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Review – Christopher Baumer, *History of the Caucasus, vol. 2: In the Shadow of Great Powers* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2024).

Abdudzhilil Abdudzhililov called himself the ‘last of the Mohicans’. Until his death in 2015, he was the last inhabitant of the village of Gamsutl in Dagestan, in the south of the Russian Federation. A spectacular image of the deserted village, high in the mountains, features on the cover of Christopher Baumer’s second volume of his sweeping *History of the Caucasus*. It is a fitting choice. As Baumer emphasised in the first book, this is a history of the whole region: it includes the north of the Great Caucasus Mountain Range, now within Russia, and not just the modern republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The image is also fitting as it simultaneously illustrates the drama of the Caucasus’s landscapes, and the effects of recent history. A later picture of Gamsutl in snow and winter fog illustrates the challenges faced by the Russian army as it tried to crush resistance to the incorporation of the North Caucasus into the Russian Empire in the mid-nineteenth century. Elsewhere in the book, photographs show the Wehrmacht crossing the passes of the north-west Caucasus in 1942. Baumer shows that the current configuration of the Caucasus is not predetermined by its landscapes: it was the economic dislocations brought about by the end of the Soviet Union that spelled the end for Abdudzhililov’s village.

This is very much a political history of the Caucasus. Volume two begins with an account of the Georgian ‘Golden Age’ under Bagrationi rule in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Baumer sets out the contexts of Byzantine, Seljuk, Fatimid and Crusader politics with concision and clarity. The text gives less sense of the cultural efflorescence of the period: Baumer refers dismissively to the ‘sycophants’ at the court of Queen Tamar (ca. 1160–1213) who had to compensate for her lack of ‘military virtues’. Shota Rustaveli’s epic poem dedicated to her, the *Knight in Panther’s Skin*, a masterpiece of medieval literature, does not get a mention. However, the fine pictures of churches and monasteries, coins, manuscripts and modern monuments bring to life the period itself, and its modern political resonances.

Baumer's inclusive understanding of the Caucasus region is shown in chapters treating the Kingdom of Cilician Armenia, the Ottoman-Safavid wars and Russian expansion into the North Caucasus. Each offers fresh perspectives on broader issues: relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and the Christian communities of the Middle East, the reshaping of the Islamic world by the Sunni Ottomans and the Shi'a Safavids of Iran, and the transformation of the steppes by agricultural colonisation. One grim thread through these, and subsequent chapters, was the repeated willingness of imperial powers to organise forcible movements of whole populations in attempts to reorder the region's persistent cultural, linguistic and religious diversity.

Contrary to romantic ideas of a timeless Caucasus, Baumer places its changing history at the centre of developments that have shaped our modern world: the rise of nationalism, the oil industry, socialism and changing forms of political Islam. Several chapters are enlivened by brief excurses. One such treats Ludwig and Robert Nobel (brothers of Alfred, inventor of dynamite and founder of the Nobel Prize), and their role in the Baku oil industry: in 1897, its oilfields produced 45% of global output, of which their company Branobel owned 20%. This was also the context for major industrial unrest, which Bolsheviks including Ioseb Jugashvili (later known as Joseph Stalin) helped organise.

Baumer brings us right up to the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 2020 and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. History continues to move on: as of late 2023, Azerbaijan has taken full control over Nagorno-Karabakh, and regional conflicts have further destabilised politics in Dagestan. Much of the history in this book will be unfamiliar to many from outside the region. The inhabitants of the Caucasus, though, have rarely had the luxury of forgetting that they are part of a wider world. This beautifully produced book explains why.