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Research paper

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NORTH-CAUCASUS AND OTHER FRONTIERS OF RUSSIA: HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Abstract. The applicability of the frontier concept to the North Caucasus has been repeatedly proposed and substantiated within scholarly literature, including international sources. However, some researchers contest the frontier interpretation of the historical process of Caucasian incorporation into the Russian Empire, particularly objecting to the application of the classical (Turner's) frontier model to the history of the North Caucasian peoples. This study aims to examine the commonalities and differences between the North Caucasian borderland and other contemporaneous Russian frontier zones, most notably the Siberian and southern frontiers. Comparing the latter with the North Caucasian case allows for the application of established methodological approaches from Siberian and South Russian historiography to the North Caucasian region. This comparison reveals the unique and distinct historical characteristics of each region, contributing to frontier theory by prompting investigation into the causes of similarities, differences, and evolutionary trajectories of Russian frontier territories. The study's methodological foundation is the comparative historical method, incorporating the frontier concept as an integral analytical framework. This research demonstrates that the North Caucasian frontier possesses several distinguishing characteristics that set it apart from other Russian contact zones, contributing to its unique character, despite consistent interactions with the Russian state. A comparative study of the North Caucasian frontier with other Russian border zones reveals distinct characteristics such as polyfrontierism, its nature as a religious borderland, and the absence of a "no man's land." These features warrant further investigation and promise to enhance our understanding of how Russian influence was established in the North Caucasus. Similarities observed across these frontiers include the concurrent development and demarcation of state borders, the common practice of Cossack settlement as a vanguard of Russian colonization, and the element of coercion in settler presence within these frontier zones.

Keywords: frontier concept; North Caucasus; Russian South; Siberia; comparative analysis; similarities and differences.

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Исследовательская статья

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СЕВЕРОКАВКАЗСКИЙ И ДРУГИЕ ФРОНТИРЫ РОССИИ: ИСТОРИКО-СРАВНИТЕЛЬНЫЕ ПАРАЛЛЕЛИ

Аннотация. Перспективность использования концепта «фронтира» в отношении Северного Кавказа не раз высказывалась и была научно обоснована в специальной литературе, в том числе и в зарубежной. Вместе с тем ряд исследователей до сих пор выступает против фронтирного измерения исторического процесса присоединения Кавказа к Российской империи, в частности, против использования классического (тернеровского) фронтира в изучении истории народов Северного Кавказа. Цель настоящего исследования – рассмотрение общих и специфических черт между северокавказским пограничьем и другими российскими фронтирными зонами, параллельно существовавших во времени, среди которых наиболее заметное место принадлежит сибирскому и южному фронтирам. Сопоставление последних с северокавказским аналогом позволит использовать многочисленные методологические наработки сибирской и южнорусской истории в качестве перспективных исследовательских тем применительно к северокавказскому региону. Раскрывается неповторимость сопоставляемых объектов, их историческая индивидуальность, что будет способствовать развитию теории, поскольку требует обобщающих ответов на вопросы о причинах сходства, различий и эволюции российских фронтирных территорий. Методологической основой исследования послужили сравнительно-исторический метод, а также концепт фронтира, который становится частью методологии исследований. Проведенное исследование показывает, что северокавказский фронтир имеет ряд особенностей, отличающих его от других российских контактных зон и делающих его во многом оригинальным несмотря на то, что одной из сторон взаимодействия всегда оставалось Российское государство. Сравнение (компаративное исследование) северокавказского фронтира с различными пограничными зонами России позволило выявить такие его особенности и характерные черты, как полифронтирность региона, религиозное пограничье, отсутствие «ничейной» земли и др., которые нуждаются в более углубленном изучении в качестве самостоятельных вопросов и позволит лучше понять исторический процесс установления российского влияния в северокавказском регионе. Среди сходств можно отметить такие факторы, как одновременность начала освоения этих регионов и оформления их государственных границ, общие принципы заселения приграничных территорий казачеством, выступавшим авангардом российской колонизации, вынужденное нахождение поселенцев во фронтирной зоне.

Ключевые слова: концепт фронтира; Северный Кавказ; Юг России; Сибирь; сравнительный анализ; аналогии и различия.

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Introduction

The frontier theory, put forward by the American scholar F.J. Turner [1] in the late 19th century to explain the unique development of the United States, bears striking similarities to the colonization theory, first articulated by the prominent Russian historian S.M. Solovyov and further elaborated by V.O. Klyuchevsky as a key factor in Russian history. These theories, however, developed independently. Scholar M. Bassin pointed out the commonalities in their underlying scientific sources in his comprehensive article [2]. Russian historian D.I. Oleynikov further highlighted the parallels between Turner's frontier thesis and Klyuchevsky's colonization theory, observing that "the parallel passages in Turner and Klyuchevsky are sometimes simply fascinating." Similar to Klyuchevsky, Turner structured his periodization of American history around successive waves of colonization and the incremental expansion of developed spaces [3].

In post-Soviet academic discourse, the theory of colonization has been largely supplanted by studies employing the concept of the frontier within Russian historiography [4]. The work of the American historian Thomas Barrett, particularly his article on the North Caucasian frontier (translated into Russian) [5], has become a model for Russian historians engaging with this concept. Barrett convincingly demonstrated the broad analytical potential of Turner's theory by applying it to the history of the North Caucasus' incorporation into the Russian state [6].

The potential and efficacy of applying the frontier concept to the North Caucasus has been repeatedly emphasized in both Russian and international scholarship. Moving beyond traditional approaches to studying Russia's expansion and consolidation along its Caucasian borders offers a richer understanding of the processes shaping the Russian state in the North Caucasus and the specific developmental trajectories of these peripheral territories. However, some scholars remain critical of interpreting the Caucasus's annexation through the lens of the frontier, with some specifically objecting to the application of the classical (Turner's) frontier model to the history of the North Caucasian peoples. Our previous publications have explored the challenges of periodization, outlined the stages of formation and evolution, and identified the distinctive characteristics of Russia's North Caucasian frontier.

The aim of the present study is to explore the commonalities and contrast between the North Caucasian borderland and other contemporaneous Russian frontier zones, particularly the prominent Siberian and southern frontiers. The central objective is to identify the unique characteristics of these regions, especially the North Caucasian borderland, and to highlight its distinct historical identity. This contributes to theoretical development by prompting broader inquiries into the reasons for similarities, differences, and evolutionary patterns observed across Russian frontier territories.

A comparative study of the Siberian and South Russian frontiers with their North Caucasian counterpart will enable the application of numerous methodological advancements from Siberian and South Russian historiography to the North Caucasian region, opening up promising new research avenues. For instance, we have already examined the North Caucasian region's role as a religious borderland of the Muscovite state/Russian Empire, highlighting its function as a space for interfaith dialogue. The similarities and differences revealed through this comparative analysis are not presented as stark contrasts, but rather considered within a broader analytical framework encompassing various factors: the nature and timing of frontier development and settlement, the characteristics of ethnocultural development and religious consciousness.

A substantial body of research has accumulated in science comparing different frontiers and frontier communities. The question of commonalities and differences between the American frontier and the Russian borderland is not a recent development; it has been explored by Siberian researchers [7; 8], who have made significant contributions to the field. Austrian researcher A. Kappeler [9] has compared Russian frontiers, specifically the steppe border in southern Russia and the forest border in Siberia. However, no dedicated historiographical works exist that undertake a comparative study of the North Caucasian frontier with other Russian frontier zones.

Contributors to a significant discussion on frontier theory in the journal *Studia Slavica et Balcanica Petropolitana* argue that comparing coexisting frontiers within inter-imperial spaces, such as those of Russia

and the Ottoman Empire, offers a more productive approach. This comparison allows for the identification of shared and unique characteristics in the development of comparable territories, particularly focusing on entities like paramilitary border communities [10, p. 99]. We would add that a comparative analysis of different, contemporaneous Russian frontiers and frontier communities presents a highly promising avenue for research.

Commonalities

The development of Siberia, the southern steppes, and the territory of the modern North Caucasus began concurrently. Following Yermak Timofeyevich's expedition, which commenced in 1581, the first forts were established, serving as bases for further expansion into Siberia: Tyumen in 1585, Tobolsk in 1587, Tomsk in 1604, Yeniseisk in 1619, Yakutsk in 1632, and Irkutsk in 1661. By 1648, Cossack explorers had rounded the northeastern edge of Eurasia, reaching the Pacific Ocean [8, p. 97]. The formation of Russia's southern borderland began around the same period. After the founding of the first two cities on the "Wild Fields" – Voronezh and Livny – in 1585, new cities and surrounding districts began to emerge along the periphery of these fields [11, p. 60].

Starting in the latter half of the 16th century, Russian influence and interests progressively extended towards the North Caucasus. The Muscovite state established military fortifications, including fortresses and forts, in strategically significant locations: the Sunzhenskoye settlement in 1567, the Terki fortress (Tersky town) in 1588, the Sunzhensky fort in 1590, and the Koisinsky fort in 1594 [12, pp. 241, 270, 276, 283; 13, pp. 69–78]. Concurrently, Cossack settlements emerged along the lower Terek River and near the mouth of the Sunzha River. This allowed Russian authorities to control the strategically vital route to the North and South Caucasus, and exert influence over the actions of certain North Caucasian rulers. This demonstrates a clear simultaneous expansion of Russian frontiers across multiple peripheries of the state.

The construction of new fortified lines marked the next phase of Russian expansion into border territories. The establishment of the Belgorod and Tambov defensive lines on the southern frontier facilitated the advancement of Russian borders further into the southern regions and towards the Great Steppe. These fortifications enabled the Russian state to suppress nomadic raids and progressively expand its influence by settling the southern expanses. [14, p. 86]

In the North Caucasus, the Caucasian Line served as a fortified border for an extended period. This line was initially based on Cossack settlements established along the Terek and Kuban rivers during the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1722, Tsar Peter I personally initiated the construction of the Holy Cross fortress on the Sulak River. However, shifting geopolitical circumstances forced Russia to demolish this fortress and relocate its border to the right bank of the Terek River. Kizlyar, a new fortress, was founded there in 1735, alongside three new Cossack villages. The establishment of the Mozdok outpost in 1763 marked the beginning of that city's development. The fortified line then extended along the left bank of the Terek River, from Kizlyar to Mozdok [15, p. 559]. With the founding of the Vladikavkaz fortress in 1784, the Russian Empire had, by the end of the 18th century, constructed the Azov-Mozdok fortified line. This created a unified fortified system encompassing a vast territory stretching from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea.

Cossacks were instrumental in furthering Russian interests in Siberia, tasked with both defending and expanding the frontiers. Their significance in Siberia's development led researchers to coin the term "Cossack frontier" [7, p. 101]. The Cossacks also served as frontiersmen in the southern border region. Recognizing their versatility, the Russian government employed them in settling new territories, protecting state borders, and even contributing to the economic development of annexed lands.

Cossacks were also at the forefront of the Russian colonization of the Caucasus, recruited to guard the fortified line. Their reputation was traditionally linked to service and border life. Historian A. Kappeler describes Cossacks in Russian history as "faithful servants of the tsars" [16, p. 377]. Highlighting their ability to develop new territories, a late 19th-century author wrote: "Where 10-20 Cossacks settle, they already

accept everyone into their community – Russians, peasants, and Circassians (under the condition of being baptized)" [17, p. 6].

The tsarist government leveraged Cossack forces to consolidate its control over the North Caucasus. This led to the formation of a Cossack army specifically tasked with protecting the southern borders of the Russian State. A key step in this process occurred in 1721 when the Terek Cossacks were transferred from the jurisdiction of the Ambassadorial Prikaz to the Military Collegium. This effectively transformed the Cossacks into a military service class. Furthermore, the central government utilized these Cossack irregular units to suppress local socio-political unrest.

Another common characteristic of the North Caucasian frontier and other Russian border regions was the compulsory nature of settlement. Similar to experiences in Siberia, Russians often perceived their presence in these new territories as involuntary and temporary, constantly yearning to return to their homeland, "Raseya" [18, p. 31].

Service on the Caucasian border placed a heavy burden on Cossacks and soldiers. Beyond their military duties, they were sometimes required to participate in economic activities like viticulture and winemaking in Derbent. The unhealthy climate led to many deaths from disease, making service in the Caucasus undesirable. Consequently, on March 28, 1726, the Supreme Privy Council opted to replace Cossack service with a monetary payment. "No longer send Cossacks from Little Russia to the fortress of the Holy Cross and to Derbent, where they were 5,000 men per year with rotation and were mainly used for city work, since they are of little use, and many of them die from the local climate and hardship. Instead, collect 3 rubles per person from the Little Russian Cossacks who were supposed to go to the Holy Cross Fortress this year to replace others, from the five-thousand-strong group. With these funds, hire workers for the Holy Cross Fortress and Derbent, or pay the soldiers and dragoons who are there. Those Little Russian Cossacks who are currently at the Holy Cross Fortress and in other local areas should be sent home in September of this year." [19, p. 148–149]. The Russian orientalist of the 19th century I.N. Berezin also noted that those who arrived in Derbent "from Little Russia, sometimes from Finland, sometimes from Vologda… mostly dream of returning to their homeland" [20, p. 53]. Nevertheless, even in the 19th century, Cossacks regularly went to serve in the Caucasus.

Differences

In the modern era, the Caucasus region served as a focal point of geopolitical conflict among at least three major empires: Russia, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire. Each power maintained a presence in the Caucasus through military forces, fortifications, and various avenues of cultural exchange and influence, including language, religion, and trade. This dynamic is often described in historical scholarship as "polyfrontierism" [21]. In contrast to the Caucasus, neither Siberia nor the Volga region experienced this same level of international rivalry.

With the Muscovite state's expansion towards the Ciscaucasia, the North Caucasus transformed into a religious frontier, eventually becoming the Muslim borderland of the Russian Empire. The Georgian and Armenian Christian populations found themselves on the other side of this evolving border, subject to tribute demands from both the Persian and Ottoman Empires. Surrounded by the Muslim peoples of the Caucasus, the Georgians frequently sought assistance from the Russian tsars, emphasizing their plight as oppressed Christians. For example, in 1588–1589, ambassadors of the Georgian Tsar Alexander petitioned the Russian Tsar for liberation from the Turks, whom they described as "foes" who had unjustly seized the "Iverian land" (Georgia). These ambassadors also lodged complaints against the shamkhal, the Dagestani ruler, whose people they characterized as "infidel dogs… who raided at night, take captives and forcibly convert Georgian peasants to Islam" [22, pp. 55–56]. Conversely, the local Muslim ruling elites sought aid and patronage from their powerful co-religionists, the Turkish sultans. The Dagestani shamkhal, alarmed by the rapid encroachment of the Muscovite state upon his territory, appealed to the Turkish sultan in 1589. In his letter,

the shamkhal complained that the Russians "have placed a city (Terki) on my land and taken the Koysu River (Sulak) away from me" and were preparing to deploy a substantial military force from Astrakhan and Terki against him. The shamkhal noted that their only hope for safeguarding Muslim lands rested with the Turkish sultan. He warned that without the sultan's military intervention, the Russians would conquer Derbent, Shemakha, Shirvan, and Ganja, placing these cities under the control of the Moscow tsar. He predicted dire consequences for the Muslim populations of these cities, claiming they would be "flogged, others will be converted to their (Christian) faith, and our entire Muslim faith will be destroyed by you, unless you stand up for us" [22, pp. 202–203]. Appealing to the orthodox sultan's role as caliph of the Muslim world, the shamkhal sought to persuade him to aid his fellow Sunni Muslims.

The Russian, Ottoman, and Persian governments frequently exploited religious commonality to further their geopolitical ambitions. They asserted claims to lands and populations based on shared faith. Russian ambassadors justified their protection of Georgia primarily on the grounds that it was a Christian nation. Likewise, Ottoman representatives maintained that the Muslim faith of many Caucasian peoples made them subjects of the Ottoman Empire [22, p. 572]. In the mid-17th century, the Dagestani ruler, the utsmi of Kaytag Amirkhan-sultan, contested Moscow's claim over the rulers of Endirey, declaring: "And you should know: Kazanalp and Burak are Muslims, and Muslims to a Christian sovereign are like slaves; they can be slaves of our sovereign, the Shah" [23, pp. 173–174]. The utsmi's uncompromising stance stemmed from his rise to power, which was achieved solely through the military support of the Shah's troops. Ironically, by the mid-17th century, numerous Muslim societies were under the protection or control of the Russian Tsar, while many Christian populations were subjects of the Ottoman Empire.

The influence of religion in Caucasian international relations persisted into later periods. During Peter I's Persian campaign in September 1722, Crimean Khan Seadet Giray Khan urged the Shamkhal of Tarkov, Adil Giray, to declare a "holy war" against the Russians. He implored him to "for the sake of the Mohammedan faith, fight cruelly against the agitators… with all your heart for the sake of the faith and the Mohammedan lands, try so that they are not devastated by the giaur (infidels)… do not believe the giaur words…" [23, pp. 261–262]. Despite the Crimean Khan's appeals, the Shamkhal not only resisted his call to holy war but instead forged a close relationship with Peter I, even extending a warm welcome to the Tsar in his own home. However, religious (Muslim) solidarity still held sway in certain situations. In 1737, shortly after pledging allegiance to Russia, the ruler of Endirey was commanded to contribute troops to Russia's war against the Ottoman Empire. He refused, arguing that as a Muslim, it was inappropriate to support a ruler of a different faith (the Russian Tsar) against a Muslim sultan.[1]

Some subjects of the mountain rulers sought refuge in Russian territories, where they had the opportunity to convert from Islam to Christianity. When demanding their extradition, the Caucasian rulers argued that these conversions were motivated not by genuine religious conviction, but rather by a desire to secure freedom or evade punishment for committed offenses and crimes. The Russians, in turn, recognized that the defectors' conversions to Christianity were often disingenuous, serving merely as a pretext. To avoid straining relations with loyal Caucasian rulers, Russia implemented a policy forbidding refuge for these fugitives and mandated their return. Conversion to Christianity was allowed only with the express permission of the local commander [24, p. 83]. In 1771, following a petition from Kabarda, Catherine II consented to return fugitive Kabardians and to pay a ransom of 50 rubles for each individual who had converted to Christianity [24, p. 85].

The Russian ruling circles had large-scale plans to Christianize the mountain population in parallel with the conquest of the region. However, these plans, despite missionary work, did not bring the expected success and remained largely unrealized.

Another key distinction between the North Caucasian frontier and the Siberian and southern Russian frontiers lies in population density and land occupancy. Siberia, upon the arrival of the Russians, possessed vast tracts of uninhabited or sparsely populated territory ("no man's land"). With a popula-

1. On the Ossetians and other Asian peoples who wished to accept holy baptism // Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts. Fond 248. Inv. 113. File 1257. Folio 14 rev.

tion of only around 200,000–220,000 across its entire expanse, Siberia appeared to the newcomers as a "great desert" [8, p. 9].

Unlike the sparsely populated Siberia and the southern Russian steppes, the Caucasus lacked readily available free land. Russian expansion in other regions typically began with settling unoccupied territories. In the south, this involved annexing and colonizing the "Field" [25, p. 45]. This southern borderland, a vast area between the Volga and Don rivers, stretching south to the Caucasus foothills, had a minimal permanent indigenous population following the Great Horde's departure in the mid-16th century. Crimean Tatars, Nogais (from the 17th century), and Kalmyks, who roamed these steppes, constituted the primary local presence. Their nomadic lifestyle prevented them from developing and securely holding these territories. Consequently, the struggle for the forest-steppe and steppe borderland persisted throughout most of the southern frontier's existence [26, p. 12].

In our previous publications, we've already mentioned the inaccuracy of American researcher T. Barrett's application of the "no man's land" concept to the North Caucasus. Borrowing from classical frontier theory, Barrett defines "no man's land" as a neutral territory between the mountain peoples and the Russians during the 17th to early 19th centuries, predicated on the absence of a dominant ethnic group capable of enforcing behavioral norms [5, pp. 178–179].

However, there was no such land as uninhabited in the North Caucasus. E.A. Sheudzhen's critique of interpretations that define the frontier as a boundary between inhabited and uninhabited territories is particularly relevant in this context. We concur with Sheudzhen's assessment that the North Caucasus, especially as perceived by Russian society, was not considered uninhabited [27, pp. 77–78]. The lands in the North Caucasus and Ciscaucasia, developed by the Cossacks, had long served as arable lands and steppe pastures for the western Adyghe, Nogai, Kabardians, and Kumyks. Although the central government considered these areas deserts, they were not.

The only commonality between the border regions of the North Caucasus and those of southern Russia was their designation as "borderlands." This designation was also inaccurate in Siberia, where a singular state border remained largely undefined for a significant period during the region's development [8, p. 40]. The geographic characteristics of southern Russia (forest-steppe and steppe) contributed to border instability. In contrast, the Caucasian borders were more clearly defined, and their defense was strengthened by official demarcation lines and established security systems. Such an order was absent for an extended period in southern Russia. The nomadic steppe peoples and the Crimean Khanate didn't establish defined boundaries with the Russian state, instead adhering to traditions inherited from the Golden Horde era. The vast southern steppes effectively functioned as neutral territory due to the lack of a settled population [28, p. 33].

The "closure" of the compared Russian frontiers occurred in different times. The southern and Siberian frontiers, established in the second half of the 16th and 17th centuries, ceased to be frontiers by the first half of the 19th century. They were integrated into the main territory of the state [26, p. 12], while the North Caucasian frontier zone persisted until the mid-19th century.

Some historical works classify the North Caucasus as a perpetual frontier [29; 30]. This notion lacks scientific basis and is categorically incorrect. With the North Caucasus's full incorporation into the Russian Empire during the latter half of the 19th century, the region ceased to display the characteristics of a frontier. The concept of a frontier in this context loses all practical meaning. Such assertions are driven more by political rhetoric than historical accuracy.

In conclusion, a comparative analysis of the North Caucasian borderland with Russia's southern and Siberian frontiers reveals both similarities and significant differences. Comparing various Russian border zones with the North Caucasian frontier highlights the latter's distinctive features and unique characteristics, including its polyfrontierism, its nature as a religious borderland, and the absence of a "no man's land." These individual aspects warrant further in-depth investigation. The similarities between the North Caucasian borderland and the Siberian and South Russian frontier zones are indeed pronounced, particularly in terms of the historical timing of their development, the establishment of state borders, the settlement patterns involving Cossacks and Russian peasants, as well as the involuntary relocation of settlers to these

frontier areas. These parallels raise important questions about the underlying reasons for such similarities. The shared characteristics identified in various Russian border regions highlight a commonality in the principles and approaches used to shape Russia's territorial boundaries across different regions. Despite this shared framework, these regions exhibit significant differences in factors such as the ethno-confessional makeup of the population, the level of socio-economic development, and the natural-geographical settings in which they are located.

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