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La forteresse des forteresses : Kars et l'armée russe, 1807-1878

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CANDAN BADEM, ALEXANDER MORRISON

THE STRONGHOLD OF STRONGHOLDS

Kars and the Russian Military, 1807-1878

On the morning of 25th June 1829, a young Russian poet gazed with awe at the supposedly impregnable Ottoman fortress of Kars, which had been captured by the Russian Army of the Caucasus just a year before. Alexander Pushkin had come from Moscow via the so-called Georgian Military Highway from Vladikavkaz to Tiflis, and from there to Gyumri and Kars, crossing the Russian-Ottoman frontier to visit friends in the Russian army. He would later write in his travel notes, “touring the fortifications and the citadel, built on a sheer cliff, I could not see how we had managed to capture Kars.”¹

In the course of the 19th century Russian forces attacked Kars four times, and captured it on three of those occasions, returning it twice to the Ottomans before occupying it in 1878, supposedly permanently—only to see it returned to the Ottomans in 1918 and eventually to the new Republic of Turkey. Like so many sites in the Caucasus and Crimea, it became sanctified by its association with Pushkin, who with other writers of the “golden age” helped provide a literary basis for territorial claims to the Caucasus as “Russia’s own Orient,” simultaneously exotic and eternal Russian land.² In the case of Kars it was Pushkin who established its mystique as a uniquely desirable but impregnable fortress—something he underlined by using it as a code-word for Natal’ia Goncharova whom he was then wooing, entitling a forbidding sketch of his future mother-in-law “Mamin’ka Karsa” (fig.1):

The authors would like to acknowledge the kind assistance of Dr Mikhail Belan in consulting materials in the Russian State Military-Historical Archive (RGVIA).

1. A.S. Pushkin, *Puteshestvie v Arzrum vo vremia pokhoda 1829 goda*. Ch.2. For an English translation, see Derek Davis, “A Journey to Arzrum during the 1829 Campaign by A.S. Pushkin: Translation with Commentary,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 32 (2022): 3–117, here 36.

2. Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire. Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 62–67.

**Fig.1 A.S. Pushkin “Mamin’ka Karsa,”
(Pushkin Apartment Museum, St Petersburg)**



For officers of the Empire’s Caucasus Military District, the fortress acquired a symbolic importance which far outweighed its notional strategic significance. They considered it rightfully theirs, yet it remained tantalisingly unattainable until the final siege of 1877, and after just forty years of Russian rule would be returned to the Ottomans under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918. Russian military memoirists and historians would weave the story of the three sieges into a highly coloured narrative of Russian heroism, much of which dissolves on closer examination both of Russian archival and Ottoman sources. While an extensive historical literature exists on the sieges of Kars in Russian, much of it is dependent on and reflects these 19th-century narratives.³ The literature in Turkish is sometimes more balanced, but frequently descends into nationalist polemic and recrimination.⁴ Meanwhile the only dedicated accounts of these Caucasian campaigns in English are those of Baddeley from 1908, and Allen and Muratoff from 1953.⁵ While these have their merits, neither had access to archival material on Russian campaigns and Ottoman resistance,

3. See e.g. Evgenii Tarle, *Krymskaia Voina*, [The Crimean War] (M. – L.: Izd. AN SSSR, 1950), Vol. II, 523-541. Khadzhi Murat Ibragimbeili, *Kavkaz v Krymskoi Voine 1853–1856 gg.* [The Caucasus in the Crimean War] (M.: Nauka, 1971), 305–322.

4. Fahrettin Kırzioğlu, *1855 Kars Zaferi* [The 1855 Kars victory] (Istanbul: 1955).

5. John F. Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus* (London: Longmans, 1908); W.E.D. Allen & Paul Muratoff, *Caucasian Battle-Fields. A History of the Wars on the Turco-Caucasian Border* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953). J.B. Conacher, “The Asian Front in the Crimean War and the fall of Kars,” *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 68, 275 (1990): 169–187 makes no use of sources in either Russian or Turkish. See however Candan Badem, *The Ottoman Crimean War* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 238–256.

and both focused on operational history largely to the exclusion of questions of imperial ideology or motivation. One key question posed by Allen & Muratoff, and subsequently by Christopher Walker was this: why were the Russians so apparently obsessed with a fortress of such doubtful strategic significance? Kars had “a rather negative value” for the defence of Asia Minor by the Turks—it did not control the approaches to Erzurum, which was the real key for an army wishing to control Armenia and Anatolia.⁶ It was expensive to occupy and did not improve the security of the Russian frontier once they finally did seize it in 1877. This article will explore the underlying diplomatic and military reasoning which led Russia to expend so much blood and treasure on acquiring and then forfeiting this apparently barren and inaccessible fortified pinnacle of rock, but it will also seek to understand the outsized role which Kars came to play in the Russian imagination.

Before the Russian Empire—Kars as a borderland fortress between Safavids and Ottomans

The medieval fortress of Kars was conquered by the Ottomans in 1579 from the Safavid dynasty, though it would be sacked by the forces of the latter several times thereafter. The Ottoman-Iranian peace treaty of Qasr-i Shirin in 1639 confirmed that Kars lay within Ottoman borders, along with Akhaltsikhe and Van, while Tiflis, Erivan and Azerbaijan remained Iranian dominions. The Ottoman province (eyalet, pashalik, later sanjak) of Kars had “small revenue and large expenses,” as expressed by an early 19th-century pasha of Kars.⁷ While Kars did not have much economic value, its strategic value both for the Ottomans and, after their annexation of the region in 1878, for the Russians, is often thought to be considerable. For the Ottomans though, the Caucasus front came after the Bosphorus and the Danube in terms of strategic importance. Sultan Selim III remarked in 1807 that if he had artillery, ammunition, and money, he would spend them on the Bosphorus defences rather than those of Eastern Anatolia.⁸ As we shall see, even within the Caucasus the importance of Kars was not entirely clear.

Until the advent of the Russians at the beginning of the 19th century, the Ottoman south Caucasus provinces neighboured only the Iranian Empire and its Georgian and Azerbaijani dominions. Nadir Shah besieged Kars unsuccessfully in 1735 and again in 1744. After that, the fortress and the city remained at peace until 1807, when

6. Allen & Muratoff, *Caucasian Battle-Fields*, 85; Christopher J. Walker, “Kars in the Russo-Turkish Wars of the Nineteenth Century,” in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *Armenian Kars and Ani* (Costa Mesa CA: Mazda Publishers, 2011), 207–222.

7. BOA (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi – Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archives), HAT 35-1787, from Mehmed Pasha, commandant (*muhafız*) of Kars, 27/02/1808. Mehmed Pasha asked for the uniting of the eyalets of Childir and Kars into one eyalet under his command. Until the Russian conquest in 1828, Akhaltsikhe was the centre of the Childir eyalet.

8. BOA, HAT 149/6274. 9 March 1807.

a small Russian army under General Nesvetaev fought before the city walls.⁹ This first Russian attack on Kars was repulsed with the help of the civilian inhabitants of the city.

Russia had begun building a cart road from Mozdok to Tiflis via Vladikavkaz (the so-called Georgian Military Highway) in 1783. In 1799 the road was opened for passenger travel. It connected the lands of the Terek Cossacks in the north Caucasus with the heart of Transcaucasia. This road did not have much commercial value: as its name implied, it allowed for the faster transport of troops and artillery. The Ottomans had the advantage of using maritime transport for sending war material from the imperial arsenal in Istanbul to Trabzon, thus covering most of their comparable route by sea. Until 1828, the eastern Black Sea ports such as Anapa, Sohum and Poti were also controlled by the Ottomans. The Trabzon-Erzurum road had the advantage of being both a militarily strategic and commercially important route. Iranian caravans with Iranian and British Indian goods reached the port of Trabzon through Bayezid and Erzurum. That is why Britain was also interested in the safety of this road. However, the Ottomans built a cart road from Trabzon to Erzurum only in the second half of the 19th century. Road works began in the autumn of 1850 from Trabzon, but soon ended due to winter. Works did not begin next summer but only after the Crimean War, in 1857. Nevertheless, by the time of the next Russo-Turkish war in 1877, the road from Trabzon to Erzurum was still so bad that cannon were transported to Erzurum and Kars with much difficulty by manpower alone.¹⁰

Before the Tanzimat reforms of 1839 and even long after, Ottoman central authority was weak in Kurdistan and among Kurdish feudal notables. Kurdish nomadic tribes also inhabited the Ottoman borderland provinces of Kars, Childir (Çıldır) and Bayezid. The Russian army of the Caucasus had come into contact with these groups early in the 19th century.¹¹ After Russia's annexation of the khanates of Erivan and Nakhichevan from the Persian Empire, many Kurdish tribal chiefs pursued a policy of not fighting against the Russians while paying lip service to the Ottoman authorities. These Kurdish tribes would participate in war only if they hoped for easy gains. Since the Russian army had shown that it was more prepared than the Ottomans or the Iranians to punish Kurdish robberies and launching punitive expeditions into the mountains, these tribal leaders and Ottoman Kurdish local administrators had become mostly neutral, and refused to provide their best cavalry

9. The only account in English of the Caucasian front of the Russian-Ottoman war of 1806–1812 during which this skirmish took place is in Baddeley *Russian Conquest*, 73–91. Allen & Muratoff begin their study in 1828.

10. Report from Major General Dukhovskoi to headquarters of the Caucasus Army, Erzurum 05/06/1878, RGVA (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv – Russian State Military-Historical Archive), f. 15322, op. 1, d. 18, l. 83–84.

11. For a Russian official military account of Kurds in the wars among Russia, Turkey and Iran, see Russian staff officer P.I. Averianov's *Kurdy v voynakh Rossii s Persiei i Turtsiei v techenie XIX stoletia*. [The Kurds in Russia's wars with Persia and Turkey in the course of the 19th century] (Tiflis: Tipografiia Shtaba Kavkazskago voennago okruga, 1900).

or infantry for the Ottoman army in time of war.¹² Nomadic and semi-nomadic Kurdish tribes were also among the causes of conflict between the Sunni Ottoman and Shi'i Qajar dynasties because these tribes frequently crossed borders both ways to avoid tax officials. In 1811, some Kurds of the pashalik of Kars prevented an Ottoman-Iranian alliance. Prince Abbas Mirza, the Iranian crown prince and governor of Tabriz, was at that time in favour of an alliance with the Ottomans against Russian expansion in the Caucasus. Hüseyin Khan of Erivan, a vassal of Iran, was also in favour. On 30 August 1811, the Ottoman governor of Erzurum and commander of the eastern army (*şark seraskeri*) Emin Pasha and Hüseyin Khan met in Magazberd (Mağazberd), another medieval fortress not far from Kars and Ani, and near the Arpachai (Arpaçay) river, to negotiate a military alliance against Russia. The Russian commander in Georgia, General Tormasov, was aware of these negotiations through his spies. Under Russian influence, the Magazberd chieftain employed a Kurdish assassin who severely wounded Emin Pasha, bringing negotiations to a halt.¹³ The local Hatunoğlu (Hatunzade) lineage produced many pashas of Kars. During the first, abortive Russian attack on Kars in 1807, Hatunoğlu Mustafa Pasha, governor and commander of Kars, together with his brothers Chakal Agha and Kara Bek, allegedly attempted to surrender the city and fortress to the Russian army and they were sentenced to death by the sultan. Nevertheless, the Hatunoğlu family continued to have influence in Kars and another descendant, Hatunzade Mustafa Bey, was appointed governor of Kars in July 1828 after the former governor was taken prisoner by Paskevich.¹⁴ Kurt Ismail Hakkı Pasha, also a scion of Hatunoğlu, was a favourite of Sultan Abdulhamid II during the war of 1877-78.

12. W. Monteith, *Kars and Erzeroum: With the Campaigns of Prince Paskiewitch in 1828 and 1829*, (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1856), 220. Monteith, as a British officer in the Persian Mission was in contact with Paskevich and with Georgian and Persian princes. He misspells the name of Behlul Pasha of Bayezid as "Bukhal Pasha" and wrongly infers that the name means "shopkeeper," taking it for the word *bakkal*. Also see Gültekin Yıldız, *Neferin Adı Yok. Zorunlu Askerliğe Geçiş Sürecinde Osmanlı Devleti'nde Siyaset, Ordu ve Toplum (1826-1839)*, [The nameless soldier. Politics, army and society in the process of transition to compulsory military service] (Istanbul: Kitabevi, 2009), 229.

13. This event is confirmed by Ottoman archival documents, though we could not find information on how the Magazberd chieftain escaped punishment afterwards. See Hasan Oktay, "Kafkaslarda Rus Yayılması Karşısında Osmanlı-Kaçar Faktörünün Harekete Geçirilmesi Teşebbüsü (Ağustos-Eylül 1811) [An Attempt at Mobilizing the Ottoman-Qajar Factor against Russian Expansion in the Caucasus]," *Vakanüvis Kafkasya Özel Sayısı* [Special Issue on the Caucasus], 2017. Baddeley describes this event but has no idea where Magazberd might be, speculating "possibly Melasgird?" Melasgird (Malazgirt) is however very distant from Kars. Baddeley most probably never visited Kars or bothered to find Magazberd on a map. This throws into ironic relief his critique of "Oriental inertness and inefficiency." Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, 81, 183.

14. BOA, HAT 1073-43929, grand vizier's note on the report of Galip Pasha, 14/07/1828. Although the Hatunoğlu family tradition relates their origin to the Crimean Tatars, some Kurdish researchers argue they are Kurds. In any case, they had close relations with the seminomadic Kurdish tribes of the Kars region.

The First Russian Siege and Capture of Kars: 1828

In all the Ottoman-Russian wars of the 19th century, the Russian army of the Caucasus was tasked with diverting a large part of the Ottoman armed forces from the Danube front. Both empires considered the Caucasus front to be secondary. However, being secondary did not mean campaigns there were a *petite guerre* or tribal warfare with mountaineers. The Russian army of the Caucasus was successful against both the Iranian and the Ottoman armies in part because irregular, untrained troops (*bashibozuks* and Kurdish tribal cavalry) constituted a large part of the Ottoman Anatolian armies and of the armies of Iranian prince Abbas Mirza, while Russian forces (with the partial exception of Cossack cavalry) were all regular troops.

In 1828 the fortress of Akhaltsikhe was the foremost Ottoman outpost and stronghold in the south Caucasus. Despite Pushkin's awestruck impressions of impregnability, Kars was not as well-fortified as it would later become. As Baddeley wrote,

Kars at this time was less formidable as an object of attack than later on—in 1855 or in 1877—for its lines were less extensive, its walls weaker, its whole system of defence less elaborate, its garrison smaller. But it was, none the less, a very strong position, and, properly defended, might well be deemed impregnable against so small an army as Paskevich disposed of.¹⁵

Similarly, the fortresses of Ardahan, 90 km north of Kars, and Akhaltsikhe, 110 km northeast of Ardahan, were also not prepared for modern siege artillery, while their own guns were outdated and manned by untrained men.¹⁶ The governor (*beylerbey*) of Childir reported in May 1828 that the Ardahan fortress had been built in 1556 against the “Qizilbash bands” (meaning Safavids) who could not lay siege to the fortress with cannons, whereas now that the enemy was the “Muscovite infidels” (*kefere*), the fortress did not have proper cannon and ammunition, and as such could not hold against a Russian attack.¹⁷ As early as 24 April 1828, two days before Russia's declaration of war on the Ottoman Empire, Emin Pasha, the governor and commander of Kars, was warning Galip Pasha that Paskevich was moving troops, artillery and ammunition from Erivan to Gyumri (Aleksandropol') in order to attack Kars in May. Emin Pasha was also asking whether any artillery had arrived at Erzurum and was urging Galip to send it on immediately to Kars.¹⁸

15. Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, 184.

16. BOA, HAT 1088–44264-O, Galip Pasha to the grand vizier, Erzurum, 15/05/1828.

17. BOA HAT 1088–44264, Ahmed Rüşdi Pasha of Akhaltsikhe to Galip Pasha, governor of Erzurum and commander-in-chief (*serasker*) of the east, 12/07/1828. The original report was from Ali bey of Ardahan and the *naib* (deputy kadi) of Ardahan, Ibrahim Efendi, 02/05/1828. Ibrahim Efendi added that engineers had checked the fortress and concluded that it was indefensible. The civilian population of the fortress had already fled.

18. Emin Pasha to Galip Pasha, BOA, HAT 1088–44262-J, Kars, 24/04/1828. Emin Pasha had his spies in Erivan and official envoys to Paskevich. Emin also reported that Russians were buying enormous amounts of grain from Ottoman sanjak of Bayezid.

The Russian Caucasus army included many officers and soldiers who had participated in Russia's war against Napoleon in 1812-14. In 1827, they had defeated the Iranian armies and captured Erivan and Karabagh. There were also many talented young officers, who had been sympathizers or suspects in the Decembrist Uprising of 1825. They were sent to Kars with demotion of rank as a form of punishment. Baddeley mentions one—Pushchin—who was skilful and brave in the laying of the first parallel and the placing of the siege guns.¹⁹

On 24th June 1828, Russian naval and Cossack troops captured the Ottoman fortress of Anapa and subdued the local Circassians. Two days later, Paskevich's 12-thousand-strong active army corps with 70 pieces of artillery and 20,000 rounds of ammunition moved from Alexandropol', crossed the Arpachai River that was the border with the Ottoman province of Kars, and laid siege to Kars on 2nd July 1828. Paskevich blocked all roads to Kars and made a reconnaissance around the city. He built batteries to bombard the city walls with siege artillery (12 guns) and 58 other pieces of artillery, planning a final assault on 7th July.²⁰ Instead Kars would fall two days earlier, in a manner not fully explained by the existing historiography.

Allen and Muratoff's description is short and inaccurate:

Following a bombardment, the Russian infantry took the suburbs to the east of the Kars-çay, and on the morning of 23 June [O.S. – i.e. 5th July]²¹ they captured the wall which divided the town from the fortress itself. The Turkish commander [Emin Pasha] then surrendered with 2,000 nizams and 150 guns; but the rest of the garrison succeeded in withdrawing. Russian losses amounted to less than 400 men.²²

However both Ushakov and Baddeley claim that the Russian assault on the 5th July was unplanned and unauthorised, the result of a skirmish led by a hot-headed officer, Colonel Miklashevskii, which developed into a full-blown, disorganised attack

19. Baddeley *Russian Conquest*, 178. See further Davis "A Journey to Arzrum," Appendix 8, S105–S117.

20. Nikolai I. Ushakov, *Istoriia voennykh deistvii v Aziatskoi Turtsii v 1828 i 1829 godakh* [History of military operations in Asiatic Turkey in 1828 and 1829] (SPb.: Tip. Eduarda Pratsa, 1836), vol. 1, 192–222. Ushakov was in Paskevich's service in both the Russo-Persian War of 1826–1827 and the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828–1829, participating in the siege of Kars. Paskevich almost certainly vetted his account. Allen and Muratoff (25) claim that Paskevich did not have siege artillery, but this is incorrect. The report on the army's movements notes the difficulty of hauling siege artillery (*osadnoi artillerii*) across the rugged landscape from Kars to Akhaltsikhe. "Izvestiia iz deistvuiushchego korpusa [News from the operational corps]," 04/08/1828 RGVIA, f. 15099, op. 1, d. 1, l. 19.

21. Ottoman official chronicler Lutfi Efendi dated the fall of Kars to 7 July 1828, and many later Turkish military historians such as Ferik Ahmed Muhtar Pasha, Colonel Naci Çakın and most recently Hasip Saygılı have copied this mistake from him.

22. Allen and Muratoff, *Caucasian Battle-Fields*, 26. Ahmed Muhtar (217) gives the number of Russian casualties as 4000 instead of 400 but does not give any source for this number.

without the use of regular siege tactics or preparatory artillery bombardment.²³ Baddeley goes on to allege that this was only reluctantly endorsed by Paskevich once it became clear that it had, fortuitously, been successful, noting that his source for this was N.N. Murav'ev, who had a considerable animus towards the former. His account is certainly the most vivid, but reveals this personal dislike very clearly:

All of this was clearly visible from my battery, and I was a witness to the kind of fighting that our troops have long since become unaccustomed to. Men were mixed up together in masses, as they portray them in paintings; our men stabbed with bayonets, the Turks hewed them with their sabres; all this lasted for a few minutes; our men overcame them, and the Turks ran once again through their battery to the suburb, and Miklashevskii was rewarded [...] I walked over to [Paskevich] at that moment. Instead of the thanks I expected from the commander for the successful construction and maintenance of my battery through four hours under the heaviest possible fire, he broke out in anger against me and with the most insulting raising of his voice, pointing at the fight he asked me "What does this mean? Who ordered this? What was the occasion for doing this without orders? How dare they!"²⁴

Meanwhile, as we shall see, Ottoman sources suggest that this fortunate and unexpected outcome for the Russians was the result of treachery.

Inside the walls of the city, the Ottoman force consisted of four thousand infantry men, three thousand cavalry and four thousand armed citizens under the command of Emin Pasha. Most of the soldiers were untrained levies from the poorest portion of the Muslim population (*nefir-i amm*). Nevertheless, Ottoman cavalry and infantry sortied from the city and attacked Russian cavalry, only retreating after a powerful Russian cannonade. Ushakov considered Emin Pasha to be ignorant of the military art because he risked a sortie with just 5,000 men, half the size of the besieging force.²⁵ Emin Pasha was expecting reinforcement from Erzurum. Troops under the command of Köse Mehmed Pasha, governor of Sivas, were on their way, abandoning their artillery and provisions at Micingert in order to arrive as quickly as possible.²⁶ Ushakov confirms Köse Mehmed Pasha's rush to Kars with only four pieces of field artillery, lacking provisions, informing Emin Pasha of his coming by letter and urging

23. Ushakov, *Istoriia voennykh deistvii*, vol. 1, 227–239; Baddeley, *Conquest of the Caucasus*, 185–187.

24. N.N. Murav'ev-Karsskii, *Sobstvennye zapiski 1826–1828* [Personal notes 1826–1828] (M: Kuchkovo Pole, 2019), 547–549. See further Davis, "A Journey to Arzrum," Appendix 8, S110–111.

25. Ushakov, *Istoriia voennykh deistvii*, vol. 1, 212.

26. Köse Mehmed Pasha figures as Kousa or Kios Pasha in the works of Monteith and Baddeley, who mistake him for the seraskier Galip Pasha of Erzurum. Allen and Muratoff give the correct Turkish spelling of Köse Mehmet Pasha, but they also take him for the seraskier of Erzurum. Interestingly, Monteith, Baddeley, Allen and Muratoff all seem not to have read Ushakov's very important first-hand account, because they make no references to him, whereas Ushakov correctly writes that the Seraskier of Erzurum was Galip Pasha, and that Mehmed Pasha came to help him.

him to hold out until the arrival of the relief force. Ushakov considered that Köse Mehmed Pasha was only a half day late, and blamed Emin Pasha for not holding out just a little longer in the face of the Russian assault: as we will see, his critical account of Emin Pasha's leadership is corroborated by Ottoman sources.²⁷

On the road to Kars, Mehmed Pasha met Şerif, the voivode of Magazberd who had come from Kars and told him that the Russian army had blocked the road. Therefore, instead of heading straight towards the besieging Russian army from the south, Köse Mehmed's army circumvented Kars and camped at a place by the name of Bey Yurdu to the north of Kars. Köse Mehmed Pasha reported to Galip Pasha on 6 July as follows:

Meanwhile the shocking news came that the infidels (*kuffar*) had entered the suburbs and the pasha of Kars with many soldiers and civilians took shelter in the fortress. I sent Nebi Agha with two men into Kars with a letter informing them I will enter at night through Sukapu gate. Nebi Agha reported that on Saturday morning [5 July 1828] the *kuffar* entered the fortress suburb and three thousand men in the fortress, without any shortage of food or ammunition or anything else, could not resist even for one day and the *naib (kadi)*, *mufti* and the notables went to the Russian commander without any necessity, surrendering the city and afterwards bringing the fortress commander [Emin Pasha] to him. Escaping soldiers and Haji Osman Agha from the fortress later confirmed this news. Because I have not taken artillery and ammunition with myself and because I do not have many soldiers, I had to retreat to Ardahan to prevent my troops from deserting, as there is no other place around to take shelter. At Ardahan, I tried to gather escaping soldiers from Kars. It became clear that the Russian commander disarmed soldiers in the fortress and then released them all, detaining only the fortress commander and a few soldiers and not doing harm to the civilians.²⁸

This accords with Baddeley's claim that Paskevich did not allow excesses against the Muslim population of Kars.²⁹ Turkish nationalist historian Prof. Fahrettin Kırzioğlu argued instead that Paskevich was cursed and nicknamed "Başkovuç" by the natives of Kars for his "barbarism," because he set fire to the city and killed 15,000 people, but there appears to be no evidence for this assertion.³⁰ Meanwhile there was no prospect of Köse Mehmed Pasha's relief force being able to dislodge the Russians

27. Ushakov, *Istoriia voennykh deistvii*, vol. 1, 240.

28. BOA, HAT 1073-43929-E, Galip Pasha to the grand vizier, Ardahan, 06/07/1828.

29. Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, 189.

30. Kırzioğlu, *Kars Tarihi*, 1. Cilt, (Istanbul: Işıl Matbaası, 1953), 548; "Anadolu Cephemizde Geçen Son Altı Rus-Türk Savaşında Kars'taki Serhad Ruhunu Besleyen Halk Geleneklerimiz [Our Folk Traditions Feeding the Spirit of the Frontier Kars during the Last Six Russo-Turkish Wars in Our Anatolian Front]," in *Yakın Tarihimizde Kars ve Doğu Anadolu Sempozyumu Bildirileri* [Papers of the Symposium on Kars and Eastern Anatolia in our Recent Past] (Ankara, 1991), 173. Kırzioğlu did not cite any sources. We could not find any confirmation of the burning of Kars and killing of 15,000 civilians in Ottoman sources. Neither do European observers like Monteith and Fonton mention any such figures. Murav'ev mentions only looting in Kars, but murders and arson in Akhaltsikhe, by Russian troops, non-combatant personnel and irregulars. See his *Sobstvennye zapiski*, 569, 669.

from their occupation of Kars. On 10 July 1828, Köse Mehmed Pasha again reported from Ardahan to Galip Pasha in Erzurum that soldiers who arrived at Ardahan from Kars were disarmed, unclad and wounded and as such they were now useless as a fighting force. His own troops were also reduced owing to desertions. He did not have artillery, ammunition, or provisions. It was difficult to get even plain bread in Ardahan. As for the fortress, it was rather a stockade (*palanka*) and its cannon were not usable.³¹ Thus one of the most formidable strongholds in Asia—compared by Murav'ev and other contemporaries to Gibraltar—appears to have fallen to Russian arms almost by accident.³²

Ottoman sources lay greater stress on active treachery as a component in the fall of Kars. Galip Pasha in his turn reported to the grand vizier in Istanbul that the “Muscovites” had come from Gyumri to Kars and attacked Kars straight away (“with the dust still on their shoes”). A portion of the Russian force had found a breach in the walls and fighting continued within city. Some of the Ottoman cavalry fled, while about three thousand cavalry and infantry men together with six to eight thousand fighting natives of Kars remained inside the citadel. They had enough provisions, and they could have held out against the enemy for a long time. However, the notables of Kars, including the mufti and the *naib* (*kadi*) had forced Emin Pasha to surrender on favourable conditions. Galip Pasha reported that the “traitors of Kars” had surrendered the city and fortress to the “enemy of religion.”³³ Sultan Mahmud II wrote on top of the report that he was not saddened by the fall of Kars, because the real culprits on the Danube and in Kars were the “remnants of the abolished troops” (meaning the janissaries) and he hoped that the Muscovite infidels would perish just like the janissaries.³⁴ Ottoman official chronicler Ahmet Lutfi Efendi also confirms the “blackguardism of the inhabitants of Kars” and blames “some bandits and traitors” for the city’s fall.³⁵ Galip Pasha reported to Istanbul that he had interrogated Şerif and the voivode admitted his guilt before he was hanged.³⁶ In a letter to his steward in Istanbul, Galip Pasha complained as follows:

Although it has been confirmed by those who left Kars two days later that the fall of Kars happened only because of the treason of the people of Kars, and that the Muscovite general even appointed Abo Agha of the notables of Kars as *sergerde* (leader of Ottoman irregular troops), I have been screaming for six or seven months about the situation of the eastern marchlands (*serhadat*) and of the intentions of the Muscovites.³⁷

31. BOA, HAT 1073–43929-F, Köse Mehmed Pasha to Galip Pasha, Ardahan, 10/07/1828.

32. Murav'ev-Karsskii, *Sobsvennye zapiski*, 519.

33. BOA, HAT 1073–43929-C, Galip Pasha to the grand vizier, Erzurum, 14/07/1828.

34. BOA, HAT 1073–43929, 14 July 1828.

35. *Vakanüvis Ahmed Lutfi Efendi Tarihi* [Chronicle of the Chronicler Ahmed Lutfi Efendi], cilt 2-3 (Istanbul: YKY, 1999), 370.

36. BOA, HAT 1071–43848, Galip Pasha to the grand vizier, Erzurum, 28/07/1828.

37. BOA, HAT 1073–43929-C, Galip Pasha to his steward in Istanbul, Erzurum, 14/07/1828. The American missionary Eli Smith met this Abo Agha in Kars under Russian rule and described

In a later report, Galip Pasha gave more details of the “strange, unprecedented event of Kars.” The Muscovites had taken prisoner 1,800 Ottoman soldiers and sent them to Tiflis, releasing the rest after disarming them. Those who escaped during the siege and those who were released afterwards went to Ardahan or Erzurum, and some men deserted to their villages. Some of these deserters had already been captured and brought back to Erzurum. The deserters were spreading speculation and lies, though Galip does not clarify exactly what. He asserted that they belonged to the “notorious lot” (that is, former janissaries) headed by Abo Agha, former head of the janissaries in Kars and an *ayan* (notable) of Kars. General Paskevich had bestowed gifts upon him, the *naib*, *mufiti* and some other notables but the naib apparently did not accept.³⁸ İsmail Hakkı Danişmend argued that the people of Kars, consisting mainly of former janissaries and their relatives, insisted on surrendering the fortress because they were angry about the abolition and massacre of the janissary corps in the so-called ‘Auspicious Incident’ (*Vaka-i Hayriye*) in 1826.³⁹

Turkish nationalist historiography has typically accused local Ottoman Armenians of collaboration with the Russian army and spying for it. Some of them have even argued that Akhaltsikhe, Kars and Erzurum surrendered to the Russian army “thanks to Armenian efforts.”⁴⁰ Kars certainly did have a significant Christian population—Monteith wrote that the population of the city of Kars was about 12,000, the majority of whom were Christians.⁴¹ According to the Russian census of the villages around Kars after the conquest, Turks and Armenians were almost equal in numbers, while we do not have information on the population of the city itself.⁴² However Christianity did not necessarily translate into support for Russia, and reality was, as usual, more complex. While there certainly were Armenians who worked for the Russians and who spied for them, there were also many Armenians who spied for the Ottoman army. For example, the beylerbey of the Childir eyalet, Ahmed Pasha of Akhaltsikhe, reported in May 1828 that his non-Muslim spy returned from Kutaisi and brought news that the Russians were preparing to attack the fortresses of Akhaltsikhe, Kars, Bayezid, Akhalkalaki and Ardahan.⁴³ After capturing Kars, Paskevich concluded from some papers of Emin Pasha that the Turks had information about Russian affairs

him as a very “mercenary” man in the pay of Russia. See Eli Smith, *Missionary Researches in Armenia*, (London: George Wightman, 1834), 163.

38. BOA, HAT 1071–43848-H, Galip Pasha to the grand vizier, Erzurum, 30/07/1828.

39. İsmail Hakkı Danişmend, *İzahlı Osmanlı Tarihi Kronolojisi* [Annotated chronology of Ottoman history] cilt 4, (1925), 113.

40. See Mücteba İlgürel, “Rusların Doğu Anadolu Siyaseti ve 1828-1829 İlk Rus İstilasası [Russia’s East Anatolian Policy and the First Russian Invasion of 1828-1829],” *İ.Ü. Edebiyat Fakültesi Tarih Dergisi* 35, (1994), 172.

41. Monteith, *Kars and Erzeroum*, 161.

42. Ushakov, *Istoriia voennykh deistvii*, vol. 1, 76.

43. BOA, HAT 1088–44264-B lef 2, Ahmed Pasha to Galip Pasha, governor of Erzurum and commander of the Ottoman eastern army, 14/05/1828. Ahmed Pasha describes his spy as a loyal man from the *reaya*, meaning a non-Muslim subject of the Ottoman Empire, who could be a Georgian or an Armenian.

through Armenian spies.⁴⁴ There were also local Muslims (Turks, Karapapaks, Laz, Adjarians and Kurds) who collaborated with the Russian army or took a neutral position. For the Russians, employing Muslim spies was in any case necessary so as not to arouse Ottoman suspicions. Ushakov mentions one such Muslim spy who brought true information on the number of troops inside Kars's walls.⁴⁵ Turkish nationalist historians have generally kept silent about them.

General N. Murav'ev wrote in his notes that the inhabitants of Kars were not warlike, and that most of the city dwellers were engaged in commerce. He also argued that the pasha of Kars was more under the influence of the Erivan authorities than of Istanbul, because of commercial relations.⁴⁶ It is hard to draw definite conclusions from this contradictory evidence, but it seems more likely that Kars fell owing to incompetence on the Turkish side and luck on that of Russia, and that stories of betrayal by various groups were a post-hoc invention by Ottoman officials keen to minimise their own culpability.

After the fall of Kars, Paskevich moved towards Akhaltsikhe, and first took the small fortress of Akhalkalaki, defended by 1000 men only—with the Russians recording the following defiant message from the garrison:

We are not inhabitants of Erivan or Kars, we are men of Akhaltsikhe (*Akhaltzykhtsy*), we have neither wives nor property, and 1,000 of us have resolved to die on the walls of our city.⁴⁷

After a fierce bombardment the Russians stormed the fortress, finding 300 of the garrison dead and another 600 wounded. Meanwhile Köse Mehmed Pasha's renewed army also rushed towards Akhaltsikhe for help. Untrained recruits, hastily gathered from peasants and shepherds who had not seen war, deserted at the first sight of a regular army and cannon fire. The fortress and city of Akhaltsikhe itself resisted Paskevich much more resolutely than the troops of Köse Mehmed or of Kars. Nevertheless, a column under Baron von Osten-Saken first beat Köse Mehmed's army and then took Akhaltsikhe after a fierce, pitched battle—the admittedly florid Russian report described how

up to 10,000 armed inhabitants and up to 4,000 troops made up the garrison and fought with desperate courage which only the unshakeable bravery of the

44. Paskevich to Nesselrode, Kars, 10 July (OS) 1828, *Akty Kavkazskoi Arkheographicheskoi Komissii* (AKAK) [Proceedings of the Caucasian Archaeographical Commission], vol. VII, (Tiflis: Tip. Glavnogo upravleniia Namestnika Kavkazskogo, 1878), 753.

45. Ushakov, *Istoriia voennykh deistvii*, vol. 1, 222. Ushakov also wrote that “the Armenian spies, by their usual cowardice and rather limited understanding, could not be absolutely useful for us,” because they either exaggerated the number of the enemy or reduced it to half. See Ushakov, *Istoriia voennykh deistvii*, vol. 1, 196.

46. N.N. Murav'ev-Karsskii, *Sobstvennye zapiski*, 520.

47. “Izvestiia iz deistvuiushchego korpusa,” 04/08/1828, RGVIA, f. 15099, op. 1, d. 1, l. 20.

Russians could overcome; each house had to be stormed, in each alleyway the most stubborn resistance was offered.⁴⁸

During the taking of a single bastion “out of 1,500 Turks defending it, more than a third perished and the whole area between the trenches and the outskirts was littered with corpses,” while the Russians lost 400 dead in this assault alone, including Major-General Korol’kov.⁴⁹ Salih Pasha, the new governor of Erzurum after Galip Pasha, later described the Russian firepower at Akhaltsikhe (where they made extensive use of canister shot) as “European military fire.”⁵⁰ In all the defenders of Akhaltsikhe lost about 5,000 men and even some women from the city population, while Russian casualties exceeded 500, including generals and officers. It is clear then that both Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhe offered far fiercer resistance to the Russians than Kars in this campaign—yet it was the latter which would become iconic, as shown in the Polish artist Januarius Sukhodolsky’s fanciful 1839 painting “The Storming of Kars” (fig.2), commissioned as one of a series of depictions of Russian military victories by Nicholas I:

**Fig.2 Januarius Sukhodolsky, ‘The Storming of Kars’ (1839)
Military-Historical Museum of Artillery and Engineers, Moscow**



48. Von Osten-Saken to Paskevich, 17/08/1828, RGVIA, f. 15099, op. 1, d. 1, l. 130.

49. “Izvestiia iz deistvuiushchego korpusa,” 25/08/1828, RGVIA, f. 15099, op. 1, d. 1, l. 135.

50. BOA, HAT 1014–42487, Salih Pasha to the grand vizier, 10/11/1828.

The doyen of Russian military historians of the Caucasus, General Vasilii Potto, would later argue that Kars did have strategic importance, and that had Paskevich marched first on Akhaltsikhe, “the Turks in Kars would certainly have taken advantage of the weak border defence throughout the Kars *pashalik*, and before the negligible Russian detachments scattered along could concentrate, they would have been already at the gates of Tiflis.” Akhaltsikhe itself did not pose any special danger because the Borjomi gorges would not allow the Turks to bring artillery from there. With the fall of Kars, Akhaltsikhe would be cut off from the operational base of Turks in Erzurum.⁵¹ Potto’s reasoning seems to be a post-factum justification. Ottoman plans and events showed that the Kars garrison never intended to cross the border and would almost certainly have been incapable of doing so, let alone reaching the gates of Tbilisi. Akhaltsikhe was closer to Tbilisi and transporting artillery along difficult paths was not an unsolvable problem for the Ottomans, had they resolved to do so. Furthermore, the road from Erzurum to Akhaltsikhe passes through Oltu and Ardahan and not through Kars at all.

It is also notable that following the loss of Kars and Akhaltsikhe, the Ottomans made a serious attempt to recapture the latter in February 1829. While forces under Ahmet Bek of Adjara besieged and attempted to storm the fortress of Akhaltsikhe, Galip Pasha made feint attacks in the direction of Kars to divert Russian attention away from Akhaltsikhe. Although the siege of Akhaltsikhe failed, it showed Ottoman priorities, which again suggest Kars was of minor strategic importance.

The exaggerated significance subsequently attached by the Russians to Kars seems to have been precisely because, unlike other territory conquered during the campaign, it would be handed back to the Ottomans. Nicholas I and his foreign affairs minister Count Nesselrode were wary of the response of the other European great powers to Russian expansion and sought not antagonise them excessively. They were therefore content with their territorial acquisitions along the Circassian coast, at Anapa and Poti, together with the fortresses of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki, while returning Ardahan, Kars, Erzurum, Bayburt and Bayezid to the Ottomans by the Treaty of Edirne, signed on 14th September 1829. Paskevich disagreed, and as early as August 1828, he was arguing for an enlargement of Russia’s borders to include the territories of Batumi, Akhaltsikhe, Kars and even Bayezid. He wanted Batumi as a haven for Russian ships, but envisioned Kars as a commercial centre and warehouse of Russian export goods, though without mentioning it as a strategic fortress. If it were impossible to take all of these, he argued, then at least Batumi and the *pashalik* of Akhaltsikhe should be annexed to Russia.⁵² During the peace negotiations, the commander in chief of the Balkan front, Marshal Diebitsch, in his correspondence with Nesselrode and the emperor opposed demanding the annexation of Kars, saying that it had very little use as a forward (offensive) post, as Russia already had Erivan

51. V.A. Potto, *Kavkazskaia voina v otdel'nykh ocherkakh, epizodakh, legendakh i biografiakh* [The Caucasus War in accounts, episodes, legends and biographies], vol. 4, (SPb.: V.A. Berezovskii, 1889), 22.

52. Paskevich to Nesselrode, 26 July (OS) 1828, Akhalkalaki, *AKAK* VII, 758.

and could fortify Alexandropol, whenever it wanted. For Nicholas I, the priority was to trade Kars for two million (ducats) of the war indemnity.⁵³ Paskevich was thus robbed of what he considered to be one of the principal prizes of his campaign. It was only at this point that Kars began to assume the outsized role it would maintain until 1878 in the minds of the staff of the Caucasian Military District—a prize rightfully theirs, won by feats of arms but shamefully handed back, which should be recovered at the first available opportunity.

The Second Russian Siege and Capture of Kars: 1855

The ninth Russo-Ottoman war—better known to European historians as the Crimean War—began in 1853 as just another episode in the series, but soon became the only major, multilateral European war between 1815 and 1914. Russian emperor Nicholas I had suppressed the Hungarian revolution of 1849, helped Austria, and upheld the principle of monarchy, and was full of hubris as gendarme of Europe and protector of law and order. He had long been hoping to come to a gentleman's agreement with Britain over the legacy of “the sick man of Europe,” as he dubbed the Ottoman government. Nicholas thought politics was decided by the personal tastes of monarchs and gentlemen. He did not understand the class nature of great power politics, or the role of public opinion in influencing foreign policy in the more open societies of Britain and France. The trust he placed in the long-serving “Napoleonic generation” of statesmen such as his foreign minister, Count Nesselrode, meant that he still held Marshal Paskevich Erivanskii-Varshavskii in high esteem.⁵⁴ In 1853, Paskevich sent notes from Warsaw to Nicholas advising him on military matters. There he wrote the following on a renewed attack on Kars:

With the remaining 20 battalions or the main corps we can approach Kars and take a position that will undoubtedly eliminate all the Turkish operations from Batum and Ardahan, for we can assume that they will rush to defend Kars, in any case they will not be able to break through. The main detachment could make a manoeuvre similar to the one made in 1829. It would be divided into two parts: one sent to Ardahan, the other to Akhaltsikhe. The same can be done against Kars and Ardahan. If it is not possible to take the fortresses first, it is possible to break the troops, which are likely to come to the aid of the fortresses. Moreover, nowadays the fortifications and the number of guns in them should be weaker than they were in 1828 and 1829. I assume that we will have enough cavalry and artillery.⁵⁵

53. Nikolai K. Shilder, *Adrianopol'skii mir 1829 goda: iz perezpiski grafa Dibicha* [The Peace of Adrianople of 1829: From the correspondence of Count Diebitsch] (SPb.: Tip. Gratsianogo, 1879), 30–41. General Shilder, military historian and publisher of Diebitsch's papers, considered Paskevich to be in the right and Diebitsch to be wrong about the need to retain Kars in 1829.

54. Alexander Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Expansion 1814–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 56–64.

55. “Vsepoddanneishaia zapiska kniazia Varshavskago, 11 (23) Sentiabria 1853 g. [Most humble notes from the Prince of Warsaw, 11/23 September 1853],” *Russkaia Starina*, 8 (1876), 695–702.

Paskevich was right in his confidence of Russian superiority over Ottoman forces on the Caucasus front, but he was wrong in assuming that the fortifications of Kars were now weaker than in 1828. As in the earlier conflict the Caucasus front was secondary for both sets of combatants. Here the Ottoman Anatolian Army, after winning one and losing two battles in the open field, notably a humiliating defeat at Kürükdere in August 1854, found itself bottled up in Kars, demoralised and lacking transport, although initial Russian war aims on this front saw little in the way of offensives either. Meanwhile Colonel William Williams was appointed British military commissioner to the Anatolian army. Even before his arrival two British officers, Colonel Atwell Lake and Major Christopher Teesdale, together with two Hungarian officers in Ottoman Service, György Kmety and Richard Guyon, had begun to construct a series of modern, well-sited forts and redoubts around the city, converting Kars into a formidable artillery fortress.⁵⁶ Relations between these British officers and their Ottoman allies were sometimes strained, largely because of Williams's exaggerated sense of his own importance. As confirmed by British ambassador Stratford Canning and British advisor to the Ottoman navy Rear-Admiral Adolphus Slade, Colonel Williams was in "singular hallucination" when he claimed that he was not given due respect by Ottoman military authorities in Erzurum and Kars. He had in fact received official recognition greater than was necessitated by his rank.⁵⁷ However, although Williams's remarks about the Ottoman military leadership are often Orientalist in tone, this does not necessarily refute his claims of corruption by Ottoman officers, as he based these on his actual counting of Ottoman troops and comparisons with official muster rolls.⁵⁸ This method of swelling the numbers of troops to get extra pay and rations was well known to the Ottoman authorities.

The return of N.N. Murav'ev to Tbilisi in March 1855 as the new viceroy of the Caucasus and commander of the Caucasus army signalled a more aggressive Russian strategy. As we have seen Murav'ev, who spoke French, German, English and Turkish, had participated in the capture of Kars in 1828 under Paskevich, while in 1833 he had served on the Bosphorus in Russia's mission to aid Sultan Mahmud against the rebellious Ottoman pasha of Egypt, Muhammad 'Ali.⁵⁹ Now he lost no time in crossing the Ottoman frontier at the beginning of the campaign season in May 1855. As in 1828, the Russian army of the Caucasus entered Ottoman territory from three points: from Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki towards Ardahan in the north,

56. Atwell Lake, *Narrative of the Defence of Kars, Historical and Military* (London: Richard Bentley, 1857), 47–58; Humphry Sandwith, *A Narrative of the Siege of Kars, and of the six months' resistance by the Turkish garrison under General Williams to the Russian Army* (London: John Murray, 1856), 246–247.

57. Stratford de Redcliffe to the Earl of Clarendon 21/01/1855 in "Papers relative to Military Affairs in Asiatic Turkey and the Defence and Capitulation of Kars," *Parliamentary Papers* (1856), Vol. LXI cmd.2032, 91. See further Badem, *Ottoman Crimean War*, Ch. 5.

58. Williams to the Earl of Clarendon 28/10/1854 in "Papers relative to Military Affairs in Asiatic Turkey," 49.

59. Badem, *Ottoman Crimean War*, 243.

from Gyumri (Alexandropol') towards Kars in the centre and from Erivan towards Bayezid in the south. And once again, as in 1828, the main target was Kars, to which Murav'ev laid siege after subduing Ardahan and Bayezid. According to one member of the Russian corps that crossed the Arpachai river into Ottoman territory in June 1855, they were surprised at the indifference with which the Turks looked at their occupation of the environs of Kars, suggesting that it perhaps did not hold quite the same symbolic or strategic importance for their opponents.⁶⁰

In Kars, the new commander of the Ottoman Anatolian army was Mushir (Marechal) Vasif Pasha, who reported that about one thousand inhabitants of Kars took part in the defence of the bastions of Kars against an initial Russian attack on 18 May 1855.⁶¹ Meanwhile Murav'ev reported in June 1855, following his reconnaissance of the fortress, that Kars "the all-time stronghold of the Turks in that region," was now "significantly enhanced by European art," referring to the new fortifications constructed by Lake and Teesdale.⁶² It would be a much tougher nut to crack than had been the case in 1828. From the outset the siege of Kars loomed large in the international reaction to the Crimean War. Karl Marx wrote that:

if Kars is the key to Erzerum, Erzerum is the key to Constantinople, and the central point of the strategical and commercial lines of Anatolia. Kars and Erzerum, once in the hands of Russia, the British land trade, *vide* Trebizond to Persia, is cut off.⁶³

Meanwhile the plight of Williams and the other European officers captured the public imagination in Britain.

While Kars was tightly under siege, the Ottoman commander of the Rumelian army, generalissimo Ömer Pasha, was trying to convince British and French commanders to relieve Kars by landing a sizeable army somewhere on the eastern Black Sea coastline and threatening the rear of the Russian army around Kars. Stratford Canning, Williams and the other British officers at Kars preferred instead a landing at Trabzon for the direct relief of Kars.⁶⁴ The allied commanders were reluctant to part with Ottoman troops because they were busy with the siege of Sevastopol'. At that time, the allies were subjecting the city to the greatest bombardment in history to date, however eventually, with misgivings, they yielded to the arguments of the Ottoman war minister, Mehmed Rüşdi Pasha, who said that the operation proposed was like striking the snake at its tail to turn its head to the rear. When Ömer Pasha's

60. *Blokada Karsa, pis'ma ochevidtsev* [The blockade of Kars, letters of an eyewitness] (Tiflis: Tip. Namestnika Kavkazskogo, 1856), 16.

61. BOA, ATASE Kırım Harbi, 7-21-5, Vasif Pasha to the seraskier, Kars, 18/06/1855.

62. Report of General Murav'ev, Kars, 8/20 June 1855, RGVA, f. 15321, op. 1, d. 8, l. 2.

63. Karl Marx, *The Eastern Question. A Reprint of Letters Written 1853–1856 Dealing with the Events of the Crimean War* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, 1897), 613.

64. Clarendon to Stratford de Redcliffe in "Papers relative to Military Affairs in Asiatic Turkey," 14/07/1855, 226.

campaign finally ended in failure, another Ottoman statesman, Rifat Pasha, remarked that “we have given away Kars for the sake of a metaphor.”⁶⁵

Sevastopol’ fell on 11 September 1855 and Ömer Pasha landed at Trabzon and Batum. Murav’ev was now restless before Kars. He had a very effective blockade in place and the city was on the verge of capitulation, but Sevastopol’ had fallen and as far as he knew Ömer Pasha was about to advance into Georgia. Murav’ev wanted to storm and take Kars before Ömer Pasha’s forces made any advance, as well as obtaining a triumph for Russia that would offset the humiliation of losing Sevastopol’.⁶⁶ On the morning of 29 September 1855, the besieging Russian forces made an all-out attack on the bastions of Kars, mainly on the Tahmasb redoubt. The Ottoman army, although much-weakened by hunger and diseases, fought very well behind fortifications. General Kmety (Ismail Pasha) had foreseen the Russian assault, and therefore it was not a surprise attack. The Ottoman artillery was very effective, with the batteries sited by Lake and Teesdale doing terrible execution on the advancing Russian columns with grapeshot, though it was a bayonet charge by Kmety’s riflemen which broke the Russian assault.⁶⁷ By any standards Russian casualties on this day were heavy: according to Murav’ev’s own report, they amounted to 252 officers and 7,274 men, including General Pyotr Kovalevskii among the 2,278 dead, and this is confirmed from other sources.⁶⁸ Ottoman losses were less than 1,000, including about 100 to 150 civilians from Kars. The Ottoman army had no cavalry available to harass the retreating Russians, as they were slaughtering horses for meat.⁶⁹ This was the greatest success of the Ottoman army on the Caucasian front, the result of a serious miscalculation by Murav’ev who had launched a pointless assault entirely for reasons of prestige, when as he knew well without relief the fortress was bound to fall into his hands before long through starvation. By early October Ömer Pasha’s diversion operation from Sukhum towards Tbilisi had literally got stuck in the marshes of Megrelia under heavy rains, and all hope of relief was gone. Kars’s starving garrison surrendered two months later on 27th November 1855, to considerable international interest: as Karl Marx wrote “The fall of Kars is the turning point in the history of the sham war against Russia.”⁷⁰ Thanks to the presence of Williams and other British Officers, in 1860 this would be romantically immortalised in paint by a British artist, Thomas Barker (fig.3), and also made the subject of a Parliamentary enquiry which published much of Williams’s increasingly bilious correspondence with Stratford Canning and Lord Clarendon before and during the siege.

65. Badem, *Ottoman Crimean War*, 248.

66. N.N. Murav’ev, *Voina za Kavkazom v 1855 g.* [War for the Caucasus in 1855] (SPb.: Tip. “Obschestvennaia Pol’za,” 1877), vol. 1, Part 2, 282–283.

67. Sandwith, *Siege of Kars*, 280–285; Lake, *Defence of Kars*, 195–201; A.O. “Vospominaniia o Shturme Karsa” [Reminiscences of the storming of Kars], *Voennyi Sbornik*, 18, 3 (1861): 115–134.

68. Murav’ev, *Voina za Kavkazom*, Vol. II, Part 3, 81; A. Korsakov, “Vospominaniia o Karse [Reminiscences of Kars],” *Russkii Vestnik*, 34 (1861): 338.

69. Badem, *Ottoman Crimean War*, 251.

70. *People’s Paper*, 05/04/1856.

**Fig.3 Thomas Jones Barker, *The Capitulation of Kars* (1860)
National Army Museum, London**



Once again there were rumours among some Ottoman officers in Crimea that Kars was deliberately given to Russia so that it could save face and make peace.⁷¹ An anonymous author, probably General Kmety, criticised the Ottoman army command for their inactivity: “The Turkish army, placed in a trap by the chiefs that led it, was held there in inglorious and miserable inactivity, until it was starved into surrendering.” “A considerable Turkish army, equipped and intended for active field operations, was shut up... in a weak position,” and the British commissioner for calling the Ottoman officers “brutes,” “blackguards,” “thieves,” etc *en masse*... Williams’s remarks “had much more of the rough edge of the Newgate Calendar or some seminary in St Giles’s.”⁷² While Ottoman strategy was certainly open to question, Vasif Pasha’s assessment that his army was incapable of taking the field was probably correct, and he did succeed in tying down a substantial Russian force for six months and inflicting heavy casualties. By contrast it is less clear that the Russians were justified in devoting so many resources to besieging (as opposed to masking) a fortress of doubtful strategic importance, while even the doyen of Soviet historians, Evgenii Tarle, considers Murav’ev’s failed assault to be a costly folly.⁷³ Russian staff captain Cherkesov, a participant of the siege of Kars, was to the point when 17 years later he questioned the strategic importance of Kars, although he only criticised Williams’s strategy, seemingly oblivious to how this also reflected on Murav’ev’s obsession with the fortress:

71. Ahmed Trabzoni, *Manzume-i Sivastopol* [Epic of Sevastopol], 254-255.

72. *Kars and its Defenders: The Campaign in Asia Minor* (London: Partridge and Co., 1857), 7.

73. Tarle, *Krymskaia voina*, vol. 2, 325-330.

...it seems possible to question the degree of importance which Williams and the British officers attached to it before the opening of the campaign and which especially in their descriptions of the blockade they tried to attach to it afterwards, as if to justify all the sacrifices and efforts made to hold this point. There was a perception in the region that Kars was impregnable. The local proverb that says that 'one man of Kars is worth two from Akhaltsikhe and three from Erivan' shows how much the people valued the courage of the Kars residents. In some writings we find the expressions that Kars is a stronghold of Anatolia, etc., but all this cannot serve as a sufficient basis for a correct assessment of the strategic importance of this point; it would be even stranger to give Kars a special importance only because it had some shops and scarce, as we have seen above, vital and fighting supplies. As a matter of fact, Kars could be of great importance for the offensive operations into our lines, as a fully secured storage point for concentrating there, close to the border, all the supplies for the advancing army. In defensive terms, however, it can only serve as a cover for a defeated or retreating army for the time being, but in no case does it cover either Erzurum, the main city of Anatolia, or Anatolia itself [...] As for the impregnability of Kars, the unsuccessful storming of September 17 does not prove that it was impossible to capture Kars, it only shows that it should have been captured in a different way than it was done.⁷⁴

After the Treaty of Paris of 30 April 1856, Kars was again returned to the Ottoman Empire, as in 1829 – although Murav'ev and others put a brave face on this, claiming that the capture of Kars had allowed Russia to redeem some honour, and that it had provided a counter that ensured the return of Sevastopol in exchange, it was clearly a bitter pill to swallow, something that was reflected in the many memoirs of the siege which were subsequently published, which further elevated its significance in the Caucasian Military mind. Cherkesov, despite his playing down of the fortress's strategic significance, provided the following anecdotal verdict:

The fall of Kars itself had a great impact on the entire Transcaucasus [...] The impression made by this success was characteristically expressed by the following local saying: "The mullahs affirm that the most powerful sovereign in the world is the Turkish Sultan; But how did it happen that the Sultan, together with other sovereigns, besieged a Russian city for a whole year and seized only ruins, while the Russians on their own took Kars?"⁷⁵

In 1861, A. Korsakov wrote that his motivation in publishing his notes on the siege and fall of Kars was to recall to memory the heroism of the besiegers, "strong and brave, who through their labour, and in many cases their blood, made it possible for a Russian heart to breathe once more lightly and freely."⁷⁶ Meanwhile Major-General Likhutin was clearly bitter about the way in which the campaign against

74. Shtabs-kapitan Cherkesov, "Blokada Karsa v 1855 godu [The blockade of Kars in 1855]," *Sbornik sochinenii ofitserov Nikolaevskoi Akademii SPb*, (1862), kn. 1, 25.

75. Cherkesov, "Blokada Karsa," 134.

76. A. Korsakov, "Vospominaniia o Karse," *Russkii Vestnik*, 34 (1861), 337–338.

Kars had been dismissed as a side-show, as well as the loss of its principal prize in the treaty negotiations.⁷⁷

In 1876, a year before war with the Ottomans broke out yet again, the staff of the Caucasus Military District began publication of *Kavkazskii Sbornik*, a military orientalist journal on the ethnography, peoples and culture of the Caucasus. The cover of this very first issue (fig.4) bore the image not of any of Russia's own Caucasian possessions, but of the fortress of Kars—symbolic of the Caucasian corps' frustration at the decision to return the fortress to the Ottomans at the end of the Crimean War, and of its continued tantalising impregnability.

The illustration referred to another memoir of the campaign of 1855, by Prince Dondukov Korsakov, who opened the piece by remembering how

The conclusion of peace in Paris had a heavy impact on the hearts of the Caucasian Corps. At a stroke the diplomat's pen had destroyed the fruits of our three-year glorious struggle in Asia Minor, all traces of our weapons and our blood before Kars.⁷⁸

In his conclusion he waxed even more lyrical:

Thus ended our campaign of 1855 in Asiatic Turkey. An extensive field of military operations would have opened up before the Caucasian Corps the following year—only then would then would we have been able to appreciate the full weighty significance of the fall of Kars! The keys of this stronghold had opened the doors of all Asia Minor. It would have been difficult to predict where our triumphant banners might have halted! The peace treaty concluded in Paris closed these doors to us for a long time.⁷⁹

As it turned out Dondukov-Korsakov and his readers did not have long to wait: the following year Kars would fall to the Russians for the third and final time.

The Third Russian Siege and Capture of Kars: 1877

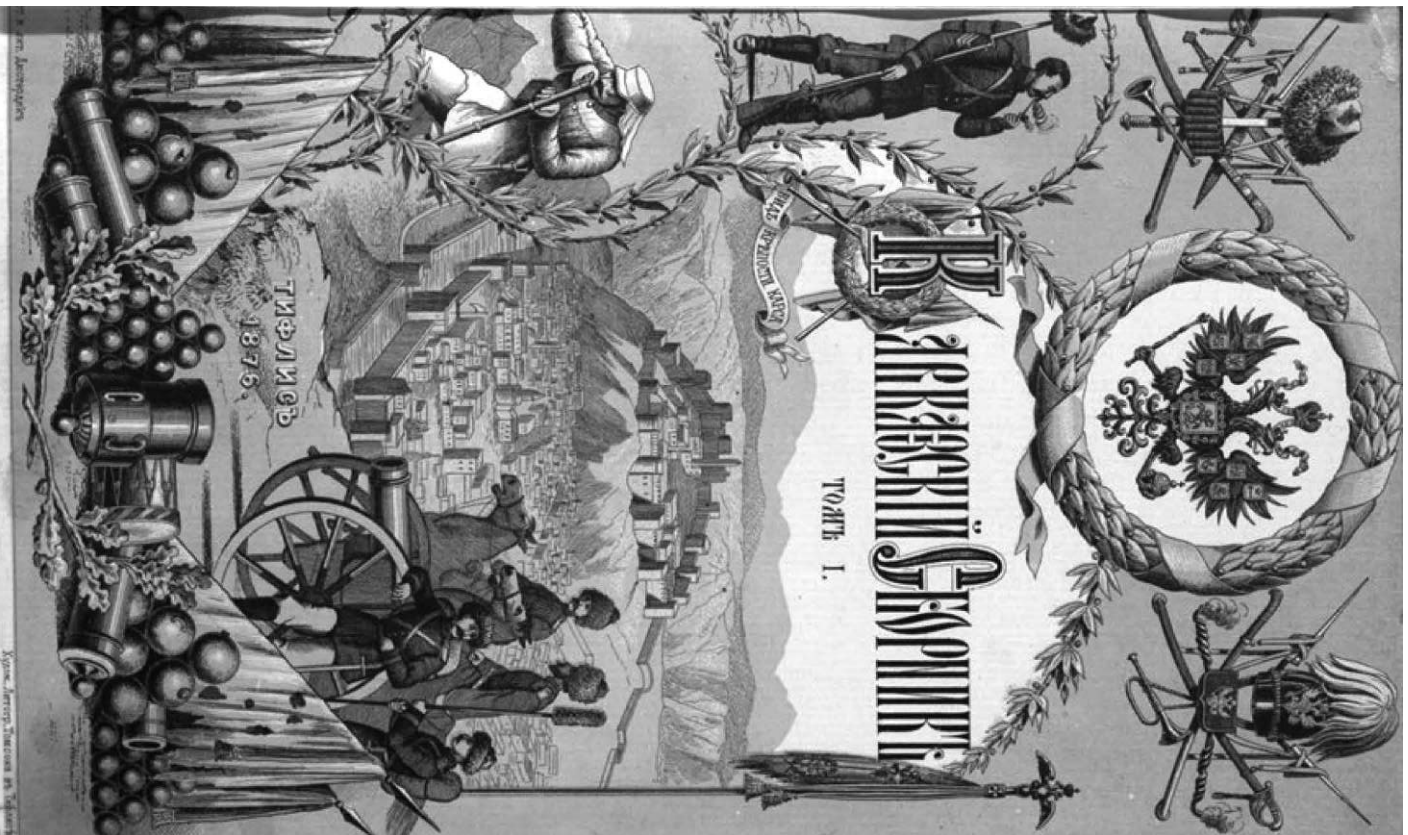
The next Russo-Turkish war broke out in April 1877, after the “Bulgarian horrors” of 1876. Unlike the Crimean War, European public opinion and the French and British governments did not actively support the Ottomans. While there were still some British advisers in the navy, and Valentine Baker Pasha and other European officers served with the Balkan army, there were almost no European officers in Kars in this

77. General-Maior M. Likhutin, *Russkie v Aziatskoi Turtsii v 1854–1855 godakh* [The Russians in Asiatic Turkey in 1854–1855] (SPb.: Tip. “Obschestvennaia pol'za”, 1863), 444–445.

78. Kniaz' A. Dondukov-Korsakov, “Vospominaniia o Kampanii 1855 g. v Aziatskoi Turtsii [Reminiscences of the Campaign of 1855 in Asiatic Turkey],” *Kavkazskii Sbornik*, No.1. (Tiflis: Tip. Shtaba Kavkazskogo Voennogo Okruga, 1876), 289–368, here 289.

79. Dondukov-Korsakov, “Vospominaniia o Kampanii 1855 g.,” 367–368.

Fig.4 *Kavkazskii Sbornik* (1876) No.1



war. As before, the Danube or Balkan front was the priority, where international opinion soon became fixated on the gallant siege of Plevna.⁸⁰ Meanwhile Kars was once again the primary Russian target on the Caucasian-Asia Minor front. Its defences had by then undergone a further partial modernization, with a number of new fortresses on the right and left banks of the Kars-cay, and at least 300 positioned artillery pieces (fig.5).⁸¹

Fig.5 Plan of the fortifications of Kars (1877)
Gippius, *Osady i shturm kreposti Karsa v 1877 g.*



80. This is reflected in the European memoir literature, which for the 1855 siege is extensive, but for 1877 non-existent. Instead, we have Captain F.W. von Herbert, *The Defence of Plevna, 1877. Written by one who took part in it* (London, 1895) & Charles Ryan, *Under the Red Crescent. Adventures of an English Surgeon with the Turkish Army at Plevna and Erzeroum, 1877-78* (London: John Murray, 1897) although as the title suggests the latter did also serve briefly in Anatolia.

81. Allen & Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields*, 201.

Ottoman strategy was, as before, to defend fortresses on both fronts, while Russian strategy was offensive. The commander of the Russian Caucasus army was Grand Duke Mikhail Nikolaevich, Alexander II's brother, while the commander of the active army before Kars was General Mikhail Loris-Melikov, an officer of Armenian origin who had served as a colonel during the Crimean War on this front. Subordinate to him were a number of other Caucasian generals, of whom Tergukasov and Lazarev were also of Armenian origin, while General Geiman (Heimann), one of the most active Russian commanders, was of German Jewish origin. The commander of the Ottoman 4th army based in Erzurum was Ahmed Muhtar Pasha. He had graduated from the new military academy of the Tanzimat era and gained his fighting experience in Montenegro and Yemen against local insurgents. Ismail Hakkı Pasha of the local Kurdish feudal nobility was governor of Erzurum and commander of the Bayezid corps. Throughout the campaign he would send telegrams directly to Sultan Abdulhamid, without informing Ahmed Muhtar Pasha. Since Ismail Hakkı was a protégé of Sultan Abdulhamid, Ahmed Muhtar could not remove him from his position.

In 1877, Ottoman non-Muslims still were not admitted into military service, paying instead a tax. Among the Muslims, the *ulama* was exempt from military service and most of the Kurdish tribes, such as those of Dersim or Kars, did not send recruits and did not even recognize Ottoman authority.⁸² There was rivalry and intrigues between the graduates of military schools and the non-schooled officers in the Ottoman army. Out of the roughly 20 thousand officers, only 1,600 were professionally educated and only 132 of them were staff officers.⁸³ The tactical and operational unit of the army was the battalion, and regiments and divisions did not function well.⁸⁴ As usual, most of the Ottoman troops were either new recruits, or *redif* (reserve) soldiers, or irregulars.

Russia on the other hand had a larger population and a larger recruitment base, and since the Crimean War had seen its own military reforms and improvements in officer training overseen by War Minister Dmitrii Miliutin. The Russian officer class of the Caucasus army remained better-prepared for war than most Ottoman officers, as it had been in 1828 and 1855. While the Russian army employed Cossack troops as well as North Caucasian, Georgian, Armenian and Kurdish militia, the Ottoman army also had its Kurdish, Laz, Karapapak and North Caucasian militias, as well as a former general of the Russian army, the Muslim Ossetian Musa Kundukhov.⁸⁵ Telegraph lines had reached near Kars, but its advantages were offset

82. Report from Major-General Dukhovskoi to headquarters of the Caucasus Army, Erzurum 05/061878, RG VIA, f. 15322, op. 1, d. 18, l. 81.

83. Mesut Uyar, "Balık Baştan Kokar: 1877–78 Osmanlı-Rus Savaşının Osmanlı Komutanları ve Savaşın İdaresi [The Fish Stinks from the Head: Ottoman Commanders of the 1877-1878 Ottoman-Russian War and the Administration of the War]," *Cumhuriyet Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 36, Güz (2022), 608.

84. *Ibid.*, 615.

85. On Kundukhov, who left Russian service and emigrated to Ottoman territory in 1864 with 23,000 North Caucasian Muslims, mostly Chechens, see Jeronim Perovic, *From Conquest to Deportation. The North Caucasus under Russian Rule* (London: Hurst & Co, 2018), 61–74.

by Abdulhamid's ability to interfere with military operations and send orders from Istanbul to local commanders on both the Balkan and Caucasus fronts, skipping over their superiors.⁸⁶ Abdulhamid also made appointments to all important military positions not according to professional qualifications but according to his perception of personal loyalty. Thus, as *Seraskier* (war minister), he appointed first Redif Pasha, an unschooled and corrupt officer of dubious ability, and then Mahmud Celaledin Pasha, another ignorant and incompetent man, whose only merit was being husband to Abdulhamid's sister. Chief of the general staff was another incompetent officer, Mahmud Mesut Pasha. Apart from the *seraskeriat*, Abdulhamid created three military councils, these councils came to compete and further increase chaos in the hierarchy at the top.

Ahmed Muhtar Pasha did not repeat the mistakes of previous Ottoman defenders of Kars and did not allow his troops to be confined within the fortress. Instead, he fought the Russian army in the open field away from Kars, and his outnumbered forces were victorious the battles of Halyas, Zivin, Yahniler and Gedikler around Kars before his great defeat at the battle of Alacadağ on 15 October 1877, at which 12,000 prisoners and twenty-two guns were taken, to only 1,500 casualties on the Russian side.⁸⁷ In the battles around Kars, many Ottoman pashas were killed or wounded in offensive action for the first time on the Caucasus front. This indicated an improvement in the Ottoman officer class, though many Ottoman officers were still incompetent. Ahmed Muhtar Pasha and his remaining 10,000 troops were finally driven behind the shelter of fortifications, this time at Erzurum, which the Russians failed to storm despite its lack of modern defences. Baulked of this prize, Loris-Melikov turned his attention to Kars—as Allen & Muratoff put it “For the Russians the capture of the fortress could be the only *logical* conclusion to the campaign of 1877” (emphasis added), but the logic was undoubtedly more symbolic than strategic.⁸⁸ The Russian force that laid siege to Kars in November 1877 was about 30,000 strong, double the number of the city's demoralised garrison led by Huseyin Hami Pasha, while the Russian troops were regulars with recent battle experience. Nevertheless, they would not have things all their own way. During the initial Russian reconnaissance around the Kars fortifications in May 1877, a sapper officer named Zezeman reported:

As soon as we set off, a signal was heard from the Turks, and from a small battery, to the right of the Tik, a cannon shot was heard and the shell flew far over our heads. Once again ridicule that the Turks do not know how to shoot. The second shell did not reach us, the third fell just in the middle of one unit. All 4 men fell, and I thought they were killed, but after that everyone got up. Geiman called over a sapper non-commissioned officer, who was in this unit, and asked

86. One officer, Izzet Pasha Keçecizade, openly accused Abdulhamid of interfering with military decisions from his palace in Istanbul. See Izzet Fuad Pacha, *Les occasions perdues, la campagne turco-russe de 1877–1878*, (P.s: Chapelot, 1900).

87. Allen & Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields*, 170-186.

88. *Ibid.*, 201.

him: “Are you a yid or something, that you are afraid of firing?” “Not at all your Excellency,” he answered, “but the company commander taught us that if a shell falls close by, then we should lie down.” Meanwhile, all the other fortifications on the Shorokh Heights opened fire. Shells fell all around us, and it became a deadly spot. It was clear that the guns were aimed precisely at us commanders, and in addition to everything, the Turkish cavalry rode out and opened rifle fire at us from a long distance. Our troops remained silent, and only one officer fired a trial shot. Geiman ordered us not to huddle together and got angry when we broke ranks.⁸⁹

Geiman’s own Jewish origin lends a certain piquancy to what otherwise seems like a characteristic expression of the ingrained antisemitism of the Russian officer class, but more importantly this episode indicated that, as in 1855, the quality of Ottoman gunnery was very high. Once Kars was fully invested in late October 1877, the Russians brought up 48 heavy siege guns of their own, and during the first half of November, all the redoubts of Kars were subject to heavy bombardment, directed principally at the fortresses to the South of the city as it was hoped this would have the maximum effect on the civilian population. According to one inhabitant who crossed the lines to the Russians, this was indeed the case:

Takma Suleiman, a resident of Kars, arrived from Kars on the evening of the 18th and reported the following [...]: our shells are inflicting enormous devastation on the city; the Pasha’s house (Saray) was badly damaged. In the fortress, in the citadel, in the Su-Kakus quarter (near Chilag-Tapasa), many houses were destroyed. The population is in great alarm, especially with the fires produced by our shelling. From morning to evening, the Ferik’s apartment is besieged by a crowd demanding the surrender of the city. Huseyn Hami-Pasha yesterday conveyed to the population through Huseyin Bek that on Friday, that is, October 21, he would give a definite answer regarding his course of action in the event that the Russians continued to bombard Kars.⁹⁰

Similar reports on the terror of the city’s inhabitants and their repeated pleas to Huseyin Hami Pasha to abandon military resistance flowed in over the following month, but Kars did not surrender. Instead, the city fell to a daring night assault on the 5th/17th November, following an unplanned but successful night attack by six companies of Kutaisi grenadiers on one of the strongest outlying forts, Hafiz Tabia, which persuaded Loris-Melikov that the feat could be completed on a larger scale. Although Russian attacks from the South were beaten off, those from the North and East were successful, and by daybreak the Russians were in control of the whole of the right bank of the Kars-çay including the citadel and the main part of the town, prompting a Turkish retreat. In contrast to 1855, the Russian army suffered only

89. Col. Zezeman, “Oblozhenie Karsa [Siege of Kars],” 18/05/1877, RGVIA, f. 15322, op. 1, d. 50, l. 12 ob.

90. “Doneseniia o situatsii v Karse [Report on the situation in Kars],” 18/10/1877, RGVIA, f. 15322, op. 1, d. 42, l. 11.

2,000 casualties, although a high proportion of these were officers, to 2,500 dead and 17,000 prisoners on the Turkish side.⁹¹ It was an emotional and symbolic moment for those who survived—on the day after the assault Captain N.I. Speranskii wrote to his wife that Kars, the “stronghold of strongholds” (*tverdynia iz tverdyn*), had fallen.⁹² Kars had been taken once again—would it remain Russian this time?

During the peace negotiations for Berlin Congress in 1878, Russian war minister Dmitrii Miliutin reported to Emperor Alexander II that the province of Kars was worthless for Russia because it did not have roads and had an “uncivilized (*malokul’turnoe*) population.” In his view, Kars could be given back to Ottomans, whereas the port of Batum should be kept.⁹³ His advice would be disregarded—Kars would indeed prove a fiscal burden on the empire, and certainly did not render the frontier any more secure but giving it up a third time was out of the question—forty years of Tsarist rule awaited. During that period the city’s population became overwhelmingly Armenian, though this was not a result of deliberate Russian policy. The first Russian governor of Kars, General Frankini, wrote in his annual report for the year 1879, that if Russia wanted to create an Armenian state, Kars would be the ideal place:

Kars province is called Little Armenia, but it would be more correct to call this region the centre, the heart of ancient Armenia, indeed there is no corner here where one could not discover historical reminders of ancient Armenia. The very capital of the ancient Armenian state is located within Kars oblast, the place of ancient Ani still contains the ruins of Armenian palaces and cathedrals, and not far from Ani, in the monastery of Kosha-vank, on the bank of Arpachay, travellers can see the hall where the Armenian princes and nobles met under the chairmanship of the king himself. Thus, if there is a country in which the Armenian national feeling can best be exalted and take the most sublime direction, it is without doubt the Kars oblast.⁹⁴

However, Russian policy on the Armenian question remained ambiguous, and would enter a much more negative phase after 1896 when Prince G.S. Golitsyn became head of the Caucasus Administration—Frankini’s vision would not be realised, and Armenian nationalism was increasingly seen as a threat rather than an asset by the Russian authorities.⁹⁵ By the beginning of the 20th century, Kars had become a centre of

91. V. Gippius, *Osady i shturm kreposti Karsa v 1877 g. Istoricheskii ocherk* [The siege and storming of the fortress of Kars in 1877. A Historical Account] (SPb.: Tip. In Skoropokhodova, 1885), 460–510; Allen & Muratoff, *Caucasian Battlefields*, 204–210.

92. N.I. Speranskii, “Pis’mo Speranskoi N.I. 6 noiabria 1877 g.” [N.I. Speranskii’s letter of the 6th November 1877], *Rossiiskii Arkhiv*, vol. V (M.: Studia TRITE, 1994), 144.

93. Sh.V. Megrelidze, *Zakavkaz’e v Russko-Turetskoi voine* [Transcaucasia in the Russo-Turkish War] (Tbilisi: Izd. “Metsniereba,” 1972), 185.

94. *Godovoi otchet voennogo gubernatora Karsskoi oblasti o sostoianii vverennoi emu oblasti za 1879 god*, [Annual report of the military governor of Kars Province on the condition of the province entrusted to him for 1879] (Kars: Oblastnaia tipografiia, 1880), 57–58.

95. In 1903 Golitsyn would be wounded in an attempted assassination by the Armenian Socialist Hunchak party. See Stephen Badalyan Riegg, *Russia’s Entangled Embrace. The Tsarist Empire and the Armenians 1801–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 195–221.

Armenian cross-border revolutionary activities against the Ottoman Empire, and figured prominently in the Armenian nationalist imagination, where it was likened to a bride (*hars*) of Armenia.⁹⁶ However neither the Russian imperial nor the Armenian nationalist vision of Kars would survive the destruction and genocide of the First World War.

Conclusion

In 1880 Modest Mussorgsky would compose a ceremonial march with “oriental” themes entitled “The Capture of Kars,” possibly based on Turkish tunes he had transcribed from the journalist Krestovskii, who served as a correspondent during the Russo-Turkish War.⁹⁷ As this suggests, Kars loomed large in Russian imperial imagination in the 19th century. It was considered by many as the key to Ottoman Anatolia, a stronghold that was impossible to bypass just because it stood there. The Russian biographer of General Paskevich wrote:

Kars, whose name resounded so loudly in the victorious chronicles of the Russian army, always seemed impregnable not so much because of its man-made structures as because of the steep heights that curved up around it from the north, west and east.⁹⁸

Echoing Murav’ev, Prince Vladimir Meshcherskii, a journalist and observer of the Russian army, likened Kars to “that Asiatic Gibraltar on land.” He wrote the following in his diary after the fall of Kars in 1877:

I don’t remember ever having to go through so many feelings and thoughts in one day. When everything around me died down, in this silence, one after another, all events, faces, pictures, sounds began to come to life. The giant of Kars appeared before my eyes even more clearly than in reality, and the thought that from now on it was ours and that our soldiers would soon find a warm shelter in it was felt like great happiness. What should the Grand Duke now experience after so many trials and after this terrible night? I imagined the joy of the Tsar... And how Moscow will rejoice, Petersburg, Russia! Finally, they will say, we are finished with this Kars! But will they understand anywhere what Kars is and what the Caucasian troops have taken? Once in a hundred years can such an enormous military feat happen.⁹⁹

96. Rubina Peroomian, “Kars in the Armenian Liberation Movement,” in Hovannisian, ed., *Armenian Kars and Ani*, 245–272.

97. Adalyat Issiyeva, *Representing Russia’s Orient. From Ethnography to Art Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 202.

98. General Scherbatov, *General-feldmarshal kniaz’ Paskevich: ego zhizn’ i deiatel’nost’* [General-field marshal Prince Paskevich: his life and activities] (SPb.: Tip. R. Golike, 1894), vol. III, 113–114.

99. V.P. Meshcherskii, *Kavkazskii Putevoi Dnevnik* [Caucasian travel diary], (SPb.: Tipografiia G.E. Blagosvetlova, 1878), 271–272, 288.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Russian army of the Caucasus army developed an obsession with Kars that defied strategic logic. In all the Russo-Turkish wars of the 19th century, the Russian command thought of first capturing Kars before moving towards Erzurum. However, Ottoman forces in Kars could only ever play a defensive role. On each occasion the Russian army could have captured Erzurum, the most important commercial and communication centre in the region, while bypassing Kars, although distance and a lack of roads posed significant logistical obstacles.

In November 1910, a monument to Russian soldiers who fell during the four assaults on Kars in the 19th century (it included that of 1807) was inaugurated with elaborate military ceremonies in Kars (fig.6).¹⁰⁰

Fig.6 N.N. Murav'ev and M.T. Loris-Melikov on the 1910 Kars Monument (now in the Istanbul Military Museum – photograph by C. Badem)



The grave of General Nesvetaev, the Russian hero of 1807, was transferred from Tiflis to Kars. Russian General Vasilii Potto, head of the military historical section of the Caucasus army general staff and author of the standard Tsarist history of the Caucasus wars, published a brochure celebrating this event and the numerous conquests of Kars. Potto blamed Nesselrode for giving Kars back in 1829 despite Paskevich's personal request to include the pashalik of Kars within Russian Empire.¹⁰¹ He put forward what had become the standard justification for the 'storming' of Kars

100. Cast in bronze, with portraits of Paskevich, Murav'ev and Loris-Melikov, it survives in a somewhat battered state in the Istanbul Military Museum.

101. V.A. Potto, *Karsskiiia torzhestva v 1910 godu i chetyre shturma Karsa* [Kars celebrations in 1910 and the four stormings of Kars] (Tiflis: Izdanie Voennno-Istoricheskago Otdela Shtaba Kavkazskago voennago okruga, 1911), 64.

in 1855, in the process eliding the fact that it was not Murav'ev's assault which delivered the fortress into Russian hands:

The fall of Kars was of great importance in the course of the Crimean war: it erased the fall of Sevastopol from the memory of our enemies and could not but have an impact on the scales of the congress which was reckoning our Crimean losses. At the conclusion of peace, the allies returned Sevastopol to us, and in return we handed over Kars back to the Turkish government. Kars, like a magical treasure, did not fall into our hands.¹⁰²

As if to underline that the importance of Kars was more symbolic than strategic, Potto then continued:

Since the last assault Kars has become a Russian fortress. The Turkish names of its forts are being erased from people's memory and replaced by new names—the names of the three Russian leaders, who marked themselves by their valiant exploits in the capture of the Asian stronghold.¹⁰³

This was hubris – just eight years later, under the terms of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, Kars and Ardahan would be returned, first to the Ottoman Empire and subsequently to the Turkish Republic. Although local Armenian *Dashnak* forces attempted to retain control after the Russian evacuation, they could not hold the fortress and the city against the Turkish army, which reoccupied them in October 1920. A full history of the forty years which Kars spent under Russian rule or its fate in Republican Turkey lies beyond the scope of this article—but it is notable that it was one of the only portions of former Tsarist territory which not even Stalin was able to reclaim. In this respect its singularity and impregnability to Russian power would be prolonged into the twentieth century.

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102. *Ibid.*, 81.

103. *Ibid.*, 99.