



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

The Circassians: A Handbook by Amjad Jaimoukha
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Europe-Asia Studies, Vol. 54, No. 6. (Sep., 2002), pp. 1003-1005.

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of importance for the nation-state and the return of greater influence and self-determination for regions and their cultures' (vol. II, pp. 320, 318).

Even for readers not specifically interested or competent in Rusyn or Eastern European studies, the two volumes of Magocsi's book provide a wealth of food for thought. Empirical illustrations, often left out of more general European histories, abound. Realised and unrealised options, successes and failings of nation building in Europe, patterns of assimilation and national revival, interrelation between diasporas and homeland in the preservation and construction of the national identity all make for fascinating reading. Above all, the discussion surrounding the diffused boundary between the qualified scholar's observing of and participating in evolving socio-political phenomena will capture readers' attention.

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Amjad Jaimoukha, *The Circassians: A Handbook*. Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001, 384 pp., £30.00 h/b.

THIS HANDSOMELY PRODUCED and thoroughly readable work is remarkable in its scope, offering detailed cultural information from an insider's perspective on a wide range of topics in Circassian history, culture and language. The work is published as volume 6 in the 'Peoples of the Caucasus & the Black Sea' series of the Caucasus World imprint edited by Nicholas Awde for Curzon Press. It appears, however, that this is the first volume in this projected series of 26 volumes actually to be published. As such, it sets a very high standard for future volumes, many of which will not have the benefit of so knowledgeable a single author. It is difficult to compare this work with other works devoted to the study of a single nationality of the former USSR such as the works published in the 'Studies of Nationalities' (formerly 'Studies of Nationalities of the USSR') series of the Hoover Institution Press. Rather this work resembles in depth and scope a shorter version of the standard ethnographic handbooks of individual peoples published earlier in Soviet times and now continued in the '*Narody i kul'tury*' series of the Russian Academy of Sciences (see most recently the volume *Tatary* published in 2001).

In the introduction the author offers an explanation of the different uses of the term 'Circassian', which in a broader sense can refer to the Adiga, Abkhaz-Abaza and (extinct) Ubykh peoples of the Northwest Caucasus; in this work the author focuses exclusively on the Adiga. In the first chapter (pp. 19–35), introducing the people and land, the author offers a more detailed description of the 'nation-tribes' of the Adiga, which he divides into an Eastern branch (Kabarda, Beslanay) and a Western branch also known as the Kiakh (Abkhaz, Shapsugh, Bzhedugh, Nartkhuaj, Kemirgoi, Hatuqwey), as well as extinct tribes now known only in the diaspora. He also surveys the present territorial units in the Russian Federation where the Circassians live, namely the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, the Karachai-Cherkess Republic, the Adigei Republic and the Shapsugh region. The author examines the history of the Circassians from ancient times until the current day in the second, third and fourth chapters (pp. 36–100). These are supplemented by a useful chronological table (pp. 311–317). The fifth chapter offers a welcome treatment of the very significant Circassian diaspora in Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, the United States, Israel and various countries in Europe, even Poland (pp. 101–122). The author also treats the historical diaspora in the Mamluk states as a part of the historical survey (pp. 55–57). The sixth chapter surveys the historical and modern economy (pp. 123–136).

The most valuable contribution of the work is in the subsequent chapters devoted to Circassian culture in which the author draws upon a deep well of knowledge concerning his own culture. The seventh chapter, on religion and beliefs (pp. 137–156), offers an excellent

survey of the Circassian pantheon and the traditional beliefs, rites and ceremonies of the Circassians as well as topics such as ancestor worship, oaths and vows, entreaties and toasts, superstitions, fire worship (linked to earlier Zoroastrianism in the Caucasus, which the author does not describe in any detail), the arrival of Christianity, the spread of Islam and religion under the Soviet regime. There is practically no discussion of the influence of Sufism (since the author considers that it made no inroads among the Circassians) or of the Islamists who arrived in the Caucasus to participate in the Chechen wars (known misleadingly in post-Soviet parlance as 'Wahhabis'). Indeed, the author considers the Muslim Circassians of the diaspora to be far more religious than the Circassians living in the Caucasus.

The eighth chapter, on social structure (pp. 156–171), surveys the class system, clan divisions, traditional noble 'congresses', property, the judiciary, the downfall of feudalism, historical family structures, traditional family life (including avoidance customs), female slavery, charity and life in the Soviet period. The ninth chapter, on customs and traditions (pp. 172–190), surveys birth, christening, upbringing, courtship and marriage, post-nuptial ceremonies, divorce and bigamy, death, greetings, the Circassian code of chivalry, blood-revenge and hospitality and feasts. The 10th chapter, on folklore (pp. 191–204), surveys cuisine, costume, masks, toasts, sports and games. The 11th chapter, on arts, crafts and architecture (pp. 205–223), offers a survey beginning with the ancient period. The 12th chapter, on music and dance (pp. 224–244), surveys both traditional and modern genres. The 13th chapter discusses language and linguistic policy (pp. 245–261). The 14th chapter, on literature (pp. 262–287), surveys traditional oral literature and literature in Circassian in modern Western genres. This chapter probably offers one of the best succinct descriptions of the Circassian Nart tales in English (to which must be added the forthcoming translation and study of the Circassian Nart tales by John Colarusso to be published by Princeton University Press). The 15th chapter treats the modern genres of theatre, media and film (pp. 288–293). This is followed by an afterword, a collection of proverbs and sayings, a chronology, and appendices on the Circassian pantheon and caste system, a Latinised Kabardian alphabet and extensive bibliographical information.

At the same time, my tremendous enthusiasm for this volume—which will no doubt remain one of the standard works on the Circassians for a very long time to come—is tempered somewhat by a number of academic concerns. My first concern is the author's lack of a critical approach in a number of areas (biographical information on the dustjacket suggests that the author is trained in the sciences rather than in the humanities). The author's approach to the history of the Circassians is heavily influenced by the approach to ethnogenesis espoused in the traditional Soviet model of nationalities, which sought to document the existence of each individual nationality in its official Soviet-era homeland going back to pre-historical times. As a result, the author devotes significant space to a discussion of the various archaeological cultures in the areas inhabited by Circassians today and various theories concerning how ethnonyms in the classical sources might be related to modern NW Caucasian peoples. While this may be a more valid approach for the Circassians than for say Nogais or Kazaks, it is completely superfluous in a volume published in Europe or North America. It also does not help the author's text to claim that 'archaeological finds give credence to the theory that all NW Caucasian peoples ... were ethnically and linguistically related and that they were the ancestors of the Circassians and Abkhazians' (p. 45). After all, it is well known that archaeology and even material culture cannot establish the identity or relationship of linguistic communities; only linguistic evidence can.

Second, one must also consider that terms such as 'nation' tend to be used in the Soviet sense rather than in the sense they carry in modern Euro-American scholarship (see for example pp. 26–27, 157).

Third, the author does not hesitate to draw upon legendary accounts in his historical narrative, as in the unlikely account of the 13th century Mongol khan Kitai, whose wrestler

Qaisin fought the disguised female Circassian wrestler Lashin (pp. 48–49). The author also notes that in other versions the Adiga were fighting the Kalmyks. Perhaps this account should have been included in the section on literature rather than in the historical narrative, since it certainly would not be known to a specialist on the Golden Horde. Similarly, much of the author's discussion of traditional life, customs, social structure and so on is based upon the ancient Nart tales (which have been recorded only in modern times).

Fourth, throughout much of the work, a curious reader who is not familiar with the vast bibliography on which the author has drawn will often wonder what the author's sources might be for a given section because of the rather infrequent notes. On the other hand, his reliance on Shora Nogmov's famous 19th century *Istoriya adygeiskogo naroda* (Tbilisi, 1867) is obvious. Although the author cites in his bibliography an important article questioning the sources of Nogmov's work (Brian J. Boeck, 'Probing Parity Between History and Oral Tradition: Putting Shora Nogmov's *History of the Adygei People* in its Place', *Central Asian Survey*, 172, 1998, pp. 319–336), this article does not appear to inform the author's use of Nogmov's work as a source. This is unfortunate, because Boeck has shown that Nogmov took much information from non-Circassian sources and presented them as Circassian traditions.

Fifth, the author appears to have fallen victim to the many Orientalist stereotypes that still dominate the study of the former Russian Empire: the civilising influence of the Genoese (presumably because they are Christians, p. 49) and the fact that the Circassians or others are 'Eastern' peoples (pp. 51, 168). One also wonders whether the emphasis on Circassian feudalism owes its inspiration in part to Marxist/Soviet historiography. (One would also have expected that a work including such a large number of citations of names and works in Russian would have been reviewed for typographical errors, which are in abundance in this work.)

For specialists in other fields such as Turkic studies, this work offers many rich comparative data. For example, the sorceress *almesti* (p. 145) is known in a variety of Turkic cultures as well. There are numerous other connections with Turkic or later Turko-Mongolian cultures that require further investigation too. In the case of the institution of the *ataliq* or 'foster-father' (pp. 56, 159, 175–177) one wonders whether this is an ancient Circassian practice that has somehow acquired a Turkic appellation or was somehow introduced in a later period. There are many instances where a Turkologist will wonder what the connection with Circassian culture might have been.

Amjad Jaimoukha has performed an important service by bringing together such a wealth of valuable information on the Circassians in a single volume. The academic concerns I have expressed above should not matter for most readers. Certainly readers looking for an 'essentialist' statement of what it means to be a Circassian will not be disappointed in the least. I hope that this work will find the wide readership it richly deserves.

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