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IMAM OF CHECHNYA AND DAGESTAN – SHAMIL (1797-1871) IN EUROPEAN ARTWORKS

Abstract. *This article examines the European perception of Shamil, the Imam of Chechnya and Dagestan. Western cultural figures were genuinely interested in the national liberation war of North Caucasus peoples against Russian imperial despotism and its territorial expansion. Also, they liked vibrant personality of the supreme ruler of the North Caucasus Imamate who led the highlanders' struggle for freedom. Over three centuries, interest in Shamil has preserved a constant focus of artistic attention. Lacking reliable data on Shamil, French figures perceived the Imam as a medieval knight-liberator and leader of uprising. German artists, already possessing visual primary sources about Shamil, quite accurately shaped the Imam image as invincible, although formally the losing side in the Caucasian War. Imam Shamil has become the subject of Turkish literature as well. His personality captivated 19th-century composers and poets of the second half of the 20th century. Thanks to cultural and artistic works of Western masters, Imam Shamil has entered world history not only as a state leader but also as a remarkable personality.*

Keywords: *Imam Shamil, North Caucasian Imamate, European cultural and artistic figures, perception of personality.*

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ІМАМ ЧЕЧНІ ТА ДАГЕСТАНУ – ШАМІЛЬ (1797-1871) У ТВОРАХ ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКОГО МИСТЕЦТВА

Анотація. *У статті досліджується сприйняття імаму Чечні та Дагестану Шаміля діячами європейського мистецтва. Автори дійшли висновку про те, що представники культури Західної цивілізації з непідробним інтересом ставилися як до національно-*

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визвольної війни народів північного Кавказу проти російського імперського деспотизму та його територіальної експансії, так і яскравої особистості верховного правителя Північно-Кавказького імамату. Протягом трьох століть інтерес до персони Шаміля не згасав і завжди залишався у фокусі уваги митців. Не маючи достовірних даних про Шаміля, французькі представники культури сприймали імама в образі середньовічного лицаря-визволителя та ватажка народного повстання. Німецькі майстри мистецтва, вже маючи візуальні першоджерела про Шаміля, досить достовірно сформували образ імаму як, хоча б формально, і сторони, що зазнала поразки у Кавказькій війні, але так і непереможної. Імам Шаміль став героєм численних творів турецької художньої літератури, зокрема й белетристики. Особа Шаміля не залишила байдужими композиторів XIX ст., прогресивну громадськість українських земель, літераторів другої половини XX ст. Завдяки творам культури та мистецтва західних майстрів імам Шаміль увійшов у світову історію не лише як лідер держави, а й як яскрава історична особистість.

Ключові слова: *імам Шаміль, Північно-Кавказький імамат, представники європейської культури та мистецтва, сприйняття особистості.*

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In the history of statehood and national liberation movements among North Caucasus peoples, a special place is held by the most prominent figure of the theocratic North Caucasian Imamate – Shamil (1797-1871), a fighter against Russian chauvinistic imperialism. The future leader of the North Caucasian state received an excellent upbringing and education at home, the key elements of which were the Arabic language, philosophy, jurisprudence, military science, and comprehensive physical training. From an early age, Shamil was an excellent martial artist, horseman, marksman, runner, and swimmer. He was highly skilled with bladed weapons and was distinguished by his bravery and courage.

Reading books was one of Shamil's favorite pastimes. He wanted to become a scholar, but his election as supreme ruler changed those plans. From an early age, Shamil systematically built up his library, the lion's share of which was a wide variety of Arabic literature that he obtained from abroad. He took great pride in this and, even in the midst of military operations, tried to preserve as many books as possible (Dadaev, 2012: 36-50).

On 19 September 1834, Shamil was elected Imam of Ichkeria and Dagestan. He succeeded in establishing a theocratic state in the North Caucasus with armed forces and in leading a protracted national liberation war by mountain peoples against Russian imperial occupiers. His brilliant knowledge of military tactics allowed Shamil to resist the numerically and militarily superior army of the Russian Empire for many years during the Caucasian War (1817-1864). The hostile strategic goal was military incorporation of North Caucasus territories into the Russian monarchy.

A "bandit" and leader of "guerrilla bands" that rose up against the Romanovs' annexation, he was regarded as a formidable adversary and a major political problem for Russian despotism. Shamil became the object of keen interest for the ruling Russian circles and absolutist states of Europe. The protracted struggle of mountain peoples garnered enormous international attention, with his romantic aura as a hero and leader of the liberation movement playing a great part in this (Donogono-Korkmas, 2020: 8).

The source basis for this study comprises works by historians who have examined Shamil's life and political activities, as well as issues related to perception of Shamil within Western civilization (Abdullaev, 2016; Vinogradova, 2020; Gubahanova, 2008; Zaharova, 2015; Magomedova, 2025; Murtazaliev, 2022a; Murtazaliev, 2022b).

To illustrate how historical memory of Shamil's heroism and courage, preserved by many generations, is reflected today, we have drawn upon materials from online sources. They clearly demonstrate that Shamil's feat has not been forgotten and has become an example for many members of the public with dissenting views.

In writing this article, general research methods were applied: synthesis and analysis; deduction and induction; generalization; historical description). Also, specific historical approaches were applied: the problem-chronological, critical, anthropological, and content analysis methods.

Analysis and synthesis assessed the perception degree of Imam Shamil in cultural and artistic works. It demonstrates the distinctly respectful attitude of the Western public toward the Imam. Finally, conclusions were drawn.

Via induction and deduction, empirical data were identified and compiled. The factual data formed the basis for theoretical definitions, and conclusions were substantiated and illustrated with specific empirical evidence. The authors synthesized the factual study material. The narrative method was employed in description.

Special historical methods were also employed. The critical method assessed representativeness of historical works and collections of primary sources. The problem-chronological method formed a general understanding of the nature and specifics of how Western civilizations perceived the image of Shamil in its chronological sequence and logical completeness. The content analysis was applied for the literature assessment. The anthropological method placed Shamil's personality at the center of the study.

Although the charismatic figure of Imam Shamil and practical achievements of state-building in the North Caucasus Imamate have long attracted attention of historians, the topic represents an unaddressed "gap" in historiography.

At the 19th century end, M. Chichagova devoted a comprehensive historical and biographical essay to Shamil, which remains relevant to this day for scholars in humanities and social sciences (Chichagova, 1889). The state established by Shamil became the subject of detailed study in Russian historiography, for instance by Y. Dadaev (Dadaev, 2006; Dadaev, 2012). The figure of Shamil also attracted attention of prominent historians of international renown, notably M. Gammer, a professor at Tel Aviv University. Inhis seminal monograph, he examined Shamil's life and activities as a process of Muslim resistance to Russian imperial expansion (Gammer, 1998).

However, the issue of how Imam Shamil is portrayed in European culture and art has not received adequate attention in historiography. In light of this, we have reason to believe that this publication will help, at least in part, to address the issue.

While acknowledging Shamil's obvious successes in struggle against the Russian Empire over a quarter-century and admiring heroism of mountain tribes, European political circles were eager to see what Imam Shamil actually looked like, even if only in artistic depiction. Several attempts to visually present Shamil to the public can be identified across the European continent.

In France, an article by E. Taksier about Imam Shamil was published in 1854 in the Journal Universel Illustrй. As a visual supplement to the text, an engraving by M. Jubй and F. Mornan was printed with the Shamil depiction. He was represented in armor more reminiscent of a medieval knight than that of a Caucasian state ruler. He was on horseback, wearing a helmet and chain mail, with a bow and arrows. The presence of national costume indicated that Europeans were aware of traditional culture of mountain peoples. In our view, this depiction of Shamil suggested that, in the eyes of French artists, the Imam was the ruler of a state that was small in territory but powerful in military strength and spirit; a state that fought for its very existence. In this regard, they were interested not only in Shamil's military experience but also in his abilities as a statesman.

Shamil was shown in a similar manner on the cover of P. Zikonsi's book "Shamil: Liberator of the Caucasus", which was illustrated J. Bussi. The Imam appears to the public as a leader of Sherwood Forest – the famous romantic tale of the Middle Ages. The artist painted Shamil's portrait without visual references, but rather guided by his historical aura and existing international resonance (Donogono-Korkmas, 2020: 10).

In Germany, visual representation of Shamil was different. Thanks to the drawings by the Bavarian artist T. Horschelt, image and appearance of the Imam became well-known among the German population even before this happened in the Russian Empire itself. Having heard much about Shamil and struggle of mountain peoples, T. Horschelt dreamed of visiting the North Caucasus.

He realized this dream by arriving in the Russian Empire, enlisting in temporary military service, and thereby participating in the Russian campaigns against the Caucasus. Wishing to record everything he saw, he diligently kept a diary, which has been preserved for posterity.

Drawings in the diaries held particular cultural value and served as a basis for artistic portrayal of Shamil. After the Imam was captured by Russian troops on 26 August 1859, T. Horschelt managed to sketch a portrait of Shamil. In November of that same year, T. Horschelt sent his materials and Shamil's portrait to Germany with an eloquent confession: "…Here is a great man who tormented us, but in the end still missed his mark…!".

T. Horschelt's sketches served as a foundation for his painting "The Capture of Shamil", which he created upon his return to Munich. The painting illustrates T. Horschelt's true attitude toward Shamil – the artist's sympathies lay with the leader of mountain tribes. The main focus is not on representative of the Russian Empire's authority – Prince A. Baryatinsky – but on the Imam figure in a Circassian coat with a white turban. Against the backdrop of prince's glittering entourage, Shamil embodied ideals of human dignity and nobility. In the painting, A. Baryatinsky painted the sitting captive Shamil. It demonstrated not only his social and psychological superiority but also political arrogance (Gubahanova, 2008: 60-82).

The Russian Emperor Alexander III later purchased this portrait of Shamil from the T. Horschelt's widow, and it now belongs to the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. Incidentally, Shamil was depicted in the paintings by G. Villevalde ("The Capture of Shamil") and A. Kivshenko ("Imam Shamil Before Commander-in-Chief Prince A.I. Baryatinsky on 25 August 1859"). In A. Kivshenko's composition, Shamil is shown monumentally as a defeated but fundamentally unbroken leader of North Caucasus peoples. Hisright hand holds a belt with a dagger, thereby indicating that, morally and ethically, the Russian monarchy had not defeated the mountain peoples.

Other artworks dedicated to the Caucasus history were also created in Munich. For example, the French artist F. Roubaud painted about 20 canvases in the Bavarian capital, one of which was titled "Shamil at Prayer" (Gubahanova, 2008: 60-82).

On 27 August 1859, Shamil, accompanied by a special military escort, was taken from the North Caucasus to be the court of Russian Emperor Alexander II. The ruler could see the Caucasian hero in person.

Shamil was given a particularly grand reception in Ukrainian territories of the Russian Empire, regarded not only as a liberation hero but also as a most worthy role model, with people romantically wishing for a similar leader for the Ukrainian movement. In Kharkiv, he was given an opportunity to visit the circus, ride thoroughbred horses, take a guided city tour, etc. On one evening, Shamil was invited to a grand ball with illuminations, hosted by the provincial nobility assembly of the Kharkiv Governorate. Representatives of the Ukrainian aristocracy stayed by Shamil's side the entire evening, eager to learn about him and his struggle (Zaharova, 2015: 292).

On 26 September 1859, Shamil was brought to St. Petersburg. The Russky Khudozhestvenny Listok, edited by V. Timm, published a series of drawings depicting Shamil's stay in the city. He was shown wearing a white turban, and a dagger was clearly visible at his waist. He impressed the public in the imperial capital with his sociability and extraordinary tact. By visiting St. Isaac's Cathedral, he demonstrated not only his religious tolerance but also loyalty (Chichagova, 1889: 46).

Kaluga was chosen as the main location for his exile, where he lived under tacit surveillance for 10 years. In October 1869, he and his family moved to Kyiv, a warmer city further south. Here, as in Kharkiv, he was warmly received, with people publicly admiring his struggle. The population demonstratively threw copies of T. Shevchenko's poem "The Caucasus" into the carriages with Shamil, thereby showing the authorities their true attitude toward him. For most Ukrainians, Shamil was an important model in the national liberation struggle, although after the Valuev Circular of 1863, this became a largely unattainable goal (Mahun, 2024).

Abas-relief of Imam Shamil bearing the inscription "Fight and Conquer" was unveiled in the contemporary Kyiv at the site where his former residence once stood. It symbolized the Ukrainian people's admiration for his heroism (Memorialna doshka).

The figure of Imam Shamil also held a great interest for Turkish culture, particularly among literary figures. The portrayal of Shamil in poetry, prose, journalism, and memoirs constitutes a vast body of Eastern fiction. The main themes are heroism of Shamil's struggle, his statesmanlike efforts, and role of religion in Imam's life (Murtazaliev, 2022a: 32-38).

In the 19th century, academic composers showed an interest to Shamil. For instance, M. Musorgsky composed a special choral work dedicated to the Imam. Progressive and highly oppositional activities of the "Mighty Handful" – an association of renowned composers in the Russian Empire – took place during the Caucasian War. Therefore, relevance of the subject was indisputable. M. Musorgsky's work comprised a choral prayer accompanied by piano, which covertly illustrated the association members' true attitude toward Shamil (Vinogradova, 2020: 62-101).

During World War II, the figure of Shamil did not go unnoticed by progressive members of society, particularly the intelligentsia. The renowned writer G. Tsadasa dedicated the poem "Shamil". The central theme was Shamil's relationship with society as the supreme ruler of the North Caucasian state, thereby emphasizing the high degree of popular support for the Imam and his moral character (Murtazaliev, 2022b: 39–45).

In modern history, cultural figures have continued to take an interest in Shamil. For example, H. Tovshalumov wrote the novella "The Imam's Interpreter", and M. Ibragimova published the novel "Imam Shamil". Both works are based on well-known historical events and show a political portrait of Shamil as an extraordinary statesman (Abdullaev, 2016: 26-31; Magomedova, 2025: 12-16).

Heroic deeds of the North Caucasus knight are remembered and will never be forgotten in the modern Ukraine. On 4 February 2026, during Russia's barbaric war against Ukraine, a grand opening ceremony was held in Kyiv for Imam Shamil Square (Skver Shamilja, 2026). Nor has Shamil's worthy successor in the struggle against Russian imperialism in the modern history of Ichkeria been forgotten – D. Dudaev. InLviv, a memorial plaque was solemnly unveiled in April 2026 (Memorialnaja doska, 2026).

Despite the obvious lack of reliable information about Shamil (1797-1871), prominent figures in European culture took a keen interest in his personality. There was a significant international resonance of the national liberation movement waged by mountain peoples of Ichkeria and Dagestan against the Russian Empire during the Caucasian War. His fully realistic and truthful image could be presented to the public. Europeans regarded Imam Shamil as a great man, recognized his state talent, and paid tribute to struggle of mountain peoples.

French cultural figures saw him as a medieval knight who led the uprising of a small nation's people against a vast empire. German cultural figures, who could see Shamil in person, portrayed the Imam from a moral, ethical, spiritual, and religious perspective. Since, unlike in European philosophy, imperatives of human honor and dignity have always been paramount in Islam, German artists focused public attention precisely on these qualities of Shamil, which was most vividly manifested even in his monumental image. The Imam undoubtedly interested representatives of European art from the intercultural communication perspective, as they sought to understand true motivations behind the North Caucasian Imamate's struggle against the Russian Empire.

The authors have demonstrated that interest in the Imam of Chechnya and Dagestan has persisted over three centuries, a fact that confirms the immense historical significance of Shamil's legacy. Turkish fiction writers, progressive Russian composers, writers, and poets have dedicated many works to the Imam. The Ukrainian public has regarded the legendary figure of Shamil with particular reverence – as a role model in the national liberation cause of the Ukrainian people.

Although the North Caucasus was ultimately incorporated into the Russian Empire through superior military force, Imam Shamil has forever entered the world history and consciousness of Western civilization. He was treated as a towering figure, a leader of peoples and a statesman that fought to the last drop of blood for independence, which deserves the utmost respect.

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