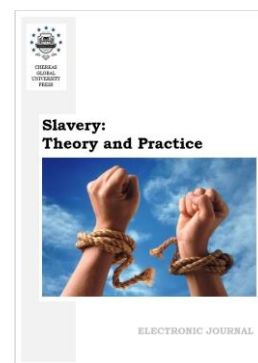


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Caucasian Women in the Russian Imperial Record-Keeping Narrative: The Representation of Women in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ (1792–1800)

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Abstract

This article analyzes how Caucasian women were represented in the record-keeping narrative of the Russian Empire in 1792–1800. The principal source relied on in the preparation of this paper is ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ by A.A. Cherkasov, a collection of documents on runaways from Circassia to the Russian Empire. Most of the documents under analysis were created by Russian officers (often little-educated Black Sea Cossacks) seeking to describe to their superiors cases of mountain people crossing over to the Russian side of the border. Thus, we are talking here about spontaneous testimonies, meaning the officials had not designed to describe the traditional status of women in Caucasian society.

A key focus is on the lexical representation of Caucasian women in the collection’s documents spanning the period 1792–1800. Caucasian women tend to be lexically objectivized and act as an appendix to men (e.g., the border being crossed by “a mountaineer accompanied by a woman”, rather than by “a mountaineer and a mountaineeress”; the willingness to enter Russian allegiance being articulated by a male for his entire family). In a similar way are objectivized children and servants. Most mountaineeresses’ names are not even mentioned – she is just an unnamed wife of a named mountaineer. This was not the case only in one document.

In the documents, Caucasian women tend to be objectivized and are not represented as a person capable of independent action. As a rule, she crosses the border in company with her father, husband, or master. An exception is widows, although these cases actually go back to the early 1800s, when the border was sometimes crossed by families headed by widows; it is with the widows that the Russian officers would communicate, not their sons (some of whom were already adults and even had children of their own). During that time, there occurs a change in the lexical representation of Caucasian women – we now come across more of them named, with one case even including a description of a woman’s physical appearance.

Keywords: history of slavery, history of the Caucasus, imperial discourse, narrative, gender roles, objectivization of women

1. Introduction

The issue of women in the Caucasus is currently attracting the attention of many a researcher – and there are good reasons for that. The traditions of local communities, including gender-related ones, are being influenced by globalization and the hegemonic advances of Western civilization – in some cases, they are able to withstand this impact, while in others, they end up being destroyed irrevocably. In this climate, there has been a rise of interest in the axiological

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assessment of local gender traditions, even to the point of patently unscholarly works being produced, some of which laud the traditional treatment of women, while others, on the contrary, condemn it.

Of particular note in this context is the research by L.U. Kurbanova. This Chechen researcher, who speaks of an “intensification of traditionalism and the religious factor in North Caucasus society”, views this trend as an ambivalent one – on one hand, this intensification of traditionalism has a positive side to it, which is that it helps revive “traditional normative practices of an ethical and moral nature”, and, on the other, its downside is that it restricts women’s “personal freedom and individual opportunity” (Kurbanova, 2016: 83-84). According to the sociological surveys cited by L.U. Kurbanova, 78 % of women in the Chechen Republic, the most traditionalist of the Caucasian republics, feel that life for women is better in neighboring republics, with “inequality”, “dominant control by men”, “restriction of women’s freedom”, “strict religious norms”, and “absence of protection from violence and injustice” cited as the most common issues (Kurbanova, 2016: 83). In 2008, L.U. Kurbanova conducted a survey of her own on legal culture among girls attending Grades 8 through 11 in high school (60 respondents) and women living in temporary accommodation, mostly little educated and without a fixed occupation (90 respondents) (Kurbanova, 2012: 43). It is revealing that most of the students, whose formative years were part of the period of “intensification of traditionalism and the religious factor in North Caucasus society”, had a positive attitude toward bride kidnapping, a traditional practice in that region, whilst most of the little educated and socially vulnerable members of the older generation deemed this custom censurable and found it necessary to have bride kidnapers punished in accordance with the laws of the Russian Federation (Kurbanova, 2012: 43). Of note is also the fact that a negative attitude toward bride kidnapping was articulated by those who had been forced into marriage (Kurbanova, 2012: 43). It should, however, be noted that the surveys cited by L.U. Kurbanova are not representative of the entire Chechen population, for one cannot judge the attitude of most Chechen women toward bride kidnapping based exclusively on the views of schoolgirls and socially disadvantaged women. Nevertheless, the research by L.U. Kurbanova provides a good insight into the negative aspects of how women have traditionally been treated in the Caucasus.

It is to be noted, however, that modern Russian researchers tend to refrain from criticizing the traditional treatment of women in the Caucasus. Of interest in this context is the following statement by Z.V. Shoranova, a researcher based in Kabardino-Balkaria: “The the process of entering into and learning the gender roles was incontestably of high significance to Caucasian ethnic groups, had been polished over centuries, and, consequently, was perceived as something commonplace and natural” (Shoranova, 2009: 139). In describing the “process of entering into and learning the gender roles”, Z.V. Shoranova does not mention its compulsory nature but views it as a phenomenon natural for mountain society (“The woman’s world, while taking definite form in a girl’s mind, was clearly delimited by their home, leaving which was regulated”; “From an early age, most females would undergo preparation for the primary role in life for them – motherhood”; “As a child and adolescent, most girls would most of the time hang around with other women and engage in contact with them regularly and for all kinds of reasons” (Shoranova, 2009: 137-139)).

This antagonism does merit discussion. The difference in the conclusions arrived at by L.U. Kurbanova and Z.V. Shoranova is grounded in the actual methodologies underlying their studies. L.U. Kurbanova looks at the Caucasus’s traditional gender roles from without. The social surveys cited by this researcher are constructed in such a way as to have the respondents consider their status based on the rules of communities that are external to them. They are asked to compare their status with that of women in other, less traditionalist, republics; it becomes possible to assess the degree to which it is necessary to punish bride kidnapers not only within the frame of local traditions but Russian laws as well. Thus, what the research by L.U. Kurbanova subjects to assessment is the traditional attitude toward women in the Caucasus. By contrast, Z.V. Shoranova looks at the Caucasus’s traditional gender roles from within – the researcher treats them as a given that is not subject to assessment and focuses on the social mechanism underlying a girl’s adaptation to them.

Of interest is the fact that the sociological surveys conducted by Z.V. Shoranova in 2019 revealed “a transformation of the gender order; a shift away from patriarchal towards more egalitarian gender relationship structures” in Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygea, and Ingushetia

(Shoranova i dr., 2021: 147). What is more, the surveys revealed different attitudes toward preferred gender roles among local males and females. Most local males were found to continue to opt for the preservation of traditional gender roles, whilst most women were found to no longer see themselves in them. The answer ‘a woman of the house; a mother’ to the question ‘What do you think the modern woman considers herself first and foremost?’ was given by 64 % of males versus just 30 % of females, and the answer ‘an independent, unique person’ was given by 25 % of males versus 60 % of females (Shoranova i dr., 2021: 142). However, the organizers of the survey did not pose the question of how comfortable the women felt in the climate where there was such an obvious mismatch between the above-stated gender role preferences. Nor were they asked to compare, in terms of living a comfortable life, the traditional norms of their societies with, say, those of (ethnic) Russian or European ones.

Both approaches to exploring the status of women in the Caucasus (the one involving its criticism and comparison with that in other societies (“external”) and the one involving its acceptance and contemplation from within based exclusively on the logic behind the development of local societies (“internal”)) have their upsides and downsides, and they complement one another. It is only by using the internal approach that we can understand the logic behind the evolution of gender roles in the region. Yet to assess the degree to which the gender role of women has met their own interests we will need the external one. At the same time, it is worth noting that research into the history of women in the Caucasus is dominated by the internal approach, which justifies the harsh treatment of women. For instance, Dagestani researcher S.V. Sirazhudinova states the following in one of her works: “The role of women as a stabilizing factor in the North Caucasus has been highlighted by O.S. Mutiyeva, a researcher who has explored the relationships between the mountaineers and the Cossacks and has noted the special role played by the fact that some Cossack men captured mountain women and married them” (Sirazhudinova, 2022: 131). In this case, the very language of the text is conducive to a sort of objectivization of the woman – mountaineeresses who were ravished by and forced to marry Cossack men turn into a “stabilizing factor” for the region.

Of particular note is the following discussion on mountain woman slavery during the Caucasian War period. In her article ‘Caucasian Women as an Object of Ransom Kidnapping Between the 18th and 19th Centuries’ (Klychnikov, Tsybul'nikova, 2011: 38-74), Kuban researcher A.A. Tsybulnikova approaches the issue of Caucasian slave women through the lens of the internal approach. The scholar, quite predictably, draws the conclusion that “most Caucasian women had quite an accepting attitude toward the possibility of being sold into slavery”. The work is mainly focused on the social practices and social characteristics of mountain society that made the process of selling a female into slavery as painless for mountaineeresses as possible (Klychnikov, Tsybul'nikova, 2011: 44). Thus, A.A. Tsybulnikova’s conclusions confirm Z.V. Shoranova’s view that “the the process of entering into and learning the gender roles was incontestably of high significance to Caucasian ethnic groups, had been polished over centuries, and, consequently, was perceived as something commonplace and natural” – in the climate where women were wholly subservient and society was dominated by a positive attitude toward slave trade, it was a social norm for girls from the lower social estates to be brought up as a potential slave.

However, whereas research on the status of women in the Caucasus is dominated by the internal approach, i.e. the one that has you stay away from criticizing the more negative aspects of the traditional division of gender roles, things are somewhat different with research on slavery in that region. Recent decades have witnessed a trend toward exploring the evolution of Caucasian slavery from within, based from the logic behind the development of local communities (a topic for a separate study). However, the external one continues to be the dominant approach, with most researchers today viewing Caucasian slavery through the lens of European culture and painting it in a clearly negative light. Some researchers have even used 19th-century imperial narratives with a strong emotional overtone (e.g., “predatory behavior”) (Klychnikov, Tsybul'nikova, 2011; Klychnikov, 2020; Gapurov, 2003: 27). Therefore, although the attitude of most modern researchers toward mountain women’s acceptance of their traditional roles tends to be neutral or even positive, their readiness to be sold into slavery as their acceptance of the traditional gender role is not considered and is assessed a lot more strictly.

Quite predictably, the study by A.A. Tsybulnikova is met with heavy criticism from Dagestani researcher O.S. Mutiyeva, who attempts to prove that back in the day a tolerant attitude toward

being a slave was not something typical of Caucasian women. The scholar argues in her article ‘Women as an Object of Captivity and Slave Trade in the Context of the Caucasian War’ that “no sane person, regardless of gender, ethnicity, and religious affiliation, can regard sale into slavery as something normal and natural” (Mutieva, 2017: 47-51). From this statement it is clear that O.S. Mutiyeva considers mountain woman slavery during the Caucasian War from without, based on the values and norms of modern society and modern women. That being said, the researcher provides no facts demonstrating mountain women’s non-acceptance of personally being a slave during the Caucasian War.

The subject of the historical status of women in the Caucasus during, and immediately before, the Caucasian War merits special attention. This is the last period before the firm inclusion of this region into the cultural spaces of the Russian Empire and European civilization. Therefore, if we are to establish how much their traditional gender role met the interests of Caucasian women, we will need to explore this specific period. What adds more relevance to the narrower subject of mountain woman slavery at the time is that, as already discussed earlier, issues related to getting kidnapped, deprived of one’s rights, and having a slave-like status are still relevant to Caucasian women, with phenomena of this kind tending to be justified by their proponents as traditional and thus subject to revival as part of the “intensification of traditionalism and the religious factor in North Caucasus society”.

However, to determine the degree to which the status of women in mountain society matched their own interests, we need to explore this through the lens of the external approach – by comparing the distribution of gender roles in the region with that in other places. With that said, assessing the status of mountain women based on present-day norms and values appears to make little sense – from the standpoint of present-day society and in the light of all the successes of the feminist movement, any society of the period between the 18th and 19th centuries will be seen as sexist and toxically masculine.

In 2020, researcher A.A. Cherkasov published a collection of documents entitled ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’, which contains nearly 1,200 archival records from the State Archive of Krasnodar Krai dealing with captivity and slavery in mountain society (Cherkasov, 2020). Thanks to these documents, we now have access to materials that describe Caucasian slavery from without – by Russian officers and officials. These materials also mention mountain women – both slaves and free women. What is particularly valuable about these records is that the testimonies they contain were spontaneous (as opposed to those provided by travellers and memorialists whose writings mainly describe the exotics of the Caucasus), as the authors of these texts had not sought to characterize the status of women in mountain society but touched upon it in conjunction with other topics. Furthermore, although a significant portion of the period’s archival materials are not available due to having perished, the numerous documents in this collection have made it possible to determine the typicality of particular situations and get an idea of how mountain women were normally represented in the imperial narrative.

2. Materials and methods

‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ contains a fairly diverse collection of documents, from decrees from the country’s highest-level officials (including Emperors Paul I and Alexander I) to records of interrogations of mountaineers who fled to the Russians. Arguably, all these texts may be defined as imperial discourse – even the testimonies of mountaineers and the messages of Osman pashas are provided by imperial officers and officials in Russian translation. In certain cases, we can directly observe from the texts how Caucasian Islamic discourse was transforming for inclusion into imperial discourse. For instance, there is documentation containing the so-called “oath of promise”, which was taken in November 1800 by a group of Nogays entering Russian allegiance (Cherkasov, 2020: 1506). A portion of the oath that contains a few novel obligations for its takers is well-aligned with the Russian nationwide tradition (“I wish and ought to be a loyal, kind, and obedient subject to His Imperial Majesty the Lord Emperor and Autocrat of All Russia Pavel Petrovich and His Imperial Highness the Lord Heir Tsesarevich and Grand Prince Aleksandr Pavlovich” (Cherkasov, 2020: 1506). However, what the oath-takers swore by is suggestive of the use of a unique mixture of regional Islam and imperial Orthodox Christianity – they swore by “God Almighty” (i.e., it is not specified in the Russian version of the oath that it was Allah), “Holy Prophet Mohammed Mustafa”, and, best of all, “the four God-given books – the Torah, the Psalms,

the Gospel, and the Quran” (Cherkasov, 2020: 1506). Thus, the pursuit of political interests and the mixing of imperial discourse with Islamic discourse created a formulation that was heretical from the standpoint of Orthodox Christianity and Islam alike.

This group of texts in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ is dominated by short, report-like, as opposed to analytical, record-keeping documents created by company and staff officers of the Russian army. Accordingly, the author of the narrative is typically a person who is characterized by neither a spacious mind nor an analytical mindset, i.e. someone who is not capable of reflecting upon the clash of civilizations and the blending of discourses. Their texts are primitive both lexically and content-wise. Mainly concise descriptions of facts, they tend to introduce mountain realities into imperial discourse in a more or less distorted manner. Besides, some of those authors may very well have not fitted into imperial discourse themselves (e.g., the Cossacks or junior officers of non-ethnic-Russian descent). In other words, the real picture of the Caucasus in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ is simplified and distorted not only by that most local events had to be fitted into the formulations and norms of imperial record-keeping that had not been intended for something like that but also that it was done by individuals who were used more to wielding a sword than using a pen and more to fighting the mountaineers than conducting bureaucratic correspondence.

Therefore, our analysis of ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ will be of a dual nature. First and foremost, we will be interested in the factual material, i.e. everything related to the capacity in which mountain women took part in the slavery-related narratives captured in the Russian archival materials. The Russian origin of the latter is of great importance. Research indicates that mountain women were mainly sold into slavery in Islamic countries in the Mediterranean region, where they were regarded as an expensive, exotic commodity (Klychnikov, Tsybul'nikova, 2011: 38-74; Šmigel', 2020: 19-36). No similar practice of selling them into Russia is known. Accordingly, the available Russian documentation on slavery in the Caucasus is by no means representative enough to permit characterizing local female slavery in an integrated and systematic manner. At the same time, compared with the predominantly Islamic Caucasus, the Orthodox Christian Russian Empire had completely different forms of social order and slaveholding practices, for which reason for most slaves fleeing to its territory meant liberation. The analysis of how women are represented in the Russian documentation on Caucasian slavery makes it possible to find factual material specifically on female runaways who managed to radically change their fate and, most importantly, understand their motivation.

Of no less interest is the way the Russian imperial narrative captures facts about Caucasian women. Of primary interest to us are the very words and formulations used by Russian officers and officials to describe the realities of the status of women in the Caucasus. Once again, our primary focus is on external assessment – in this case, assessments by observers of dubious competence. This kind of assessment is of value for gaining an insight into how ordinary people from a European culture reacted to and introduced into their discourse facts related to the status of Caucasian women.

The study’s chronological scope is the period from 1790 to the early 1800s. The thing is that the number of documents on Caucasian women that ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ contains is too large to examine in a single article. The collection has a sufficient number of documents for the 1790s decade (around 150). This period, in which we come across a certain trend that gradually diminishes, is of interest in that during that time Russia’s cultural influence in the Caucasus was only starting to manifest itself, with Russian officers running into what then was an absolutely traditionalist mountain society, one that would not readily lend itself to description by way of then-existing record-keeping templates. The aim of the present work is to reveal what it was initially and why their representation of Caucasian women began to change later. How it would change subsequently will be the focus of another article.

Finally, it is worth caveating that the conclusions drawn in this article are not to be seen in absolute terms. The characteristics of the narrative under examination could have been associated both with the nature of objective facts observed by Russian officers and officials and with that of their subjective perception of those facts. With that said, most of the authors of the documents in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ spanning the period 1792–1800 were Black Sea Cossacks, i.e. members of a community whose picture of the world has been researched fairly little. Therefore, our private observations need to be matched to information obtained from other

sources. Nevertheless, overall, the picture of the status of women in the Caucasus offered by the imperial record-keeping narrative is fairly vibrant, illustrative, and research-worthy.

3. Results

Typical representation of Caucasian women in 1790s documents in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’

Overall, A.A. Cherkasov identified 2,878 individuals who between 1792 and 1861 fled or were redeemed from Circassia to Russia (Cherkasov, 2020: 1425). Given the region’s traditional gender roles, it is quite natural that there was a significant gender imbalance among the runaways. Specifically, there were 2,120 males and just 692 females (another 66 individuals were documented as children, with no gender listed) (Cherkasov, 2020: 1425). For the most part, women crossed the border between the Caucasian and imperial spaces in company with their husband or father.

What draws attention here is the language used by Russian officers in documenting the crossing of the border by Caucasian women. Chronologically, the earliest document in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ to mention the crossing of the border by a mountain woman goes back to March 1795. It represents an order given by Sublieutenant Ul’yanchenko to Sublieutenant Semenok. It reads as follows: “From the Circassian side . . . a Khatukay nobleman will be sending two Circassians, Deunez and Unazhuk, accompanied by two wives and some children, who ran away from Psheduk Prince Batyr Girey. Please take them to our side, Sir” (Cherkasov, 2020: 1446). As we can see, the women and children in this text have no subjectness (not even their names are provided), acting as a sort of appendix to the male head of the family.

This way to represent Caucasian women – not by name but by marital status and as the wives or daughters of males fleeing to the Russian side – is typical of 1790s documents in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’. For instance, in the winter of 1796, Colonel Geldish wrote of “Tatar or Nogay Abdula accompanied by a wife”, who “wishes to come over to our side in order to live here and convert to Christianity” (Cherkasov, 2020: 1452-1453). As we can see, in this case, lexical objectivization is taken even further, with the woman not only having no name but also being in a position to do nothing about her fate. Although the source does say that the border was crossed by a husband and a wife, it mentions only the male’s motivation to do so – i.e., the wording is such that it is clear that the woman will accept his choice no matter what. The name is not mentioned even in the imperial documentation for the only 1790s case in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ where a certain degree of independence is displayed by mountain women. On October 27, 1796, “two Nogay women accompanied by some children and subordinates” crossed over to the Russian side. However, the documentation does not mention any names; nor does it mention the reasons they did it – first Colonel Kulik and then Black Sea Ataman Z.A. Chepega merely report this crossing as a fact (Cherkasov, 2020: 1461-1462). The women’s husbands arrived only the following day. Their names (Gadzhe Ali and Muradi) were documented immediately, with the local officials also requesting that Z.A. Chepega provide an interpreter to translate during the interrogation (Cherkasov, 2020: 1461). Based on the documentation, whilst the male runaways “expressed a willingness to live under Russian rule on the Crimean peninsula”, there again is no mention of the women’s position on the matter and their personal input into the escape (Cherkasov, 2020: 1462).

Yet it is worth noting that certain documents for that period in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ contain cases where even mountain men and ethnic Russian women are not mentioned by name. For instance, in 1797 there was a Russian officer (Lieutenant Mirgorodsky) who would document only the ethnicity of men, women, and children crossing over to the Russian side of the border and their numbers (e.g., “two Nogay men accompanied by a wife and a minor boy, who came here from the Transkuban region in a two-horse wagon”; “five Nogay men accompanied by two women, who came here from the left side of the River Kuban” (Cherkasov, 2020: 1465-1466)). As we can see, the women in this case, likewise, are treated as an appendix to the men – as someone who is inadequate and not capable of independent action.

As far as ethnic Russian women are concerned, ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ contains the following case: on September 18, 1796, a group of mountaineers “captured a woman” when robbing two Russian officers – Lieutenants Nabokov and Gagrinov (Cherkasov, 2020: 1454). On one hand, the woman’s ethnicity in this case is not mentioned, so, theoretically, she may have been a mountaineeress. On the other hand, there is one important nuance here – no relation of this woman to any man is mentioned; she is mentioned just as a kidnapped woman and not someone’s

wife or daughter. This is atypical. The collection's 1790s materials tend to mention ethnic Russian women beside their husbands. At the same time, these women tend to be referred to by name and have a certain degree of subjectness. For instance, when in October 1796 a Cossack named Nichipor Zholob had his wife kidnapped, it was mentioned in the corresponding documentation that her name was Varvara (Cherkasov, 2020: 1459). In another case, Lieutenant Krutofal's wife, who had died of wounds, was referred to as Marina in a document capturing in March 1797 those killed and captured by the mountaineers (Cherkasov, 2020: 1467).

'The Circassian Slave Narratives' also contains 1790s documents that mention both the name and marital status of a mountain woman. Yet their emergence was associated not with their authors regarding this information as important but with the Empire's peculiar record-keeping practices. One of the first such documents, dated April 27, 1798, captures the names of several Caucasian women. It is a form containing information about 49 Circassians (with nobleman Shostan Ali at the head) who crossed over to the Russian side (Cherkasov, 2020: 1479). Understandably, the very genre in which this information was documented involved capturing the names of all the participants in an escape, regardless of their gender and age. Owing to this, the women and children (as little as a year old) in this case were included in the imperial narrative (Cherkasov, 2020: 1479-1480). Shostan Ali's subordinates included as many as six women not bound to any of the men by marital ties (the rest were documented as someone's daughters or wives). There were three childless widows aged 18 to 60 and a 30-year-old widow with two minor daughters (Cherkasov, 2020: 1479-1480). Thus, generally speaking, Caucasian women crossing over to the Russian side included not only wives and daughters but also lone individuals (i.e., someone without a husband or father) who were subjects to male aristocrats fleeing to the Empire. Nevertheless, here, too, the mountain woman has no subjectness – being a mere appendix to the male they are accompanying, which can be not only their husband or father but their master or the master of their male relatives as well.

Furthermore, in an earlier document, a Russian officer (Major Gulik) cites the following statement, allegedly made by Shostan Ali when crossing over to the imperial side (based on the interpreter's rendering of his words): "Because of my longtime commitment to Russia and my intention to receive Russian protection and patronage for myself and for my family members and subordinates, my life is now in mortal danger at the hands of the vindictive and merciless Abazinians. Thus, I have decided that I would rather die in full view of the Christians, whose patronage I've long sought, by drowning myself and my family members and subordinates in the Kuban than be brutally killed, the very thing the Abazinians have been eager to do all along" (Cherkasov, 2020: 1479). While we can question the authenticity of the above statement, which appears to have been distorted by the interpreter with the aim of smoothly incorporating it into imperial discourse, of note is that Shostan Ali, unwilling to die at the hands of the enemy, was ready to drown not only himself in the River Kuban but also all of his subordinates, including the women and children. An even more curious one is the fact that Major Gulik then describes the way Shostan Ali's subjects shared in his emotional outburst: "Upon uttering these words, he was joined by all his companions in acting like an insane person because of his grief" (Cherkasov, 2020: 1479). This is a great example of how in 'The Circassian Slave Narratives' not only females but male subordinates, too, are deprived of subjectness when it comes to expressing one's emotions and deciding one's own fate.

Lastly, the collection's 1790s materials also contain an in-between case of referring to mountain women – by marital status and by marital status *and* name in a single document. In January 1798, "a man named Ivan Mamsin, accompanied by his two wives, who had escaped from Georgian captivity in the Transkuban region, approached the Mar'yinsky post" (Cherkasov, 2020: 1475). Of note is that the verb 'approach' is used here in the singular form – i.e., it is only the male who is seen as fleeing from captivity, whilst the females are seen as just an appendix to him. Mamsin's first wife in the narrative documenting this event, put together by the same Gulik who covered the case of Shostan Ali, is referred to not by name but as "a noble Circassian woman", and his second wife is referred to as "Nogay woman Bezzoya" (Cherkasov, 2020: 1475-1476). In this case, Gulik, who lists the runaways in a report for his superiors, mentions the names of all of Mamsin's companions, including his second wife, three sons, and two daughters, except his first wife – for reasons unknown (Cherkasov, 2020: 1475).

We have examined enough material to draw some conclusions now. There are relatively not so many narratives in the collection as a whole and in the 1790s corpus in particular relating to slave mountain women and mountain women in general. It is not only that women fled Circassia to the Empire less frequently back then. In the collection's 1790s materials dealing with runaway slaves, the woman is almost exclusively treated not as a subject but as an object – a powerless, voiceless appendix to the man. Even lexically speaking, the border is normally crossed not by a man and a woman but by a man accompanied by a woman, and mountain women are referred to by name a lot less frequently than mountain men are. Russian officials tend to learn the reasons behind an escape by engaging in conversation with a male only. At the same time, of note is the fact that ethnic Russian females, too, tend to be mentioned in 'The Circassian Slave Narratives' strictly beside males, as someone's wife or daughter; yet their names tend to be captured. On the other hand, objectivized are not only women but children and subordinates – these individuals tend to be in no position to decide their own fate (e.g., the case where the man is ready to drown himself, his family, and his servants but his decision is not questioned or contested by anyone).

Thus, in the 1790s, in describing cases of escape from Circassia in their official documentation, Russian officers captured lexically the fact that Caucasian women were in total subjection to men – they were not independent subjects.

Atypical representation of Caucasian women in 1790s documents in 'The Circassian Slave Narratives'

Unfortunately, most of the documentation in 'The Circassian Slave Narratives' is not characterized by much focus on details and particulars. Russian officials were mainly interested in hard facts – how many people and why crossed the border and what they planned to do next. Given the nature of this approach, it must have been difficult to describe unusual, nonstandard stories, so such stories were normally reduced to mere facts.

The first unusual story of a Caucasian woman in 'The Circassian Slave Narratives' is described in two documents produced in July 1798. The situation described in these materials is quite a puzzling one. Anapa Pasha Osman informs the Russians of a Nekrasov Cossack named Andrey having taken an unnamed captive, accompanied by his wife and four children, across the border (Cherkasov, 2020: 1483). The curious fact is that, whilst the captive's name remains a mystery, the pasha does mention the name of his wife – Khazina (judging by the name, she hailed from one of the Turkic tribes) (Cherkasov, 2020: 1483). However, the documented fact is that no group consisting of a Nekrasov Cossack, a captive mountaineer, and the latter's wife and four children crossed the Russian border around that time. At the same time, there is a documented crossing by a Nekrasov Cossack, a woman, whom he referred to as his wife, their four children, and two captive "Great Russians" (Cherkasov, 2020: 1483-1484). The Black Sea Host officials presume that Pasha Osman is interested in this very group of people and that Khazina's real husband is one of the two captive "Great Russians" (Cherkasov, 2020: 1484). However, the investigation is cut short – just a few days later, the mountaineers kidnap Khazina and her children from the place of detention. The Cossacks who reported the incident are convinced that Khazina was the wife of "Nekrasovite Andrey Fazonov" (Cherkasov, 2020: 1484).

This story is of interest in several respects. The woman is related in them not to one but two men – both Pasha Osman and the Black Sea Host officials are convinced that Khazina is the wife of the unnamed captive; however, the individuals who spoke to her directly are convinced that she is the wife of the Nekrasov Cossack, Andrey Fazonov. Besides, it is her and her children that the mountaineers later kidnap from the Russians, not the males who were with her. This can be explained in several ways. It may have been an inaccurate translation from the Old Ottoman language into Russian – it may have been meant in the original document that the captive listed as Khazina's husband was actually Andrey Fazonov himself. Of note in this context is the fact that in the 1790s the Russian authorities in the Caucasus had serious problems with interpreters, with this role mainly performed by local residents or officers with only limited education (Kolesov, Sen', 2020: 610-616). However, it may also be that Khazina did, indeed, change husband when crossing the border – from the unnamed captive mountaineer to Andrey Fazonov. It may even be that the willingness of the Nekrasov Cossack to save her, her children, and the two males was driven by certain romantic motives. Thus, whilst we can only guess what it really was, this mysterious case, clearly, stands out in 'The Circassian Slave Narratives' for its openness to multiple interpretations.

Furthermore, this is the only story in the 1790s corpus where we observe an inversion of gender rhetoric – it is not the female whose name is not mentioned and who is just referred to as a spouse but it is the male.

The second, and last, unique case on the subject from the corpus under examination goes back to November 1800. Just shortly before this, the Black Sea Host appointed F.Ya. Bursak as its new ataman. This man would go on to become one of Black Sea Cossackdom's most successful and prominent figures. In 1800, he launched tough measures against the mountaineers. In their classic studies, V.A. Potto and F.A. Shcherbina view these measures as a response to mountaineer incursions; these studies mention no mountaineers captured by the Cossacks as a result (Potto, 1887: 580-581; Shcherbina, 1913: 155-157). Here is how F.Ya. Bursak's campaign is described by V.A. Potto (F.A. Shcherbina's description is more detailed and drier but is close in terms of content): "The Circassians would time and time again venture into Cossack territory in pursuit of loot. And every time, after repelling these predators and chasing them off, would the Cossacks halt at the uncrossable border, which would stop them from charging on to victory. This was an unequal contest. . . . Offensive action on the part of the Black Sea Cossacks began as early as the summer of 1800. Two thousand Black Sea Cossacks, under the personal command of Ataman Bursak, entered Circassian territory and the first time around sacked the villages of two of their bitter enemies – Aslan Girey and Devlet Girey. The rich loot secured by the Cossacks not only made up for their former losses but beckoned them on to new raids" (Potto, 1887: 580-581). 'The Circassian Slave Narratives' contains a document entitled 'Report on Those Captured During the Raid on the Transkuban Side', according to which the Black Sea Cossacks took captive 15 people during their punitive campaigns undertaken in 1800 (Cherkasov, 2020: 1506-1507). Tellingly, different fates awaited the males and the females captured. Most of the males (which included two Nogays freed by the Cossacks from Circassian captivity) either were held in custody or were swapped for captive Cossacks (Cherkasov, 2020: 1506-1507). A woman with four children was handed over to a friendly mountain potentate (Cherkasov, 2020: 1507). The most curious is the case of the unmarried Circassian girls. Three girls, ages 15, 12, and 4, were temporarily placed with the families of top-ranking officers, with the oldest, Dsitse, going to no other than F.Ya. Bursak's (Cherkasov, 2020: 1507). Unfortunately, no more information is available on them in 'The Circassian Slave Narratives' or any other source. What is significant here is the very fact that the mountaineeresses captured by the Russians would receive much better treatment than their male counterparts would, with most of those women likely to come under the influence of educated Russian families.

Transformation in the representation of Caucasian women in early-1800s documents in 'The Circassian Slave Narratives'

It is for a reason that 1790–1800 was chosen as the study's upper chronological limit. This period witnessed a change in the representation of Caucasian women in the imperial record-keeping narrative. They now tend to be documented in the same way as ethnic Russian women – still as an appendix to males, but at least referred to by name. There even are cases where women are on par with men in terms of lexical representation.

Of particular interest is the case of a group of Nogays who came out of the Transkuban region in 1803. Although the documentation does not mention any independent activity on the part of the Caucasian women (as a reminder, normally Russian officers would deny subjectness to subordinates who would come out in company with their masters), of note is the way it captures the facts about the families. As we may remember, in an earlier case, the one dealing with the crossing of Shostan Ali and his subordinates over to the Russian side, the women are viewed either as someone's wives (or daughters) or as widows, for whom the relationship to the males is not documented. The 1803 documentation contains a new category – mothers. Quite predictably, if a widowed mother has a son who has a wife, she is documented as someone related to him, not as an independent subject – i.e., the family is documented in the following fashion: "32. Karamurza; 33. Bebey-Dzhane, his wife; 34. Kokuz, his brother; 35. Ayevidzhe, his mother" (Cherkasov, 2020: 1515). However, the documentation also lists several mothers – in whose case, by contrast, a married son is lexically subordinate to his mother even if he has children himself: "205. Seratli, a widow; her children: 206. Kozakay; 207. Arukhan, his wife; their children (daughters): 208. Naslukhan; 209. Kutlukhan; 210. Mambet" (Cherkasov, 2020: 1518-1519). Unfortunately, we do not know why the Russian author of this document (collegiate assessor Lintavrev

(Cherkasov, 2020: 1521)) documented different families differently. One possible explanation for this is that the priority is with the de-facto head of the family, i.e. the person who has the primary say over the family's affairs. In some cases, that person was a woman.

A case where it is a Caucasian woman who does the talking, not her grown-up son, is described in a document that goes back to the first half of the 1800s. In April 1804, a group of Armenians came out to the Ekaterinoslav outpost, and, as was the usual procedure at that time, the Russian officials documented them family by family. This time, there was no aristocrat leader involved. As usual, most of the families (three out of the four) were documented in such a way that lexically only the oldest free male had subjectness (Cherkasov, 2020: 1536). Tellingly, here, too, deprived of subjectness are the slave mountaineers – the document states that the Russians received “some Armenian residents of the Transkuban region”, although, if we look at the list that is provided later in it, there also were a few Circassians, who belonged to the Armenian families (Cherkasov, 2020: 1536). Here is an excerpt from the documentation: “Khachadur Temirov, accompanied by his wife, Duspiche, and his children (sons Kaspar, Titu, Samun, and Anznam) and by his Circassian captives – widow Chelin Khatme, her children (sons Sulaakh and Abrech and daughters Gachekosh and Tatma), and a girl named Nav” (Cherkasov, 2020: 1536).

Yet listed as the head of the last, fourth, family is a widow – “Armenian widow Shirin, accompanied by her children (sons Mikhail and Avanes), the latter's wife, Zalizan, and their children (daughters Fizh, Malenkha, and Ipusug)” (Cherkasov, 2020: 1536). We have here a situation similar to the one with the Nogays who came out of the Transkuban region in 1803 – the family is headed not by the oldest free man but by the widow. Of particular interest is that in this case the “desire to be in Russian allegiance and live in the village of Grivenoye beside people of similar ethnicities” was expressed by “the Armenians” crossing the border, i.e. the heads of the four families – Khachadur Temirov, widow Shirin, Ipusug Karambiy, and Tich Baronov (Cherkasov, 2020: 1536). Thus, it turns out that it is widow Shirin who communicated with the Russian officers on behalf of her family, and it is she who expressed the desire to enter Russian allegiance for herself and her children, including her married son.

Of interest is the fact that in April 1804, the border was crossed by another two widows accompanied by children – “Circassian widow Gushepak, accompanied by her son, Gazov” and “Armenian widow Dam, accompanied by her children – son Nakhupsh and daughter Naskh” (Cherkasov, 2020: 1537, 1539). The case of the latter is of particular interest – compared with widows Shirin and Gushepaks, Dam was not accompanied by other families when crossing the border. Thus, this is the first time we have come across a situation where a woman crosses over to the Russian side of the border not in company with males unrelated to her. Of note is also the fact that in this case there is a change in the way a family is typically documented by the officials – here they document not a female head of the family *accompanied by* some people who are dependent on her but a female head of the family *and* the people dependent on her. For some reason (perhaps, the Russian officers did not wish to speak only to the woman), in this case the subjects engaging in communication with the Russian officers are both the widow and her children – all three of them, together, express “the desire to be in Russian allegiance” (Cherkasov, 2020: 1539).

The woman's name is used increasingly more often in the collection's 1800s corpus – even in the cases where she is still seen as an objectified appendix to the man. This may have been associated with a boost in the level of record keeping in the Russian Caucasus – subjects to the Empire begin to turn from abstract mountain people into specific persons whom it is necessary to document personally. In September 1807, a Russian officer even captured the appearance of a mountain woman, one wholly objectified. The document given to the mountaineer, written in a style we are now perfectly familiar with, mentions “Kalabat Oglu, accompanied by his wife, proceeding with the aim of entering Russian allegiance”. However, subsequently, the document also describes the physical appearance of Kalabat himself and that of his wife, a Circassian woman named Nagaytsuk, who has “white skin [and] black hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes” (Cherkasov, 2020: 1568).

Also of note is the fact that the 1800s witnessed a sharp increase in the number of captive exchanges (previously, to get their men freed both sides would mainly resort to official (diplomatic) channels; captives could be ransomed or exchanged only on the initiative of private individuals (Peretyatko, 2021: 219-222)). In this regard, during that time Caucasian women begin to be documented in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ in one more status – as exchange material for

getting Russian captives freed. However, in the documents on this, both mountain men and women are equally and maximally objectivized – ethnic Russians whose social background and name are mentioned (e.g., “an Astrakhan resident named Larion Smakhtin” or “a young lady from the Black Sea Host named Tat’yana”) are swapped for unidentified mountain men and women (Cherkasov, 2020: 1522, 1531-1532, 1542). Thus, these materials are of little interest to this study – they reveal not the status of mountaineeresses in a particular society but the attitude of Russian officers and officials toward mountaineers who found themselves in Russian captivity.

4. Conclusion

Many Caucasus residents share the view that by the end of the 18th century “the process of entering into and learning the gender roles was incontestably of high significance to Caucasian ethnic groups, had been polished over centuries, and, consequently, was perceived as something commonplace and natural”. However, from the viewpoint of outside observers, mainly Russian officers who did the documenting of border crossings by mountain people at that time, the picture may have been not as rosy. Fleeing from captivity by themselves was problematic for most mountain women. As a rule, Russian officers would document only a male runaway’s desire to enter into Russian allegiance, whereas his wife, children, and servants would be treated as objectivized property. Lexically speaking, in the imperial Russian record-keeping narrative, the border was normally crossed not by a man, a woman, some children, and some servants but by a man *accompanied by* a woman, some children, and some servants. In the 1790s corpus of ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’, the trend toward objectivization is underlined by another lexical characteristic (which gradually diminishes) – the names of women crossing over to the Russian side of the border are often not mentioned; these women are only listed as belonging to certain men as a daughter or wife of theirs. Of note, however, is the fact that in some cases Russian officers did not document the names of runaway mountain men either, and in most cases they documented both the names of ethnic Russian women and their status in relation to their husband or father.

In the 1790s, it was common for mountain women to run away to the Russian side in company with their father, husband, or master. There are two exceptions to this in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’. In the first case, in 1798, a female named Khazina crosses the border in company not with her husband but a Nekrasov Cossack named Andrey Fazonov. To be more accurate, the Black Sea Host officials are convinced, by way of the information received from the Turkish pasha, that Khazina’s husband is an unnamed captive. Thus, we have here a unique inversion of gender rhetoric – it is not the female whose name is not mentioned and who is just referred to as a spouse but it is the male. The Cossacks who communicated with Andrey Fazonov and Khazina personally are convinced that these were husband and wife. Thus, there may have been a translation error, with the Russian authorities simply misunderstanding the pasha. However, if we regard the documents as describing the situation correctly, it turns out that Khazina crossed the border in company with a stranger, passing herself off as his wife. In the second case, in 1800, the Cossacks capture several mountain women during a special raid on the residents of the Transkuban region. Whereas the captured males in the story end up being deprived of freedom, their female counterparts get much milder treatment, with the younger mountaineeresses ending up being temporarily placed with potent Russian families, including that of the Black Sea Host ataman.

The situation began to change with the start of the 19th century. First, there appeared a new phenomenon in the imperial record-keeping narrative – the widow being positioned as the head of the family. Although there were such cases in the 1790s too, back then it exclusively was about mothers with minor children who crossed the border in the footsteps of their aristocrat masters. By contrast, in the 1800s, several widows crossed the border as the heads of their family, and that was despite the fact that their children were married and some even were already parents themselves. There also were a few cases where families whose heads, as per the official documentation, were widows crossed the border not in company with a master but together with other families fleeing to the Russian side. Of particular note is the case of a widow named Dam. In 1804, accompanied by two children, whose age is not known but who are known to have been unmarried at the time, she managed to cross the border all by herself and not together with male-headed families.

However, cases of this kind were rare, and it remained typical for women to cross over to the Russian side as objectivized wives, daughters, or maids. One cannot rule out that similar cases of

families with grown-up males headed by widows crossing over to the Russian side did take place in the 1790s too – it is just that the imperial documents capturing them did not survive to the present day. In any case, it can be stated with confidence that, based on the materials in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’, only widows who had become the head of the family after the death of their husband were in a position to be considered full subjects in mountain society on the cusp of the 19th and 20th centuries. In such cases, entering Russian allegiance would be discussed by the officers with no other than the woman.

Second, the strengthening of the Empire’s influence in the Caucasus gradually facilitated documentation becoming systematized and more detailed. Consequently, beginning in the 1800s, even objectivized Caucasian women were increasingly referred to in the imperial record-keeping narrative both by relation to the man and by name.

Thus, despite the absence in the 1790s imperial record-keeping narrative of willful assessments of the status of Caucasian women, it can be stated with confidence that for the overwhelmingly most part to Russian officers they mattered only as a sort of appendix to mountain men, if not their property. Both content-wise and lexically, for the most part, except where widows are involved, the imperial record-keeping narrative is permeated with not even gender inequality and imbalance but by women having no real subjectness. With that said, the collection’s documentation spanning the period between 1790 and the early 1800s does not seem to have captured either mountain women’s disgruntlement with their status or, with the rare exception of a few widows’, any attempts to rectify it by crossing over to the Russian side of the border. Thus, it is obvious that the traditional practices of mountain society employed back then did indeed facilitate the adaptation of Caucasian women to their gender role. Besides, this role was viewed as something sufficiently normal in the mind of Russian officers and officials for them to refrain from trying to change it – no information has been found showing a change in the status of Caucasian women subsequent to their crossing over to the Russian side of the border in the 1790s, with most retaining the status of a sort of appendix to their husband. Therefore, the Caucasus’s traditional division of gender roles cannot be regarded as something peculiar for that time (there is more than one case in ‘The Circassian Slave Narratives’ where we also come across ethnic Russian women with no lexical subjectness, which is testimony to there having been gender inequality in their case as well).

At the same time, the materials examined in this study seem to confirm the view of F. DuBois de Montperreux that “in Circassian society, women were wholly subordinate to their husbands and were more of a slave to them than a mistress” (Šmigel, 2020: 28). Thus, as is argued by researcher L.U. Kurbanova, an intensification of traditionalism and religiousness in the Caucasus may be detrimental to women’s interests. That said, unlike in the 1790s, today Caucasian women are in a position to imagine a different division of gender roles for themselves.

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