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Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder (Review)

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MOSHE GAMMER, ED., *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*, Central Asian Studies Series (New York: Routledge, 2008). Pp. 256. \$160.00 cloth, \$39.95 paper.

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars and policymakers alike have become increasingly focused on events in the Caucasus. The region—with its wars, human-rights abuses, and terrorist acts—has garnered unprecedented international media attention, although it has hardly become “a familiar name in each household” (p. xiv), as Moshe Gammmer claims. “The post-Soviet disorder” in Caucasia that the authors address in this stimulating and at times frustrating volume is a most worthy subject because despite the region’s increasing prominence on the world stage, it remains *terra incognita* to most nonspecialists.

The volume addresses the situation in (mostly northern) Caucasia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to the editor, the purpose of the volume is to “present the reader with a broad sample of the growing volume and range of studies on the contemporary Northern Caucasus” (p. xiv), and in this it succeeds. The thirteen essays approach events in the region from multiple disciplinary and thematic angles, including religion, nationalism, ethnic identity, state policies and practices, nonstate actors, interstate relations, and transnational influences. Whatever coherence the volume has will be for readers to decide, because it lacks a general introduction where a case could have been made.

It appears that the editor intends Maxim Barbashin’s contribution to serve in lieu of such an introduction by providing an “overall review” and “model for the causes and essence of ethnic conflicts in the Northern Caucasus (and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space)” (p. xiv). Barbashin claims that efforts to understand and resolve ethno-political conflicts in the region are hampered by “the lack of proper theoretical tools” and that his essay can be interpreted as an attempt to find “a new conceptual system” adequate to both tasks (p. 2). He emphasizes the “territorial localization of ethnic groups” and their “positional advantage” in arguing that “growing positional inequality” is “the main reason for current ethnic conflicts” (p. 5). The main weakness of the article is that it assumes rather than shows that “the main force in ethnic conflict is the struggle for positions”—that is, the struggle for power—and that “ethnic mobilization” is the means to the end of achieving power in northern Caucasia (p. 13). I see nothing new here, conceptually or otherwise.

The first five chapters treat the western and central Northern Caucasus in terms of law, religious and ethnic identity, territorial separatism, and Islamic extremism. Irina Babich reviews the history and current status of Islamic law (*shari‘a*) in northwestern Caucasia and argues persuasively that despite Soviet-era bans and its absence in the official legal code of the Russian Federation, its influence (and that of *‘ada* or customary law) is on the rise (p. 23). What explains this phenomenon? In his chapter on Circassian communities in the 1990s, Chen Bram presents “re-Islamisation” and “ethno-nationalism” as simultaneous and overlapping processes. Noting the existence of these phenomena across northern Caucasia, he emphasizes the role of the International Circassian Association in bringing together Circassians of diverse backgrounds and argues that what distinguishes the Circassian case from those of its neighbors is the important role played by diaspora Circassians as the agents of both processes. The chapter by Cemre Erciyes treats popular perceptions of civil and political rights and freedoms and of what she calls “life chances” (e.g., equality of opportunity) in the Republic of Adygheia. Erciyes’ 2005 survey findings suggest that the majority of her informants

believe they enjoy religious freedom and that progress is being made in the areas of freedom of speech and political participation, while they are aware of systemic economic inequality. Julietta Mieskhidze recounts the events surrounding the 1996 Balkar declaration of national sovereignty and locates the historical roots of Balkar separatism in the Soviet period. In one of the volume's strongest pieces, Walter Richmond explores the Russian government's attempts to define and combat Islamic extremism and the consequences of its strategy in Kabardino-Balkaria. The policy of defining all nonindigenous Islamic movements as "Wahhabism" and of equating them with extremism, together with the practices of local law-enforcement agencies, Richmond argues, have already pushed apolitical and avowedly nonviolent Muslim groups and individuals into the camp of antigovernmental forces and "will lead to increased polarization and more frequent civil disturbances and quite possibly an extension of the Chechen war throughout the Northern Caucasus" (p. 97).

The next four chapters concentrate on Chechnya. Ekaterina Sokirianskaia examines Chechen national identity since the 19th century, which prior to 1994 was based on "rejection of Russia and eagerness to maintain a common identity with it" (p. 103). This formulation hints at the essay's analytic problems. The rejection of Russia, the author unsurprisingly argues, intensified as a result of the recent wars in Chechnya. What is surprising is that the author nowhere establishes the depth and breadth of "Chechen national identity" among Chechens, lending the piece an impressionistic feel. In contrast, Victor Shnirelman's carefully argued and well-documented contribution shows how a dispute over territory "encourages the development of the Orstkhoi ethnicity" among people who had previously self-identified as Chechens and Ingush. Not that Orstkhoi identity is a straightforward matter; some Ingush self-identify as Orstkhoi, while some Orstkhoi (also known as Karabulak) consider themselves a "tribe of the Chechen people" (p. 140), all of whom are said to belong to still another group, the "Vaynakh people." Yagil Henkin looks at the military conflict of 1994 to 1996 and concludes that although numerically inferior, the Chechens demonstrated superior military leadership and the ability to adapt to the exigencies of war, while the Russians fought the war "according to what they believed the Chechens were doing, not according to what they actually did" (p. 152). In another strong piece, Brian Glyn Williams assesses the role of foreign fighters and al-Qa'ida in the "Chechen insurgency." In addition to establishing links—some "tangential," others more direct—between al-Qa'ida and foreign jihadists in Chechnya, he concludes that the latter's "greatest contribution to the Chechen conflict has . . . been in grafting the language and worldview of the global Salafite-extremist movement to the isolated Chechens' secessionist struggle," an achievement facilitated by "foreign money" and "the Russians' brutal response" (p. 174).

Rounding out the volume are essays by Moshe Gammer, Sofie Bedford, and Mark Tolts on Dagestan, Azerbaijan, and Caucasian Jewry, respectively. Gammer explains how attempts by Soviet-era "partocrats" to maintain power by harnessing the ideological potential of nationalism and religion while marginalizing their carriers—a phenomenon visible throughout the region—have been hampered by Dagestan's national and religious diversity. Echoing other contributors' arguments, Gammer views harsh anti-"Wahhabi" policies in the republics and the centralizing tendencies of Moscow as the main cause of antigovernment violence under the banner of Islam in northern Caucasia (p. 188). Bedford finds the key to understanding why Islam has become an antigovernment ideology in Azerbaijan in the notion of "official religion," which she traces to Stalin's attempts to co-opt Muslim leaders during World War II. Based on interviews conducted with an array of secular and religious informants, she shows both that the state "plays an important role in the emergence of religious opposition" (p. 206) and that religious conflict among Muslims in Azerbaijan sometimes has nonstate-related sources. Finally, Tolts' analysis of late-Soviet and more recent census data suggests that Russia's Caucasian Jewry are eschewing such Soviet-era designations as "Tats" and self-identifying as

Jews. Whether this indicates, as Tolts suggests, “a strengthening of their Jewishness” (p. 221) remains to be demonstrated.

As is often the case with published conference proceedings, the essays in this volume are of uneven quality. Problems of translation and editorial lapses often frustrate attempts at comprehension and may cause some readers to direct their attention elsewhere. In some essays, the further one moves away from contemporary events, the less reliable is the analysis. Despite these shortcomings, the volume succeeds in emphasizing the diversity of Caucasia and in making a strong case for the importance of understanding local contexts in making sense of events in the region. If there is a single lesson to be drawn from the volume, it is that when secular nationalist projects fail in the region, Islam has proven to be an attractive alternative for an array of state and nonstate political entrepreneurs.

ABDULKADER H. SINNO, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008). Pp. 352. \$39.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

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Over the past three decades Afghanistan has endured almost nonstop political violence; interventions by two superpowers; seemingly endless competition between an ever-changing array of militarized groups motivated variously by ideology, ethnicity, religion, and personalistic leadership; and a persistent inability of central governments to exert effective control over any significant part of the territory. Abdulkader Sinno’s book, employing a combination of organizational models and typologies with an extensive analysis of the strategies and circumstances of many of these actors, is an ambitious and innovative effort to make sense of these dynamics. The work is important for its depth of research and for demonstrating that many aspects of Afghanistan’s apparently chaotic situation can be understood using general principles of organizational theory.

The core of the analysis—about two-thirds of the book—uses an organizational model influenced by the older approaches of Herbert Simon, James March, Alfred Sloan, Mancur Olson, and others. Sinno convincingly shows that this theoretical approach—which typically focuses on corporate bureaucracies—can inform our understanding of the behavior of bands of opium-growing Kalashnikov-carrying bandits. This is not because corporations are necessarily like bandits but rather because successful bandits—as well as more complex and sophisticated militarized actors—face many of the same leadership, resource, and information constraints as corporations. The analysis is also clearly influenced by the eclectic application of organizational theory pioneered by the Indiana University “workshop” group of Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom, which takes what might first appear to be a very exotic and unique case and then shows it can be studied using a set of familiar analytical tools. Culture and history are important in determining the values of the parameters that influence behavior—and Sinno provides considerable detail in this regard—but behavior can still be understood according to general principles.

Three institutional characteristics dominate the analysis. The first is the level of centralization of the organization, whether highly centralized (the organizations of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Ahmad Shah Massoud, and the Soviet, Taliban, and U.S. invaders), highly decentralized (almost everyone else), or at the intermediate level of patron–client relationships, which are ubiquitous in the region, and of village, clan, and tribal structures that have characterized