor-general of the Caucasus, Prince Woronzoff, who has received, from his imperial master, powers little short of dictatorial for the conduct of the war.

M. Hommaire de Hell, in his valuable work, The Steppes of the Caspian Sea, gives the Russian statement, for 1843, at 160,000 men; but suppose that the official number is considerably above the truth. This, however, is not the opinion of Professor Koch and other late authorities—and, indeed, does not seem very probable in itself; for considering the continual losses and defeats endured by the Russian troops, it would be manifestly for the interest of the commanders to rate their own forces at the lowest amount, and to exalt those of the enemy as much as possible.—Accordingly they do not scruple in their bulletins, to assign to their most formidable opponent, Shamil, a force of 40,000 warriors, being about the total number of men, capable of bearing arms, within the territories subject to his sway.

With regard to the chief just named, a very general misapprehension prevails in this country. He is commonly supposed to be a Circassian, and the present Russian contest in the Caucasus is almost styled the war in Circassia. The proper Circassians, however, who inhabit the western part of the Caucasian range, bordering on the Black Sea, are quite distinct from the Lezgians and Tchetchens, the followers of Shamil, who live in the eastern mountains near the Caspian. Twelve years ago, it was true, the Circassians were engaged in a desperate struggle with the Russians, for their own independence. They came off triumphant; but, at the same time, their losses had been severe enough to make a strong impression upon them. They have welcomed with pleasure the respite from strife which the insurrection of the eastern tribes has afforded them, and all Shamil's endeavors to engage them to take part in the present contest have as yet proved fruitless. To this result, the presents profusely distributed by the Russian commanders among the Circassian chieftains have no doubt effectively contributed; and still more the license now accorded to their slave-trade with Constantinople, particularly the trade in female slaves.—It is curious enough that one of the liberties for which the Circassians contend so desperately was the liberty of selling their own daughters to the Turks; and it is said that the maidens themselves were particularly indignant at the interference of the Russians with this time-honored custom. The statement is not at all improbable. Considering that in Circassia, as in other eastern countries, wives are always bought, and are treated as the property of their husbands, there is, in fact, no material difference, in point of actual freedom, between the position of a Circassian woman, as a slave in a harem of Constantinople and that which she would hold as the wife of one of her own countrymen; while, as regards those pleasures to which oriental females are most addicted—namely, idle-

ness, gossiping, gay adornment, and good living—the advantages are all on the side of slavery. At present, as has been remarked, the Russians, to prevent the Circassians from joining with Shamil have given up their opposition to this singular commerce; and the freeborn sons of the mountains now go on selling their offspring in peace and contentment.

The Tchetchens and Lezgians, who form the main body of Shamil's adherents, share with the Circassians the palm of superior personal beauty among all the races of the world. There is however, some difference between them. The Circassians, by their graceful forms, dark blue eyes, chestnut hair, and oval faces, recall the lineaments of the ancient Greeks, to whom they bear perhaps greater resemblance than any other people of the present day. The Lezgians, on the contrary, may be compared with the modern Italians, they are more strongly made than the Circassians, with full black eyes, dark brown hair, and bold features. They have a proud and martial expression of countenance, with something of the wildness natural to men who lead the free & reckless life of mountain freebooters; for such, it must be confessed, was the calling of the present followers of Shamil, before they adopted that of patriots. The united members of the two tribes, are estimated at about 500,000 souls. All of these, however, do not acknowledge the supremacy of the warlike chieftain. Many of the lowland clans have submitted to the Russian domination. It is probable that the total of Shamil's adherents and subjects, of all classes & conditions, does not exceed 300,000. With this petty following, he has maintained, for ten years, an equal contest with the absolute ruler of sixty millions of human beings. Such an enormous disparity of force was probably never seen since the days when "baffled Persia's despot fled" before the united contingents of half a dozen little Greek republics. Even in that case, the circumstances were by no means similar. The semi-barbarous host of Xerxes was inferior in all respects, but number, to the well equipped and well-disciplined army of Russia; while the Greeks had every advantage over the Caucasian mountaineers; except in the natural strength of their country.

This, after all, is Shamil's main reliance for success, as it was of Moutrose & Zumalacaregui, and as it has been of the Swiss in all ages. The Caucasian mountains are even better adapted for purposes of refuge and defence than the Alps or the Pyrenees, or the Scottish Highlands. In all those regions, the dwellings of the inhabitants are in the valleys which divide the heights; and an enemy who can penetrate to those glens and ravage the hamlets and cultivated grounds, will inflict a severe and perhaps irreparable injury upon the mountaineers. In the Caucasus, on the contrary, it is only the high table-lands on the slopes of the mountain-ranges, which are habitable. The valleys are deep and narrow ravines, often the beds of torrents, extremely difficult to cross, and presenting a serious obstacle to the advance of an invading force. The mountain-sides, moreover, are covered by dense forests, through which a single wanderer often finds great difficulty in forcing his way. It may well be supposed that an army, encumbered by artillery & baggage, can make but slow progress through the country. Cannon, however, are indispensable in this contest, since they are the only arms of which the mountaineers really stand in dread. The terrible effects of artillery upon their breastworks of timber have often compelled them to retreat from the positions which would otherwise have been impregnable.

A Russian incursion into the mountains is usually conducted pretty nearly in the following manner: A column of several thousand men advances from one of their military stations towards a stronghold of the enemy. It experiences, at first, but slight resistance. The mountaineers, lurking along its flanks, in the encompassing forest, watch its progress from a distance. Each bears in one hand his long and heavy gun, in the other a forked stick. At length one of them catches the glimpse of an epaulet within the range of his piece. Planting the sharp end of the stick in the ground, he lays his gun in the fork, and, with this rest, takes long and steady aim at the shining mark. Powder and lead are too precious to the mountaineer to be thrown away. Presently the report rings through the hills, the officer falls, and his company is thrown into confusion. Russian soldiers, excellent in a war of tactics, are of all troops, the least adapted to mountain warfare, which requires especially individual energy, sagacity, and promptness of resource. Of these a Russian private has nothing whatever. He is a mere machine, and of little more use without a leader than a steam engine without an engineer. This fact is perfectly understood by Shamil and his followers, as is evinced by the disproportionate loss of officers during the present war.

At length, the advancing column reaches a narrow pass, which is found closed by a barricade. A sharp conflict ensues. The artillery is ordered up, the logs fly in splinters, and the enemy disappears. The column then proceeds, but a strong

detachment is left to guard the pass. In this way the advance continues, the barricades becoming more frequent, and the resistance more stubborn, as the invading force approaches the stronghold. At length weakened by many losses and by the separation of numerous detachments, it arrives at the intended goal. Here on ascending a lofty height, is found a small plateau, upon which are the smoking ruins of a score or two of mountain huts. Sometimes, indeed, a strongly fortified hold occupies the summit, and is defended by the natives with desperate valor. But more often, it is, as before said, a small mountain hamlet, which Shamil has selected as a place of deposit for his stores and ammunition.

Having thus attained the object of their useless search, the Russians prepare to descend. But their case proves to be the converse of that of the Trojan hero in his Stygian expedition. To ascend is comparatively easy; but to retrace their steps and return to the regions *hic labor, hoc opus est*. Now, around them, on every side, swarm the fierce mountaineers, seemingly in countless numbers. From every quarter are heard the yells of execration, the report of the unerring musket, and the whistling of the fatal lead. One gallant officer falls after another. Front, flank, and rear are driven in upon the centre, and the column becomes a confused mass of useless and hopeless soldiers. Sometimes the commander-in-chief, awakening to his danger, pushes desperately onward, and reaches his station with the loss of half his force. Sometimes he waits, in a favorable position, until he is released by the advance of reinforcements. In either case, as soon as he regains his fortress, he writes a long and grandiloquent despatch, detailing his successful operations, which have ended in destroying the chief stronghold of the rebels, and inflicting upon them a blow from which they will not readily recover. He has hardly sent off his despatch to St. Petersburg before he hears that Shamil, at the head of a strong force, is in the plains, ravaging the country almost up to the very gates of the Russian forts.

A brief account of the origin and early history of this chieftain may not be uninteresting. In all Mohammedan countries there are men called *Moorshids*, who devote themselves expressly to the explication of the Koran and the Sunna, (or body of Moslem tradition) and are consequently held in high estimation by the people. Each of them generally has about him a number of youths who attend him as scholars and are called his *Murides*, or acolytes. Such a Moorshid was Kasi Mollah, who about the year 1830, aroused the first great insurrection of the eastern tribes against the Russians. He was regarded not merely as a teacher, but as a prophet, and displayed also some capacity as a military leader. He was, however, two years afterwards, besieged by General Rosen, in his stronghold called Cimri, and fell, pierced with many bayonet wounds, 'with his hand on his beard,' says the traveller Eichwald, "and a last prayer murmuring from his lips." His name is still a spell of power in the Caucasus.

One of his disciples was Shamil, a Tchetchen by birth, and whose early residence was in the large village or town of Tchirkei, a place of some 3000 inhabitants, on the Koissou river. Although he was more than thirty years of age at the death of Kasi Mollah, he was still considered too young, according to the established usage, to become a leader. In Lezgistan, as in Circassia, none but men who have passed the middle term of life, and whose years afforded a warrant both of experience and discretion, are considered worthy to occupy a post of such responsibility. It was not before the year 1838 that Shamil's name was first made known to the Russians as that of an eminent Moorshid, and the leader of a considerable body of Tchetchens & Lezgians. He was, at the time, about forty years of age. He is described as a man of moderate stature and slender frame. His physiognomy seems to indicate some infusion of Tartar blood. He has, however, unlike most Tartars, an ample beard, on which ornament he, as a Moslem teacher, sets a peculiar value.

The title which Shamil assumes in his proclamations, and by which he is best known in the mountains, is that of "Imam of the Caucasus." Professor Koch says that, according to the Koran, there can be but one Imam and successor of the Prophet, and that the Sultan of Constantinople is now regarded as such; but as he has ceased to extend protection to the Mohammedans of the north, they have transferred the title, and the reverence connected with it, to Shamil. This is not exactly correct. The title of *Imam*, or "preacher," was adopted by Mohammed in sign of humility, and was retained, for the same reason, by the *Khalifs*, or "successors." But it was not, like the latter term, peculiarly appropriated to that line of monarchs. On the contrary, every priest of a mosque is called its *Imam*; and the title is, moreover, frequently assumed by princes who desire to unite a religious prestige to their secular power. For this reason it has been adopted by the ruler of Muscat, in preference to that of *Sultan* or *Malik*; to either of which he would be fairly entitled by the extent of his dominions.

Shamil is said to rule the districts under his command with great strictness and equity. Life and property are perfectly safe, his armed followers not being allowed the slightest license in their own country. Every crime, by whomsoever committed, meets with prompt and just punishment. He is not accused of cruelty, except in the case of certain offences connected with the contest which he is waging. Woe to the individual or tribe that deserts or betrays the common cause!—Instances are known of entire villages, whose inhabitants had been guilty of this offence, having been destroyed by Shamil and his host as suddenly and completely as though they had been swept away by a flood, or buried under an avalanche. Nor is it merely for treason that he inflicts such dire punishments. On one occasion, when he was besieging a Russian detachment in a small fort and had nearly compelled it to surrender, the commander of the force, expecting soon to be relieved, sent a messenger to Shamil, avowedly for the purpose of negotiating a surrender, but with secret orders to protract the parley as long as possible, in order to give time for the assistance to arrive. He followed his instructions, and succeeded in the object of his mission. The relieving force came up before the terms were settled, and Shamil then became aware of the deception that had been practised upon him. When Napoleon was similarly tricked by Alexander, after the battle of Austerlitz, his resentment exhaled in the bitter speech—"*Gratias le Russe, et vous trouvez le Tartare.*" Shamil, it appears, is not one whose vengeance can be satisfied with a pungent apothegm; and besides, his situation was somewhat different from that of the victorious emperor. It is said that the unfortunate messenger was literally cut in pieces. This was called cruelty, and violation of the laws of war; but it is not recorded that any other officer has ever since attempted so to deceive the mountain chief.

The first attempt which the Russians made to crush the growing power of Shamil was in the year 1839. In the spring of that year, the commander-in-chief of the Caucasian army—who bore the unheroic designation of General Grabbe—assembled a considerable body of troops on the north side of the mountains, and proceeded to ascend them, with the intention of capturing the fortress of Achulko, which was then Shamil's stronghold. It is situated at the summit of a steep mountain, which rose near the swift Koissou, the chief river of Lezgistan. As the Russians advanced up the river, they encountered some slight opposition, which was easily overcome. They soon arrived at the populous village of Tchirkei, rich in orchards of many species of fruit. The inhabitants, though strongly disposed in favor of their warlike fellow-citizen, were dismayed at the prospect of seeing their fields and gardens ravaged by the enemy; they submitted to the favorable conditions offered by the Russian general, and the latter pressed on towards the interior of the mountains. At length he reached a spot which Shamil had apparently selected for the first serious resistance; for a battle ensued, which is represented as the most bloody and fiercely contested that had been fought for many years in the Caucasus. The conflict lasted two days. The mountaineers disputed every foot of ground with desperate fury, and yielded at last only when the artillery was brought to bear upon their position. Again the Russian columns moved forward. Another fierce encounter awaited them before they attained the term of their expedition. It ended in a similar manner; and at length the division found itself at the base of the height on which stood the fortress of Achulko.

The siege began on the 12th of July, and lasted to the 23d of August. During that time every attempt to take the fort by storm was repulsed with heavy loss to the assailants. But the defenders began at length to suffer for want of provisions.—Shamil once tried to make terms, offering his son as a hostage; but the Russian commander would accept nothing but unconditional surrender, to which the chief would not submit. Three days afterwards a furious assault was made, and the resistance, though finally successful, showed that the besieged were too weak to hold out much longer. Shortly after this affair, the Russian general was informed by his spies of Shamil's intention to have himself lowered down at the steepest part of the precipitous rock on which Achulko stood, and thus to elude the grasp of his enemies. His desertion to his followers, at such a juncture might perhaps be justified in his eyes by the certainty that they would not, it taken, meet the fate which would assuredly await him—namely, that of being sent away into the interior of Russia, never to return to his native land. On learning this design, the general ordered a close watch to be kept around the whole mountain, but particularly at the spot designated. Suddenly a suspicious movement was observed. The watch crept cautiously forward, and perceived a man suspended by a rope, descending the side of the precipice. On reaching the ground, the mountaineer freed himself from the rope, which was then drawn up, and two more men were successively lowered down. All then crouched on the ground,

and were crawling away, when the triumphant Russians seized them, and dragged them off to the camp. One of them owned himself to be Shamil, and the news of the capture caused the greatest joy at the quarters of the general, who had promised the emperor to bring him the Caucasian emperor, dead or alive. While he was receiving the congratulations of his officers, the rope was cautiously lowered again at the same spot, now left unguarded; and the real Shamil now slipped quietly down, and crept away unseen. Presently a raft, bearing a single human figure, was observed floating swiftly down the impetuous Koissou. The Russian muskets instantly rang from the shores, but the fugitive reached the opposite shore in safety.

In the morning the deception was discovered, and the general, rendered furious by his disappointment, ordered a last assault. Fifteen hundred men ascended the height, and when the action terminated, and the Russian flag waved over the ruins of the fort, only a hundred and fifty of the storming party remained unhurt. Of the seven hundred defenders of the fortress, very few escaped alive. Such was the capture of Achulko, the first of many similar enterprises undertaken by the Russians against Shamil, and which, however various in their circumstances, have all been attended with only one effect—that of exalting the reputation of the bold and astute chieftain.

In the present case, his singular escape added not a little to the peculiar reverence with which he was regarded by the mountaineers; for it was the general belief among them that the angel Gabriel himself had borne off the prophet chief from the midst of his enemies. His fame and influence spread through the whole of the Eastern Caucasus. During the next two years he was busily employed in organizing his adherents, extending the circle of his operations, and winning over the numerous independent tribes of the mountains to his standard. The Russians vainly attempted, by frequent razzias, to intimidate the natives, who grow every month more confident and daring in their enterprises, penetrating far into the lowlands, and laying siege to the posts along the frontier. The emperor became at last so disquieted by the intelligence which arrived from the Caucasus, that he despatched the minister of war, Count Tchernitcheff, to examine personally into the state of affairs in that quarter, and report concerning the most advisable method of carrying on the contest.

Tchernitcheff arrived just in time to witness the return of the Russian commander-in-chief from a disastrous attempt to penetrate to Shamil's new asylum, the village of Dargo, situated near the source of the river Yakaai, some distance west of Achulko. It is worthy of remark that, in all his changes of residence, Shamil has been gradually advancing towards the centre of the Caucasian isthmus, as if in furtherance of his expressed design of uniting the whole mountain region between the Black Sea and Caspian into a single compact government. The Russian general, anxious to distinguish himself before the minister's arrival by some shining enterprise, similar to the capture of Achulko, had set out, with a body of 8000 men, upon the course of the Yakaai. The mountaineers, according to their custom, made at first only a faint show of resistance.—When, however, he had reached a spot which they considered favorable for their purpose, they suddenly closed around him with such overwhelming fury, that he was compelled to retreat; and it was with the greatest difficulty that he reached the fort from which he started, having left all his baggage and most of his artillery in the hands of the enemy. Out of 60 officers only 24 returned; and 2000 soldiers remained dead on the field or along the line of march.

Such was the intelligence which greeted Count Tchernitcheff on his arrival. It is not surprising, therefore, that he should, after a careful examination of all the peculiar difficulties of the contest, have come to the conclusion that the wisest plan would be to confine all future operations strictly to defensive measures. This counsel was adopted. A cordon of posts was established around the mountains, to prevent the incursions of the enemy into the plains; thus, as was said, leaving the fire of fanaticism to burn itself out. It was, however, too late for the success of such a plan.—The mountaineers were now conscious of their strength, and exasperated by the injuries which they had suffered, they judged the forbearance of the Russians to be an evidence of weakness—and not altogether without reason. Accordingly, their marauding descents, into the lowlands became more frequent and daring than ever before. The imperial government was compelled again to change its policy. General Neidhart, an officer of the highest reputation for both civil and military talents, was sent as governor-general. The army was at the same time increased to the force, at which it now stands, of 160,000 men—a greater mass of troops than had been assembled between the Black and Caspian Sea, since the time of Gengis Khan.

Neidhart, however, was fated to be quite as unfortunate as any of his predecessors. (See 4th page.)