
I. Caucasus—Gateway to Central Asia

David Urquhart's holy war

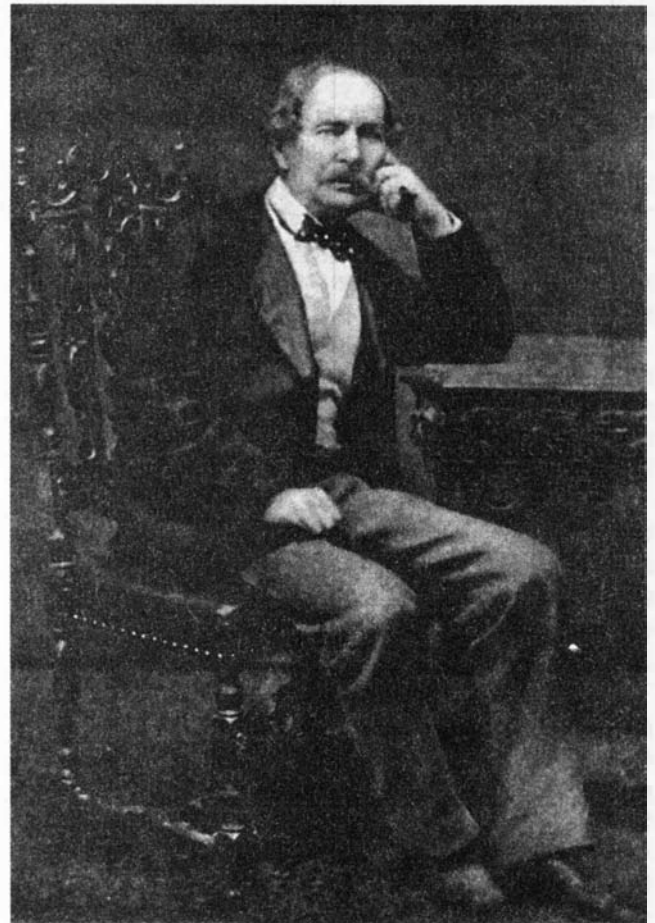
by Joseph Brewda and Linda de Hoyos

In 1785, a Chechen leader, Naqshbandi Sufi Sheikh Mansur, raised the Chechen, Ingush, Ossetes, Kabard, Circassian, and Dagestani tribes in revolt against the steady advance of the Russian Empire into the Caucasus Mountains. Before 1774, the Caucasus and Transcaucasus region, now embracing Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, had been loosely ruled by the Persian and Ottoman empires. After Russia's victory over the Ottoman Empire in the war of 1768-74, the Russian military moved in on the Caucasus. Sheikh Mansur raised the flag of the "Mountain Peoples" against the czar. Although Mansur's 20,000-man force was crushed by the Russian onslaught in 1791, Sheikh Mansur became the hero of the Mountain Peoples, his revolt the inspiration for the uprisings in the Caucasus today.

Strangely, Sheikh Mansur was not a Chechen. He had been born Giovanni Battista Boetti, and had been a Dominican monk before his conversion to Islam. Although Boetti's direct ties to Venice and London are not known, his rebellion served their geopolitical aims.

Years later, another hero of the Mountain Peoples emerged. In 1837, James Bell, an agent of the British secret services who was touring the Caucasus, wrote in his memoirs that "a Circassian prince pointed out [to me] the sacred spot (as they justly esteem it) where Daud Bey had held (just three years ago) his meeting with the chieftains of this neighborhood, and first inspired them with the idea of combining themselves with the other inhabitants of the mountain provinces as a nation, under one government and standard." Daud Bey had penned the declaration of independence of Circassia and designed its flag.

Daud Bey was not a native of the Caucasus either. His name was David Urquhart, and he had been sent into the region on a special mission in 1834 by British intelligence. Urquhart had been a protégé of Jeremy Bentham, the founder and head of the newly organized British secret services in the aftermath of the American Revolution. At the point that he was posted to the Ottoman Empire in 1833, Urquhart reported directly to Sir Herbert Taylor, private secretary to King William IV, as well as to Foreign Minister Lord Palmerston.



David Urquhart, Palmerston's Peripatetic.

The occasion of Urquhart's first trip to Turkey was the 1833 Russo-Turkish treaty, through which Russia had virtually won control of the strategic Dardenelles. As Urquhart wrote in a memorandum, his mission was: "by obtaining the information necessary, to suggest measures of internal organization if the British government takes Turkey under its protection, or for meeting . . . the disorganizing influence of Russia in the contrary sense."

Urquhart's mentor in instigating revolt in the Caucasus was Prince Adam Czartoryski, an ethnic Pole who had been a Russian foreign minister during the Napoleonic wars, and who later helped lead the failed 1830 Polish rebellion against Russia.

After that venture, Prince Czartoryski fled to Britain, where he was inducted into the British Foreign Ministry, with the mission of organizing insurrections against the Russian Empire, becoming a patron of the Caucasus tribes and of Urquhart.

Full British support

During July and August 1834, Urquhart, posing as a businessman, toured the eastern shores of the Russian-con-

trolled Black Sea. Landing near the Anapa fortress, he met some 15 Circassian beys and 200 village chiefs, offering them salt, gunpowder, lead, and, eventually, full British support for revolt against Russia.

Urquhart's mission was made all the easier by Russia's murderous oppression of the Caucasus people, zealously carried out by First Viceroy Mikhail Vorontsov. As Prince Kochubey explained to an American visitor at the time: "The Circassians are like your American Indians—as untamable and uncivilized. . . . And owing to their natural energy or character, extermination only would keep them quiet."

"Daud Bey" was good to his word, as supplies and aid flowed into the Caucasus.

In 1834, Urquhart published a pamphlet, *England, Russia and Turkey*, to drum up support for his developing rebellion. He argued that it was necessary for Britain and France to check Russia's advance in the Caucasus in order to secure Turkey. In 1835, Urquhart formed *Portfolio*, a publication dedicated to the "Eastern Question." His first issue published Russian secret dispatches allegedly confirming Russia's ambitions. A later issue featured his Circassian declaration of independence.

In 1836, Urquhart returned to Istanbul as secretary at the British embassy. Toward the end of October, he outfitted a private schooner, the *Vixen*, to trade with the Circassians, in defiance of Russian trade restrictions. In early April 1837, the Russians seized the ship; the British ambassador to Turkey called on Palmerston to send a fleet, but Palmerston decided to avert a crisis at that time.

By 1840, Circassian guerrilla actions against Russian forces finally succeeded in sparking a general insurrection of all the Mountain Peoples—the Chechens, Ingush, Dagestanis, and Kabardians. The insurrection was led by Sheikh Shamil of Dagestan, who, like the former Dominican monk Sheikh Mansur, was a leader of the Naqshbandi Sufi order. Shamil created an Imamate which ruled the region with an iron fist.

During the 1853-56 Crimean War between Russia and Britain, Britain considered invading the Caucasian Black Sea coast with the help of the Circassians, but scotched the option. At the 1856 Paris peace conference, London failed in its bid to create a Circassian buffer state between Russia and Turkey.

Even after the Crimean War, London continued to aid the Caucasus rebellion. Circassian chiefs traveled to Istanbul to meet the British ambassador, Sir Henry Bulwer, to plan operations. But Russian response to the rebellion became increasingly brutal. By the time the revolt was finally crushed in 1864, more than 1 million Caucasians had either been killed, or deported to the Ottoman Empire.

"Daud Bey" had left the mountains long before. After the *Vixen* incident, Urquhart officially left British government service, insinuating himself as an adviser to the sultan of the Ottoman Empire.

General Thomson's little war

by Joseph Brewda and Linda de Hoyos

The next occasion for British interference in the Caucasus was World War I. This time the intervention was not disguised. In the aftermath of the March 1917 Menshevik revolution in Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia declared themselves independent from Russian rule. The Chechens, Dagestanis, and other mountain tribes also declared independence from Russia, and formed a Mountaineers Republic.

But independence was short-lived. In November 1918, a 23,000-man British expeditionary force led by Gen. William Thomson invaded the Caucasus region via Persia. Thomson's force occupied the Batumi, Georgia-Baku, Azerbaijan railway and other strategic points of what had been Russia, establishing military governorships in Batumi, Baku, and other areas in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Direct military occupation continued until their recapture by Russia in 1920.

In 1919, a British Foreign Office memorandum stressed the necessity for Britain to design a flexible policy: "If Russia recovers rapidly, they [Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the mountain tribes] might conceivably rejoin her in some federal relation; if the anarchy in Russia lasts many years, their present separation from her will probably be permanent. Our policy toward the Caucasus should be framed to meet either eventually."

In reality, this meant pursuing different options simultaneously, all of them mutually exclusive (see **Map 12**), under Lord Palmerston's dictum "no permanent allies, only permanent interests."

For instance, in 1919, General Denikin's White Russian Army, heavily backed by the British, invaded the Mountaineers Republic in Dagestan, whose primary patron was Lord Curzon.

And, London fostered a constant state of conflict between its dependents Armenia and Azerbaijan, the center of which was the tug of war over the status of Karabakh.

The Karabakh region had been an ancient Armenian center, but under the Mongols had been populated by the Azeris. After Russia seized the region in the early nineteenth century, Karabakh was repopulated by Armenians, becoming an Armenian enclave in the Azeri-populated czarist district of Baku.

Jurisdiction over the enclave had become a heated emotional issue for both Azeris and Armenians. General Thomson deliberately intensified the problem.

While Thomson dished out military aid to Armenia and