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1 The Chechens' encounter with Russia

> [E]verywhere there are mountains, everywhere forests, and the Chechens are fierce and tireless fighters.
>
> John F. Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus* (1908)[1]

> The sun had risen and its spreading rays were lighting up the dewy grass. Near by the Terek murmured in the awakening forest . . . The Cossacks, still and silent, stood round the dead [Chechen] . . . The brown body . . . was well-proportioned and comely. "He, too, were a man," [the Cossack who had killed him] muttered, evidently admiring the corpse.
>
> Lev Tolstoi, *The Cossacks* (1863)[2]

The Caucasus, a chain of high mountains which extends across an isthmus separating the Caspian and Black Seas, have traditionally been recognized as a key natural frontier dividing Europe from Asia. The range stretches a total of 650 miles, of which 400 miles constitute the truly mountainous part; the chain's width averages about 100 miles, except in the middle, the site of the Daryal Pass and the Georgian Military Highway, where it narrows significantly, and at the tapering extremities. The two natural routes for traversing the mountains are through the Daryal Pass and along the Caspian coast in the present-day autonomous republic of Dagestan.[3]

The word "Chechen," which entered Russian from a Turkish tongue, is taken from the name of a lowland Chechen village where the Russians first encountered them. The Chechens, it should be noted, do not refer to themselves by this name; rather they call themselves "Nokhchii" (singular "Nokhchuo"). The Chechens have lived in or near their present territory for at least 6,000 years. Their language belongs to the so-called Nakh branch of the Caucasian group of languages (the two

[1] John F. Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1908), p. 268.
[2] Leo Tolstoy, *The Cossacks; The Death of Ivan Ilych; Happy Ever After* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1960), pp. 203–04.
[3] Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, pp. xxii–xxiii.

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other Nakh languages are Ingush and Batsbi, a moribund language found in Georgia). The Nakh branch split off from the Caucasian family of languages some 5,000–6,000 years ago, thus rendering it comparable in age to Indo-European, the language family ancestral to English, Russian, and many other modern languages. The Caucasian family of languages is entirely indigenous to the Caucasus mountains.[4]

The area which tsarist Russia named Chechnya – and which present-day Chechens refer to as "Checheniya" – constituted a quadrangle located between the Terek and Sunzha Rivers in the west and north; the Andi mountain range in the east, separating it from adjacent Dagestan; and the main Caucasus range to the south.[5] Most of Chechnya lay within the forest zone of the Caucasus. Writing in 1908, before the environmental devastation of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, British author John Baddeley observed that Chechnya "was, and for the most part still is, covered with dense forests interspersed by numberless streams, deep-set and rapid, having their sources in the mountains that rise range upon range, higher and ever higher, to the south."[6] What the Russians called Chechnya was largely populated by ethnic Chechens, but the western and southwestern part of the region was inhabited by the Ingush, the name a Russian ethnonym based on the place-name Angusht; the Ingush, who refer to themselves as "Ghalghaaj," speak a related but distinct Nakh language. The Chechens and Ingush together are said to speak "Vainakh" (or "Veinakh") languages – the word means "our people" – and the term "Vainakh" is frequently used to refer to the two peoples taken together.

[4] See Johanna Nichols, "Chechen," and "Ingush," in Rieks Smeets, ed., *The Indigenous Languages of the Caucasus* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1994), vol. IV, pp. 1–77, 79–145; and Johanna Nichols, "Who Are the Chechen?," Discussion List about Chechnya, Chechnya@Plearn.EDU.PL, 15 January 1995, and the same author's "Ingush and Chechen," Discussion List about Chechnya, 7 November 1996. See also Paul B. Henze, *Islam in the North Caucasus: The Example of Chechnya*, P-7935 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1995), pp. 1–7. On the unrecorded and early recorded history of the forebears of the Chechens, see Zaindi Shakhbiev, *Sud'ba checheno-ingushskogo naroda* (Moscow: Rossiya molodaya, 1996), pp. 7–63.

[5] Moshe Gammer, *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan* (London, UK: Frank Cass, 1994), p. 12. For an example of the use of the word "Checheniya," see the book by former Chechen acting president Zelimkhan (Zelimkha) Yandarbiev, *Checheniya – bitva za svobodu* (L'vov, Ukraine: Svoboda narodiv [*sic*] and Antibol'shevitskii blok narodov, 1996).

[6] In Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, p. xxxv. On the geography of Chechnya, see Yu. A. Aidaev, ed., *Chechentsy: istoriya i sovremennost'* (Moscow: Mir domu tvoemu, 1996), pp. 71–110.

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Chechnya before the Russians

From the seventh to the seventeenth centuries, there took place a slow penetration of Sunni Islam into the Caucasus region. During the eighth century, the Arabs began actively to convert the peoples of the Caucasus to Islam. When their advance was checked by the Turks, they turned into the mountains, where they spread their religion among the ancestors of the Chechens and of the Avars, who were centered in mountain Dagestan. Many pagan beliefs, however, persisted among the forebears of the Chechens, so the religion of their region before the nineteenth century is best described as mixed Islamic–animist.[7] Orthodox Christianity, it should be noted, had also begun to spread into the mountains, particularly in the area adjacent to the Daryal Pass; it was disseminated from the territories that today compose the Republic of Georgia.[8] The conversion of the Golden Horde between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries sparked a second penetration of Islam into the North Caucasus and halted the inroads being made into the area by Orthodox Christianity.

In ancient times, the highland regions of the Caucasus had been populous and self-sufficient. From the period of the late Middle Ages until the nineteenth century, however, a worldwide cooling phase known as the Little Ice Age ensued, which resulted in glacial advances and in shortened growing seasons in the alpine areas of the Caucasus. This development had major repercussions for the Chechens, since it served to weaken highland economies and virtually to force their migration down from the mountains into the lowlands; for many Chechens this economically forced descent from the mountains occurred just as the Cossacks were beginning to migrate into the region in large numbers. There was thus a likelihood attaching to the historic encounter of Chechens and Russians, which ensued in the second half of the sixteenth century.[9]

The Russians move south

The ancestors of present-day Russians and Ukrainians had been making periodic appearances in the Caucasus region for a millennium. The

[7] Ronald Wixman, *Language Aspects of Ethnic Patterns and Processes in the North Caucasus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Department of Geography Research Series, no. 191, 1980), pp. 70–71.
[8] Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, p. 263.
[9] Nichols, "Who Are the Chechen?," and V. A. Tishkov, E. L. Belyaeva, and G. V. Marchenko, *Chechenskii krizis* (Moscow: Tsentr kompleksnykh sotsial'nykh issledovanii i marketinga, 1995), p. 6.

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"Rus′" or Varangians passed through the Caspian region en route to invading Persia in the tenth century. Prince Mikhail of Tver′ was assassinated in the year 1319 near Derbent on the Caspian Sea in what is today Dagestan.[10] The first stage of concerted Russian penetration into the North Caucasus extends for over a century and a half, from the 1550s to the early 1720s. In 1556, when Tsar Ivan the Terrible succeeded in conquering the khanates of Kazan′ and Astrakhan′ and thus in entering into the Caspian orbit, the North Caucasus region – which had previously been a geopolitical backwater – became the object of a competition involving Muscovy, the Ottoman Empire, Iran, the Crimean Khanate, and other lesser powers. The strategic importance of the region for trade and military routes became clear.

Ivan the Terrible's thrust southward coincided with a largely unplanned and elemental movement south by two discrete groups of Cossacks. These two groups had settled in the Terek delta and in the foothills of Chechnya and subsequently became known as the Terek and Greben Cossacks. When the Chechens began to come down from the mountains in large numbers beginning in the sixteenth century, they found Greben Cossacks already residing in the Caucasus foothills.[11] In the sixteenth century, the Cossacks represented free and lawless communities, who conducted plundering raids on their Muslim neighbors and, on occasion, on the states of Poland and Muscovy as well. Many of them were by origin runaway serfs. While living a freebooting existence, the Cossacks clung tenaciously to the Orthodox Christian religion. Ethnically, the Cossacks were of mixed race, many of them having taken native women as wives, some of them in raids. A number of the Cossack wives were ethnic Chechens, while others were Kumyks.[12]

The first Russian fort in the North Caucasus region was erected at Tarki on the Sunzha River in 1559.[13] Ivan the Terrible had agreed to pardon the Greben Cossacks for various misdeeds in exchange for their agreeing to build a fort on the Sunzha. Due to fierce and repeated attacks by tribesmen, the fort had to be relocated four times.[14]

In the year 1559, emissaries from the Adygei, a people of the western North Caucasus region, appeared in Moscow with a request that

[10] Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, pp. 1–2. [11] Gammer, *Muslim Resistance*, p. 1.
[12] Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, p. 11. For a discussion of the Kumyks and the other peoples of the North Caucasus region, see Ronald Wixman, *The Peoples of the USSR: An Ethnographic Handbook* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1988).
[13] Alexandre Bennigsen, "Un mouvement populaire au Caucase à XVIIIe siècle," *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, April–June (1964), 168.
[14] Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, pp. 7–8.

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Orthodox priests be sent to them to baptize the populace.[15] Russia, however, at the time lacked the will and the organizational strength to undertake a major missionary effort in the region. The triumph within the Russian Church of the ritualistic "Josephite" tendency, which led directly to the Old Believer schism of the following century, was a key reason for this weakness. It would be another two hundred years, during the time of Empress Catherine the Great, before Russia would undertake such a proselytizing effort, but by then Islam would have begun to be firmly rooted throughout most of the North Caucasus region.

As Muscovy slowly penetrated the North Caucasus, the rulers of Kakheti (a part of present-day Georgia) began increasingly to look to their powerful Orthodox Christian neighbors to the north for assistance against Muslim powers. The first contacts with Russia were made by King Levan I in 1558, but it was during the reign of Levan's son, Alexandre II, that Moscow sent a number of embassies to Kakheti. Alexandre wanted Russia to assist him in his conflicts with Iran and against the powerful Shamkhal of Targhu in Dagestan. After an exchange of ambassadors in 1586–87, Tsar Fedor of Muscovy, in 1589, told envoys from Kakheti that he was prepared to take their king under his protection, and he pledged to fight the Shamkhal.[16]

In 1594, Fedor sent a force of 7,000 men to Alexandre's aid. The force captured the Shamkhal's capital but was then annihilated on the banks of the Sulak River in present-day Dagestan. In 1590, the Russians had built a fortress on the lower Sunzha River and were thus poised for breakthrough into the North Caucasus. By the following year, they had reached the banks of the Sulak in Dagestan. In the year 1604, Tsar Boris Godunov sent out a force from Kazan′ and Astrakhan′ to avenge the 1594 massacre suffered under Tsar Fedor, but his force was driven back by Dagestanis, aided by Ottoman Turks.[17]

In 1615, the Georgian kings of Kakheti and Imereti sent a letter to the newly enthroned Tsar Mikhail Romanov asking him for aid and informing him of their opposition to the Persian shah. No assistance was forthcoming. In 1624, the request was repeated, but "Russia, recovering

[15] See *Kavkazskaya voina: uroki istorii i sovremennosti* (Krasnodar: Kubanskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 1995), p. 256. This volume contains papers presented at a scholarly conference held on 16–18 May 1994.

[16] Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd edn., (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 49.

[17] See Gammer, *Muslim Resistance*, p. 1; Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, pp. 8–9; Marie Bennigsen Broxup, "Introduction," in Marie Bennigsen Broxup, ed., *The North Caucasus Barrier* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 2.

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from its Time of Troubles, was not prepared to intervene in the Caucasian maelstrom."[18]

In hindsight, we can see that Muscovy of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century had overreached. Expansionist élan, combined with a desire to help Orthodox co-religionists in proto-Georgia, had brought the Russians to the Mountain (as they were wont to refer to the Caucasus range). But Russia was revealed as militarily too weak to challenge the Ottoman Turks, Persia, and the numerous Muslim princes of the region. For more than a century – from 1604 until 1722 – Russia was forced to abandon its thrust into the Caucasus region. During the seventeenth century, Muscovy entered a period of great turmoil, which witnessed the Time of Troubles, the Old Believer Schism, and the rebellion of Sten′ka Razin, among other travails.

Peter the Great

"The conquest of the Caucasus, as distinct from the Cossack approach," John Baddeley has observed, "begins with Peter the Great's [1722] campaign."[19] Having succeeded in strengthening the institutions and military prowess of the Russian state, and having recently defeated Sweden, Peter felt ready to head an expedition against much-weakened Persia down the Caspian coast, during which he captured the strategically located city of Derbent, as well as Baku, the capital of today's Republic of Azerbaijan. On his way back from Derbent, Peter founded the Holy Cross fort on the Sulak River. It should be noted that in the course of preparing for this campaign Peter had in essence integrated the "hosts" (*voiska*) of the Terek and Greben Cossacks into the Russian state. In 1721, the Terek Cossacks were withdrawn from the authority of the Foreign Office and put under the command of the War College.[20] Henceforth the Cossacks would be seen by the Russian state as its servants, required to provide military, courier, construction, and other services.[21] Peter's 1722 campaign proved to be a major but temporary success. In the Treaty of St. Petersburg (September 1723), Persia ceded key Caspian territories to Peter, and for the next ten years the Dagestan plain was placed under the direct administration of Russia.[22]

[18] Suny, *Making*, p. 51.
[19] Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, p. 23.
[20] Thomas M. Barrett, "Lives of Uncertainty: The Frontiers of the North Caucasus," *Slavic Review*, Fall (1995), 591.
[21] Gammer, *Muslim Resistance*, p. 2; Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, p. 10.
[22] Bennigsen, "Un mouvement populaire," 172.

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First major clash with the Chechens

It was during the course of Peter's 1722 thrust into the Caucasus that the Russians had their first serious encounter with the Chechens. Earlier, in 1707, Chechens had joined with other tribes and with Cossack Old Believers in destroying the Russian fort at Tarki.[23] In 1722, Russian cavalry were sent by Peter to occupy the village of Enderi, located on the Aktash River in eastern Chechnya, and that force suffered a serious reversal at the hands of the local Chechens. "This was the first time that Russian regular troops had come in contact with that tribe in their native forests, and the result was ominous."[24] Ominous indeed.

Peter died in 1725, and his expansionist project was put on hold for nearly half a century. Empress Anna soon abandoned Peter's conquests of Persian territory, and Russia withdrew to its old line on the Terek River. Under Empress Elizabeth, Russia's sole concern in the eastern regions of the North Caucasus became to defend its line of forts near the Terek. In 1735, a new fort was founded at Kizlyar on the Terek, in present-day Dagestan, which until the year 1763 remained the Russian capital of the Caucasus.[25] (In January 1996, 160 years later, Kizlyar would become the site of a bloody battle between Russians and Chechens.)

Russia's military presence in the North Caucasus region was significantly weakened by the growth of the Old Believer schism among the Cossacks. By 1768, fully half of the Greben Cossacks adhered to the Schism.[26] Before the coming to power of Empress Catherine the Great, it appeared possible that Russia might settle on the Terek River as its "natural" southern boundary in the North Caucasus region.

Catherine the Great

It was under Catherine the Great (ruled 1762–96), like Peter I a protean state-builder, that a major conflict between Russia and the Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus became increasingly likely. In 1762, in an aggressive and portentous move, she constructed a fort at Mozdok on the Terek, in what is today North Ossetiya. Mozdok has aptly been called "the cornerstone of the Russian conquest" of the Caucasus.[27] This fort brought Russia close to the Daryal Pass, the natural passageway through the mountains to Georgia. The construction of this fort sparked a fourteen-year struggle with the Kabardintsy

[23] Ibid., 171, n. 1.
[24] Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, p. 25.
[25] Gammer, *Muslim Resistance*, p. 2.
[26] Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, p. 14.
[27] Ibid., p. 33.

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(1765–79), as well as a war with the Ottoman Empire (1768–74). During this latter conflict, in 1769, a Russian force of 400 men was sent through the Daryal Pass to Tbilisi.[28] Mozdok also came to serve as a center of Russian Orthodox missionary efforts in the region; in 1746, through a ruling of the Holy Synod, and with the participation of the Russian government, a decision was taken to reestablish Orthodoxy in the North Caucasus, especially among the Ossetians, who played a central role in controlling transit through the Daryal Pass.[29]

Catherine's political and military successes encouraged the embattled kings of Georgia to renew their pleas for protection and assistance. In 1769, Solomon I of Imereti and Erekle II of Kartli–Kakheti requested that Russia send five regiments to the region. In 1773, Erekle's son, Levan, together with the Georgian catholicos, traveled to St. Petersburg to petition Catherine to take Kartli–Kakheti under her protection. Instead, however, the empress, not wishing to overextend her forces, withdrew her troops from Transcaucasia.[30]

In 1783, the town of Azaq fell to the Russians, and the Crimean khanate was eliminated. The Crimea was then directly absorbed by Russia, whose boundaries were thus automatically pushed to the frontiers of the Mountain. This development significantly increased the likelihood of an eventual confrontation between Orthodox Russia and the Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus.

As in the second half of the sixteenth century, it was Georgia which continued to beckon its powerful northern neighbor to come south. In 1783 – the same year that the Crimea was absorbed by Russia – King Erekle of Kartli–Kakheti appealed for help to Russia. Catherine the Great responded positively to this appeal, and by the Treaty of Georgievsk of 1783, a Russian protectorate was established over Kartli–Kakheti. The path through the Daryal Pass was transformed into a military road, and the construction of a major fort called Vladikavkaz ("Ruler of the Caucasus") near the Pass was begun. These moves understandably concerned the Ottoman Turks, who, in 1782, had begun construction of a fort at Anapa on the Black Sea, north of the present-day Russian city of Novorossiisk.[31] In 1787, however, during a Russo-Turkish war, and following Sheikh Mansur's insurrection (to be discussed shortly), Catherine once again ordered her troops to evacuate Georgia.

To dilute the impact of Islam in the region, the Russian Empire settled Christian peoples from the Transcaucasus at key forts in the

[28] Gammer, *Muslim Resistance*, pp. 2–3; Baddeley, *Russian Conquest*, p. 19.
[29] In *Kavkazskaya voina*, pp. 256–58.
[30] Suny, *Making*, p. 58.
[31] Bennigsen, "Un mouvement populaire," 173.

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North Caucasus. In 1796, there were 2,800 Armenians and only 1,000 Russians at Kizlyar; in 1789, 55.6 percent of the population of Mozdok was Armenian or Georgian.[32]

The rebellion of Sheikh Mansur

At the time of the Russian invasion of Chechnya in December 1994, it was observed by journalists that a painting of Sheikh Mansur, the son of a Chechen shepherd who had led a major resistance movement against the Russian Empire from 1785 to 1791, hung in a prominent place in the office of Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudaev.[33] To return to the eighteenth century, as we have seen, given the rapidity and the pervasiveness of the Russian move into the Caucasus and Transcaucasia, a counterthrust by Muslim tribes had become a near certainty. Especially worrisome for the Muslims was the solidifying of Russian ties with Kartli–Kakheti following the signing of the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783.

Mansur Ushurma hailed from the Chechen *aul* (i.e., Muslim village) of Aldi, located near the present-day capital of Groznyi, an area which was at the time coming under heavy Russian pressure. As Alexandre Bennigsen has observed in an excellent study devoted to Mansur, there were strong economic and social factors underlying the Mansur uprising.[34] The North Caucasus had been preserving its traditional economic equilibrium with great difficulty. The poor soil of the region did not offer sufficient resources to support a relatively dense population. The local agriculture was primitive and, since the alpine pastures were inadequate, flocks and herds had to be moved long distances in the winter. By contrast, the adjacent lowlands (the Kuban′, the Terek plains, and the steppes along the Caspian) represented fertile areas capable of sustaining the needs not only of the local populace but of the mountaineers (in Russian: *gortsy*) as well. An interchange between mountain and plain was thus necessary for the continued survival of the mountain peoples of the North Caucasus. Unfortunately, with the arrival of the Russians to the region, access to the steppes had become "precarious."[35]

In the late eighteenth century, the mountaineers of the North Caucasus numbered about a million and a half persons, divided into some twenty groups. With the exception of the Ossetians, who had been converted by the Russians to Orthodox Christianity, all of them were at

[32] Barrett, "Lives of Uncertainty," 593.
[33] See *Moscow Times*, 18 December 1994, pp. 22–23.
[34] Bennigsen, "Un mouvement populaire," 167.
[35] Ibid., 167–68.

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least nominally Muslim, though some, such as the Chechens, were at the time only superficially so. It would take perceived massive aggression on the part of "infidel" Russians to transform them into observant Muslims.

Like the mountain Dagestani tribes, the Chechens were largely isolated from the outside world and maintained rudimentary ethnic and social structures. The Chechens and the mountain Dagestanis had preserved the patriarchal structure of large extended families (*teipy* or *taipy*) in which all members were both free and equal (*uzden*).[36]

In their initial contacts with the indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus, the Russian authorities sought to deal, as much as possible, with the feudal nobility of the region. (The Ottoman Turks, too, chose to focus on the feudal nobility, and this was one reason that they refused to take Mansur and his movement seriously.) But the Chechens and the mountain Dagestanis completely lacked feudal structures, being grouped in "free societies." The struggle against the Russians in these regions was rooted in the very poorest areas of the eastern North Caucasus, those which had preserved the most archaic political, social, and economic forms. The most archaic of all of these peoples were the economically destitute Chechens, who "first raised the banner of revolt."[37]

In 1784, Mansur proclaimed himself sheikh (i.e., elder) and then, more boldly, imam (i.e., chief of a Sufi Muslim order), and the following year he began his public preaching. In his sermons, Mansur called for a return to an ascetical and purified Islam and vilified the use of tobacco and alcohol (both of which had been introduced into the region by the Russians). He also criticized certain practices which were widespread among his semi-pagan fellow Chechens: theft, the cult of the dead, and the practice of vendetta. Mansur fought for the replacement of corrupt customary law (*adat*) by Islamic religious law (*sharia*). In the name of Islamic unity, Mansur declared a three-day fast in the settlements of Chechnya. As he traveled about the villages of Chechnya, he demanded "faith in God" and "order."[38] The *gazavat*, or holy war, he declared was directed first of all against corrupt Muslims, who held to the *adat* and allowed themselves to be assimilated by infidels. It seems wisest to see Mansur as a forerunner or precursor of the great religious revival led by Naqshbandi Sufi imams – the most renowned of whom was, of course, the legendary Shamil′ – in the following century.[39]

[36] Ibid., 169–70. On the development of the clan system in Chechnya, see Aidaev, *Chechentsy*, pp. 185–90.
[37] Bennigsen, "Un mouvement populaire," 171.
[38] In M. M. Bliev and V. V. Degoev, *Kavkazskaya voina* (Moscow: Roset, 1994), p. 134.
[39] Bennigsen, "Un mouvement populaire," 178.

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