



The Baron von Münchhausen of British Travel Writers: Edmund Spencer and his Travels in Circassia

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Abstract

The article is devoted to a critical analysis of the legacy of Edmund Spencer – a nineteenth century British travel writer and author of numerous books and articles on Circassia and the Caucasus. The widespread use of Spencer's work by historians notwithstanding, until now there has been no published biography of the author, which led to a proliferation of claims about his background and the timing and circumstances of his visit to Circassia. This article contributes to the correction of this omission by presenting the results of the latest biographical research on Edmund Spencer, based on manuscript and printed primary sources. Despite doubts expressed by some historians about the existence of such a person, the article conclusively proves that Edmund Spencer was indeed a real historical personage. Furthermore, since until now no attempt has been made to evaluate the reliability of Spencer's works on Circassia as historical sources, the article examines references to Spencer in contemporaneous manuscript sources, such as the British, French and Russian diplomatic, military and intelligence correspondence and reports, finding that available documentary evidence refutes the author's claim of a visit to the interior of Circassia. The attitudes of Western scholars of the period and of foreign visitors to Circassia raise further serious doubts about the authenticity of Spencer's travelogues. The article calls into question Spencer's account of his travels in Circassia as a source of geographic, ethnographic and sociological knowledge, concluding that it was a nothing more than a fabrication.

Keywords

Circassia – Circassians – Edmund Spencer – Caucasian War – Russo-Caucasian War – Russo-Circassian War – Caucasus – invented tradition

1 Introduction

The 1830s in Britain saw a tremendous rise in the number of newspaper articles and books devoted to the Circassian question. Some were serious publications that analyzed the grand strategic implications of the Russian conquest of the North Caucasus or gave first-hand accounts of the struggle Circassians waged against the Russian military. Others belonged to the genre of romantic fiction, capitalizing on the growth of the print media market to cater to Britain's growing Russophobia, using the widespread and largely mythical stereotypes of the inhabitants of the Caucasus.

At the time the most popular work by far about the Circassians was a book titled *Travels in Circassia, Krim Tartary, &c., including a steam voyage down the Danube, from Vienna to Constantinople, and round the Black Sea*, written by Edmund Spencer. Published in 1837 at the moment when anti-Russian rhetoric in the British press had reached fever pitch following the seizure of the *Vixen*, a British merchant vessel, by a Russian brig on the Circassian coast, it achieved instant popularity not just in Britain but in other European countries and the United States and went through three English editions in as many years.

Over the last several decades Spencer's Circassian travelogues have become a staple of historians of the Caucasus and are now being used extensively as an authoritative primary source. However, their present-day readership is not limited to scholars: they exercise a powerful hold over the imagination of the general public. Spencer's descriptions of the Circassian lifestyle, music and folklore, physique (e.g. Khotko 2014, 112), dress, customs, language and toponymy (e.g. Khotko 2015, 24), illustrated by numerous sketches, are much more expansive than those of his contemporaries and are used by present-day Circassians in the reconstruction of their folk traditions, inspiring cultural experts (e.g. Khludova 2017, 104–9) and scholars (e.g. Cherkasov et al 2018, 88–96), clothing designers and choreographers alike (e.g. Atabiev 2019, 5). His transcriptions of Circassian folk songs have sparked modern imitators, such as a group of enthusiasts who have “recreated” one of these songs devoted to sheikh Mansur and presented it at a scholarly conference to an enthusiastic reception, while versions of it posted on YouTube have been viewed hundreds

of thousands of times (Ansar Circassia 2022, Zico Zico 2018).¹ Spencer's version of the Circassian national flag has become universally recognized, ubiquitous in Circassian communities the world over, and has been officially accepted as the flag of the Republic of Adygea. As opposed to other contemporary accounts of the political situation in Circassia, which paint a complex picture of inter-tribal rivalry, shifting loyalties and confused self-identity, Spencer describes a nation in its modern sense, constituted as a confederation, and claims to have witnessed crucial nation-building events. Such an idealized description of the national past is very appealing and less problematic to many modern-day Circassians whose national identity is still evolving.

While Spencer continues to excite interest among the general public and to attract scholarly attention, the personality of the author who was able to leave such a lasting and powerful legacy remains a mystery. So little is known about him that some historians have even speculated that such a person never existed, and that "Edmund Spencer" was a pseudonym for another writer or group of writers. Others have relied on clues from Spencer's writings or on the general historical context to hypothesize about his background. Furthermore, despite the fact that Spencer's works have been extensively used by contemporary historians of the Caucasus, there have been no attempts to consider the reliability of his travelogues as a historical source about the region.

2 Spencer in Western Historiography

Spencer's Circassian travelogues encountered a very cold reception from nineteenth-century Western scholars. Karl Friedrich Neumann was the first to mention them, writing that they "contain[s] many empty speeches but no new facts unknown from other sides [sources]" (Neumann 1840, 64). Another contemporary German scholar, Karl Koch, was more explicit in his criticism:

before Spencer gives more evidence of his residence in Circassia, I must at least doubt the reality of his journey. Of all the new things of which Bell tells so many, Spencer says nothing, and many of his names beyond all doubt do not belong in the realm of reality. His whole book is full of contradictions and only its beautiful picturesque language is the reason,

¹ This song of Spencer's has also been mentioned in scholarly literature, such as the recent comprehensive collection of archival documents about sheikh Mansur (Manyshev 2022, 67–8).

like incense which he peddles to his countrymen, that it has suffered two or even three editions (Koch 1842, 263–4).

In another book Koch found fault with Spencer's descriptions of the military situation in Circassia and noticed mistakes in his use of local toponyms (Koch 1855, 8, 13, 15). French scholar Louis Vivien de Saint-Martin expressed a certain skepticism about the reliability of Spencer's account:

Mr. Spencer saw, if at least we are to believe his account in all regards, certainly the most uncharted parts of the Caucasus ... His observations are rushed and shallow and apart from a very small number of pages, the four volumes he dedicated to the account of his excursions will scarcely leave a mark in the scientific history of the explorations in the Caucasus. (Bell 1841, 1, lxviii)

His criticism of Spencer notwithstanding, Vivien de Saint-Martin harbored no doubts about the fact of the author's visit to Circassia (Vivien de Saint-Martin 1842, 374). Spencer's account of his travels was given some credence in the commentary to Admiral Saumarez Brock's sketches and notes, which put him in the category of writers who produced "volumes ... full of curious matter, though sadly wanting in topographical detail" ("Views in Circassia" 1892, 173).

An unsuccessful attempt to research Spencer's biography took place in 1915 when *Notes and Queries* published a request to provide biographical particulars concerning "Capt. Edmund Spencer, author of several books of travel in the Near East, published between 1837 and 1867" (*Notes and Queries* 1915, 100). A 1919 memorandum written for European policymakers by Haidar Bammate counted Spencer among the Europeans who "have been able to raise up a little bit of the veil hiding the horrible drama which was being acted out in a remote corner of Europe" (Bammate 1919, 4). Polish historian Ludwik Widerszal described him as a "Circassophile publicist," while noting his penchant for compilations from other sources (Widerszal 1934, 58, 135–6). Ramazan Trakho described Spencer as "an English traveler" in a book on Circassian history and ethnography (Trakho 1956, 11). John Howes Gleason, in his work on the history of Russophobia in Britain, mentioned Spencer as having "visited Circassia in 1836 in the company of consul-general James Yeames of Odessa and Count Vorontsov" (Gleason 1972, 202–4). French scholar Michel Lesure considered Spencer a source credible enough to quote from without any caveat (Lesure 1978, 33). Paul Henze, an American scholar, quoted extensively from

Spencer (Henze 1992, 82–7). Moshe Gammer included Spencer in the list of David Urquhart’s “agents” who incited the Circassians to resist Russia, promising British intervention and supplying them with weapons and ammunition (Gammer 1994, 116–17).

More recently, Spencer has been mentioned by Turkish scholar Musa Şaşmaz (Şaşmaz 1999, 222), Thomas McLean, a scholar from New Zealand (McLean 2003, 295–318), and Eric Hoesli, who described him as one of Urquhart’s followers tasked with an intelligence and political mission, who spent time in Circassia, preceding James Bell and John Longworth (Hoesli 2006, 157, 173, 179).

American historian Charles King described Spencer as “a major Caucasus travel writer” (King 2008, 134) who witnessed Circassian attacks on the Russian forts (King 2007, 243). Walter Richmond used his account of the history of Anapa in an overview of the history of the North-Western Caucasus (Richmond 2008, 53). Michael Khodarkovsky enthusiastically commended *Travels in Circassia* as “brilliantly insightful” (Khodarkovsky 2015, 387). Anthony Cross, in his influential bibliography of travel accounts of the Russian Empire, did not doubt the authenticity of *Travels in Circassia* but dismissed Spencer’s claims of subsequent journeys to Russia, made in *Turkey, Russia, the Black Sea and Circassia*, as not supported by any evidence and described the latter book as “re-jigging of material from his earlier travels updated with contemporary political commentary” (Cross 2014, 161, 180). Gia Gelashvili published the Georgian translation of Spencer’s account of Abkhazia together with his own commentary, although he made no attempt to provide a historical analysis of the text (Gelashvili 2013, 322–41). French scholar Matei Cazacu described Spencer as “one of the most active, if not one of the greatest travelers of the first half of the XIX century,” but noted that he had made little contribution to the accumulation of scientific knowledge on the Caucasus (Cazacu 1998, 48–50). Turkish scholar Ayşegül Kuş implied that he was sent there by British authorities to collect intelligence during his “extensive travel throughout the region” (Kuş 2019, 418, 434). British historian Pat Walsh claimed that Spencer “spent many years in Russia” (Walsh 2020, 113).

3 Spencer in Soviet and Russian Historiography

For many decades Spencer’s *Travels in Circassia* was an important part of Russian historiography of the Caucasus, considered to be a primary source of significant value – even in Soviet times it was referenced by many prominent historians (Bushuev 1940, 233; Fadeev 1951, 76–96; Gardanov 1967, 66;

Pokrovskii 1989, 317). With the publication of the first abridged Russian edition in 1994, the work became easily accessible to Russian-speaking scholars and the general public. The personality of Spencer himself, however, remained an enigma and there existed rampant speculation regarding his background. His Russian translator Naima Nefliasheva characterized *Travels in Circassia*² as a credible source and hypothesized that Spencer may have been “one of the numerous British spies that inundated the Caucasus at that time” (Spencer 1994, Introduction). Her *prima facie* opinion has been accepted as fact by many authors, including Mark Bliev (2011, 9–10); Zalina Basieva (2014, 21)³; Elina Kasabova (2010, 67); Vitalii Vinogradov and Yuri Klychnikov (2000, 70)⁴; Kasbolat Dзамikhov (Lesure 2015, 11); Svetlana Kudaeva (2007, 43); Vladimir Naumenko (2015, 57); and Askerbi Panesh (2013, 9–14).

Other scholars, such as Ali Bizhev (1994, 79), Oleg Matveev (1995, 139)⁵, Aleksandr Cherkasov, Vladimir Ivantsov, Michal Smigel and Violetta Molchanova (Cherkasov et al. 2015, 73–88), described Spencer as a travel writer and publicist. Vladimir Degoev has quoted his works extensively in the context of European discourse on the Circassian question (Degoev 2001, 55–7, 67, 69, 87, 96, 97, 100–3, 105–11, 114, 116, 182, 219, 221–3). Khadji Murad Donogo cited Spencer’s works as examples of romanticized English literature about Dagestan and the Caucasus, describing him as “an English captain” (Donogo 2017, 99). Perhaps the most peculiar description of Spencer is contained in an entry of *The Circassian Encyclopedia*, a massive compendium of Circassia-related information: “Edmund Spenser [sic] – influential English civil servant” (Kumakhov 2006, 1041).

Not only did none of the Russian scholars doubt the authenticity of *Travels in Circassia* but most considered them to be a highly valuable and accurate primary source. For example, Vladimir Naumenko pointed out the “exceptional thoroughness in depictions of everything that came into the field of

2 In the Russian translation the name of Spencer’s book was mistranslated as *Travels to Circassia* rather than *Travels in Circassia*.

3 In another article Basieva used a quote from Spencer in support of her statement about shipments of arms to mountaineers by “foreigners” (Basieva 2011, 20).

4 Klychnikov and Vinogradov described Spencer as “an English traveler who with intelligence purposes visited the North-Western Caucasus among ‘unpacified Circassian tribes’ and “left interesting historical, ethnographic notes, very valuable for scholars of the Caucasus.” In their other works Spencer was designated an “English traveler ... who visited the Caucasus for intelligence purposes in 1836” (Klychnikov 2002, 103) and an Englishman who “acted in the Caucasus with political intentions” (Vinogradov, Vinogradov and Klychnikov 2012, 75).

5 Matveev described Spencer as an English traveler who “visited Circassians in 1830.” In another work, Matveev implied that the writer was a British intelligence agent (Matveev 2015, 136–7).

vision of the author" (Naumenko 2015, 48–9), while according to Mark Bliev, "[Spencer] was thoroughly prepared for his professional activity ... As opposed to many other English agents, Spencer knew 'everything' about the Caucasus and Circassia" (Bliev 2011, 9–10). And when Spencer's sequel to *Travels* was published in Russian in 2008, its translator Karal'bi Mal'bakhov suggested that the thorough geographical and ethnological descriptions in that work allowed light to be shed on the less explored parts of the Caucasus (Spencer 2008, 5).

4 Spencer in the Historiography of the Balkans

For many decades Spencer has been known to historians specializing in the modern history of the Balkans (e.g. Jelavich 1955, 396–413), but his works were generally approached critically. According to Radovan Subić, in his description of travel through Bosnia and Herzegovina Spencer relied on information from other authors and his writings were "a mixture of correct, semi correct, and incorrect information, as well as his thoughts" (Subić 2020, 86). Subić hypothesized that "Captain Edmund Spencer" may have been a pseudonym used by several individuals who produced work for the publisher Henry Colburn⁶ (Subić 2018, 123–4). Neval Berber noted that Spencer's accounts of the Balkans contained fanciful information and many unattributed borrowings from other writers, and speculated that "Edmund Spencer" may have been the pen name of a Victorian fiction writer (Berber 2010, 4). Veselin Kostić, who found numerous examples of Spencer's unabashed plagiarism as well as factual inaccuracies, inconsistencies and anachronisms, referred to him as the "Baron Munchausen of English travel writers" (Kostić 2014, 152). Thus, a critical examination of Spencer as a primary source and the absence of any biographical information about the author have led several prominent historians of the Balkans to view him as a source of questionable reliability and dubious authenticity.

6 Colburn paid writers more than his competitors and had a nose for sensational material that would sell well, but at the same time had a somewhat unsavory reputation (Cross 1985, 181–2).

5 The Biography of Spencer

William Edmund Spencer was, indeed, a real historical personage. He was born in Carlisle on 25 December 1799.⁷ He was the second son of one James Spencer, Esq., an attorney from Liverpool.⁸ Spencer also had a younger sister, who like himself was taught French from infancy, and both of them spent part of their teenage years going to school in France where their father resided from 1815 (Spencer 1866, 1, 3–5). In addition to French, early in his life Spencer acquired proficiency in German and by his thirties was making professional translations from that language. On 1 August 1827 at St. Pancras Church in London he married Mary Rennie, the eldest daughter of the late Revd. John Rennie, vicar of Long Itchington, Warwickshire.⁹ Their son, Almaric Edmund Spencer, was born at Fiume (today's Rijeka) in the Austrian Empire on 23 June 1828.¹⁰ It appears that at some point before his thirties Edmund Spencer may have served in the British army, although the evidence for this is scant and inconclusive. He was often designated “Captain Spencer” by the publishers of his books. Furthermore, André Adolphe Challaye, the French consul in Odessa, described Spencer as “a former officer.”¹¹ Given that the title abbreviation “Esq.” was added to the author's name in his earlier works, one may surmise that he did hold the rank of captain, although it is also possible that both “Esquire” and “Captain” were nothing more than courtesy titles. Having said that, the rank in and of itself did not necessarily mean that one has spent an extended or even any period of time on active military service, since the practice of acquiring rank through the purchase of officer commissions was widespread. Furthermore, Spencer makes no mention of military experience in any of his works.

In 1834 Spencer's translation from German of *Tutti Frutti*, a book of miscellany written by Prince Hermann Ludwig Heinrich von Pückler-Muskau, was published. Despite, or even partly due to, the liberty with which Spencer treated the original text, the book was a commercial success and was reprinted two years later. In 1836 Spencer anonymously published his first major work,

7 Archive of the Royal Literary Fund. BL. Loan 96 RLF 1/1938/1.

8 *Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser*. 11 August 1827.

9 *Leeds Intelligencer*. 9 August 1827.

10 *The Sun*. 16 July 1828. Some of the letters in the first two editions of Spencer's *Travels* are addressed to his son Almaric. As an adult Spencer's son became a tutor, engaged in the preparation of young men for army and civil service examinations. He also helped his father in his work; for example, the illustrations for some of Spencer's books were done by Almaric (Spencer 1854, v; BL, Archive of the Royal Literary Fund, Loan 96 RLF 1/1938/1).

11 Correspondance politique des consuls (1826–1896). AMEAE, Russie, dossier 2 (Odessa 1833–1840), Fol. 231–232.

a travelogue titled *Sketches of Germany and the Germans*. The book did draw some criticism for inaccuracy, but was such a sales hit that a second edition was published within a few months. In 1836 Spencer made his trip to the Crimea, including a voyage along the Circassian coast, and, ostensibly, to the interior of Circassia, returning to England to publish in July 1837 his *Travels in Circassia*. The book's popularity was capitalized on by the publication of a slightly revised second edition in 1838, which also sold very well, and that same year Spencer published a sequel, *Travels in the Western Caucasus*. The next year was marked not only by the birth of Spencer's first daughter – Emily Wilhelmina – but by the publication of an abridged (and apparently unauthorized) Dutch translation and of the third English edition of his *Travels in Circassia*. In 1840 Spencer published *The Prophet of the Caucasus*, a historical fantasy about sheikh Mansur.¹² The novel was released again in 1843 with a revised plot under the title *Prince Potemkin and the Prophet of the Caucasus*.

This flurry of writing must have resulted in substantial income for Spencer, but it appears that he lost a large part of his earnings through some bad investments. The first was the failure of Hammersley's Bank in which he and his wife kept their money.¹³ Then there was the loss of his investments in French financial instruments as a result of what Spencer later claimed to have been fraudulent actions by his stockbroker, Louis Isot. According to Spencer, Isot had forged his signature and sold his holdings, pocketing the proceeds. Spencer also claimed that Isot defrauded numerous other clients and, after making disastrous speculations on the Paris Bourse, committed suicide.¹⁴

12 In 1841 an adaptation of this novel was turned into an equestrian circus show under the title *Conqueror's steed! or the Prophet of the Caucasus*. This expensive and elaborate production about the exploits of sheikh Mansur and the Circassians, featuring grand decorations, special effects and complicated stunts by acrobats, trapeze actors, tightrope walkers, clowns and trained animals, received enthusiastic reviews (mixed with political commentary about the war in the Caucasus), became very popular and profitable and ran for two years on such stages as Astley's Royal Amphitheatre and Theatre Royal, Sadler's Wells. (*Astley's Royal Amphitheatre herald*, 19 April 1841; *The Age*, 18 April 1841; *The Bell's New Weekly Messenger*, 18 April 1841; *Court Gazette and Fashionable Guide*, 17 April 1841; *Ibid.*, 15 May 1841; *English Chronicle and Whitehall Evening Post*, 13 April 1841; *The Era*, 18 April 1841; *Evening Mail*, 14 April 1841; *The Morning Herald (London)*, 13 April 1841; *The Morning Post*, 13 April 1841; *Naval & Military Gazette and Weekly Chronicle of the United Service*, 17 April 1841; *The Sun (London)*, 13 April 1841; *Ibid.*, 8 August 1842; *The Weekly Chronicle (London)*, 18 April 1841).

13 Archive of the Royal Literary Fund. BL, Loan 96 RLF 1/1938/2.

14 Real events were somewhat different – it was not Louis Isot but rather his brother Gabriel Isot who committed suicide by shooting himself. Prior to the collapse Isot had a sterling reputation and was the oldest member of the "Parquet," France's most important stock exchange. It appears also that Isot's business went into insolvency because of a market

Throughout his life Spencer supplemented his income by written translations from German and worked for various periodicals as a correspondent. For example, at the time of his visit to Crimea he was a correspondent for the conservative paper *The Morning Herald* (St. Sauveur 1837, 33).

In 1844 the Spencers had their third child, a daughter, whom they named Mary Jane.¹⁵ By then Spencer and his family were living between two countries – England and France, where they resided in Paris and Boulogne. Robert Pearce Gillies, a Scottish writer and poet who in 1844 lived in the same house in Boulogne, described Spencer as an avid smoker, prone to light his *tchibouque* every morning, who nevertheless did not shy away from exercise, taking long walks and engaging in the sport of stone putting.¹⁶ Spencer took a special liking to Boulogne for its pleasant atmosphere and the picturesque beauty of the surrounding countryside (Spencer 1853, 1, 9). It was there that Gillies, the Spencers and their French landlord's family were stricken down by influenza during an epidemic that affected the area and, according to Gillies, they faced “a battle for life” (Gillies 1851, 3, 285–7). This information fits with Spencer's family history, as his wife's sister Ann Rennie died of “consumption” in Boulogne on 21 July 1844.¹⁷ (In 1849 another sister of Spencer's wife, Elizabeth Rennie Walker, filed a suit against Spencer, his wife and children in the High Court of Chancery. It appears that in order to avoid being served with a summons to the court, Spencer left his usual place of residence in England and went abroad.¹⁸ Spencer was accused of appropriating the claimant's entire share of Ann Rennie's inheritance and of withholding information about the assets and liabilities of the deceased.¹⁹) Several years later Spencer would write that one of the few drawbacks of life in Boulogne was the offensive miasma

collapse rather than as a result of fraud, since a court dismissed the lawsuit of shareholders of Compagnie Aymard against Isot, clearing him of all charges and ordering the plaintiff to cover the legal expenses. It is noteworthy that until his last years, Spencer exhibited an inclination to take personal and financial risks, as well as a tendency to play fast and loose with the truth when it suited his purpose (*The Illustrated London News* 1845, 386; *The Economist* 1845, 1304; *Journal des Chemins de fer* 1846, 291).

15 Archive of the Royal Literary Fund. BL, Loan 96 RLF 1/1938/1, 3.

16 Spencer included a *tchibouque* with its “aromatic fragrance” among the necessities for a traveler (Spencer 1837, 1, xxviii) and even ascribed to smoking beneficial effects on a person's moral character, such as the cooling of anger and the forgetting of misfortunes (*Ibid.*, 151).

17 *The Banbury Guardian*. 1 August 1844.

18 *The London Gazette* 1849, 2275.

19 *Rennie v. Spencer*. NAUK, C 14/1046/R49, 1849. The materials in this legal case do not represent Spencer's position but given his evasion of service, it is likely that he expected the court to rule against him.

arising from the mud in the harbor during low tide, which he blamed for aggravating outbreaks of diseases (Spencer 1853, 1, 10). Spencer and Gillies maintained their correspondence and a complimentary letter posted by Spencer from Paris in support of Gillies' grant application dated 19 October 1846 is held by the British Library.²⁰

The 1850s were Spencer's most productive decade, in quantity if not in quality. In 1851 he published *Travels in European Turkey*, followed by another travel book, *A Tour of Inquiry through France and Italy*. The Crimean War gave a new lease of life to Spencer's Circassian franchise and in 1854 he rushed out a further title, *Turkey, Russia, the Black Sea, and Circassia*, which was a rehashing of his previous works with some additional miscellany on the Caucasus and on imam Shamil. That same year he published *The Fall of the Crimea*, another novel about the Crimea and Circassia. On the back of a voracious demand for information about the war theater, Spencer's reputation was bolstered not only by his publications but by his spurious claims of personal acquaintance with prince Sefer Zanoko and imam Shamil. In 1854 Captain Frederick Hughes, who was dispatched on secret service to Circassia and was friends with Spencer, suggested to the Foreign Office he should take the author along in the hope of obtaining an opening to Shamil.²¹ However, nothing came of this idea, possibly due to opposition from Stratford Canning, even though Spencer had actually arrived at Constantinople together with Hughes.²² The year 1855 saw the second edition of *Turkey, Russia, the Black Sea, and Circassia* and the release of a new novel about the fall of Byzantium, which in the tradition of his previous literary exploits relied much more on Spencer's imagination than on historical facts. A reworked edition of *The Fall of the Crimea* may have been published in 1856,²³ followed by the second edition of *The Prophet of the Caucasus*

20 Archive of the Royal Literary Fund. BL, Loan 96 RLF 1/708/11.

21 Frederick Hughes to George Villiers, 4th Earl of Clarendon. NAUK, FO 78/1052, 4 May 1854; Lord Raglan to Henry Pelham, 5th Duke of Newcastle. Varna. NAUK, WO1/368-4, 9 July 1854; Stratford Canning to Henry Pelham, 5th Duke of Newcastle. NAUK, WO1/368-4, 27-28 July 1854; George Villiers, 4th Earl of Clarendon to Stratford Canning. Foreign Office. NAUK, FO 78/1052, 21 August 1854; Frederick Hughes to Lord Raglan. Vardan. NAM, 6807-303, 1855/05/29, ff.1r-2v, 29 May 1855; Frederick Hughes to Edmund Lyons. Vardan. NAM, 6807-303, 1855/05/29, Enclosure 1, ff.1r-2v, 29 May 1855; Memoir respecting a visit to the Naib of Shamyl by Frederick Hughes. NAM, 6807-303, 1855/05/29, ff.1r-8v, 27-29 May 1855.

22 Widerszal erroneously suggested that Hughes and Spencer reached the Caucasus together (Widerszal 1934, 135-6). More recently Richmond also mistakenly asserted that Spencer "returned to the region in 1851" (Richmond 2013, 60).

23 In his application to the Royal Literary Fund Spencer claimed that an "improved" edition of this book was released in 1856, but I was unable to find any record of it.

in 1857. The income from so many publications must have been sizable, but Spencer again made some unfortunate investments in financial instruments during the Spanish investment boom of 1850–1874, and these failed to produce any dividends.²⁴

In addition to writing books, in the 1850s Spencer was a regular contributor of articles on naval, military and geopolitical subjects to the *United Service Magazine and Naval & Military Journal*, which was published by Hurst and Blackett, successors to Henry Colburn. Several times he published extended versions of his articles in the form of pamphlets, some of which touched on the Circassian question. The most important of the pamphlets, according to his own opinion, was one titled *What Is to Be Done with Turkey? Or, Turkey, Its Present and Future*.²⁵

At the beginning of the 1860s Spencer lost around £1,000 when a loan he had extended to Stephens and Shipley, proprietors of the *Volunteer Service Gazette*, went bad.²⁶ This led to his deeper involvement with the failing publication and as its editor and main investor, Spencer was instrumental in the creation of the National Rifle Association and of the Volunteer Forces. He was also actively involved in the training of volunteers, possibly with the help of his son Almaric. In 1866 Spencer chaired the New Year dinner for about 100 volunteers and the minutes record several toasts given in recognition of his support for the volunteer movement.²⁷

After a decade-long dry spell, Spencer published two more travelogues – one on France, Germany and the Balkans in 1866 and another on Germany in 1867 – but these were visibly inferior to his previous works in both content and style. By the 1870s Spencer, who continued to reside in Boulogne and had become a widower, had fallen on hard times as a result of systematically pouring his earnings into high-risk investments and vanity projects and failing to accrue any savings in preparation for his old age. According to a grant application dated 27 February 1874 that he filed with the Royal Literary Fund, a benevolent organization created to provide monetary assistance to British writers in difficult financial circumstances, his entire income at the time was derived from a life interest of about £70 a year (equivalent to £6,540 in 2023; Bank of England 2023) arising from £2,500 invested by his wife in consol (perpetual) bonds for the benefit of one of their daughters, while his daughters were forced to make an independent living as governesses because he could

24 Archive of the Royal Literary Fund. BL, Loan 96 RLF 1/1938/2, 3.

25 Archive of the Royal Literary Fund. BL, Loan 96 RLF 1/1938/1.

26 Archive of the Royal Literary Fund. BL, Loan 96 RLF 1/1938/2, 3.

27 *Volunteer Services Gazette and Military Dispatch*, 12 January 1867.

not even provide them with a home. Spencer claimed that he could no longer rely on his pen as a means of income due to ill health and old age.²⁸ He wrote personal letters to various individuals asking for support for his grant application, which demonstrates both how desperate his situation was and how few were his friends. The application was complemented by letters from several persons (none of them prominent), such as J. Russell Davies, the employer of one of his daughters; Frederick Harrison of the London and County Bank, a long-time friend of Spencer's; and F.H. Sansom, a retired lieutenant colonel of the Madras Infantry and a friend of Spencer's daughter.²⁹ Spencer's application for relief was approved and he was granted £100.³⁰ In addition, Octavian Blewitt, a British writer and secretary of the Royal Literary Fund, arranged for Spencer to become a "poor brother of the Charterhouse," an almshouse located in London between Barbican and Smithfield Market, which, according to Spencer's daughter Mary Jane, provided him with a "very comfortable ... home for his old age."³¹

Spencer died at the Charterhouse on 17 April 1877, leaving effects valued at less than £1,500.³² The location of his grave is unknown, but most brothers of the Charterhouse were interred at Tower Hamlets Cemetery. The cemetery was hit with bombs during the Second World War and subsequently many graves were removed. It is now a nature reserve and park. None of the remaining Charterhouse graves at Tower Hamlets Cemetery seem to belong to Edmund Spencer.³³

It is very probable that portraits of Spencer are included among the many illustrations to his books. The second edition of *Travels in Circassia*, for example, features a colored depiction of the "author" in his "Circassian costume," which shows a slender mustachioed man, standing in contrapposto and wearing an eclectic outfit that resembles the uniform of a Cossack and only very distantly a Circassian costume. A very similar-looking man makes several cameo appearances in illustrations to this and later works, sometimes depicted taking notes during a bivouac, smoking a *tchibouque*, sometimes on the road or interacting with other people.

28 Archive of the Royal Literary Fund. BL, Loan 96 RLF 1/1938/1.

29 Archive of the Royal Literary Fund. BL, Loan 96 RLF 1/1938/4, 5, 6.

30 Archive of the Royal Literary Fund. BL, Loan 96 RLF 1/1938/7.

31 Archive of the Royal Literary Fund. BL, Loan 96 RLF 1/1938/9.

32 Email from Gabriella Swaffield, Museum Manager of the Charterhouse, 19 January 2021.

33 Email from Claire Slack, Heritage Officer of Tower Hamlets Cemetery Park, 5 January 2023.

5.1 *Travels in Circassia*

Spencer's book essentially consists of two parts, one dealing with his stay in Eastern Europe, Constantinople and the south of Russia, and the other describing his purported journey to the interior of Circassia. It is important for understanding the provenance of his discourse to note that in Constantinople Spencer interacted with at least two of David Urquhart's³⁴ closest associates, Julius Millingen and Hassuna D'Ghies (Spencer 1837, 1, 189). In the Ottoman capital Spencer benefited from the assistance of Mustafa Reshid Pasha (who briefly served as the Ottoman Ambassador to the Court of St. James), who procured for him many advantages and most probably introduced him to the Russian Ambassador Apollinari Butenev, arranging for the Englishman to join a Russian tour group, which included Countess Olga Naryshkina³⁵ and other Russian dignitaries, on a tour of the main mosques (Spencer 1837, 1, 148, 154). The author was able to seize this opportunity and further develop his acquaintance with Naryshkina and her entourage during a two-day trip to Odessa aboard a commercial steamer and two weeks of mandatory quarantine, after which he was taken under the wing of the Naryshkins and introduced to count de Vitt³⁶ and governor Mikhail Vorontsov³⁷ (Spencer 1837, 1, 211, 216, 218–19). And according to Spencer it was very shortly after his completion of quarantine that Vorontsov invited him to participate in a voyage along the Circassian coast (Spencer 1837, 1, 221). There is no doubt about Spencer's proximity to the circle of Vorontsov and his participation in the voyage, since these are confirmed by multiple sources.³⁸

One of the benefits Spencer derived from this newly acquired patronage was access to Vorontsov's impressive library, which ran to many thousands of volumes and contained important books about the region. According to the

34 Urquhart, David (1805–1877): British diplomat, politician, entrepreneur and publicist. Visited Circassia in 1834 on a secret mission, which led to his lifelong involvement in the Circassian question. During his brief tenure as secretary of the British embassy in Constantinople (1836–1837) organized the voyage of the British schooner *Vixen* to the Circassian coast in November of 1836 in order to provoke a confrontation between Russia and Britain and provide a pretext for the entry of the British fleet into the Black Sea.

35 Naryshkina, Olga (Potocka), countess (1802–1861) – Polish noblewoman, wife of retired Russian general Lev Naryshkin.

36 De Vitt, Ivan Osipovich, count (1781–1840) – Russian general of the cavalry. At the time served as the inspector of reserve cavalry. De Vitt was the brother of Olga Naryshkina.

37 Vorontsov, Mikhail Semenovich, prince (1782–1856) – Russian statesman and military leader, general-field marshal. Governor-general of New Russia and Bessarabia (1823–1844). Viceroy of the Caucasus (1844–1854). Vorontsov was the cousin of General Lev Naryshkin and was widely believed to have been the lover of his cousin's wife, Olga Naryshkina.

38 Correspondance politique des consuls (1826–1896). AMEAE, Russie, dossier 2 (Odessa 1833–1840), Fol. 199–200; Durham to Palmerston. No. 146. NAUK, FO 65/225, 12 September 1836.

author, starting from the voyage along the coast the governor supplied him with a variety of reading material on the Caucasus, some of which at least was unavailable to the general public (Spencer 1838b, 1, 6–7). A close reading of Spencer's *Travels in Circassia* and *Travels in the Western Caucasus* leaves no doubt that he was very familiar with the books by such authors as Klaproth, Pallas, Reineggs and Guldenstedt. It is noteworthy that on the one hand he disparaged these authors, writing that their works had “been derived from the information of ignorant Russian prisoners, Armenian pedlars, or Karaite Jews, and not from personal observation” (Spencer 1838b, 1, 5). On the other hand, he borrowed liberally from them – in most cases without proper attribution, but sometimes indicating the source and not hesitating to copy entire pages of original text (Spencer 1838b, 1, 90–2).

Following his stay in the south of Russia, Spencer claimed to have traveled back to Constantinople and then made his way to Circassia in September 1836 on a Turkish smuggler's boat, braving the Russian maritime blockade and narrowly escaping the pursuit of a cruiser (Spencer 1838a, 1, xv). There he ostensibly stayed until at least the end of October, hosted by local chieftains (*Further Papers* 1838, 11). However, as opposed to Spencer's sojourn in Crimea and Odessa, there is not a single known piece of evidence in Russian, British, French or Ottoman archives that would support his claim of having stayed in the interior of Circassia. At the time Russian authorities operated an extensive and effective espionage network in Circassia, Paris, London, Constantinople and numerous other Ottoman population centers and undertook extraordinary efforts to obtain information about any foreigners who intended to visit the North Caucasus. For this reason, the complete absence of any Russian archival material regarding Spencer's alleged visit is very telling.

Furthermore, despite some scholars' characterization of Spencer as a British agent, there is simply no evidence for this. In particular, there is no indication in the dispatches of the British ambassador in Constantinople, John Ponsonby, and of the British consul in Odessa, James Yeames (both of whom were involved in secret service), that the author was anything other than a private traveler. Spencer was mentioned in Yeames' dispatch of 2 September 1836 to Lord Durham, the British ambassador to Russia, an extract from which the latter forwarded to Lord Palmerston. The writer must have greatly irritated the consul, who reported:

In the numerous and very mixed party to Circassia [i.e. Vorontsov's voyage along the coast], was a Mr. Spencer, who was discovered to be a professional writer, and a correspondent of the Newspapers, I am anxious to be absolved of any share, the most indirect, in any thing he may publish on the subject; the more so, as he seemed strangely ignorant on some

common subjects – he never once looked into a map, but put down in his note book, always ready in hand, every thing that dropt in conversation. I thought it necessary to enter a similar protest with Count Woronzow.³⁹

Thus, it is apparent that Yeames did not consider Spencer to be in any way involved in official business and he went so far as to complain about Spencer both to his superiors and to Vorontsov. Yeames clearly treated Spencer's account of travel to the interior of the country with disdain and later reported, based on his own observations and on reliable documentary intelligence he obtained, that Spencer's claims of an absence of a Russian fort on the Doba in the bay of Sudzhuk were false.⁴⁰ In mid-1838 Yeames yet again returned to the subject of Spencer, reporting to Palmerston that his Russian informants "not only doubted, but positively denied that Mr Spencer, author of the late travels, and whose work is become generally known, did really traverse that Country, as related by him."⁴¹

Yeames' unfavorable impression of Spencer was echoed a decade later in a letter addressed to Count Alexandre Pisani at the British Embassy in Constantinople from the British chargé d'affaires in Belgrade, Thomas de Grenier de Fonblanque:

Mr. W.E. Spencer, who published some Travels of his in Southern Russia has arrived here from Athens. He has the fault of most travellers – that of generalizing on particular instances – and commenced by assuring me that "all the Turks had turned highway robbers", simply because he had been fired at on the frontiers of Albania! I explained to Mr. Spencer, that the Turkish Government could not be justly blamed for an effect of the misconduct of the Greeks ... He is an impressionable man, and I hope he will write in the amended sense, for the other would be calculated to produce much mischief. In aid of this object, I took him to Mehemet Pasha, who impressed the plastic traveler very favorably.⁴²

To understand Spencer's complicated relations with British officialdom it is helpful to take into account their context. Spencer made his living as a professional travel writer, translator and journalist (Spencer 1851, 2, 156). Although these professions allowed him to interact with diplomats, officials, merchants

39 Durham to Palmerston, No. 146. NAUK, FO 65/225, 12 September 1836.

40 Yeames to Palmerston, No. 1. Odessa. NAUK, FO 65/246-1, 30 January 1838.

41 Yeames to Palmerston, No. 7. Odessa. NAUK, FO 65/246-7, 9v, 16 July 1838.

42 Grenier to Pisani. Belgrade. NAUK, FO 78/694, Ottoman Empire: Correspondence with Consul General Thomas de Grenier de Fonblanque, Serbia, 141-3, 18 October 1847.

and military men, they could provide only modest means of making a living and most certainly did not make “a penny a line gentleman”⁴³ such as himself a member of the British establishment. However, it did put him within the growing and potentially troublesome category of travel writers, who were motivated not only by the financial benefits of their work but also by the opportunity to make their voice heard in the discussions of national affairs (Turner 2018, 3). Spencer was very much aware of his borderline social status, which may explain his hypersensitivity to perceived mistreatment, as when he systematically castigated every British consul who failed to render attention to him, while at the same time being invariably exultant in his praise of those British and foreign officials who treated him well. The foreign policy establishment watched him with caution, since he did not mince words when he saw what he considered to be a lack of effort by British diplomats to protect the Empire’s interests. Among his other pet subjects were conflicts of interest and abuses of consular posts by foreigners in the British service, the low level of education and professionalism of consular officials, as well as their system of remuneration (Spencer 1851, 2, 154, 297–300).

Yeames’ premonition came true, for after returning to England from Russia Spencer openly took issue with the stance of the British government on the *Vixen* incident through written testimony, which was later circulated in Parliament as part of the materials relating to the seizure of the ship (*Further Papers* 1838, 11–12). Furthermore, in the preface to the second edition of his *Travels in Circassia*, Spencer spent a full fourteen pages not only arguing against the veracity of Russia’s claims to Circassia but attacking Lord Durham, who was accused not just of making incorrect statements in the dispatch but of not even trying to procure evidence of facts on the ground, relying solely on information furnished by Russia. “Should we not,” wrote Spencer, “after finding him so egregiously duped, and his client [i.e. the British Government] non-suited in consequence, pronounce him to be sadly deficient in that most useful faculty, common sense?” (Spencer 1837, 1, Preface). Lord Durham, during his relatively short periods of service in Russia, was invested by the Russian emperor as a Knight of the Orders of St. Alexander Nevsky, St. Andrew, St. Anne and White Eagle.⁴⁴ To Spencer this was a sign that the British ambassador must have been a victim of “Russian chicanery,” as “his lordship is decorated with honours by the Emperor of all the Russias and his own sovereign, and imagines that he

43 A typical snobbish characterization given by Baron Peter Brougham to Henry Bulwer, correspondent of *The Morning Chronicle* and member of Parliament, on his appointment as Minister to Paris (Bourne 1982, 475).

44 *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 1988. Volume 7. Article “Lambton, John George, 1st Earl of Durham.”

deserves the gratitude of his country, while the Lion of England is left to be trampled upon by the Eagle of Russia. Must we not, therefore," asked Spencer, "see with regret the representative of our sovereign duped by so shallow a contrivance?" (Spencer 1838a, 1, xi–xvi). According to the author, he met with the ambassador in order to inform him of his observations on Circassia. It is hard to imagine, however, that a meeting could go well between a critically minded professional traveler who wrote for a living and Lord Durham, described by one historian as "proud, wayward, immensely rich, with romantic good looks and an explosive temper" (Woodcock 1959, 1). Indeed, Spencer found the ambassador to be "adverse to their [the Circassians'] cause and determined to take a Russian view of the whole question" (Spencer 1838a, 1, xvi).

Thus, it can be concluded that, the opinion of many scholars notwithstanding, there is no evidence that in the 1830s Spencer was a British intelligence agent or official and was dispatched on secret service to Circassia. On the contrary: the commentary in relevant official correspondence, as well as Spencer's own writings, not only suggest that his relations with the foreign policy establishment were complicated and often bordered on adversarial, but also refute his claims of travel to the interior of Circassia.

6 Contemporaneous Criticism of Spencer as a Source

In contrast to the enthusiastic public reception of *Travels in Circassia*, those among the British who had actually lived among the Circassians reacted to it with contempt. John Longworth obliquely referred to Spencer as "a writer who has lately fabricated a work on Circassia ... [but who] betrays his ignorance" through incorrect descriptions of Circassian mores and customs (Longworth 1840, 1, 284). In a preface to his book Longworth listed recent works by travelers to Circassia, including Klaproth and Pallas, Marigny, Urquhart, Stewart, Bell and Knight but not Spencer. To emphasize his point, he wrote:

I speak advisedly when I say that no other Europeans, besides those I have enumerated, have ever visited Circassia, always excepting the army of the invaders. The landing of an European there is too extraordinary an event not to be deeply imprinted on the recollection of the whole population, nor has such occurred within the memory of man that forms not still a common topic of conversation there (Longworth 1840, 1, vi–vii).⁴⁵

45 It is worth noting that a quarter of a century later, describing his travels through Serbia, Spencer would mention his meeting with Longworth, by then British consul in Belgrade,

James Bell fails to mention the work of Spencer, but does make reference to the work of his companion Longworth, further saying, “On this subject [Circassia] the public will now have the evidence of two eye-witnesses” (i.e. him and Longworth) (Bell 1840, 1, xiv–xv). This is all the more significant in light of the fact that in June 1837, on the eve of the publication of *Travels in Circassia*, Spencer wrote a letter of support to George Bell (James’ brother) in response to the latter’s inquiry – something of which James must have been aware (*Further Papers* 1838, 11).

What is even more surprising is that Spencer goes unmentioned in any of the editions of *The Portfolio*, although Circassia-related materials regularly appeared in that publication and despite the fact that Spencer himself made several references to *The Portfolio* in his book and gave a glowing description of Urquhart personally in the first two editions (Spencer 1837/1838a, 1, 207–8); notably, he excised it from the third edition.

Other visitors to the Caucasus also found the story of Spencer’s Circassian adventures to be unreliable. George Ditson, who visited the North Caucasus a decade later under the patronage of the Russian authorities, stated: “Mr. Spencer, who wrote two volumes about Circassia, I am credibly informed, never visited the country” (Ditson 1850, xii). Theophil Lapinsky, an active participant in the war in Circassia, mentioned both Bell and Longworth but peculiarly not Spencer in a book about his exploits (Lapinsky 1863, 1, 318). Carl Stücker, who also took part in the hostilities, seems to have had a generally skeptical view of Europeans who wrote about Circassia before him (Shtiuker 2016, 9–10, 123). As for Spencer, Stücker apparently shared Karl Koch’s view (which he quoted at length) that Spencer never went to Circassia and that his work was distinguished only by its flowery prose (Stücker 1862, 284).

Contemporaneous newspaper and magazine reviews of *Travels in Circassia* were mostly flattering. *The Gentleman’s Magazine* remarked that the book is “very well written” and that “the author seems a person of information as he is of enterprise.”⁴⁶ *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* mentioned with satisfaction the publication of its third edition, noting that it had “zest and freshness.”⁴⁷ In France *Nouvelles Annales des Voyages* published a thirty-four-page “critical review” of the work in 1837, which contained no actual criticism and extensively quoted from the book (*Nouvelles Annales des Voyages* 1837, 350–84). Edmond de Cazalès wrote a laudatory review (although making note of what

giving a flattering description of the man but completely avoiding the subject of Circassia (Spencer 1866, 2, 186–7).

46 *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, September 1841.

47 *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, July 1839.

he saw as occasional embellishments) for the novelty of the material covered, but harshly criticized Spencer's political views (Cazalès 1838, 770–829). Philarète Chasles commended Spencer's work in the influential *Journal des Débats*.⁴⁸ These generally positive opinion pieces were seconded by *The Morning Chronicle*⁴⁹, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*⁵⁰, *The Monthly Review*⁵¹, *The Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard*⁵², *The Athenaeum*⁵³, *New Monthly Belle Assemblée Review*⁵⁴, *The Literary Gazette*⁵⁵ and *The Dublin Review*⁵⁶, but there was one very important exception.

A scathing critique was published in the Tory *Quarterly Review* (which had previously run unfavorable commentary on Spencer's German travelogue) by an anonymous reviewer, very well acquainted not only with previous publications on Circassia but with the details of the *Vixen* incident:⁵⁷

Mr. Spencer now proclaims himself to be the same gentleman who last year gave to the public "Sketches of Germany and the Germans"... If we then had reason to suspect his residence in Germany to have been of very small duration, we have now a much stronger reason to suspect his residence in Circassia to be a mere negative quantity ... on the present occasion he seems to have carried this trade of purloining to a much greater extent – a trade which old Admiral Burney, on meeting a young brother compiler in the reading-room of the British Museum, called the art of making new shoes out of old boot upper-leathers. Mr. Spencer has, to all appearance, cobbled a pair of slippers out of the leggins of the Chevalier Taitbout de Marigny.⁵⁸

48 *Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires*, 11–20 October 1840.

49 *The Morning Chronicle*, Saturday, 27 June 1837.

50 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 1837, No. CCLXV 636–47; *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 1837, No. CCLXVI, 747–59.

51 *The Monthly Review*, August 1837.

52 *The Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard*, No. 27, 1837.

53 *The Athenaeum*. 8 July 1837; *The Athenaeum*, 15 July 1837.

54 *New Monthly Belle Assemblée Review* 1839, 47.

55 *The Literary Gazette*, No. 1068, 8 July 1837.

56 *The Dublin Review*, July 1837.

57 *The Quarterly Review* was significantly influenced by David Urquhart (Gleason 1972, 181) and it is probable that the anonymous reviewer had consulted either Urquhart (who had by then returned to England from Constantinople) or someone from his circle. This would certainly help to explain the disappearance of the panegyric to Urquhart in the third edition of *Travels in Circassia*.

58 *The Quarterly Review* 1837, 362.

The reviewer then proceeded to pick apart the book, antipathy to Russia and sympathy for the mountaineers being, perhaps, the only points on which he agreed with the author, although not without sarcasm: “He [Spencer] is fluent or should we rather say frothy, in his declamation in praise of the Circassians, and fierce enough in his vituperations of the Russians.”⁵⁹ The general tone of the piece can be illustrated by the following quotes:

With this captain, whose name is not given, he puts to sea in a nameless ship, on a day without a date, to a port he knows not where ...⁶⁰

How he had travelled into the interior – how many mountains of five thousand feet he had traversed – how long he had been absent, we are left totally in the dark; for Mr. Spencer’s four long letters from Circassia, like his sailing and arrival, bear no date, and his journey no direction ...⁶¹

It would be an idle attempt to follow Mr. Spencer among these mountains: he indicates no route, and consequently affords no useful information to his readers.⁶²

According to the reviewer, even a most careful study of the book can find no evidence that the author had been to Circassia and it could have been written in London with the use of Marigny’s book as a reference.⁶³ Several examples are given of when Spencer made almost verbatim appropriations without proper attribution. Perhaps the most damning evidence in this analysis is a comparison of small dictionaries of Circassian words that are given in Marigny’s and Spencer’s books, where the latter copies transcriptions of the same phonetically complicated Circassian words letter for letter, while in describing the phonetic complexity of the language Spencer gives the same anecdote as Marigny, comparing it to the sound of pebbles in a bag (Marigny 1837, 192).⁶⁴ The map Spencer gives is criticized as well – despite

59 Ibid, 389–90.

60 Ibid, 387.

61 Ibid, 389.

62 Ibid, 389.

63 Marigny’s book was published in May 1837, three months prior to the publication of Spencer’s *Travels in Circassia*.

64 This was not the only case of Spencer being unable to resist borrowing a good story. For example, discussing Circassian customs he states that one of the worst things a young man can hear from a girl is “Oh, you coward! you have not yet been able to steal a Tchernemorsky cow” (Spencer 1838a, 2, 308), which is a paraphrase from Charles Tausch’s account of the Circassians published in 1834 (Drummond 1834, 1, 99).

his claim that it contains much new information, the reviewer notes that it is extremely inaccurate and does not add “a single line nor a name” to what is already known.⁶⁵ In sum, the reviewer dismisses Spencer’s account as a fabrication but, unsurprisingly for a pro-opposition publication at the time when the government was being severely castigated for its appeasement of Russia, fully approves of his assessment of the geopolitical importance of Circassia.⁶⁶

These arrows of criticism must have stung deeply. Devoting a full six pages of the introduction to the second edition of his book to refutation of the accusations leveled against him, Spencer still could not help going back again in the following pages to the review by what he disparagingly called the “quarterly oracle” (Spencer 1838a, 1, ii). The form of defense Spencer adopts against his critic is itself rather telling. He starts by attacking the reviewer rather than the argument: first questioning the reviewer’s authority by referring to a prior incident where Auguste Rene Caillie, a French explorer and traveler to Timbuctu, was similarly treated in the same periodical but was later proven to have been correct in his descriptions; secondly by an “ergo decedo” accusation of being treated “less mercifully ... than ... the hireling scribes of Russia on the continent.”⁶⁷ Some arguments, such as the absence of dates or the scarcity of names, he dismisses without much explanation or on the grounds of security considerations. In refuting the accusation that he lifted his Circassian dictionary from Marigny’s work, Spencer makes a peculiar response: 1) even if he had appropriated it, “so trivial a circumstance could not in any way affect the merits of my publication”; 2) he has spent “many a pleasant hour in Odessa” with Marigny, who was not a Frenchman, as was asserted by the *Quarterly Review*, but “whatever his ancestors may have been ... a native of one of the Greek islands”; and 3) Marigny himself borrowed the dictionary from a prior Russian military publication. It is obvious that none of the aforementioned explanations answers the critic’s valid doubts. To the claim that he had appropriated other information about the Circassians from Marigny’s book, Spencer again responds not by an outright negation but by a logical fallacy: by questioning the epistemic value of “a voyage performed round the Black Sea by order of the Russian government nearly twenty years ago” and the knowledge of Marigny, who “does not even pretend to have travelled into the interior of the country” and, therefore, could not possibly give a description of the manners and customs of the Circassians (Spencer 1838a, 1, vi–vii). Throughout his defense,

65 *The Quarterly Review* 1837, 393.

66 *The Quarterly Review* 1837, 395.

67 This was found to be disingenuous by Cazalès, who caustically wrote that “*Hireling scribe of Russia* is a qualification, often applied for those who do not share your point of view” (Cazalès 1838, 829).

Spencer pejoratively characterizes his anonymous critic as a “censorious assailant,” “admirer of journals,” “self-constituted judge,” “malignant inquisitor” and even, mockingly, “a Catholic,” while the product of criticism is not just “not very gentlemanly” but constitutes “absurd gratuitous reflections and censures” (Spencer 1838a, 1, ii–viii).

Criticism induced an important omission in the third edition of *Travels*. Both the first and second editions contain a paragraph describing Spencer’s acquaintance with Marigny and making mention of Marigny’s book (Spencer 1837/1838a, 1, 273). The third edition contains exactly the same paragraph about Marigny but omits two lines mentioning his book (Spencer 1839, 1, 282) – clearly a rather awkward attempt to sweep the subject of criticism under the carpet.

7 Conclusion

Historians’ widespread use of Spencer’s work notwithstanding, the lack of a published biography of the author has led to the proliferation of various claims about his background and the timing and circumstances of his visit to Circassia. This article corrects the omission by presenting the results of biographical research on Spencer, which conclusively proves that Edmund Spencer was a real historical personage, despite the doubts expressed by some scholars. It also puts to rest unfounded claims about Spencer’s involvement with the British authorities and his employment on secret service, demonstrating that the author was a freelance professional writer whose relations with the Foreign Office bordered on adversarial and of whom, in consequence of his reputation as a loose cannon, British officials were wary.

Spencer’s works have been used as primary sources by many historians of the Caucasus, who made no attempt to critically examine their reliability. This article seeks to partially remedy this oversight through an examination of contemporaneous British, French and Russian sources. It is found that documentary evidence corroborates Spencer’s account of his sea voyage along the Circassian coast but refutes his claim of a covert visit to the interior of Circassia. Furthermore, the attitudes of Western scholars of the period, contemporaneous foreign visitors to Circassia and others, who either pointedly ignored Spencer or questioned the authenticity of his work, raise very serious doubts about the integrity of the author which are not dispelled by Spencer’s petulant but ineffectual defense against criticism.

All the above makes it necessary to reconsider the reliability of Spencer’s *Travels in Circassia* as a historical source, although the work continues to represent interest as a publication that has played a very considerable role

in promoting the Circassian question in Europe, shaping European perceptions of the Circassians, and continues to influence modern Circassians' understanding of themselves and their history. The case of Edmund Spencer, presented in this article, is a fascinating example of how a group of peoples, sharing a common ethnic, linguistic and cultural heritage but divided by political and geographical boundaries and struggling to define itself as a nation in the modern sense, is building an invented tradition and a foundational story partly based on the text of an imaginary journey written by an enterprising but dodgy British writer from the comfort of his armchair. It is also a cautionary tale of scholarly groupthink, which has led to an accumulation of academic gravitas by an unreliable source, misleading several generations of scholars.

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