

The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus. By Bruce Grant. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009. xxi, 188 pp. Glossary. References. Index. Paper.

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For hundreds of years, the Caucasus experienced sustained military conquest by the Persian, Ottoman, Russian, and Soviet empires. Its dramatically mountainous terrain, its confounding landscape of ethnic and linguistic diversity, and its enduring legacy of divided political and religious loyalties have made the Caucasus seem like a veritable fortress for invading armies and imperial administrators. Yet, as Bruce Grant argues in his most recent book, the region has never been as closed or isolated as it might seem. Instead, *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus* describes a “remarkably porous Caucasus landscape” of mobility and exchange across “borders that are the objects of constant negotiation” (xv).

In this book, Grant looks broadly at two centuries of symbolic and physical exchange between Russia and its restive imperial subjects in the Caucasus. Taking the body to be a key symbol of sovereign rule, he focuses in particular on the exchange of bodies in Russian narratives of Caucasian captivity, from Pushkin’s “Kavkazskii plennik” (“Prisoner of the Caucasus”) to the present. In his view, Russian captivity narratives were not simply the product of Russia’s literary imagination. Instead, they were “mutually constituted” by local Caucasian practices of trading, raiding, hostage-taking, and trafficking in persons (xvii). Grant emphasizes the ways that Caucasian practices of captivity were central to an ongoing negotiation of sovereignty between the Caucasus and Russia. Russian imperial expansion was never a one-sided conversation, but rather an ongoing dialogue between two separate, if unequal, parties. In the terms of this dialogue, Russian imperial sovereignty was presented as a “gift of empire,” albeit one that inhabitants of the Caucasus were forced to accept and obligated to offer resources, both real and symbolic, in return (157).

Grant begins by tracing the genealogy of the captivity narrative, from the ancient myth of Prometheus to Pushkin’s nineteenth-century tale of a Russian aristocrat kidnapped by Caucasian highlanders. He convincingly shows how Pushkin’s poetry became popular ethnography, inspiring a host of fictional works, films, ballets, and operas. Grant argues that Pushkin’s basic narrative structure endured because it allowed Russians to “emplace” themselves in the landscape of the Caucasus and naturalized the violence of Russia’s military actions in the region (95). Real and imagined Russian captives gave the Russian public “cause for military expenditures,” a sense of belonging

among other European imperial powers, and a “self-satisfying narrative” of an imperial enlightenment mission (16-17).

Although Russia’s pursuit of a civilizing mission was not unique, Russian expansion in the Caucasus had several distinctive features. Its new landholdings were contiguous, conquest was often accompanied by intermarriage, and the ancient pedigrees of Armenia and Georgia raised the issue of what a relatively young Russian state could offer in terms of civilization. Russian rule was continuously contested, and exchange across the porous and fluid borders of the Caucasus was a dynamic but violent process. While Russian ethnographers singled out the supposedly isolated *gortsy* (highlanders) for criticism as brutal enemies of enlightenment, lowlanders as well as highlanders participated in violent economies of theft, raiding, and outlaw resistance.

Despite Russian efforts, sovereignty was rarely stable in the Caucasus, and whatever stability existed rested as much upon the Russian “arts of persuasion” as it did on the “power of the sword” (156). Russian persuasion took the form of economic investments, educational efforts, and displays of power. Many of these “gifts” were given unilaterally; nevertheless, Russians demanded reciprocity. When none could be found, captivity narratives gave symbolic Caucasians a Russian prisoner to offer in return. At the same time, actual practices of captivity created important “spaces of encounter” (162). These spaces are arguably open today, even in the divided and uneasy Caucasus of the post-Soviet period.

The Captive and the Gift is methodologically diverse. While Grant’s approach is primarily informed by anthropological studies of gift-giving and exchange from Marcel Mauss onward, he develops his narrative through a careful reading of mythology, literature, and film, and contextualizes his claims through historical analysis. This multidisciplinary approach is one of the book’s strengths and will surely make it of interest to anthropologists, literary scholars, and historians alike. However, a study this wide-ranging inevitably invites a measure of criticism from specialists within each respective discipline. As an historian, I found myself hoping for a clearer demonstration of the changes that took place over two centuries of Russian rule. Grant’s emphasis on an enduring captivity narrative emphasizes broad continuities while glossing over some important differences. In particular, the Soviet period is treated as a brief chapter between a formative nineteenth century and more contemporary reflections on Russia’s imperial legacy. I also found myself wondering about the ultimate significance of what Grant calls the “logics of sovereignty” (xv). While the author convincingly shows how empire was framed as a gift that gave meaning to conquerors and imposed obligation on the conquered, did such “logics of sovereignty” drive imperial expansion, or merely serve to justify it after the fact? The book’s subtitle signals Grant’s focus on the “cultural histories of sovereignty,” but it would have been interesting to have more consideration of the relationship between narrative forms of conquest and the material, strategic, and geopolitical motives that helped propel Russian expansion.

Nevertheless, Grant's account of contested sovereignty in the Caucasus remains compelling. He should be commended for writing one of the few comprehensive studies of the Caucasus in any language, and for doing so in such an engaging manner. His work makes an important contribution to larger debates about empire, while successfully challenging conventional understandings of a complicated region.