

Sheikh Shamil in the Caucasus, Russia and the World

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On the first day of the month Muharram of 1212 H. (1797) by the Muslim Calendar, a boy was born in Gimry – an Avar village in Dagestan. The authors wishing to convey to readers the amazing biography of Imam Shamil used to start their story by statement of this event¹. “Shamil was born – a poor mountaineer, who received world-wide recognition, and who was destined to take more than one page in the history of Russia...”, – write others, aiming to intrigue the readers from the first pages².

Frequent diseases in the early years, the change of his name “Ali” to “Shamil”, or more correctly “Shamuil” which was rare at that time, unusual circumstances of his childhood – all these seem to have put some mystery around the future imam, who made people talk about him. Discarding all the mystique, it must nevertheless be recognized that 1797 marked the beginning of the astonishing fate of this person. In the same year an Austrian composer F. Schubert; Wilhelm I - the future king of Prussia and the Kaiser of Germany; F.P. Wrangel – Russian navigator and polar explorer; A.A. Bestuzhev-Marlinsky – Russian writer, critique, a Decembrist exiled to the Caucasus and took part in the battles against the first Imam Ghazi-Muhammad were born. Quite plausible is an assumption that the Decembrist and Shamil might met at the battlefield, since the latter, as a faithful companion, was often near the Imam Ghazi-Muhammad. Bestuzhev-Marlinsky found his death in the Western Caucasus in 1837, when Shamil already was the imam of Dagestan, gained his

¹ Mukhammad Takhir al-Karakhi. Khronika Mukhammada Takhira o dagestanskikh voynakh v period Shamilya. Moscow – Leningrad: 1941; Bushuyev S.K. Bor’ba gortsev za nezavisimost’ pod rukovodstvom Shamilya. Leningrad: 1939; Khalilov A.Y. Natsional’no-osvoboditel’noye dvizheniye gortsev Severnogo Kavkaza pod predvoditel’stvom Shamilya. Makhachkala: 1991; and others.

² Gadzhi-Ali. Skazaniye ochevidtso o Shamile // Sbornik svedeniy o kavkazskikh gortsakh. Vyp. VII. Tiflis: 1873; Chichagova M.N. Shamil’ na Kavkaze i v Rossii. Sankt-Petersburg: 1889; Bartol’d V.V. Shamil’ // Sobraniye sochineniy v 9 tomakh. Vol. II. Part I. Moscow: Izdatel’sтво vostochnoy literatury, 1963; and others.

political power. Even since then, he had made the tsar administration nervous, who tried to force the imam to bow to the Emperor Nicolai I during the visit of the Sovereign to the Caucasus in the same year.

The year 1797 was abundant with significant political events in the world. In Europe, a lucky star of Bonaparte flashed, who routed five Austrian divisions at the heights of Rivoli in winter, after which Northern Italy was de-facto conquered by the French. The victorious conduct of the future emperor continued in Europe and beyond, and at the close of the outgoing year in the honorary court of the Luxembourg Palace, a solemn commemoration of General Napoleon Bonaparte took place.

New monarchs, presidents, and ministers come to the international arena: the throne of the King of Prussia was occupied by the 27-year-old Friedrich Wilhelm III; in the US, George Washington's successor became the second president, John Adams; on July 16, Charles Maurice Talleyrand was appointed as the new Minister of Foreign Affairs of France, the coronation of Paul I was held in Moscow. The on succession to the Russian throne was issued the same year, and in St. Petersburg Saint Michael's (Engineers) Castle was laid, which Shamil would visit 62 years later.

What was happening in the Caucasus and particularly in Dagestan in this year? With the death of Catherine II, her successor Paul I changed the foreign policy towards the Caucasus by abolishing Zubov's campaign and returning troops. Taking advantage of this, Agha-Muhammad Khan Qajar invaded the Caucasus and occupied Shusha but was soon killed in a conspiracy and the Iranian troops returned home. In January 1797, the St. Petersburg royal court decided to create a federative alliance under the Russian protectorate from the domains of Dagestan and Azerbaijan declaring as the backbone of its policy in Transcaucasia the federation of domains leaning towards Russia³. Thus, on May 2, 1797, the Tsar credentials were sent to Tabasaran ruler Rustam-kadiy compiled with gratitude for his loyalty to Russia during the invasion of the Caucasus by Agha-Muhammed Khan; and about entitling Mehti-bek of Tarki the title of Shamkhal⁴. In the summer of the same year, Shamkhal swore an oath of allegiance to Russia, vowing to "faithfully and unilaterally serve and obey in everything"⁵. However, it didn't work with the federation, "in those

³ Istoriya Dagestana s drevneyshikh vremen do nashikh dnei. Tom 1. Moskva: Nauka, 2004. p. 453

⁴ Arkhiv vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy imperii. F. 77. Op. 77/6. 1791-1800 gg. D. 472. L. 195

⁵ Shamkhaly Tarkovskiye. Sbornik svedeniy o kavkazskikh gortsakh. Vyp. I. Tiflis: 1868. p. 62

specific historical conditions the political forces in the Eastern Caucasus domain were not capable to rally together and were torn by internal contradictions”⁶.

The eighteenth century was about to end. The next century in Russia began with regicide, the bright era of Napoleon came and gloriously passed, the star of fascinating happiness of the Decembrists flared up and gone away.

Meanwhile, the Caucasus gradually entered the Russian political reality and thinking: in 1801 Alexander I signed a manifesto on Georgia's joining to the Russian Empire. The following year, at the Mint in St. Petersburg, a medal for the participants of the Caucasian expedition under Count Musin-Pushkin was coined “for ore mining in the ranges of the Caucasus and Ararat mountains”⁷. On February 1804, a unit of tsarist troops ravaged dozens of villages (*auls*) in the area of Pyatigorsk and brutally suppressed the uprising that broke out there, in honor of which the silver medal was also coined. In 1816, there began cruel story of the “proconsul” (as General Aleksandr Petrovich Yermolov called himself) who also for some reason was called “the conqueror of the Caucasus”, although beside the extinguished spirits and devastated settlements he left also, the smoldering fire of problems that soon broke out as the brightest flame of the long national liberation struggle.

A.S. Pushkin, having visited the Caucasus in 1820, composed his poem “The Prisoner of the Caucasus”, which was “inflamed with a passion for the Caucasus” and would be read stealthily in future by Caucasian officers in the cadet corps. Meanwhile, the “Amalat-bek”, “Mulla Nur”, “Letters from Dagestan” written by Decembrist Bestuzhev-Marlinsky in exile, became the favorite books of youth. The mountainous region was in the center of attention.

“But the big, long, stubborn and restless thought about the Caucasus – as Kazbek Sultanov rightly points out – entered and remained in the culture precisely in Shamil’s era, whose struggle, within the historical and cultural perspective, was perceived as a message to humanity, as a truly crucial stage, as an accurate indicator of the vital problems of minor nations. The freedom theme and idea in the Russian and European consciousness began to sound with a clear Caucasian accent”⁸.

In 1834, providence gave Shamil the rod of the Commander-in-Chief, from which he refused, understanding the greatest responsibility. However, the providence was

⁶ Gadzhiyev V.G. Rol’ Rossii v istorii Dagestana. Moscow, 1965. p. 173.

⁷ Acty Sobrannyye Kavkazskoi Arxeograficheskoi Komissiei. Pod Redakciei A. Berje. Vol. I. Tiflis: Tipografia Glavnogo Upravleniya Namestnika Kavkazskogo, 1866. p. 313

⁸ Sultanov K. Chelovek-legenda. Novoye delo. № 48.1997. p. 8

persistent and inevitable, and after several refusals and reflections, Shamil agreed to become imam. From that point the Great Caucasian epic begins.

For many years, it has been a subject of close attention for scientists, writers, poets. A lot of documents extracted from archives and private collections have become indicators of the heroic struggle of the peoples of the Caucasus and major changes in the mountain society, led and run by their leader Shamil.

Life of Shamil can be divided into two parts.

His first part of life, where he emerged as a warrior and public leader, ended in August 1859. Imam Shamil was an embodiment of this tragic and heroic era of the history.

The second, which began with Gunib and ended in Arabia, is exclusively his personal life, full of reflections on the past, thoughts about the future of his family and the loss of his loved ones; “Diplomatic” relations with the St. Petersburg office and the main goal – to perform the pilgrimage (*Hajj*). In this part Shamil belonged to himself, while his name has long been the property of world history.

However, if the first part of Shamil’s epic had been studied relatively in detail, then the second, in general, presented tenuously. Basically, these are separate essays, memoirs of contemporaries, in scientific works – a modest piece. What caused such “no attention” of the authors to the Russian period of Shamil’s life extended as much as 11 years?

Especially the Dagestan historiography does not favor the Russian period of the Imam's life, not to mention the fact that local “history lovers”, far from science, often do not want to recognize Shamil’s capture. They call his meeting with General Baryatinsky on Upper Gunib on August 25, 1859, just as agreement conclusion and his residing in Kaluga factual constraint.

One may get an impression that captivity, forced living away from homeland, the voluntary loyalty oath of Imam to Russia is perceived by people as a simple sequence of events in Shamil’s life, without any desire to dive into the political component of these events, which determined to a large extent the future fate of the peoples of Dagestan and the nature of formation of Dagestan statehood as a whole.

Obsessed opponents with a simplistic and primitive view of Shamil with amazing perseverance inclined to suggest that the imam had to die on Gunib, which would be the easy solution. But the Imam even in these dramatic moments thought about his people, their fate and decided: to yield to the world and save Dagestan!

It is hard not to agree with Rasul Magomedov, who once expressed the following opinion: “To tell the truth about history, no matter how bitter it may be, is to relieve tension and pacify the illness. The truth must serve us, so that we can learn these lessons for ourselves”⁹.

However, if someone thinks that the Russian period of the honorary prisoner in Shamil’s life conceals something shameful or unworthy of Imam, is deeply mistaken. In Shamil’s life there were many difficult and seemingly desperate situations, but in none of them did he discredit his name, by contrast the Imam went through all the trials of war and captivity. He lost a lot, witnessed many injustices and at the same time bewildered companions and followers, opponents and rivals with the profound wisdom of the decisions he made.

Anguish of mind, psychological breakdown after August 1859 and the transition to a completely different world, the world of steam engines and foundry factories, large cities and magnificent palaces, boundless fields and sea spaces, encouraged the highlander from Gimry to reconsider his vision of the world. There is no happiness in the war, the Imam more than once undertook actions towards a peaceful settlement but was not heard by the autocracy. Only fool may believe that Shamil craved for fight.

Many of the people surrounding the Imam in Russia wanted to see expressions of surprise and admiration on his face from what he saw, but they did not. Imam could hide his emotions, excitement and feelings. The richest storehouse of these feelings would tell us about many things, and, most importantly, would explain many things.

For some Shamil is a subject of sweet panegyrics, for others – impartial libels. The larger is the historical personality, the more multifaceted it is for perception, its deeds are difficult to explain because they do not fit into ordinary ethical sentiments. The meaning of an individual worthy of being called historical is that it repeats itself in every new generation but participates in future life not as a guest from afar, but directly as a teacher of life.

In any case, the dignity and weakness of this bright personality can only be measured from the global historical viewpoint.

Meanwhile, Shamil is not imposed on high pedestals, the best monument to him would be the adherence to his instructions and covenants. “He reflected, like in

⁹ Magomedov R.M. *Dva stoletiya s Shamilem*. Makhachkala, 1997. p. 3

convex glass, the virtues and defects of the world development process, which was destined to be woven most precisely in the Caucasus”¹⁰.

Pathos and drama of the Caucasian war ... Triumph and the tragedy of Shamil ...

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¹⁰ Donogo H.M. Imam Shamil'. Posledniy put'. Makhachkala: 2016.p. 5