

# CIRCASSIANS

Soon after the conclusion of peace in Paris; the war in Caucasia was renewed with an energy which had not been seen up to that time and with cruelty on the part of Russia.

The main blow was aimed at first against Eastern Caucasia. Operations in Circassia in 1857 take place on the two extremities and in the Center, and, since they had, in accordance with the Russian plan, limited objectives, ended in the year 1860. The eastern detachment operated between the Kuban and the Laba, settling this strip with Cossacks of the Urup brigade, and resettling the native population to Turkey: The Central detachment moved from the lower Laba to Maikop in the country of Abdzakh. The western detachment for three years, although they were out off from the Shapsyghs and their villages were destroyed (during the end of 1858 General Babich burnt twenty three villages), and the Shapsyghs were forced in 1860 to lay their arms.

Prior to this, the Bjedugs, considered to be “pacified” in 1851, but who from the time of the Crimean War again entered the fray, were pacified in July 1859 after Babich had burnt their forty-four village habitations.

In autumn of 1859 the Russians moved from the Laba to the higher area of the Fars. According to the advice of the above indicated Muhammed Amin, the Abdzakhs decided to enter into discussions with the foe, and on 20 February 1859, in the locale of Khomasty there was concluded a peace in force of which the Abdzakhs recognized Russian authority, but demanded for themselves internal autonomy. This agreement called forth attacks on the part of some Russian circles who thought that it would hinder the pacification of Circassia.

From 1860 when Count Yevdokimov was appointed commander of troops in the Kuban, the plan of pacifying and settling Circassia by Cossacks was conclusively approved.

“The situation concerning the settling of the West Caucasus” was confirmed in May of 1862, but execution of this plan began a year earlier. Moreover the Line Cossacks were attached to the Black Sea ones into one Kuban Cossack army.

In 1861 there were appointed for settlement on Circassian soil, the first Khoper Cossack regiment and some Black Sea situations. These Cossacks showed anxiety and did not want to obey. The Russian government temporarily countermanded its intentions, but offers of privileges, cash loans and an apportionment of land up to thirty hectares per soul (one hectare equals 2.471 acres) of the best land anywhere in the Empire persuaded the Cossacks and soldiers. Seeing that the Abdzekha were not violating the agreement of 1859, Yerdokimov began the resettlement of Circassians between Laba and Belaya (Shkhaguasche) paying no attention to their protests. By autumn of 1861 all the area between these rivers was already occupied by Russians and the Circassians were forced to move to Turkey (the Besleneys as a whole, the Kemirgoys and Kabartay in part). The Circassian deputation in Tiflis, protesting against the violation of the agreement, had, of course, no success.

In the West, the war against the Shapsyghs continued in even crueller fashion: all the villages were burnt by the Russian troops and the land was peopled by Cossacks. In that very autumn the emperor Alexander II came to the Kuban, since the enormous sacrifices connected with the plan of expelling the Circassians, and the cruelty of this measure embarrassed the Russian soldiers. The arrival of the tsar had as aim to raise the spirits of his troops and to strengthen the decision of the high command. All Circassia sent a delegation to the emperor at his camp by Khamket; it expressed the readiness of the land to concede Russian dominion, but called for the removal of its troops and Cossacks from Circassian soil beyond the Kuban and Laba.

Upon refusal of these conditions by the tsar, there was nothing left for the Circassians but to fight to the end. The Russian troops sated with all the haste and cruelty of which they alone were capable. Feverishly stations were constructed: thirty five were set up from the spring of one year 1861 alone.

At this critical period of struggle for its existence on the 13th of June 1861, the National Council elected a War Government of fifteen persons. It decreed to promulgate general mobilization and to announce a holy war; the necessity of forcing the southern neighbors of the Ubykhs, the Jigit, into military service. The main brunt of the war fell on the Abdzakha and the Shapsyghs: the political and diplomatic leadership belonged by the end of the war to the Ubykh leaders: Zesh, Hundj and Berzek.

A landing on the Abkhazian area and the destruction of the building of the Great Free Assembly did not create the expected impression on the Circassians. On the contrary, the country took up arms all the more and sixty five thousand Circassian fighters stood facing three thousand Russian bayonets.

The situation of the Russians notwithstanding their enormous numerical superiority became critical, since the Circassian had never shown such intense forces. After some months, the Shapsyghs, however, fell, and in October and November of 1862, they were, one by one, pushed from their land and forced to migrate to Turkey.

Under the new viceroy for Caucasia, the grand duke Mikhail Nikoleyevich (December 1862) notwithstanding the Polish uprising of 1863 and the general state of armaments: the Russians acted at a more forces tempo, in order to beat in the Circassians, since the Russian government feared the intervention of foreign powers. The grand duke even took upon himself the person conduct of operations. In March of 1863 he is active along the rivers Psekups and Psheks. Along the extended strip of wooded foothills from the river Abin to the Shabsha there were left only ruined villages. The heavy fighting and destruction took place along the valleys of the rivers Pshekh and Pshish in the direction of Goitkh crossing. From the 15th to the 23rd November 1862 half the Russian soldiers were for whole days engaged only in putting bundles of burning straw under the roofs of houses and taking up the property left there, and bearing open trunks with gun butts. The campaign from 4 November till 11 November has as aim the destruction of all the villages between the Belaya and the Pshekh (where on 31 December 1862 there perished in battle here also the noted Abkhaz spirit and hero Tsemuk).

At this time Shapsyghs along the coast of the Black Sea withstood the advance of the Adagum column, and the Abdzakhs, surrounded from all sides, had to put down their arms at the natural boundary Melgashn in the presence of Count Yevdokimov, and to sign the conditions of surrender. (November 1863) It was proposed to them that they leave their lands and emigrate to Turkey.

Following the ruler that "where the foot of Russian soldier has stood, there the land becomes Russian," General Babich, "Victor over the Shapsyghs" and others moved along the seashore southwards destroying aools. They were on the border of the Ubykh territory. From the Goitkh crossing another column moved to meet it. A small Ubykh land became the last citadel of Circassian freedom: Ubykhs and other Circassians made last efforts in order to prolong the agony, but the Russians pressed them in a tight ring; from the south from Gagri a landing was made into the very heart of Ubykh land, and from the north there attacked through the mountains and along the seashore three columns. The last resistance was broken. The war was actually finished. All that still remained were some small coastal

tribes: the Pskhu, Akhtsipsow, Agib and Jigit. But during May these tribes were almost to a man destroyed. Seeing this, a part of the land, threw themselves in frenzy of desperation into the ravine of Aibgo. For four days (from 7 to 11 May) the Russians were repulsed with great losses. Heavy artillery which was brought up then began to vomit iron and fire into the little ravine. Not one of the defenders, symbolizing the ruin of Circassia, survived. The capture of this small valley, lost in the mountains, was the last act of long tragedy of the Circassian people.

On 21 May 1864, in a glade located at Akhchipsu, the Grand Duke gathered his troops in order to hold a thanks-giving religious service and right then sent a telegram to his brother, congratulating him on the end of the Caucasian War.

David Urquart, who remained to the end of his life faithful to the Circassian cause, published on 1 June 1864 an issue of the "Free Press" with a black border of mourning. He reported the end of Circassia. Almost all the European press expressed sympathy at the loss by the Circassians of their independence.

The unusual cruelty with which Russia carried on the war against the Circassians was to be explained not only by the stubborn resistance of the latter, or by the prolongation of the war which cost them from the time of Catherine II one and a half million human lives, uncounted sufferings and expenses, but also by the fact that the war could not be otherwise, to accord with the plan of Russia, which aimed not only at the pacification but the destruction of the people. General Fadeyev wrote:

"The Mountaineers suffered terrible misery... There is nothing to deny in this, because it could not be otherwise, they met our blows with a kind of impassivity. In same way that a single one of them when separated in the field would not surrender to a whole army but died, still killing, even so did the people after the ruin for the tenth time of their villagers to the ground, tenaciously cling to the previous places..." (NOTE 47)

Whatever the case may be, the Circassian people would not have gone on to suicide had the Russians not forced them to it. It knew and felt that the Russians had determined "to cut down half of them in order to make the other half lay down their arms". As the same General Fadeyev further wrote.

The word "pogrom" was pronounced by the Russians themselves. But not all fell before the weapons of the Russian. Some perished in blizzards in the mountains and forests, having not hearth more, since the foe burnt all, others from hunger, since the foe destroyed the sown fields. Among such victims the majority were women and children.

Count Yevdokimov himself related:

“I wrote to count Sumarokov as to why he keeps reminding me in every report concerning the frozen bodies which cover the roads? Don’t the Grand duke and I know this? But does it depend on anybody to avert this misery?”

A person who himself was one of these who were guilty of carrying out the plan of mass genocide could not have given any other answer.

Remnants of the Circassians were, with little exception, forced to emigrate to turkey. Their expulsion had been predetermined earlier and was aim of the war of Russia in the North Caucasus.

“The Grand duke quite agreed with this view and carried out the pacification to an extent... which, perhaps, had never yet been done: the submission of the mountaineers to Russian authority would not at all have freed us from foreign intrigues in that area. We had to turn the Eastern shore of Black Sea into Russian land and for this aim to clear the whole coast of Mountaineers.” (NOTE 48)

The first non- official removal of the Circassians began just after the end of the Crimean War and the renewal of active operations in Circassia. In 1859-1860 there was deported a large part of the Abazes living between Kuban and Urup. In 1861, all the Besleney and some others had to follow them. By the end of the year 1863, the main body of the Abdzakhs joined the number of those forced to emigrate.

The crowds of homeless emigrants had to be loaded onto small Turkish “kochermy” or flat-bottomed Greek vessels which took on several times more passengers than could hold them, and, for the most part, sank.

The Grand Duke, a witness of these agitating scenes of hunger, epidemic, and wholesale death among the Circassians, decided finally, to fit our several ships and appoint three commissions to Taman, Novorossisk and Tuapse for the passage of emigrants.

A.P. Berge, official Russian historian of the Caucasian War, writes about this as follows:

“The expulsion of the Circassian tribes, as a military and political measure, began in 1862, when on the 10th of May, there took place the confirmation of the ordnance of the Caucasian Committee concerning the resettlement of the Mountaineers. There followed open robbery of the weaker by the strong.”

“First to be expelled were the Natuhwadj, who occupied places in the region of Anapa and Tsemez. Then steps were taken for the expulsion of the Shapsyghs and the Abdzakhs. Russian troops burnt the dwellings, and the inhabitants crowded to the seashore, where they were placed by force in barges to be sent to Turkey. Many

barges sank in the open sea together with the expellees. In 1864 North West Caucasia actually lost almost all of its original population. Approximately 120 to 150 hundred and fifty thousand Circassians were resettled in places indicated by the Russian government, and about one and a half million “voluntarily” emigrated to Turkey”.

As to how the resettlement took place, the report of the Russian consul in Trebizond, Moshnin, bears witness. He writes:

“The resettlement to Batum began only recently. About six thousand Circassians arrived there; about four thousand souls were sent to Churuksu on the border. The Mountaineers came with their cattle, exhausted, fall. From the beginning of the resettlement to Trebizond and Environs, there came up to 240.000 souls; there died 19.000 souls. Now there remain 63.290 persons. Average death rate is two hundred persons per day. They are sending them for the most part to Samsun. In Kerasund there are about 15.000 souls. In Samsun and Environs more than 110.000. Death rate about 200 people per day. Typhus is raging. In Sinope and Inebolu about 10.000 souls”. etc.etc.

Or this is what Berge (already once cited above) writes:

“I shall never forget the crushing impression that the Mountaineers made on me in the bay of Novorossiisk, where there gathered on the shore about seventeen thousand persons. The late, rainy and cold time of the year, the almost complete absence of means of existence, and the raging epidemic of typhus, with small-pox, made their situation desperate. And really, whose heart would not shudder at the sight, for instance, of a young Circassian woman in rags, lying on the damp ground under the open sky with two little ones, of whom one in convulsive movements before death was struggling with life, while the other sought to appease his hunger at the breast of his mother whose corpse was already becoming stiff. Similar scenes were not infrequent.”

Thus, the war in the Caucasus, which had continued at least one hundred years, was concluded with a grandiose robbery of the property and lands of the Circassians and by their expulsion. In other words, the aim, which had been pursued by the Russian imperialism, even in tsarist times, convincingly and clearly demonstrated its true face as a destroyer of people.

It is necessary to point out also that some Circassian leaders by carried on propaganda for wholesale departure Turkey by obtaining the agreement of the Ottoman government concerning their offer to the expellees of the possibility of an orderly resettlement in Anatolia. But only bayonets urged on this wave of expellees, but religious provocation as well, artificially supported by the Russians

government, which finally took on the aspect of mass psychosis which gripped not only the Circassians, but also the other North Caucasians.

This is how Ed. Dulaurier describes the mood of that epoch:

“For the Circassians, the Turks were a friendly and holy people. They imagined the sultan, the great Padishah of the True Believers, as the most powerful monarch in the world, with the power to shower them with uncounted wealth from his generous hand. They imagined the government of the sultans to be a refuge in which they would be a plentiful compensation for those which Russia had laid waste with fire and sword...”

“To all advice that they should remain in the Kuban, they answered...We want to live and die among our fellow Moslems. Our desire is to rest our bones in holy soil...” (NOTE 49)

The situation of the emigrants in Turkey, however, turned out to be critical. There they died, half of them, from illness and deprivation. On the Black Sea coast near Samsun, Kenasund etc., they still even today, point to the cemeteries of Circassians who died during the emigration of the Circassians the ottoman government's attitude toward to Circassians was a sympathetic one, but it could not, materially speaking, take care of such a number of emigrants. Therefore it sent them often to the borders of Arab counties (Mosul, Baghdad etc.) to maintain order along the frontiers, and the unaccustomed climate swap away the emigrants on masse. The well-known Turkish writer Suleiman Pazif, in his review of the first novel of the Circassians authoress, Hairiyeye Melek Hundj (Namiyok), wrote that there where Circassians settled on Turkey's frontiers, cemeteries grew before the trees.

The resettlement of the Circassians called forth indignation throughout all Europe, but a pleasant surprise awaited the new Cossack settlers many of the corps planted by the Circassians still remained standing; they only had to be reaped. Soon on the land of the Abzakh there were forty stations. Along the coastal strip from Gelendjik to Tuapse, twelve stations, the majority of which were consequently transformed into pleasant villages. Together with the stations which had been set up in 1863 and earlier, their whole number now came to one hundred and eleven.

The Russian ruling circles deemed that the Trans-Kuban region could not be transformed into a Russian province otherwise than as a Cossack Army.

But inasmuch as there were not enough old Cossacks from the Black Sea, Volga and others, and since these from the Black Sea area in general refused to settle over into the Trans-Kuban area, a foreign admixture was necessary in order to make up the numbers. This was furnished by Russian soldiers, Russian moujik and serfs.

Out of these were formed the Line Cossacks living to the south of the Kuban on former Circassian land, and the “Line” troops formed the basis of Kuban Army.

The richest of lands, concerning which foreign travelers had written so much, became a wilderness. This is how, for instance, Bell described the grain fields of Circassia:

“We climbed up along the valley through a fairly open wood, in which lay villagers and unusually splendid fields... Then came a series of insignificant hillocks and hollows which were altogether so well tilled, the limits of the fields so nestle and well enclosed that one might imagine, if the surroundings permitted, that I saw before me one of the best worked fields of Yorkshire...” (NOTE 50)

A similarly enraptured description is found by us in the account of the above mentioned Spencer:

“From the first moment that the Circassian vales opened up before me, the appearance of the land and of the population made the most lively impression upon me. Instead of deserts, inhabited by wild men” (here the author has informed Russian source, RT) ” I found an uninterrupted series of cultivated hillocks, on which almost not a single bit of ground was uncultivated, huge herds of goats, horses and oxen wandered up to the knee in grass in various directions.” (NOTE 51)

And all this was destroyed by Russia with unscrupulous violence against a quiet and industrious people who had inhabited these places since the time of Homer. And what in exchange did the “bringers of culture” give to the country?

This is what the Russian historian P.C. Lichkov writes of that:

“It is necessary to say, that the adjacent country itself “ (i.e. the Black Sea coast-R.T) “ unlike what exist at the present time, was in that time flowing with milk and honey.” At the end, for instance, of the 1830’s, when the Russians began to set up the coast fortress, all the coast together with the mountain strip adjacent to it, represented a carefully constructed oasis, where, next to the wild, inaccessible crags and the centuries old woods ( now mercilessly out down in all the more accessible places), there found refuge splendid vineyard and luxurious wheat fields grew green, sometimes being situated even on artificial terraces, supplied with water from quite considerable canals which were protected from torrents by artificial water sluices... Aply making use of the rich gifts of Nature, the Mountaineers were able to make use of the proximity of the sea in order to increase trade relations and of the capability of the varied products of their economy. Naturally, at all the sea cost points where seagoing vessels could find any sort of shelter from the winds of the sea, a lively trade went on, because there were things

to market and there was someone to get them. But the bloodshed of the war forced out and destroyed the Mountaineers, destroyed their cultivation to the root, the artificial canals became overgrown and filled with rubbish, artificial terraces made with much labor, were filled in, the widespread gardens and splendid vineyards were partly cut down during war and even in the period of settlement of the country by Russians, partly became overgrown with other kinds of trees, so that it is already difficult to determine where ends the wood thicket mixed with wild vine branches, and where begins the formerly cultivated plantation..." (NOTE 52)

Another historian, Yakov Abramov, speaks on this same theme of the cultural role of the North Caucasians and of the destructive influence of the "bearers of culture". He writes:

" I have already indicates of the desolation under Russian dominion of huge stretches of the Western Caucasus, which were formerly covered with mountain meadows, wheat fields and vineyards. This same phenomenon is to be seen also in the Terek region," (i.e. in the Central part of the North Caucasus R.T.)." All there shamelessness with which the Russian destroyed products of Kabartay culture and their many years labor." (NOTE 53)

In general the above noted author thus characterizes the situation of the land after the forced evacuation of its real masters:

"A region of utmost richness became desolate. The Cossacks turned out to be absolutely unfitted for cultivating it. Huge stretches of land, formerly occupied by the Mountaineers, do not even arouse in anyone the desire to acquire them, since they seen absolutely unsuitable for cultivation. And yet these very stretches of land were formerly occupied by a numerous population and were splendidly cultivated. But now the excellent wheat fields and meadows, which had literally been created by the hands of human beings on the naked stony crags, have become overgrown with small thorny shrubs, and have been completely lost cultivation." (NOTE 54)

NOTE 47: General Fadeyev Pisma s Kavkaza 1865

NOTE 48: ibid

NOTE 49: "Revue des deux Mondes" 1 Janvier 1866

NOTE 50: Bell J. op cit

NOTE 51: Spencer E., op cit

NOTE 52: Lichkov P. S., Ocherki iz proshlogo i nastoiashchego Chernomorskogo poberezhia Kavkaza, Kiev, 1904.

NOTE 53: P. S. Abramov Ia. "Kavkazskie Gortsy", Delo, St Petersburg, 1884.

NOTE 54: *ibid*

The Circassians (who call themselves "Adyghe") are an indigenous people of the Northwest Caucasus region.

The term "Circassian" is the English equivalent of the Turkic "Cherkess". Although this term has sometimes been used in a broad sense to include the Adyghe, the Abkhaz-Abaza and the Ubykhs - whose respective languages belong to the North-West Caucasian family group - or indiscriminately, to all the peoples of the North Caucasus, it should refer more precisely to the inhabitants of historical Circassia, the Adyghe. Today, only a minority of Circassians live in their divided ancestral homeland, mainly in three republics of the Russian Federation (Kabardino Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Adygheya), the majority having

been forced to migrate to the Ottoman Empire following the 19th century Russian conquest of the Caucasus.

## **History**

The Circassians first emerged as a coherent entity somewhere around the tenth century A.D., although references to them exist much earlier. They were never politically united, a fact which reduced their influence in the area and their ability to withstand periodic invasions from groups like the Mongols, Avars, Pechenegs, Huns, and Khazars.

This lack of unity eventually cost the Circassians their independence, as they were slowly conquered by Russia in a series of wars and campaigns in the late 18th and early to mid-19th centuries. During this period, the Circassians plight achieved a certain celebrity status in the West, but pledges of assistance were never fulfilled. After the Crimean War, Russia turned her attention to the Caucasus in earnest, starting with the peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan. In 1859, the Russians had finished defeating Imam Shamil in the eastern Caucasus, and turned their attention westward, finally subjugating the Circassians in 1864.

Like other ethnic minorities under Russian rule, the Circassians were subjected to policies of mass resettlement. Collectivization under the Communists also took its toll.

## **Culture**

The Circassians were warlike people. Grown men were expected to carry arms, and boys trained to be warriors. Familial ties were not strongly encouraged; parents fostered their children to other adults rather than raising them themselves. The Circassian society was once matriarchal. Women fought in war alongside their husbands. Although the society is no longer matriarchal, women still give have a high place of respect and dignity.

Circassian society prior to the Russian invasion was highly stratified. While a few tribes in the mountainous regions of Circassia were fairly egalitarian, most were broken into strict castes. The highest was the caste of the "princes", followed by a caste of lesser nobility, and then commoners, serfs, and slaves. In the decades before Russian rule, two tribes overthrew their traditional rulers and set up democratic processes, but this social experiment was cut short by the end of Circassian independence.

The primary religion among modern Circassians is Sunni Islam.

## **The Diaspora**

Circassians have lived outside the Caucasus region since the Middle Ages. They formed a tradition of joining foreign armies, including those of Persia, Rome, Byzantium, and the Golden Horde. They were particularly well represented in the Mamluks of Turkey and Egypt. In fact, the Burji dynasty which ruled Egypt from 1382 to 1517 was founded by Circassian Mamluks.

Much of Circassian culture was disrupted after their conquest by Russia in 1864. This led to a Circassian Diaspora, mostly to various parts of the Ottoman Empire. Today, significant communities of Circassians live in Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Israel, Libya, and the United States. The small community in Kosovo expatriated to Adygea in 1998.