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Book Review: Caucasus Natives Neglected As Olympics Close in Sochi

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Performers dressed in faux-traditional Caucasus outfits take part in the elaborately choreographed closing ceremony of the 2014 Paralympic Winter Games in Sochi on March 16, 2014.

Correction Appended

As the Paralympic Games closed on Sunday in another elaborate spectacle of costumed dancers and fireworks, the attention of the world's media had for the most part already left Sochi, shifting to the referendum on secession in Crimea. While the ceremony signaled the end of over a month of events and media attention comprising both the Winter Olympic Games and Paralympics, the glitz of the spectacle once again made no reference to the culture and history of the Caucasus Region.

This has been a common thread throughout the whole Olympic season in Sochi — while the Olympic opening ceremony included a long reenactment of scenes from Russian history, no reference was made to the history of the Caucasus, a region home to myriad cultures that

long predate the existence of any kind of Russian state.

Though costumed cossacks made occasional appearances at Olympic events to perform traditional dances, for the most part Olympic organizers scrupulously avoided highlighting the native cultures of the North Caucasus, preferring to glorify the Russian Federation rather than noting the independent native cultures. The stringent security measures, intended to weed out Islamic terrorists and separatists, largely targeted the Caucasus natives, making it even more difficult for these groups to travel in their own native lands.

While exiled Caucasus natives protested in front of the Russian Embassy in Istanbul and some traditional folk crafts and dances were displayed at the hastily constructed "Circassian House" pavilion in Sochi, Caucasus natives were conspicuously absent from the carefully managed tableau of the Sochi Olympic Games, which happened to concide with the 150th anniversary of the Russian genocide against the indigenous Caucasus peoples.

James Forsyth's recently released book, "The Caucasus: A History," is a weighty work that examines in great depth the cultures and histories overlooked by Russian politicians and international media. Examining the region without the lens of present-day national borders, Forsyth looks at the region from the Volga as far south as Persia and Syria over a period of thousands of years, showing the roots of the present order in the region.

The first fact that immediately strikes the reader upon perusing Forsyth's book is the constancy of conflict and competition between rival powers over the Caucasus — while states like the Soviet Union occasionally succeed in bringing peace to the entire region, these periods are rather the exception to the general trend of warfare and division in the region. Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Mongols and Russians all fought over the region extensively, while the ever-changing palette of "native" peoples of the Caucasus found their homelands on the war-torn frontiers of empires.

Forsyth does an excellent job of portraying the clear differentiation between the North Caucasus, or Ciscaucasus, and the South Caucasus, or Transcaucasus. The Ciscaucasus, comprising the regions north of the Caucasus range that are now wholly controlled by Russia, is open to the Eurasian steppe to the north, and so historically has been vulnerable to conquest by whatever power dominates the plains to the north: Khazars, Mongols and Russians have all left their mark on these territories. At the same time, the high mountains of the Caucasus range shield the region from interference from the south, resulting in limited cultural influences from Persia and Asia Minor.

While the independent states are rare in the Ciscaucasus, the mountainous plateaus of Transcaucasia allowed small local states to maintain independence from the greater powers to the east and west, resulting in the formation of cultures like Georgia and Armenia, both of which managed to maintain independent states for significant periods, while also succumbing to foreign domination by various external powers.

Readers may be somewhat surprised to find that large portions of the book are devoted to discussing regions that are not, in fact, in the Caucasus: Iran, Kurdistan, Turkey and even Central Asia are discussed at length. While these long interludes can distract somewhat from the main subject, they are helpful in showing the many cultural influences which have spread and combined in the Caucasus.

Perhaps the most ambitious aspect of Forsyth's work is the time frame — he covers the history of the entire Caucasus from the beginning of recorded history almost up to the present day, even covering the controversial 2008 Russian-Georgian War. Generally, writing a history book about events in recent memory is a risky business, and no doubt there are many observers who would object to Forsyth's portrayal of the recent history of the Caucasus.

However, Forsyth's main goal is not to comment on the current order in the Caucasus but rather to show its roots: Through his narrative we see current structures in the Caucasus not as states like Russia or Georgia or Azerbaijan would have us believe with their triumphalist nationalist narratives, but rather as they really are — relative newcomers in a region where diverse native peoples have found themselves lumped into one empire or another for thousands of years.

"The Caucasus: A History" By James Forsyth. Cambridge University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-521-87295-9. 938 pages. List Price: $160.

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Editor's note: An earlier version of this article gave an incorrect date for the Georgian-Russian war. It occurred in 2008, not 2006.

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