

The Circassian Genocide



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WALTER RICHMOND



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For my mother

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The Circassian Genocide

Introduction

On May 20, 2011, the Parliament of Georgia passed a resolution that labeled as genocide the “preplanned” mass killing of Circassians by the Russian Imperial Army in the 1860s. The resolution also stated that those who survived but were driven from their homeland and their descendants should be recognized as refugees. The move was stunning, since the Circassian genocide as well as Circassians themselves had been forgotten by the world within decades of the destruction of their nation in 1864.

The Circassians went from being an almost legendary people of the northwestern Caucasus Mountains, a subject of travelogues about exotic warriors and beautiful maidens, to a central concern of the European powers, and then to a forgotten nation in a span of only a century. The erasure of Circassia from the cultural memory of Europe was abrupt and total: whereas between the 1830s and the 1860s it was nearly impossible to pick up a European newspaper without finding an article discussing the Circassians’ plight, by 1900 the only reference to “Circassia” in the European press concerned a luxury liner bearing that name. However, the tragedy didn’t end for those who survived Russia’s campaign in the Caucasus Mountains. After their deportation, nearly half were driven from their new homes in the Balkans by Russian troops in the 1870s. They were forced to migrate further, to the Middle East and beyond. They fought against all odds to preserve their identity, always with the hope of one day returning to their homeland, but the bloody twentieth century diverted the world’s

attention from their struggle, and they really did face the possibility that they would be forgotten forever.

How, then, were the Circassians able to bring the attention of the world back to their tragedy nearly 150 years after the nations of Europe abandoned them? Why is their story once again appearing on the pages of Reuters, *Time*, and other international publications? And why is the Russian government pushing back so hard against the effort to explore fully the events that caused the Circassians' dilemma, even going so far as to create a presidential commission "to counter the attempts to falsify history to the detriment of Russia"?¹

One answer lies about twenty-five miles from the northeastern Black Sea coastal city of Sochi, tucked away at an elevation of about 1,800 feet. It is a small canyon once known as Qbaada ("fortified ravine").² It was here that the Circassians and their Abkhaz allies made their last stand against the Russians in May 1864. After the Circassians' surrender on May 21 (according to the Old Russian calendar³) the Russians held a victory parade and banquet in Qbaada at which medals were presented to the officers responsible for the final victory. The Circassians were driven to Sochi, where they died by the thousands as they waited for ships to take them to the Ottoman Empire. Russian officer Ivan Drozdov described the scene around Sochi while the Russians were celebrating: "On the road our eyes were met with a staggering image: corpses of women, children, elderly persons, torn to pieces and half-eaten by dogs; deportees emaciated by hunger and disease, almost too weak to move their legs, collapsing from exhaustion and becoming prey to dogs while still alive."⁴ In 1869 Qbaada was settled by Russian immigrants and renamed Krasnaya Polyana (Red Meadow), a reference to all the blood spilled on the field during the final battle. It, too, might have been forgotten entirely if the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had not awarded the 2014 Winter Games to Sochi, to be held on the 150th anniversary of Circassians' defeat on that very Red Meadow where the Russians celebrated and handed out medals while the Circassians died on the coast. The IOC pointed the spotlight directly on the nearly-forgotten genocide and brought the Circassians' plight back into the international arena.

HOW THE CIRCASSIANS, who call themselves Adyge, originally came to occupy the northeastern shores of the Black Sea is yet another story of

exile. They are most likely the descendants of the Hattians, who developed an advanced society in central Anatolia as early as the third millennium BCE. When the Hittites invaded ca. 2000 BCE, many migrated to the north-east and occupied the land between the modern cities of Sukhumi and Anapa along the coast of the Black Sea.⁵ They eventually separated into the Abkhaz, Abaza, Circassian, and Ubykh peoples (although most Circassians consider the Ubykhs a Circassian tribe).⁶ Known as the Zigei (a corruption of Adyge?) to the Greeks and Romans, the Circassians had commercial and political ties with both peoples and had built a set of fortified cities by the early Middle Ages.⁷ The Mongols, who destroyed their civilization in the thirteenth century, referred to them as the Jerkes, literally “one who blocks a path.”⁸ Originally a term used to describe all the peoples of the North Caucasus, the Russian variant of the term, Cherkes, became attached exclusively to the Adyge people by the nineteenth century and was translated into “Circassian” in Western Europe.

There were at least one million Circassians in the seventeenth century, and possibly as many as 1.7 million.⁹ Several legends refer to a *pshi* (prince) named Inal who reunited the Circassian tribes after the Mongols drove them into the high mountains.¹⁰ While the claim that he managed to unite the freedom-loving Circassians into a single political entity is probably a romantic myth, Inal does appear to have led the Qabartay tribe, known to the world as the Kabardians, to the secure central valleys of the North Caucasus. Not only were they more insulated from raids by their nomadic neighbors, they also controlled the critical Daryal Pass, the only route through the Caucasus Mountains. As a result, the Kabardians were able to develop a relatively advanced feudal structure and exercise authority over their neighbors, and to become a major player in the politics of the region. However, although there was in theory a single ruler called the *pshi tkhamade*, no one but Inal ever exercised anything resembling complete authority. Far more often, the aristocratic families fought vehemently over the rank of *pshi tkhamade* and plotted to undermine the authority of whoever held the title. Outside powers frequently played one clan off another, and Russian interference even caused the tribe to fracture into Greater and Lesser Kabardia by the sixteenth century.¹¹ Until Russian colonization pushed the Kabardians back into the mountains, Kabardia stretched two hundred miles from present-day Karachaevo-Cherkessia in the west to the

border of Chechnya in the east. The Besleney tribe, created when a clan broke off from the Kabardians, lived to the west. In similar fashion, the Temirgoys broke from the Besleneys to become a separate tribe, and the Hatukays broke from the Temirgoys.¹² Other tribes, such as the Mahosh, Hamysh, Bjedukh, and Cherchenay, developed independently from the Kabardians and possessed similar, albeit weaker, aristocratic hierarchies.

Four tribes were little known to anyone. On most Russian maps of the nineteenth century, three of them are simply referred to as the “free tribes.” Their aristocratic families never exercised much authority, and in 1803 they were stripped of what little power they had at the Pechetniko Zafes (Congress).¹³ The most settled of the three were the Natuhays, who lived along the Black Sea coast from the Sea of Azov south, halfway to Sochi. In addition to taking full advantage of the fertile lands they occupied and raising a variety of crops and fruits, the Natuhays conducted extensive trade with the Turks. The Shapsug tribe consisted of a group that lived close to the coast south of the Natuhays and a much larger contingent that lived in the impenetrable valleys of the Caucasus Mountains. The Abzakhs, the third “free” society, lived exclusively in the high mountains, while the feudal Ubykhs occupied the southernmost region around Sochi. Both were virtually unknown to the Russians until 1840. Reclusive, wary of outsiders, and uncompromising in defense of their independence, these four tribes admitted to their ranks other Circassians fleeing attacks by the Crimeans, Ottomans, and Russians. As a result, by the nineteenth century they far outnumbered all the other Circassian tribes combined. These were the people who refused to surrender to Russian demands, and in their frustration the Russian military command decided to eliminate them at any cost.

Long before the Russians began their conquest, the Circassians had established a way of life that was destined to clash with Russian aspirations in the Caucasus. In many ways a democratic and almost communistic society, Circassian life revolved around the *aul*, which translates as “village” but more accurately means several extended families who stuck together in the harsh Caucasus climate. But, in fact, Circassians were so frequently raided by their larger neighbors that they put little care into their homes and abandoned them when attacked, only to rebuild somewhere else once the danger had passed. Each *aul* was theoretically under the rule of its own *pshi*, but problems were resolved by a village council. The village elders’ opinions were

considered sacred, and no one under the age of forty would dare contradict them or even speak at a council unless specifically asked to. Consensus was the rule of Circassian day-to-day life as well, and life was communal in many ways. If you needed a horse, you could borrow your neighbor's without asking as long as you returned it when you were done. A misbehaving child saw the negative side of this way of life: any adult in the aul had the right punish the child as if he or she were the child's own parent. One aspect of this communal approach that ran afoul of the Russian notion of order was the Circassian concept of hospitality: anyone who turned up on a Circassian's doorstep was treated like one of the family. This was most likely a result of necessity: the traveler, hungry and exhausted from the trials of mountain travel, could count on safe harbor at any household he came across. Not only was the host obliged to defend the guest even at the cost of his own life, he was forbidden to inquire about the guest's background.¹⁴ Upholding this custom was not simply a matter of pride but of survival: Circassian ethnographer Khan-Girey explains that if a person violated this rule, "honest people would lose respect for them and society would shun them; their every step would be met with insulting reproaches."¹⁵ This made it quite easy for fugitives and Russian deserters to find a safe refuge, and the Russians were repeatedly frustrated to find that the Circassians would rather die than turn over their guests. Likewise, the difficult-to-translate concept of *tkheriwage* caused Russian conquerors a great deal of grief. *Tkheriwage* is similar to the concept of blood brothers, that is, unrelated men who have taken an oath of personal alliance. To turn one's *zetkheriwegu* (blood brother) over to the authorities even if he committed a crime was an unimaginable act. The Russians also saw the practice of *pur* as a threat to their plans. In this tradition, which was widespread throughout the North Caucasus, a child would be sent to grow up with a family in another aul, or even another nation. While it weakened the bonds of parent-child in a way we would find completely alien, it strengthened intertribal loyalties. Since one of the Russians' main strategies to control the North Caucasus peoples was divide and conquer, they found this tradition intolerable.

The Circassians' approach to religion was also unconventional. Repeated attempts by their more powerful neighbors to convert them to either Christianity or Islam met with only superficial success. In 1818 Édouard Taitbout de Marigny wrote that Circassian Christianity consisted of "the mechanical

exercise of a number of pagan and Christian ceremonies,” and that while he saw crosses, the Circassians “know not what it represents.”¹⁶ As for Islam, Taitbout de Marigny reported that “the Circassian Mahometans are very indifferent to their religion.”¹⁷ The true “religion” of the Circassians was (and still is to some degree) Adygage, which translates as “to be Adyge.” The main principles of Adygage are memory of ancestors, consciousness of Circassia as the home of those ancestors, and tolerance of other ways of life and religious beliefs.¹⁸ The practical manifestation of Adygage was the Circassians’ legal–ethical code by which they regulated their society, *adyge habze*. This little-understood code of behavior has been compared to the Bushido Samurai code of honor and Spartan society.¹⁹ Adyge habze can at times appear to be brutal and unforgiving, but it possessed its own internal logic. For example, what might appear to be a minor offense such as impeding someone’s flocks could result in the death not only of the victim’s family but of his entire aul. The victim was therefore permitted to use extreme measures against the offending party. For crimes committed within the aul, on the other hand, councils of elders focused on compensation, not retribution. In fact, after receiving such compensation, the injured party would often apologize to the offender’s family for having to ask for payment. In both cases the underlying principles of Circassian justice were diametrically opposed to the notion of a central authority with power to mete out justice. When the Russians tried to impose such an authority, they saw their sacred way of life under attack and fought to the bitter end.

If a major threat arose, one or more of the leading tribes would call a *hase* (“hah-say”), a rudimentary form of congress at which hundreds of “delegates” would assemble. A second assembly, the *zafes*, was called less frequently and dealt with more critical issues. Both the *hase* and *zafes* suffered from several shortcomings that turned out to be fatal in the war with Russia. First, there was no protocol for the meeting; theoretically, anyone who wished to speak could come forward. Often the person who was most eloquent carried the day, regardless of the wisdom of his ideas (a phenomenon not unknown in modern politics). Even the dialect was important; the Kabardians and Besleneys were considered the most prestigious, so delegates from those tribes held particular sway over the *hase*. Second, a unanimous vote was required for any measure to be adopted. As a result, *hases* often ran for weeks without any decisions being made. In a time of war,

particularly the war for national survival that they faced in the nineteenth century, this indecision kept the Circassians from taking decisive action. Third, there was no enforcement mechanism, so individual tribes frequently ignored the decisions of the hase. In the 1850s leaders among the Circassians tried to create a more effective system, but it was already too late.

It wasn't only the lack of a central authority that kept the Circassians from developing a stable, unified state. On the one hand, the rugged Caucasus Mountains allowed for little agriculture, so the Circassians lived a semi-migratory life, tending huge herds of sheep and, in lesser numbers, cattle. Where agriculture was possible, the growing season was very short; a late spring or early fall meant widespread famine. In addition, plagues frequently annihilated large segments of the population, and because of their strategic location along the Black Sea coast, the Circassians suffered from countless raids by their neighbors that often decimated their population. Humans were the main capital sought in these raids, taken for sale at the slave markets throughout the Middle East and Europe. Established by Genoan colonists in the 1300s, the slave trade was institutionalized by the Mongols and remained a thriving business well into the nineteenth century. The Crimeans and Ottomans also demanded tribute on a regular basis, particularly from the western tribes, and this further crippled their ability to establish a stable way of life. Some tribes, such as the once powerful Jane, disappeared altogether. The Circassians participated in the slave trade themselves, a fact that has been regularly used by the Russians to justify their actions, although the accusation rings somewhat hollow when one considers that the Russians practiced institutionalized slavery on a far more massive scale all the way until 1861. Also, despite Russian claims that slaves were the only goods the Circassians traded in, the truth is that the Circassians also sold furs, leather, wax, honey, copper, hard woods, jewelry, and other goods to the Turks.²⁰

THE RUSSIAN MINDSET that led to the fateful decision to destroy this reclusive nation in the 1860s had its beginnings in the military command of previous generations. These officers ruled the Caucasus as their own personal fiefdom, and the tsar and his ministers were not sufficiently knowledgeable about the region to challenge their judgment. As Muriel Atkin has pointed out, this weakness in the system of governance created problems for Russia throughout the Caucasus and beyond:

Although both [emperors] Paul and Alexander, and not their advisors, made their foreign policies, the options that each entertained were effectively limited by the kinds of information they received. This was especially true in dealing with such areas as the Caucasus and Iran, which were remote from the traditional interests of most of the Russian elite. Few people understood, or even claimed to understand, those areas, so Paul and Alexander had little choice but to rely on many of the same ignorant or biased people that Catherine had.²¹

These advisors went beyond simply providing biased information. Commanders from Alexei Ermolov in the 1820s to Nikolai Evdokimov in the 1860s regularly misled St. Petersburg and deliberately sabotaged policies that might have led to a peaceful conclusion to the war.

The destruction of the Circassian nation began in a very physical sense decades before the final blow in the 1860s and continued well after the genocide of 1864. Once Catherine the Great decided in the 1760s that the northeastern shores of the Black Sea should be Russia's, the Russian military worked to hem in the Circassians bit by bit until they were surrounded in the high mountains. By the 1820s the vast majority of the Kabardians had either been killed or expelled into western Circassia, where they continued to fight until 1864. After the Circassians' expulsion, nearly half the survivors were subjected to a second ethnic cleansing in 1878 when the Russians chased them from their new homes in the Balkans. Both those who remained in Russia and those in diaspora struggled for the next five generations to preserve their culture. Unfortunately, the states in which they lived were more interested in assimilating them.

With this book, then, I will acquaint the reader with the entire story of the Circassians: why the Russians chose to destroy their nation, how they briefly entered the international consciousness, the horrifying details of their final days in their homeland, their life in exile, and finally how Russia's opposition to their efforts at gaining recognition for the genocide and repatriation have not only failed to dampen their spirits but have actually energized the Circassians and propelled a nearly forgotten chapter in history into the international arena once again. I will also introduce the reader to the Circassian people, whose way of life before their deportation was quite alien to ours but it possessed a logic and dignity all its own.