

Murat Yaşar,

The North Caucasus Borderland Between Muscovy and the Ottoman Empire, 1555-1605,

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022, x + 272 p.,
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Belated child of the author's doctoral dissertation (*The North Caucasus in the Second Half of the Sixteenth Century: Imperial Entanglements and Shifting Loyalties*, University of Toronto, 2011), this book analyses a largely overlooked and rather challenging aspect of the early modern Ottoman foreign policy: the border between the Ottoman Empire and the Muscovite State on the North Caucasus frontier. As Yaşar claims in the Introduction, the study's motivation was to remedy the scholarly malady of exclusive approaches to the geography whereby the Turkish historians tended to rely heavily on Turkish archival sources, and the Western researchers (as well as the Russians) on the Russian ones. Such an approach, as the author continues, inevitably produced rather inimical historiographies in which Russian researchers were inclined to portray a duo of "slave-harvesting Ottoman Empire and Crimean Khanate" while the Turkish scholars painted a picture "of Russian aggression against the local peoples who strove to be under Crimean/Ottoman/Turkish rule because they were Muslims (p. 9)".

In such a conflictual ambience, Yaşar tries to bring clarity to the understanding of the North Caucasus in the second half of the sixteenth century with a balanced approach by making use of both Ottoman and Russian sources, something the existing literature mostly failed to manage. Drawing on a large pool of *Mühimme Defterleri* (protocol registers of the Porte's commands from the Ottoman Archives) and *Posol'skie Knigi* (ambassadorial books from Russian State Archives) along with published documentation and literature, Yaşar aims at providing his readers with an exposition of how the North Caucasus underwent "borderlandisation" between the Ottomans and Muscovites. What's more, the author suggests that the borderlandisation was a process far from being unilateral: the promotion of the Ottoman *sancak* of Kefe to the status of a *beylerbeyilik* in 1568 and the establishment of the city of Terek as a Muscovite bridgehead in the North Caucasus were vivid examples of how the borderland could influence the administrative decisions of the imperial centers.

The first chapter of the book is a study of the topography and the peoples of the region in the early modern period and offers a masterful anthropological

sketch. The ethnic and religious diversity of the geography (the main groups the author deals with being the Kabardinians, Circassians, Daghestanis, Cossacks, and Nogays) is herein adequately addressed. The second through fifth chapters are the narration of the good old Rankeian diplomatic history: the Muscovite southern expansion culminated in the incorporation of Kazan and Astrakhan in the 1550s into the Tsar's territories, alerting the Ottomans for the first time regarding this northerly neighbor. As Astrakhan was a springboard for the Russians to infiltrate into the North Caucasus, the erection of the first Russian fortress in Kabarda in 1567 necessitated the well-known Ottoman campaign to Astrakhan in 1569. Following the failure of the campaign, the Ottomans reconsidered their traditional policy of confiding the North Caucasian affairs to the Crimean Khanate and started to play a more direct role in the region through direct diplomatic links with local leaders. And while the Russians continued fortifying the North Caucasus via enlisting the allegiance of certain tribes in the region, the Ottoman acquisition of Shirvan (and Derbend) during the Ottoman-Safavid War of 1578-1590 brought the Ottomans face to face with them: the Daghestani capital Tarku was occupied twice by the Muscovites and recaptured twice by the Ottoman-backed regional forces. In 1605, the Russians were driven from the geography for good and the next round of Russian expansion into the region would have to wait for the reign of Peter the Great (1672-1725) in the late seventeenth century. But the Ottoman presence in Shirvan also soon came to an end when the Safavids rekindled their offensive in 1603 and occupied the area amid the heat of the Ottoman-Habsburg War (1593-1606) in the West. Chapter 6 puts aside the chronology and serves as an argumentative piece where the author resents the pejorative perception of the local tribes as fickle and self-seeking power nodes that sought benefit maximization by shifting their loyalties between the Ottomans and the Muscovites: to the contrary, Yaşar argues, "the local rulers were forced to pick a side" to ensure their survival (p. 198). The conclusion wraps up the narrative chapters and puts forth the emphasis that the Russian intervention in the North Caucasus in the 1555-1605 period was an extension of Muscovy's steppe frontier policies with two maxims: establishing a network of fortifications on the one hand and eschewing direct military confrontation with the Ottomans on the other.

In dealing with such a complex geography and in combining Russian and Ottoman archival material to that effect, the author does a commendable job. His meticulous and finely balanced endeavors see to it that almost every chapter include both the Ottoman and Muscovite perspectives one after the other. Speaking of perspectives, Yaşar's peripheral (i.e. local) vantage point is very successful

in describing how Caucasian rulers and even the Crimean Khanate feared a permanent Ottoman presence in their geography despite their (alleged or genuine) loyalty to the Porte. Furthermore, the glossary and the two maps help facilitate the reading effort for an otherwise complicated subject matter. And there's also a table for the chronology of events, which is good to have but not indispensable given the author's fluent prose and diligent storytelling.

For a fair assessment of the work at hand, its weaker points will follow in the lines below, though they can hardly reduce the book's overall strength. That being said, one of the first elements that call for attention is (due perhaps to the publishing house directives) the book's preference for endnotes that are placed after each chapter. Being prepared in the footnoted format, the author's dissertation, for example, offers an easier reading compared to the book regarding to trace the references. As for the content, the author does not employ any local languages of the geography (North Caucasus) and bases his work on Ottoman, Russian and Western European sources. This is in no way a shortcoming in and of itself; nonetheless, the author's concern for the local perspective would welcome some contributions from inside the local scholarly literature, or at least a few short discussions thereof. Speaking of perspectives again, another point which could have invigorated the author's research would be the inclusion of the outsiders' voices: Venetian, French, and Habsburg embassy reports from İstanbul during the period under scrutiny are silent in the book. And so, this is, one must remind, notwithstanding the fact that Akdes Nimet Kurat's quinquagenarian work included them in its bibliography.¹

As for the nexus between the author's dissertation (2011) and book (2022), Yaşar's efforts to embrace the last decade of Ottoman historiography could have been slightly more receptive. Relatively new works by authors such as Feridun M. Emecen, Zahit Atçıl and Güneş Işıksel somehow go unnoticed in a book that covers the period between 1555 and 1605.² If they had been duly addressed, the

1 Akdes Nimet Kurat, *Türkiye ve İdil Boyu (1569 Astarhan Seferi, Ten-İdil Kanalı ve XVI-XVII. Yüzyıl Osmanlı-Rus Münasebetleri)* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2011). First edition, Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi DTCF Yayınları, 1966.

2 Feridun M. Emecen, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Kuruluş ve Yükseliş Tarihi (1300-1600)* (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2016); first edition in 2015; Zahit Atçıl, "The Foundation of Peace-Oriented Foreign Policy in the Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Empire Rüstem Pasha's Vision of Diplomacy," *Practices of Diplomacy in the Early Modern World c. 1410-1800*, eds. Tracey A. Sowerby and Jan Hennings (London: Routledge, 2017), pp.

author could have perchance drawn analogies between his quite accurate analysis of the Porte's change of policy regarding the North Caucasus after 1569 (when the Ottomans started a period of direct diplomacy with the local peoples) and Atçıl's novel coin "peace-oriented" imperial foreign policy, in which the latter referred to the emergence of "diplomacy as a fundamental tool of foreign policy by the middle of the sixteenth century".³ In the same vein, Yaşar's analysis also corresponds to Işıksel's suggestion regarding the Ottoman relations with the Safavids and Habsburgs during the second half of the sixteenth century which now started to operate "par une correspondance diplomatique régulière".⁴

Finding its way to the print at a time when nascent Ottoman historiographical trends (environmental, emotional, cultural or digital) dominate English language works in particular, Yaşar's study comes to the fore as a fresh and solid contribution to an old but ever-weakening club. With respect to its sharp foreign policy analyses during the second half of the sixteenth century, those interested in political history will enjoy the book as it fills the niche left by the Ottoman frontier studies with a traditional focus on the Mediterranean, Southeastern European or the Red Sea. Finally, the author also merits recognition as he delivers well on his quest to offer a balanced approach to the geography, enabling the work to appeal to historians in the field of Ottoman, Russian and Caucasian studies alike.

Mahmut Halef Cevrioğlu

İzmir Kâtip Çelebi Üniversitesi

132-152; Güneş Işıksel, "La politique étrangère ottomane dans la seconde moitié du XVI^e siècle: le cas du règne de Selîm II (1566-1574)" (doctoral dissertation), École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, 2012. The latter work is also published, Güneş Işıksel, *La diplomatie ottomane sous le règne de Selîm II: paramètres et périmètres de l'Empire ottoman dans le troisième quart du XVI^e siècle* (Paris-Louvain-Bristol, Peeters, 2016).

3 Atçıl, "The Foundation," p. 133.

4 Işıksel, "La politique," p. 270.