



Let Our Fame Be Great: Journeys Among the Defiant People of the Caucasus

Oliver Bullough

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Two centuries ago, the Russians pushed out of the cold north towards the Caucasus Mountains, the range that blocked their access to Georgia, Turkey, Persia and India. The Caucasus had to be conquered and, for the highlanders, life would never be the same again. This title features author's journeys who intended to hear the stories of the conquest.

Let Our Fame Be Great: Journeys Among the Defiant People of the Caucasus Details

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From Reader Review Let Our Fame Be Great: Journeys Among the Defiant People of the Caucasus for online ebook

Niklas Braun says

One of the best travel documentaries/history narratives I've ever read. It really sheds light on a criminally underreported region, set of conflicts, and group of people who have endured countless trials and suffering under Russian hands.

Danusha Goska says

In the afternoon of April 15, 2013, I was listening to the radio. An announcer interrupted the broadcast to report that there had been a blast at the Boston Marathon. He was careful not to attribute the bombing to any one group – because we are all afraid of appearing to stereotype one group as terrorists. Indeed, he insisted, the Boston blast might have been caused by a ruptured gas pipe. After Chechen refugees Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev were identified as the Boston Marathon bombers, one of my students said to me, "See? Everyone thought it was Muslim terrorists. But now it turns out it was Russians!"

My student should read Oliver Bullough's "Let Our Fame Be Great: Journeys Among the Defiant People of the Caucasus." So should many people.

"Let Our Fame Be Great" is a heartbreakingly informative, recommended book. I was often in tears while reading it. I'm very glad I learned what Bullough had to teach. LOFBG is a travelogue through the history, literature, and current events of the Caucasus. This little-known corner of the world should be better known.

I have Circassian and Armenian friends. I've been to Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey, three countries bordering the Black Sea. I remember reading about the Russian destruction of Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, in the New York Times. Even so, I knew virtually nothing about the material Bullough introduces in his book.

The Caucasus is a spit of land between the Black and the Caspian Seas, between Russia to the north and Turkey and Iran to the south. When Turkey was Europe's "sick man" and its power was declining, Russia moved south to fill the vacuum. Russia wanted access to the Black Sea, because its own ports freeze over in winter. Through brute force, Russia attempted to control or even eliminate the scattered Muslim ethnic groups living in the Caucasus. Russia did this as a czarist empire, as the Soviet Union, and as post-Soviet Russia.

Bullough depicts the Russians in the Caucasus behaving, more or less, as American settlers behaved toward the Native Americans. We want your land, and we will do what we have to do to you to get your land.

Another comparison: historian Anne Applebaum compared what the Russians did to the Caucasus to what the Nazis did to Poland.

Bullough divides his book up into chapters devoted to various Caucasus ethnic groups: Circassians, Mountain Turks, and Chechens. For each group, he works through literature going back hundreds of years, historical accounts, travelogues, state documents, and contemporary accounts. This is a massive amount of

material, reduced to brief excerpts.

With the Circassians, for example, Bullough quotes literature written by Russian authors like Ivan Turgenev, travel accounts by British representatives toying with the idea of aiding the Circassians against the Russians, quotes from Russian military leaders attacking the Circassians, and encounters with modern-day Circassians living in diaspora in Israel.

Bullough has a gift for selecting particularly heart-rending quotes, and he uses many of these quotes as chapter titles: "The Caucasus Mountains are sacred to me," "Extermination alone would keep them quiet," "The Circassians do not appear on this list," "Liquidate the bandit group," "It was all for nothing," and "I have become no one."

One anecdote Bullough recounts tells of one Caucasus woman, Khozemat Khabilayeva, who, as a child, was part of a Soviet-ordered mass deportation of her homeland. Her dog, Khola, tried to save her family, and he met with a sad fate that Khabilayeva, an old woman now, wept over, decades after his death. There are many such stories in this book, the individual droplets that add up to an ocean wave of history.

Because I was so unfamiliar with this history, I did question if Bullough was too sympathetic to the Caucasus peoples, and too hard on the Russians. Bullough, though, includes actual quotes by Russian leaders voicing genocidal intent toward Caucasus people. He cites one Russian leader who decorated his home with the decapitated heads of Circassians.

Too, Bullough does report on unappealing aspects of Caucasus culture. Circassians, for example, had the custom of selling their own children into slavery. So many Circassian daughters were sold into sex slavery that the reputation of the beautiful Circassian spread all the way to PT Barnum's sideshow. Bullough describes the 2004 Belsan hostage crisis as a complete horror.

I compared what I know of Russian behavior to my own ethnic group, Poles. In Poland, czarist Russia and Soviet Russia deported massive numbers of people, redrew maps, criminalized the identity of oppressed people, executed large numbers of people in order to terrorize populations. Russia, it seems, did to the Caucasus what it did to the Poles. Bullough's account is all too believable.

Russia plans to hold the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, one site of its genocide against the Circassians. A Caucasus terrorist leader, Doku Umarov, issued a threat against these games. Terrorism is wrong. The Sochi games should be protested, in peaceful, educational, and solidarity-building ways.

Bullough includes photos of the bones of Circassian refugees found lying in the dirt in Akchakale, Turkey. Circassian activists should take these bones from Turkey, by boat across the Black Sea, retracing the route their ancestors took, and bury them in Sochi, with the stated goal of building a genocide monument in Sochi. They should film the entire trip. No doubt the Russians would attempt to stop them. Their peaceful protest would educate the world about their history.

I wonder, after reading LOFBG, why no one seems to care about Russia's human rights abuses against Caucasus Muslims. Bullough writes of Khasan Bibulatov, a Chechen man who was horribly tortured by Russians. Zarema Muzhakoyeva is one of the most pathetic human beings I've ever read about – her life story is right out of an over-the-top Dickens orphanage. She gave up her suicide bomb mission, cooperated with the Russian police, and was still jailed for twenty years. I wonder if so little attention is paid to victims of Russian oppression in the Caucasus because Russia committed many of these crimes as a communist government, and leftists don't want to remind the world that communists were the last century's most prolific

murderers.

Paulo Jan says

Bullough deserved a Nobel Prize for his book - a complete masterpiece describing the genocides perpetrated by Russian empire and its successors in the North Caucasus. The account is so gripping because of the level of details..A book that makes us think , reflect , remember and feel what our world needs the most : compassion. It doesn't mean pity , but being able to get involved with a history that is also ours , and from every living person.

Merna says

If everyone were to read this book, the genocides of the Caucasus would've been recognised since its publication.

The book covers the genocides that happened in the Caucasus with more focus on the wars in Chechnya (makes sense, since they are more recent and the author was alive and a reporter then) and written scripts of interviews with the peoples living in diaspora.

Very convenient to those who are not of Caucasian (people of the Caucasus) decent, as they get to know about the history and nature of the areas. But not quite enough for those of Caucasian ethnicity, as we are living in diaspora, so we know how it is exactly to be so far from a homeland that's no longer yours. I would have like to know more about the history of my homeland and how my people who are still living there see life as Russians and not of their nationality.

Helen says

This 2010 book by a British journalist attempts to bring some balance to a subject that most would summarily dismiss: The issue of Chechens, and other groups of Muslims native to the Caucasus. Since the book was written, the Chechens have become indelibly linked to the Boston Marathon bombing - moreover, the current wave of ISIS-inspired killings has increased the horror with which the jihadis are regarded. And so, it is an effort to consider the story of these people outside the context of the horrors they've perpetrated on Westerners world-wide, especially in Russia, but also in Africa, Asia & N. America, and obviously, in Europe. There's nothing that can excuse the carnage, or the lower forms of extremism such as enslaving captives, and torture killings. So it is very difficult to read the backstory of what transpired in the Caucasus since the time of the Czar, given the present horrors. I think the author was trying to give a "balanced" "nuanced" look - trying to explain why the Chechens came to be violently opposed to outside rule, and so forth. But none of it rings true if the people supported leadership that engaged in vile actions like Beslan. Contrast that approach with the path of non-violence (Mandela, Gandhi, King): Which leaders are revered, in which countries were the outcomes positive, in which countries was a political settlement leading to power sharing possible, and so forth. There is no enlightened approach in terror tactics and constant warfare - the outcome invites violence, and those caught in the cross-fire flee, instead of trying to build their nation.

Yes, it was interesting to read about the clash of empires in the Caucasus from the time of the Czar, the Sultan, and the Shah - as the Russian, Ottoman, and Persian empires jostled and fought one another to conquer the myriad tribes of the mountain range. Each empire was expansionist and regarded the area as yet another territory to conquer. I'm not going to repeat what actually happened over the course of about 150 years - suffice it to say that the empires fought over the area, eventually Russia conquered the Caucasus, and determined to pacify the area, and there settle Russians - usually Cossacks. The culture clash could not have been more extreme - some of the mountain folks didn't even know of the concept of money. Barbarity and massacres were the sickening hallmarks of various campaigns. Eventually Sufism took hold, and charismatic leaders emerged, who used religion as a way to fire up the rebels. This is a hallmark of jihadi wars elsewhere, down through history, such as the Mahdi in the Sudan. Nevertheless, Russia was determined to assert control over Russian territory and fighting was followed by mass deportations. Today, the fighting is followed by thousands fleeing to W. Europe. The problems with their assimilation into Polish, or Austrian society are described. We know that these problems - combined with the current sickening "success" of ISIS in holding some territory in the ME, have led to some of these refugees or emigrants turning to violence; we see the tragic and sickening results frequently these days. Unfortunately, many times they do not assimilate, or they may assimilate to some extent but then turn to a sickening despicable form of suicide, in a sickening bid to achieve "glory" according to an extremely destructive ideology.

As noted above, it is very difficult to read the book without remembering the tragic events since then. Thus, unfortunately, the conclusion is, maybe the current Russian policy of allowing a certain amount of autonomy, with local control delegated to a strongman, is the only way to assert control. Grozny is somewhat rebuilt, but the area is probably still dangerous by and large. Evidently, many Russians from the Caucasus have joined ISIS in the ME - that alone gives some insight into the social and political climate in the area.

Unfortunately, it's not possible for me to buy into the author's viewpoint on this area. The book is actually very interesting and well-written; I did learn a lot about the history of the region. However, the occurrences since the book was written, make it impossible for me to feel any "sympathy" for these people - as if the writer were back in the 80s, when some were sympathetic of the Afghans mujaheddin after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. It is now 30 years later - the area under discussion, the Caucasus, is part of Russia. It does have some autonomy. There is no way I can feel any "sympathy" for these people.

Gary Brecht says

This book purports to be not simply a history but a travelogue as well. I believe it succeeds as both. If you seek objectivity in your historical literature you will not find it here. Mr. Bullough is outspoken in his criticism of Russian intrusion into the Caucasus. His one-on-one interviews with a wide variety of descendants of the mountain tribes of the Caucasus lends an authenticity to the story he tells.

For me, this was an eye-opening account of a region about which I knew little. Now I have a greater understanding of the history of this forgotten part of the world. Moreover, I can now read about the Chechen revolution and more fully understand the roots of the conflict. Like America's history of dislocating its indigent population, similar to that of Australia's and South Africa's, the story of the Caucasus tribes' fight against Russian and Soviet hegemony is a sad one with an inevitable ending.

Chris says

Before picking up this book I must admit I had very little awareness of this region. My only real memory is in relation to the Chechen people via the brief snapshots of news that have stuck in my mind.

Bullough is obviously well travelled; his knowledge is deep and the accounts of the displaced peoples are very intimate. The horrors these people suffered are told in a part history/part travelogue manner that is easy to read. There is obviously only one side of events on display here, but when the stories are coming from direct descendants it really hammers the message home.

I enjoyed the first section of the novel immensely. Bullough really brought to life the culture and History of the Circassian people. At times I felt the pacing of the novel suffered, section three in particular seemed to drag a little.

Despite this I have gained a large insight into the region, and how the history in turn fed the future as a direct consequence of their sufferings. There is a lot to absorb here; from the hidden history of Sochi to the plight of the Chechens. Bullogh's work is a worthy read, and keeps alive the legacy of these communities that once lived as neighbours in the mountains, but now are scattered across the globe in isolated colonies.

Paulo Jan says

Bullough deserved a Nobel Prize for his book - a complete masterpiece describing the genocides perpetrated by Russian empire and its successors in the North Caucasus. The account is so gripping because of the level of details..A book that makes us think , reflect , remember and feel what our world needs the most : compassion. It doesn't mean pity , but being able to get involved with a history that is also ours , and from every living person.

Kiwiflora says

After reading the novel 'A Constellation of Vital Phenomena' a month or so ago, which is about the wars Russia brutally and relentlessly waged against the people of Chechnya, I realised how little, in fact nothing, that I knew about this region. Sitting here in the southernmost regions of the world, on an island surrounded by water I have no comprehension at all of being surrounded by other countries/nations/states. The closest I get to all that is my neighbours. I felt after reading that novel, in light of Russia hosting the Winter Olympics in Sochi, and in the recent goings on in Ukraine/Crimea that it would be very useful to know a little more about yet another hot spot in our world. I was reading some reviews for this book, and was reminded that those who set off bombs at last year's Boston Marathon were also from Chechnya.

Were my eyes opened in my reading of this book. Chechnya and Sochi are probably the only two places many people have heard of in this region of Europe. They are in the area of land known as the Caucasus Mountains which is a mountainous range part of Russia, separating the Black Sea from the Caspian Sea and by its rugged topography, effectively separating Russia from the countries south of the Caucasus - amongst others Turkey. This area of mountains has been fought over endlessly for hundreds of years between Russia, Turkey, and amongst the numerous and very diverse ethnic groups that inhabit these mountains. There is nothing pretty at all about any of it. Nothing. And it is likely to always be thus.

Oliver Bullough is a Welsh journalist who has developed a passionate interest in making sure that the many voices of the peoples of these regions are heard. From 1999 to 2006 he lived and worked in Russia for magazines, newspapers, and finally for Reuters. He saw first hand the ruthless efficiency with which the Russians dealt to the Chechens who were fighting for independence from Russia. He makes no apologies for the behaviour of the Chechens in their hostage taking tragedies of the Moscow movie theatre in 2002, and the Beslan school siege of 2004, but he does attempt to inform the reader as to the history of the whole region, the attempts by the Russians over the past centuries to control and wipe out by massacre or deportation whole populations and ethnic groups. The Black Sea resort of Sochi, for example, is the site of the wholesale massacre of the Circassian population in the mid-nineteenth century, or Stalin's wholesale evacuation of thousands and thousands of Karachais, Balkars, Chechens and Ingush to the desolate lands of Kazakhstan. Just to mention a few.

Bullough delves deep into historical material, manuscripts, he has travelled extensively through the area, speaking to those who were deported in the 1930s, those who were children and now elderly who survived the massacres and complete wiping out of their villages, those who have been victims of the wars of the last twenty or so years, those who are now economic refugees in Poland and Austria. This is a huge book, part travelogue, part history lesson, part current events. It is incredibly interesting, easy to read and short of going there, if you dare, will give you more knowledge and understanding of the land and the peoples than you could wish for. None of it is pretty, Putin is no different really from his appalling predecessors at suppressing resistance, and with the latest trouble in Ukraine, the future looks pretty hopeless for those who continue to live there and defy Russia. This is pretty depressing of course, but only makes it that much more important that we read and learn about these areas before they disappear forever.

Yasmin says

Balanced historical and contemporaneous account of the continuing struggles of the peoples of The Caucasus. Generously peppered with personal accounts too. Worth while read into the experiences of these oft forgotten peoples.

Scottnshana says

It used to be, back in the day, that we learned about exotic lands from intrepid travelers who rolled through them and took notes. I've read a ton of books by guys sitting in comfortable university libraries (and I include myself in this number) about Chechnya; it's journalists like Oliver Bullough (and Thomas Goltz) who actually go into these former Soviet badlands that are giving us the straight poop on what's going on there today. You'll never hear me defending the two Chechens who attacked the Boston Marathon this year, but Bullough, in "Let Our Fame Be Great" helps elucidate why the Chechen diaspora is so pissed off and how putting a generation of 15-30 year old unemployed males from these displaced cultures into Western countries and expecting smooth assimilation might be problematic. In his travels around the Caucasus,

Turkey, and the Middle East, the author also looks at diaspora communities expelled by the Russian empire as it moved southward, comparing these shattered cultures to "a pot that had been smashed, and then tumbled around in a river for a hundred years. The shards would still match in colour and pattern, but their edges would have been knocked about and chipped and scarred and encrusted. It would not be possible to slot them back together." He speaks to Chechens and Circassians who tried to go home and couldn't slip back into place as their homelands underwent violent change after 1989. He examines the literary and military figures the Russians sent to conquer these lands and the legends (and facts) about the indigenous tribesmen who led the resistance to this push. I think Bullough has done a fine job here; his prose is readable, these interconnected events (from the Seventeenth Century to today) flow together well, and he has made the narrative interesting by actually going to the places he writes about and digging around (he actually finds the bones of Circassians who died on a Turkish beach during a particularly nasty 1864 migration). It's thorough, well-written, and interesting. Recommend.

Clivemichael says

Extensive dedicated investigative reportage. Chilling, insightful exposé.

"By this stage, the Chechens were likely to have known they were on their own. The Russian network of 'filtration camps', 'the cleansings', the bombings, the arrests, the disappearances had created a climate of horror in their homeland that no amount of hypocritical statement from Western powers could begin to outweigh."

"The law-abiding, orderly Austrian system could not be more alien to a Chechen man raised on the concept that ripping off the state was a duty and a pleasure. Visita Ibragimov was one such man....'It is beautiful to say that I am a patriot, but that word has required me to sacrifice all those who are close to me, this word causes problems for everyone. There is no longer a war between Russia and Chechnya. There are people in the resistance, there are people making money, there are people killing, there are other people. And I cannot take part in this, but it is hard to explain to my family that my moral principle means that I must cause them harm.' "

Hugh Miller says

Oliver Bullough takes you with him on his trip through history and geography of Chechnya. The word trip is an understatement, however calling it an adventure would be an affront to the Caucasus Mountain people. Chechens, Circassians, and Turks have lived under the heavy yoke of Russia without a proper recount of their plight. Small independent documentaries, news clippings, and little word of mouth has revealed little about this mysterious final region of tribal Caucasian people. It is a wonder stories such as the life of Imam Shamil haven't made their way into Western history books. I am thankful to Oliver for writing so beautifully about the mountain people of Southern Russia. Not only does his knowledge and personal reverence for this part of the world show through in the book, but he connects the present to the past in his current travels and interviews with key players who were there in both Chechen Wars and Beslan. It is of great personal interest to me to compare and contrast my experience in the Hindu Kush to this region, as well. You should read this book!

Xavier Quintana says

I first saw this book in a hostel in Tbilisi, and after skimming through it I decided to pick it up once I got home.

First of all, I would recommend you will enjoy this book a lot more if you have prior interest in Russian/Soviet history and the Caucasus. Otherwise, things may be a bit difficult to follow.

That being said, *Let Our Fame Be Great* is an expertly researched, compelling chronicle of the struggles of a people that has so often been written off as a side show from events reaching from the Crimean War to the War on Terror. I initially expected it to be more of an ethnography of the different groups living in the region, and while these aspects are slightly touched on, this book focuses more on the bloody relationship they have shared with Russian imperialism since the time of Catherine the Great. The sources Bullough utilizes are both extensive and impressive, and his knowledge of Russian gives him access to primary sources, including Pushkin's poetry, old KGB files, and interviews with members of the Circassian diaspora in Israel which really allows this book to shine.

Let Our Fame Be Great is fairly dark. The stories of the Circassians and the Mountain Turks share similarities of the cruelties inflicted upon Native Americans, with the themes of one-sided conflicts and forced relocation repeating themselves time and time again. Things grow even more bleak in the chapters detailing the experiences of the Chechens. Bullough does a fantastic job of cultivating understanding for a group of people that have been simply written off as terrorists from a backward part of the world. If you're considering reading this book, you're probably aware that there's more to Chechnya than that, and this book does a great job at explaining how this 'rebranding' has been allowed to occur.

In sum, it's a grim, necessary read.

Geoff says

It's amazing to pick up a book from a random stack and find it so intriguing. This is one. It's all about the Caucasus's Mountains, with the ever constant battle between Russia and Islam. There is where holocausts got started. The story of slave trade of white children to the Turks, and the constant battle in Chechena. Shamil as a hero and a folk hero, and a Russian dignitary. The subtitle is the Journey among the defiant people of the Caucuses, and the author makes it real. I just loved this, but it was hard to get started, but once I did, I couldn't put it down. This land is truly on Huntington fault line, and will continue to be. The parallels with Bosnia are intriguing, and you wonder why it hasn't blow up even more. Fall 2011
