

## THE DEPORTATION

### THE CONQUEST AND DEPORTATION OF THE CIRCASSIANS

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Stephen D. Shenfield (ed.) Johnson's Russia List, Research and Analytical Supplement, Special Issue: The Circassians, Issue No. 43 - May 2008

At the end of the Crimean War (1853-6), General Bariatinsky consolidated the administrative units of the North Caucasus into the Left (East) and Right (West) Flanks. As the Ossetians were always cooperative with the Russians and the Kabardians had surrendered after a devastating plague, the Central North Caucasus was subdued. Thus, the two largest groups of North Caucasus peoples still resisting the Russians, the Chechens and the Circassians, were effectively cut off from each other. After Shamil's defeat in 1859 and the subjugation of the Northeast, the entire Russian army was brought to bear against the Northwest Caucasus. During the period 1859-1864, Circassians and their kin, the Abazas and Ubykhs, were overwhelmed.

In May 1859 the Bzhedukh tribe surrendered, followed by the Abadzakhs in November, and both were initially allowed to remain on their lands. An international force under the Pole Teofik Lapinski left in Nov. 1859, but it had proven incompetent and played no serious role in the end of the Russo-Circassian War.

The first formulation of the ethnic cleansing of the Circassians was forwarded by Emperor Alexander II:

"The Cossack community is destined to serve the government by defending the empire's borders adjacent to hostile and poorly organized tribes and to occupy the land from which they have been taken... Only a few years of persistent pressure remain in order to completely drive the hostile mountaineers from the fertile lands they occupy and forever establish in their place a Russian Christian population." (1)

At a meeting in October 1860, Prince Bariatinsky and General Fadeev called for "the unconditional expulsion of the Circassians from their mountain refuges." General Yevdokimov wanted to "compel them either to resettle in the open lowlands or leave for Turkey." The tribes that had already submitted were to be deported as well as those still resisting, such as the Shapsegh, Natukhay, Ubykh, Abaza, and Abkhaz.

There were some outside gestures of support for the Circassians' plight. In 1861 a British delegation offered recognition, along with the Turks and French, if the Circassians united against the Russians. In response Circassians set up a capital at Sochi, created 13 administrative units and began to work on a single legal code. In 1862 a Circassian delegation visited Istanbul, and sought support from Europe. Unfortunately, it was all too late and for naught, despite a multinational force and diplomacy. After an audience with Aleksandr II, who remained inflexible, the remaining Circassians, Ubykhs, and Abazas retreated to the headwaters of the Psekups, Pshish, and Psekha Rivers, where they made their final stand.

Even before the deportations, some Northwest Caucasus peoples chose to emigrate to the Ottoman Empire. In 1858-9 approximately 30,000 Turkic Nogais left, followed by perhaps 10,000 Kabardians in 1861. The Besleneys, Temirgoys, many remaining Kabardians, and some Abazas were driven to the Black Sea coast in 1861 as well. In 1862 40,000 Natukhais, who had already surrendered and accepted the Russians' original conditions that they resettle in the lowlands, were forced to the coast in May. In 1863 a similar fate befell the Khatukays and Bzhedukhs. Cossack settlements (stanitsy) were rapidly established on the vacated land; by 1862 there were already 111.

A deportation commission was created on 10 May 1862. Each family was to receive 10 rubles compensation. General Yevdokimov declared the action completed on 21 May 1864, although his troops were still pursuing one fleeing family at the time. Cossacks were given the vacated land en masse, and the 400,000 Cossacks north of the Kuban rapidly settled Circassia. As Fadeev relates:

"The enemy no longer existed... All [the mountaineers'] crops were inherited by the Russian settlers, who were able to live there for the first year without having to plant anything." (2)

According to Fadeev, 60,000 Circassians remained after the deportation, representing 6% of the original population, while researcher Galina Malakhova estimates 40,400 remained, or approximately 4 percent. By 1870, 70 percent of the population was Slavic.

The process of deportation brought wholesale suffering and death on an almost incomprehensible scale. A Russian officer identified only as I. Drozdov (1877) related a string of horrors he had witnessed, including half-dead women and children being eaten by dogs while still alive, and estimated that half of those who survived to embark died at sea. Ottoman reports estimate that 180,000 died shortly after arrival. While the actual number of dead is still a difficult question, it is beyond doubt that no less than one million people were deported, and that well over 50 percent of them died. (3)

In 1882, Kuban Province had only 36,000 Circassians, less than 3.6 percent of original population. All the Ubykhs were deported, and their civilization was effectively annihilated. The vast majority of Abazas, 50,000, were also deported. In 1883, Kuban Province had only 10,326 Abazas.

Thus, the Russian action resulted in roughly a 94 percent reduction in the original population of the Circassians and their kin. Does this amount to genocide?

Russia could have exterminated them, but chose not to. St. Petersburg sought ethnic cleansing (the Russian term "ochistit'" recurs throughout Yevdokimov's reports) without regard for the welfare of those cleansed. Yevdokimov and other commanders proceeded with the cleansing in full knowledge of the catastrophic level of casualties. Stephen Shenfield calls the deportation "a case of ethnic cleansing carried out with brutal disregard for human suffering," (4) while Paul Henze states that "the great exodus [of the Circassians and their kin] was the first of the violent mass transfers of population which this part of the world has suffered in modern times." (5)

One must note, however, the deportation of the Cherokee and other Indians in 1838, the "Trail of Tears." Such actions were an integral part of expansionist phases in the formation of large states or empires during the 19th century. As one of us (Walter Richmond) puts it in his forthcoming book:

“If one considers, as Henze proposes, that Russian actions in the 1860s set the precedent for future ethnic cleansings, then in terms of its ultimate consequences the deportation of the Circassians, Abazins, and Ubykhs, officially sanctioned by Alexander II, was a unique crime against humanity, regardless of what term one wishes to attach to it.” (6)

Since as with murder in the second degree, that is, an action causing death without necessarily the intention of death, one might usefully make a distinction here between intended genocide and what the Russians committed as “Genocide in the Second Degree.”

One might reasonably ask why this tragedy came to pass, despite the Tsar’s ethnocentric and bigoted views, since earlier relations between the Russians and the Circassians had been friendly. Many Russian nobles were, in fact, of Circassian origin, such as Cherkassky, Sherametov, and even Yermolov (Circassian for ‘Armenian’). Ivan the Terrible had a Circassian wife.

A shift began with the annexation of Georgia in 1801 and the desire to secure the head of the future Georgian Military Highway, which lay in Ossetia. As a result Russia began to back the Ossetians against the Circassians. Russian reaction to the adverse experience of the Crimean War (1853-6) seems also to have raised the stakes for Russia in the nearby Caucasus.

Whatever the character of earlier relations the cultural chauvinism of an expanding Russia had grown intense. As Fadeev put it,

“A fundamental difference exists between the East and West Caucasus in that the Circassians, owing to their position along the coast, could never be firmly consolidated into Russia as long as they remained in their homeland... The re-education of a people is a centuries-long process, but in the pacification of the Caucasus the time had come for us, perhaps only for a brief time, TO COMPLETE ONE OF THE MOST VITAL TASKS IN RUSSIAN HISTORY” (my emphasis - JC).

To see the conquest of this relatively small region as “one of the most vital tasks in Russian history” suggests that the significance of the Caucasus had become very high for Russia. It is a historical fact that after the conquest of the Caucasus Russia expanded across Central Asia with relative ease. Even today Russia shrouds her conquest of the Caucasus in romantic terms. Simple geopolitical considerations offer an explanation for this persistent interest. Russian control of the Caucasus permitted the Kremlin to play a hegemonic role in Central Asia and the Ukraine region. In particular, Russian control of the Caucasus permitted the Kremlin to project force into the South Caucasus, and continued control makes it possible to do so again.

Russian control of the Caucasus gives the Kremlin the chance to project influence or even force into the Middle East and Iran, something she has never done with lasting effect but might yet consider attempting. Russian control of the Caucasus permitted the Kremlin to master the Black Sea, and continued control offers the potential to do establish a base for a warm water fleet. The West, including the United States, has failed to grasp these vital dimensions of the Caucasus.

With these stakes, the fate of a relatively small, independent, warrior culture of alien pedigree was of little consequence to Russia. One might even share, in a calculating fashion, the Russian estimation that without the destruction of the Circassians Russia might not have been able to secure an empire on the scale that she achieved.

## NOTES

(1) Tagan Khabasovich Kumykov, ed. *Arkhivnye materially o kavkazskoi voine i vyselenii Cherkesov (Adygov) v Turtsiiu (1848 - 1874)*, pt. II (Nalchik: El-Fa, 2003), p. 80.

(2) Fadeev, *Kavkazskaia voina*, p. 201.

(3) Drozdov, "Posledniaia bor'ba s gortsami na Zapadnom Kavkaze," *Kavkazskii sbornik* 2 (1877), pp. 456 - 7.

(4) Stephen D. Shenfield, "The Circassians: A Forgotten Genocide?" (see [www.circassianworld.com](http://www.circassianworld.com)).

(5) Henze, "Circassian Resistance to Russia," Marie Bennigsen Broxup et al., eds. *The North Caucasus Barrier: The Russian Advance Towards the Muslim World* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 111.

(6) Richmond, *The Northwest Caucasus: Past, Present, and Future* (London: Routledge, in press).

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