

BOOK REVIEW

THE GHOST OF FREEDOM - A HISTORY OF THE CAUCASUS

BY CHARLES KING

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*This Book Review was written by Jan Künzl**

The Caucasus, an impressive mountain range of about 1100km length, stuck between the Black - and Caspian Seas, has always been home to an astonishing variety of different ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. At all times, the interests of the neighbouring great powers clashed in the Caucasus. For a long time the Russian, Ottoman and Persian Empires struggled for influence and hegemony in the region. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, a clash of interests between a resurrecting Russia and NATO seems to emerge.

With his newest book “The Ghost of Freedom - A History of the Caucasus” Professor Charles King from the Georgetown University presents a broad history of this region, from the expansion of the Russian Empire into the Caucasus at the beginning of the 19th century to the politically unstable present.

The book deals mainly with two key aspects, which initially seem somewhat unrelated, but soon turn out to be two sides of the same coin.

At the geopolitical level King draws a picture of the Caucasus as a region, which could never be fully controlled by any hegemonic power. At least some of the countless ethnic groups of the region were always rebellious in the face of the dominance of the Russian Empire, of the Soviet-Union and now of Russia and the post-Soviet nation-states in the South Caucasus. Even long lasting and brutally conducted low intensity wars and large scale demographic engineering, i.e. the deportation of whole people, had not changed that.

The title of the volume “The Ghost of Freedom” is borrowed from Alexander Pushkin’s famous novel “Captive of the Caucasus”. The motif of the Ghost of Freedom runs like a thread through the whole book. Freedom is thereby not only to be understood as the political freedom of certain groups, but as an image of freedom that is projected onto the Caucasus from outside, as well. With the second key aspect King makes an effort on a psychological and cultural level to show how the Caucasus and its dwellers are seen from the outside, and how those outside perceptions are affecting the self-perception of the inhabitants of the Caucasus. To illustrate this, King draws on rather unusual, but still quite enlightening examples for the naïve transfiguration of the Caucasus as a room of wild beauty, populated by

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noble-minded, freedom-loving and fierce warriors. The legendary beauty, especially of the female Caucasians, which even led to the exposition of fake Caucasian maidens in American sideshows, falls into this category as well. The view of the Caucasus from the perspectives of King's various examples is affected by the strong myth of a place where the escape of the limitedness and narrowness of the own existence and thereby true freedom lures.

Finally, both stated aspects interact. Both the violence, in all its forms which took place in the Caucasus, and the romanticization of the region and its inhabitants contributed to the construction of collective identities in the Caucasus itself.

King presents a book which is well researched, inventive and remarkably readable. The rather unusual perspectives he proposes from time to time are entertaining and highlight his theses. The publisher describes "The Ghost of Freedom" as the first general history of the modern Caucasus. This claim is somewhat exaggerated, however, as such a task is barely achievable in some 300 pages. Instead, King's volume is better suited as an introduction for readers who want to get a general idea of the confusing heterogeneity of the Caucasus and its turbulent history.

A rather weak part of the book is the last chapter, which describes the Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The view at the central set of the problems, concerning nation-building, secession and territorial integrity is somewhat shallow. King writes:

"There would have been no post-Soviet wars in the Caucasus if elites at the republican level had not tried to prevent their regional counterparts from claiming rights to secession and sovereignty - the very rights, of course, that the republican elites were claiming vis-à-vis Moscow".

This statement is certainly right, but not sophisticated enough. Considering the magnitude of collective identities in the Caucasus and the relatively easy process of the construction of national identity - as King so vividly describes it - it becomes clear that the Caucasus needs to establish ways of dealing with collective identities which embrace mechanisms of autonomy rather than secession.

Another aspect, which is barely covered, is the recent revival of Russia's geopolitical ambitions. Those have an increasingly important impact on the perpetuation of the so-called 'frozen conflicts' in the Caucasus, even before the bang of Russia's invasion in Georgia this August.

Nevertheless, "The Ghost of Freedom" is a recommendable introduction to a region which increasingly (re)gains global importance. It does not only deliver the background information for a better understanding of the recent regional developments, but encourages one to think about the construction of collective identities and (national) myths in a general way.

About the Author: *Dr. Charles King is Professor of International Affairs and Professor of Government at Georgetown University, USA. His previous books include [Nations Abroad: Diaspora Politics and International Relations in the Former Soviet Union](#) (1998) and [The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture](#) (2000) and [The Black Sea: A History](#) (2004). Dr. King's research interests include ethnicity and nationalism in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe. His articles on the postcommunist world have appeared in*

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