

Identifying the Caucasus as a region in a historical perspective A corpus-based study on the uses of the concept 'Caucasus'

Karina Vamling, Malmö University (Sweden)

This paper addresses the question of when the understanding of the Caucasus region started to emerge in Europe, that is, when 'Caucasus' was used with respect to a region and not only referred to a mountain range. A closely related issue is the extent of the region that 'Caucasus' refers to, its territorial spread. My perspective is an outsider's perspective: how the region was perceived and reported on by outsiders. It is not about how the Caucasus was perceived from the inside of the region, about what makes the Caucasus a region – its historical, linguistic and cultural common roots and identity.

My starting point in this paper is to take a closer look at how the concept of the Caucasus region developed. I focus on the development in Sweden, a country on the European periphery. Studies of the Caucasus were more developed and more well-known in central European countries such as Germany, France and the UK. That is also a reason why it is interesting to explore the understanding of the Caucasus in the European periphery. It's well-known that the Caucasus mountain range was a well-established geographical entity already in antiquity and the Middle Ages and it regularly appeared on early maps. For instance, the placement of the Caucasus on early medieval maps is discussed by Galichian (2007, 17).

This study is based on the use of the term 'Caucasus' and closely related concepts in a digital corpus of Swedish newspapers from the 18th and 19th centuries. In addition, as a wider frame of reference, a corpus of old European maps of the region from the same period was compiled and is also discussed.

Materials and methodology

The corpus of Swedish newspapers used in this study is *Svenska Dagstidningar*, compiled at the Swedish Royal Library, and consisting of a broad range of digitized Swedish newspapers, starting from 1645. Here, it is possible to explore the discourse of news and other types of text occurring in the Swedish press. The newspaper corpus was searched with OCR techniques for Swedish keywords related to the term 'Caucasus': *Caucasus*, *Kaukasus*, *Caucasien*, *Kaukasien*, *Transkaukasien* and *Ciskaukasien*. The encountered variation partly shows different spellings with c or k, including the rare variants *Caukasus* and *Kaukasus*. The OCR search gives a very short context for the keyword, along with a scanned newspaper page indicating the article and the keyword in color (Fig. 1. Stockholms Posttidningar, August 6, 1733).



Fig. 1. Front page of the newspaper Stockholms Posttidningar, August 6, 1733, with the earliest occurrence of the term 'Caucasus'

The database compiled for the study includes around 130 European maps with the Caucasus region as its main focus or an important part of the area shown on the map. Several collections of old maps are available online, such as the *David Rumsey Historical Map Collection*, *Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek*, *Geoportal*, but also maps in the second volume of *Caucasian Boundaries* (Burdett, 1996) were used. The primary interest in the context of this study has been the formulation of the title of the maps: is the Caucasus (region) identified as the object of the map? Does the Caucasus appear in the title? Is it marked as a region on the map? Thus, no cartographic analysis has been performed. Maps from the end of the 17th century to the mid 19th century are the most interesting ones in this context, as they parallel the data from the Swedish media. These maps are not Swedish, but one can assume that many European maps were also accessible to the educated elite in Sweden.

First we turn to the digital corpus of Swedish newspapers. Following this, we discuss the corpus of old European maps of the region.

Corpus of old Swedish press materials

When searching the database *Svenska Dagstidningar* (Swedish Newspapers) for the forms *Caucasus*, *Kaukasus*, *Caucasien*, *Kaukasien*, *Transkaukasien* and *Ciskaukasien*, it turns out that the total number of occurrences of these terms in the database amounts to over 110,000, from the earliest period up to today. 'Caucasus' occurs in the OCR search for the first time in the 1730s, whereas the

alternative spelling 'Kaukasus' appears only in the beginning of the 19th century and subsequently becomes the most common form.

The earlier uses have been analyzed with respect to possible regional and other interpretations. News articles that mention the Caucasus were encountered rather sparsely during the 18th century. During the earliest period, from the 1730s to 1780s, 'Caucasus' was used only to refer to the mountain itself. Expressions such as the ones given in (1a-c) are common and are most likely to be interpreted as relating to the mountain.

- (1) a. *i trakten av Caucasus* 'in the vicinity of the Caucasus'
- b. *på Caucasus* 'on the Caucasus'
- c. *wid Caucasus* 'by the Caucasus'

The earliest example dates from 1733. The page is shown in Fig. 1 above. The full example is given in (2).

- (2) *Dessutan förnimmes / at 40000 Man tartarer tågat öfwer Berget Caucasus wid Tiflis / at giöra et infal i Persien.*

'In addition, it became known that 40,000 Tartars marched over the Caucasus mountains close to Tiflis to launch an attack on Persia.' (Stockholms Posttidningar, August 6, 1733)

Another example of an early use of 'Caucasus' in the Swedish newspaper texts is given in (3):

- (3) *Dagestan eller Dagesthan, Tagesthan, eller Dachestan, är en provins uti Asien och et Stycke af Albanien, samt tager sin början [...] Caspiska Hafwet i Öster, Berget Caucasus emot Väster, Circassiet, åt Norra, och Persianska Landskapet Scirwan til Södra Kantén.*

'Dagestan or Dagesthan, Tagestan or Dachestan, is a province in Asia and a part of Albania, and reaches [...] the Caspian Sea in the East, the Caucasus mountains to the West, Circassia to the North and the Persian landscape of Schirwan to the South.'

(Anmärckningar Wid Swenske Posttidningarne, August 17, 1741)

Towards the end of the 18th century, the term 'Caucasus' may also be used in a regional interpretation, as in (4):

- (4) *Ifrån Caucasus berättas, at friden imellan Ryssland och Persien blifwen slutén uti Tiflis*
'From the Caucasus it is told that peace has been signed in Tiflis between Russia and Persia.' (Götheborgska Nyheter, July 21, 1795)

Later, however, cases become more frequent, where a regional interpretation is preferred (5):

- (5) *Dödligheten bland de Ryska trupperne i Caucasus [...]*
'The death rate among the Russian troops in the Caucasus [...]' (Aftonbladet, August 30, 1837)

Caucasus/Kaukasus versus Caucasiën/Kaukasien

As we have seen, the forms 'Caucasus' and 'Kaukasus' could refer to either the mountain or the region. All forms ending in *-ien* refer only to a region. The suffix *-ien* is similar to Georgian *-იანი*, *-ეთი*. Forms with this ending are beginning to appear from the very end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century. This is the earliest example found of the use of 'Caucasiën' in the Swedish newspapers:

- (6) *Uti flera bref från Petersburg förmäles, at Ryska kejsarinnan i Maji månad ernar resa till Cherson, för at högtideligen krönas til Drottning af de bägge nyligen intagne Länderna Crim och Kuban, hwilka återfå sina fordna namn: Taurien och Caucasiën och uptagas i den kejsarlige titeln.*

'In several letters from Petersburg it is told that the Russian Empress intends to travel to Kherson in the month of May to be crowned Queen of the two recently conquered lands, Crimea and Cuban, which will get their former names back: Tauria and Caucasus, to be included in the imperial title.' (Carlstads Weckotidningar, April 24, 1784)

Here, 'Caucasiën' is understood as a part of the North Caucasus. In the next example, it is also clear that 'Kaukasien' refers to the North Caucasus:

- (7) *Ryssland. Kejsarens adjutant, Furst Dolgorucki, avgick genast med order till Gen. Yermolow, som förer befälet öfwer armén i Kaukasien och Georgien*

'Russia. The Emperor's aide-to-camp, Count Dologorukij, immediately departed with the order to General Yermolow, the commander of the army in the Caucasus and Georgia.' (Stockholmsposten, October 7, 1826)

Finally, the use of the administrative terms 'Transkaukasien' and 'Ciskaukasien' started to appear in the Swedish press in the 1830s and 1840s. The quote in (8) shows that 'Caucasus' refers to the North Caucasus and 'Transkaukasien' to the South Caucasus. At the same time, however, 'Ciskaukasien' is also used (9) referring to the North Caucasus.

- (8) *[...] har National lemnat sina läsare ett dylikt förslag till Rysslands delning [...] Kaukasien och Transkaukasien skulle bilda ett oberoende rike, kalladt Georgien, under en egen furste af inhemska ätt.*

'The [newspaper] *National* has given its readers a similar proposal for a division of Russia. [...] The Caucasus and Trans-Caucasus should form an independent state,

called Georgia, ruled by a king of a native dynasty.’ (Dagligt Allehanda, August 10, 1838)

- (9) a. *De i Guvernementet Astrakan och i provinsen Cis-Kaukasien boende Kalmuck-stammars belägenhet [...]*

‘The situation of the Kalmuck tribes, living in the Astrakhan Government and in the province Cis-Caucasus [...].’ (Post- och Inrikes Tidningar, March 4, 1836)

- b. *På krigsskådeplatsen i Ciskaukasien, herrskade under hela vintern stor rörelse and verksamhet. Schamil hade med sina Murider dragit sig tillbaka [...]*

‘In the theatre of war in Cis-Caucasus, great movement and activity reigned throughout the winter. Schamil with his Murids had withdrawn [...].’ (Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning, May 8, 1846)

Summing up, as these examples from the Swedish press illustrate, during the first half of the 18th century the use of the term ‘Caucasus’ was restricted to the Caucasus mountains. During the last quarter of the 18th century, uses with a regional interpretation began to appear, including the forms ‘Caucasien’ and ‘Kaukasien’, which are morphologically marked as denoting regions or countries with the ending *-ien*.

Exploring European maps of the 18th to 19th centuries

When we turn to the study of the maps from the end of the 17th century to the mid 19th century, the focus is the formulation of the title of the maps, whether the Caucasus (region) is identified as the object of the map. We are also interested in whether ‘Caucasus’ is marked as a region on the map and not only as a mountain or mountain range. As is evident from European maps of the time, rather detailed information on the region between the Black and Caspian Seas was available. An important map in this respect is *Nova description geographica Tattariæ magnæ* (1730), composed by Johan Philip von Strahlenberg, as it was issued in Stockholm. It covers the whole of Eurasia, but even when focusing on the area between the Black and Caspian Seas, it offers rather detailed information (Fig. 2). ‘Caucasus’ is marked on the map as a mountain range on the side of the North Caucasus.



Fig. 2. Detail of the map *Nova description geographica Tattariæ magnæ*, Johan Philip von Strahlenberg, Stockholm, 1730.

The oldest map in this study that mentions ‘Caucasus/Caucasian’ in the title is a French map by Guillaume Sanson: *Colchis Iberia Albania Quaeq; Caucasiae Gentes Isthmum qui Pontum Euxinu Caspium* (1667) (Colchis, Iberia, Albania; The Caucasian Nations are the Isthmus that bridges the Euxine to the Caspian). This map illustrates the Caucasus in an ancient era (Library of Congress). As we can see, the title does not use the term ‘Caucasus’, but refers to the Caucasian nations. However, ‘Caucasian nations’ may also be said to rely on an understanding of some sort of region where these nations live.

Many maps in the 18th century of the area that we would call the Caucasus region today, are given other descriptive titles, referring to the Black and Caspian Seas or to countries in the region:

- (10) a. *Carte des Pays Voisins de la Mer Caspiene* (1723), created by Guillaume de L'Isle, Paris.
(Map of countries neighboring the Caspian Sea)
- b. *Carte de L'Armenie, Georgie et Pays Voisins* (1764), created by Jacques Nicolas Bellin in Paris. (Map of Armenia, Georgia and neighboring countries)
- c. *Carte de la Géorgie et des pays situés entre la mer Noire et la mer Caspienne* (1775), created in Venice by Paolo Santini.
(Map of Georgia and the countries situated between the Black and Caspian Seas)

- d. *Carte du pays entre les mers Noire et Caspienne* (1819)
(Map of the Countries between the Black and Caspian Seas)

There are a few early maps that should be noted. The map *General-Charte des Caucasischen Gebürges* (1760) (General Charter of the Caucasus Mountains) by J.C. Nabholz shows the Caucasian mountains, but also supplies information on the location of ethnic groups in the region. *Neue Carte des Caucase* (1780) (The new map of the Caucasus) by Johann Güldenstedt clearly identifies the Caucasus region as the object of the map.

The observed tendency in the material is that designated maps of the Caucasus region begin to appear towards the end of the 18th century. From the first decades of the 19th century, the Caucasus is regularly mentioned as a part of the map titles of the region. Examples of such maps are *Charte der Laender am Caucasus* (1802), by Reinecke, J. C. M, published in Weimar, and *The Caucasus* (1837), by Karl Koch.

It is evident, that the explanation for the regionalization of the Caucasus in this period is partly to seek in the units established by the Russian civil and military administration, as they gradually conquered and colonized the Caucasus, making it a part of the Russian Empire. The units 'Kavkazskoe namestnichestvo' and 'Kavkazskaya Guberniya' were established in 1785, represented here on the map *Karta Kavkazskago namestnichestva i Zemli Vojska Donskogo* (1792) (Caucasian Government and Land of the Don Cossacks).

Which geographical areas are covered by the term 'Caucasus'?

The use of the term 'Caucasus' in the regional sense in the material is more frequent with reference to the North Caucasus during earlier periods. In some cases, it is even equated with Kuban (cf. example (6) above). The inclusion of the South Caucasus in the understanding of the Caucasus region comes much later, as Georgia and Armenia were well-known countries in earlier periods, and were frequently mentioned in the early Swedish media. Two quotes are given here:

- (11) *[...] Konungen af Persien låtit opbåda de under hans lydno stående Tartarer så wål som de uti Georgien regerande Furstar til at giöra Ryske Troupperne motstånd, hwarföre man befärad at et offentligt krig torde opkomma emellan Ryssland och Persien, [...]*
'The King of Persia has made the Tartars under his rule, as well as the princes ruling in Georgia, to be summoned to oppose the Russian troops, wherefore it is feared that a general war might arise between Russia and Persia. [...]' (Posttidningar, June 25, 1722)
- (12) *[...] en widlöfftig dissertation om Monophysitis, hwarutinnan han gifwer effterrättelse om deras ursprung och huru de blifwit kringströdde uti Egypten, Syrien, Armenien, Arabien, Nubien och Ethiopien.*

[...] a lengthy thesis on Monophysitis, where he gives information about their origin and how they were scattered in Egypt, Syria, Armenia, Arabia, Nubia and Ethiopia.’
(Posttidningar, March 25, 1723)

Towards the mid 19th century, ‘Caucasus/Kaukasus/Kaukasien’ started being used with reference to the whole region, both the North and South Caucasus (13a-b). It is also in this period that the use of ‘Transkaukasien’ and ‘Ciskaukasien’ become more frequent (cf. examples (8-9) above).

- (13) a. *Generalguvernören i de Kaukasiska provinserna, General Golowin, inberättat till Kejsaren att det i hela Kaukasien, Georgien inberäknadt, visade sig tecken till ett allmänt uppror*
‘The Governor-General of the Caucasian Provinces, General Golowin, reported to the Emperor that throughout the Caucasus, including Georgia, there were signs of a general uprising [...]’ (Telegrafén, December 4, 1838)
- b. *Times antager att han i år icke skall kunna framrycka längre än till Kutais, och att hans plan inskränker sig till att besätta Mingrelien och Imeretien, för att först till nästa år med biträde af westmakternas trupper jaga Ryssarne ut ur hela Caucasus.*
‘The Times assumes that this year he [Omer Pascha] will not be able to advance further than Kutais, and that his plan is limited to occupying Mingrelia and Imereti, in order to chase the Russians out of the entire Caucasus only by next year with the assistance of the troops of the western powers. (Lunds Weckoblad, November 8, 1855)

In this context it is interesting to note (without having conducted a larger corpus study) that there appears to be a tendency in modern Swedish media that ‘Kaukasus’ is used to refer to the South Caucasus. This is probably due to the fact that the North Caucasus is a part of Russia, whereas the South Caucasian independent countries stand out and are more visible in the media. A few modern examples (14a-c):

- (14) a. [...] *Kazakstan samt staterna i Centralasien och Kaukasus. Putin talar mycket om “historiska band”* [...]
‘[...] Kazakstan and the states in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Putin talks a lot about “historical bonds” [...]’ (Dagens Nyheter, February 26, 2022)
- b. *Turkiska provokationer, våld i Belarus, ryska förgiftningar och nya krigshot i Kaukasus.*
‘Turkish provocations, violence in Belarus, Russian poisonings and new war threats in the Caucasus’ (Upsala Nya Tidning, October 2, 2020)
- c. *Oljeindustrin i Kaukasus, som hade skapats av de svenska bröderna Nobel, var redan väl utbyggd.*
‘The oil industry in the Caucaus, that was founded by the Swedish Nobel brothers, was already well developed’ (Smålandsposten, September 12, 2020)

Concluding remarks

Being involved in the development of Caucasus Studies as area studies with the Caucasus region as its object of study, it's important to approach the concept 'Caucasus' from different perspectives. The examination of both old Swedish newspaper articles and old maps indicates that the use of the regional concept 'Caucasus' is emerging in the second half of the 18th century, and became more widespread in the first half of the 19th century. The observations to be made on the basis of this Swedish media material is that the mountain is the most salient interpretation for 'Caucasus /Kaukasus' up to the 1760s. Gradually, the regional interpretation is becoming more common and already in the 1780s there are cases where this is the preferred interpretation.

It is important to note that there were cases of the use of the term 'Caucasus' with a regional interpretation even before the establishment of the Russian administrative units 'Kavkazkaya guberniya' and 'Kavkazskoe namestnichestvo'. Another interesting tendency being illustrated in the material, is that the unmarked meaning of the term 'Kaukasus' is changing from the North Caucasus to the South Caucasus.

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