

# **Circassian Independence: Thoughts on the Current Political Situation of the Circassians**

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The August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia is having and is slated to have profound and long-lasting effects on the political situation and attitudes in the whole of the Caucasus. One outcome that is of fundamental importance – and a source of great joy – to the overwhelming majority of Northwest Caucasians (Circassians=Adiga, Abkhaz-Abaza=Apswa, and Ubykh=Pakhy) in the Caucasus and diaspora is the recognition of Abkhazia's independence by Russia (and a few days later also by Nicaragua and a number of internationally unrecognized entities). The ancient Abkhaz nation, which is steeped in tradition and classical history, seems to have taken yet another big step in the arduous path towards full independence.<sup>1</sup> The primordial will of a vigorous and lively nation has won yet another battle in the long war against the dark forces of hegemony and negation of the other.

This exciting development has opened the door wide for the Circassians to openly express and co-ordinate their efforts to substantiate their demand for independence. Surely, if Russia could extend sovereign recognition to the 200,000 Abkhazians, then it would also be receptive to the justified demand of the more than one million Circassians in the Northwest Caucasus (and the multi-million strong Circassian diaspora) to consolidate and reunite their country 'Circassia', which had existed for millennia prior to Russian occupation in the 19th century, and to declare independence.

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<sup>1</sup> Those interested in gaining a perspective on Abkhaz history, and other issues, unadulterated by Georgian nationalist drivel can do worse than read Prof. George Hewitt's seminal book *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, London: RoutledgeCurzon, 1999.



The first palpable ‘nationalistic’ response by the Circassians to the cataclysmic events in the Caucasus took place in November 2008, when a group of Circassian youth in the Northwest Caucasus demanded the unification of the Circassians into a single republic. During a meeting of the International Circassian Congress (ICC) on 23 November in Cherkessk, the capital of the Karachai-Cherkess Republic, convened to discuss the failure of the new (Karachai) president of the Republic, Boris Ebzeyev, to appoint a Circassian to the position of prime minister (as is required by political convention in the multi-ethnic Republic), hundreds of Circassian youth forcibly voiced their demand for the creation of a united Circassian republic (within the Russian Federation). The demand was adopted as a proposal by the Congress.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For full details and implications of the meeting of the International Circassian Congress, see Fatima Tlisova (26 November 2008); Paul Goble (26 November 2008); and Liz Fuller (10 December 2008).

## **Circassian response to Abkhaz independence**

In Turkey, the substantial and influential Northwest Caucasian community stood firmly on the side of the South Ossetians and Abkhazians in the August 2008 War. The Cherkess identity in Turkey comprehends all the North Caucasians, including the Ossetians, and the Abkhaz. The Adiga gave full and unconditional support to the Abkhazians and South Ossetians. They were also vocal in their demand that the Turkish state should recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

However, the Vainakh in Turkey (the Ingush and Chechens) did not identify with the plight of the South Ossetians, for the memories of the Ingush pogrom of October 1992 at the hands of the North Ossetians and the Russian army which resulted in the expulsion of the Ingush from Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia, and the Prigorodny District, historical homelands of the Ingush which the North Ossetians claimed for themselves during the Ingush forced exile in 1944. The Ingush are trepid of the prospect of a unified Ossetia, which would make their struggle to reclaim their historical lands occupied by the Ossetians that much more difficult. It is safe to assume that the sympathies of the ordinary Chechens in this regard would be with the plight of their kin, the Ingush.

In this context, it should be mentioned that in this most recent of conflicts in the Caucasus, the predicted stream of North Caucasian volunteers rushing to help out the South Ossetians in their struggle against the Georgians did not materialize. The Chechen contingent that took part in the war on the Russian side in South Ossetia and Georgia was the Vostok Battalion of the Russian Defense Ministry's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) (although there was talk of a rift between Chechen President Ramazan Kadyrov and the commander of the contingent, Sulim Yamadaev). No Circassian volunteers took part in the fighting in South Ossetia.

In Abkhazia the situation was different. Veterans of the 1992-1993 Abkhaz-Georgian War and newer blood took steps in co-ordination with the Abkhaz authorities to defend Abkhazia and stand shoulder to shoulder with their co-ethnics in their ordeal. The Kabardians are only too aware of the fact that a significant portion of historical Little Kabarda (Qeberdey Ts'ik'w, or Jilax'steney), including the town of Mozdok (Mezdegw), has been carved out of Kabarda by the Russians and incorporated with North Ossetia.

In the Northwest Caucasus, the Circassian authorities, nationalists and NGOs were unitary in their supportive stance for the South Ossetians and Abkhazians. Although relations between the Circassians and Georgians have generally been

cordial throughout history and the two nations have benefited from mutual influences, the dogged intransigence of the Georgians vis-à-vis the Abkhazians gave the Circassians no choice but to throw their lot with the Abkhazians in the fray. The International Circassian Association (ICA), which was established in 1991, and which represents organizations from the Caucasus and the diaspora, issued a statement on 11 August 2008 addressed to 'Leaders of Countries' urging the international community to recognize Abkhazia's independence.<sup>3</sup> No mention was made of Circassian independence.

It would be fascinating to hear the opinion of Yura Schenibe (Shanibov), the charismatic leader of Circassian drive for independence in the early 1990s, now that the constraints imposed on him in the mid-1990s have been somewhat eased, on the recent events.<sup>4</sup> It is safe to assume that many Circassian nationalists in the Caucasus are seriously contemplating independence and are waiting for the opportune occasion to express their aspirations. We shall be listening carefully to their comments on and arguments for Circassian independence. It could be that the reluctance to openly espouse independence ideology is that first historical Circassia should be formed, and any declaration of independence prior to reclamation of all Circassian lands will leave most of Greater Circassia in Russian hands.

The recent conflict has emphasized the fact that change (and upheaval) is only a heart beat away. Who had expected that Russia would recognize Abkhazia so soon after the end of hostilities? The odds were on Russia touting the issue of Abkhaz independence (shy of actual recognition) to its advantage indefinitely. The real lesson for the Circassians is that they have to be ready for all eventualities, even the sudden roll back of Russian hegemony and the formation of a power vacuum for a time. This happened in the North Caucasus before, following the communist revolution in Russia in 1917. For a few years the North Caucasians were able to manage their affairs in an independent manner, but, upon recuperation, Russia, in a different guise, was able to reoccupy the area. The Russians are well aware of the swirling undercurrent of Circassian subtle resurgence in the cultural and political spheres, and they are fearful of the inexorable Circassian drive for increased self-expression and autonomy, and

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<sup>3</sup> Visit <[http://www.circassianworld.com/News/Statement\\_ICA.html](http://www.circassianworld.com/News/Statement_ICA.html)> for full text of ICA statement on Abkhaz independence.

<sup>4</sup> All those interested in a high-end biography of Shanibov and an account of Circassian nationalism in the latter part of the 20th century would surely be entranced by G. M. Derluguian's masterly book *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

hence the Russian response of eradicating Adigea as a first step towards completely diluting Circassian presence in the Russian sea.

In Jordan, the Circassian and Abkhaz-Abaza communities were very vocal in their support of the Abkhazians. However, the Russian media (mainly the Arabic Service of Russia Today TV) succeeded in soliciting from select interviewees blanket support for Russian policies in the Caucasus and condemnation of Western role and influence therein. No mention was made of Circassian independence or the fate of Circassia despite the fact of the lack of any constraints. Circassians should always be mindful that those who condemned Russian interference in the Caucasus (the West, Poland, Ukraine, the Baltic States, and perhaps even Georgia) will whole-heartedly support Circassian independence, if ever the Circassians decide to lift the banner of freedom and rid themselves of dependence complexes [Read a [short bio of Ludwik Zierkowski-Lenoir \(1803-1860\)](#) for an example of a Pole advocating and promoting Circassian independence in the 19th century]. The conundrum of lack of support of these countries for the Abkhaz and their historical support for the Circassians should be delicately resolved. Nobody claims that this would be easy. The dilemma will undoubtedly obscure lucid thinking for some time to come.

Beyond the Middle East, a Franco-Egyptian lady of Circassian origin based in Paris gave a measured response to the 'Russia Today' question as to her views on the August 2008 events in the Caucasus. She wisely advocated the creation of an independent Caucasian federation as an antidote to outside interference in the Caucasus.<sup>5</sup> This self-same lady also presented the Caucasian case in another interview by the French channel 'France 24'. In contrast, another Circassian lady wanted mother Russia to wrap her warm shroud around all her Caucasian children! Fawning at its ugliest.

The Circassians of Syria have had a muffled voice on Circassian national issues since the 1930s. In the second Chechen war (started 1999 and still raging) the Russians extracted 'support' for their brutal campaign against the freedom-loving Chechens from the Circassian Syrians (by crook, in my estimation; 'Circassian diaspora in Syria condemn militant operations in Chechnya', in Pravda, 3 July 2002; <<http://english.pravda.ru/hotspots/2002/07/03/31724.html>>). The Circassians in Syria are a very important element in the world-wide Circassian make-up. There are still indigent villages that can do worse than be transferred to the Caucasus to find a new life in the homeland and bolster the precarious gene-

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to [http://geocities.com/jaimoukha/North\\_Caucasian\\_Federation.html](http://geocities.com/jaimoukha/North_Caucasian_Federation.html) for a particular vision for such a federation.

pool in the process. Of course, the same could be said about the hundreds of Circassian villages strewn across rural Turkey. All is needed is national vision and political will (and lesser Russian interference in Circassian affairs).

Perhaps the only international organisation to voice express support for Abkhaz independence is the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO), which was created in 1991 in The Hague to represent ethnic groups around the world that are barred from joining the United Nations for whatever reason.<sup>6</sup> The Circassians are represented in the UNPO by the International Circassian Association, which joined the Organisation in 1993. No statement on Circassian independence was issued by the UNPO, in the absence of demand by the concerned member.

### **Response of Western scholars**

Professor William G. Clarence-Smith, from the School of Oriental and African Studies, in a letter to the editor of the Financial Times of London entitled '[Russian cynicism revealed in Caucasus strategy](#)' published on 14 August 2008 says:

South Ossetians and Abkhazian Circassians have an undoubted right to self-determination, which the Georgian government has violently and wrongly denied them, but Russian cynicism in this conflict knows no bounds. If Moscow was really concerned with Ossetian and Circassian rights, it would allow its own populations in the Caucasus, including Ossetians and Circassians, the right to secede. Instead, Russia has recently fought one of the nastiest wars in modern history to prevent the Chechens of the north-eastern Caucasus from achieving independence. This follows centuries of colonial conquest and rule in the Caucasus, in the course of which the Russians deployed a shocking degree of brutality. Moscow also cites the example of Kosovo to justify its war against Georgia, and yet refuses Kosovo the right to self-determination.

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<sup>6</sup> Visit <<http://www.unpo.org/content/view/8579/81/>> for full text of statement by UNPO General Secretary on Abkhazia.

Prof. Clarence-Smith's succinct letter, a spontaneous expression of humaneness and scholarly wisdom, captures in a hundred words or so the essence of Circassian independence ethos.

In a newspaper article in The New York Times (9 September 2008) entitled [‘Russia’s Recognition of Georgian Areas Raises Hopes of Its Own Separatists’](#), Professor Charles King of Georgetown University, a specialist in international affairs and government, alluded to the Circassian demands for separation in the early 1990s and their subsequent suppression. Quoting the Professor's take on Circassian aspirations:

But few people have watched events in Abkhazia more closely than their ethnic kin, the Circassians. Many Circassians still live in Russia, in the republics of Kabardino-Balkariya, Karachayevo-Cherkesiya and Adygeya; the vast majority live outside Russia yet look back at the Caucasus as their homeland. “They’re ecstatic,” said Professor King, author of *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*. “Their cousins have gotten independence. They see this as something quite big, that could have real implications for Russia.”

## **Circassian independence**

Some Circassian groups are striving to make the Circassian issue more internationally known. The Circassians cannot forever remain ‘as if silent and absent’ and let our proverbial reticence detract from our chances for world recognition.<sup>7</sup> Our self-expression on the most accessible (and fiscally cheapest) medium, the internet, is practically insignificant. The ‘Boris Johnson affair’ (Gaby Hinsliff, [‘The riddle of Boris’s slave roots’](#), in The Observer, 9 March 2008; <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/mar/09/boris.localgovernment>>; and Andy McSmith, [‘Boris the Circassian’](#), in The Independent, 10 March 2008; <<http://blogs.independent.co.uk/openhouse/2008/03/boris-the-circa.html>>) and the indignation felt by the Circassians that British journalists were unable to locate Circassia and Circassians in the 21st century and that ‘Circassian women’ are ‘more available on the web’ than ‘Circassian men’ have demonstrated that despite valiant individual efforts to spread the word, as it were, much more needs to be done at the institutional and state levels. The separation of the ‘Circassian’

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<sup>7</sup> This is in reference to Ehud Toledano's book *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*, Yale University Press, 2007. This book should be read by all Circassians interested in how the others view them.

republics and nominal diversity (where the Circassians are variously designated as Kabardians, Cherkess, Adigeans, and Shapsugh in their respective republics and areas: the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic, the Karachai-Cherkess Republic, the Republic of Adigea, and the Shapsugh Region) partly explains the obscurity of the Circassians (even though they are in the process of becoming the largest ethnic group in the North Caucasus, pushing one million in total population) and the ‘inability’ of journalists, amongst other people, to locate present-day Circassians and Circassia. Unfortunately, the output from the Caucasus in major languages (apart from Russian) is non-existent. The work of the Federation of European Circassians ‘EuroXase’ (<<http://www.euroxase.com/>>) is commendable in this respect (perhaps the addition of a Circassian edition would be considered next to send the signal that Circassian matters).



Circassian mountains.

A check of the incidence of the word ‘Circassians’ in the news on the recent conflict yielded less than 5 counts! As Circassians, do we have a common issue with regard to our future in the Caucasus? Do a majority of us conceive of a Circassia of sorts in the Caucasus? Is independence an issue that a significant number of us contemplate? Is there a creed or an ideology that guides us in our path? Only one person mentioned the issue of Circassian secession and independence, and he was not even Circassian. But where is the voice of the Circassians on their issues? Of course, they were vocal, nay, vociferous in the support of the Abkhaz struggle and independence. It could be that thousands of Circassians internally envisioned a free Circassia, and in their wisdom chose to mute the issue until better circumstances. Unfortunately, countries are not structured on wishful thinking. We need to speak out loud so as to be heard and make people take notice.



## **Russian attempts to undo Adigea**

The Adigeans in the Republic of Adigea have been under tremendous strain for the past three years trying to save their republic from liquidation and insidious attempts by Moscow to incorporate it in the Krasnodar Region. It is true that the Circassian nationalists in the Caucasus stood as one in the face of this latest Russian attempt to eradicate Circassian presence in the Caucasus. The diaspora, especially in Jordan, also played a positive role in tempering Russian aggression. The Circassians in the USA were brilliant in drawing political and scholarly attention to this issue. However, with the whole world focused on the Caucasus, wouldn't it have been opportune to advocate the Circassian issue in all its manifestations? Not a single article by any Circassian was written to turn the table on the Russians and demand that the will of the Circassians in the Caucasus should be respected (I stand to be corrected on this, and other assertions that I make). It was gratifying seeing the Circassian flag (green background with twelve golden stars and three crossing arrows) raised in the mass gatherings in both Turkey and Abkhazia, but is the symbolism clear to world viewers? The Circassian lobby in Turkey, which showed itself to be vigorous and self-asserting, should be more eloquent still and should focus on Circassian issues that would also bring benefit to the host country. The matter of Turkish investment in the Circassian republics in the Caucasus and Abkhazia should be pushed into centre-stage. The scare tactics of the Russians and their cronies to drive away potential investors should be exposed. Yet a more important issue is the rights of the diaspora Circassians in the Caucasus. Besides the right of automatic citizenship in any of the Circassian republics without hindrance and obstacles and with all the rights and duties associated with this, diaspora Circassians need to press their claim to their ancestral lands. They should be allotted land plots in restitution of their loss of land and expulsion and subsequent suffering in exile.

## **Historical precedents for Circassian independence**

Independence is not an alien concept in Circassian history and ethos. Here are some precedents from the past three centuries, keeping in mind that the Circassians had lived in their lands for thousands of years, creating civilizations and states that preceded any Russian entity by millennia. The myth of Kabarda's 'Voluntary Union' with Russia in the 16th century is discussed/dispelled in 'The Story of a Bronze Idol' <<http://jaimoukha.synthasite.com/statue-of-maria-teimriqwe-yidar.php>>.

## **Treaty of Belgrade**

In 1736, a war broke out between Russia and the Ottoman Empire due to the latter's intervention in Kabarda. In the Treaty of Belgrade of 18 September 1739, the independence of Kabarda was formally guaranteed. Article six of the Treaty stated:

As for the two Kabardas, Greater and Lesser, and the nations that inhabit therein, the two parties agree that the two Kabardas shall remain free, and will submit to neither of the two empires, but will be considered as a boundary between the two; and on the part of the Sublime Porte, neither the Turks nor the Tatars shall interfere in [the internal affairs of] of these [two] countries, and, according to old custom, the Russians shall continue to have the right to levy hostages from the two Kabardas, the Sublime Porte being also free to levy the same for the same purpose; and in case the above mentioned peoples of the Kabardas give ground for complaint by either of the two powers, both are permitted to punish them. (B. Nolde, 1952-1953, p341)<sup>8</sup>

## **The Russo-Circassian War**

The Circassians declared independence in 1836 (encouraged by the Circassophile Scotsman David Urquhart) and a national flag (green background, twelve gold stars, three crossed golden arrows) was adopted as one of the symbols of independence (A. Jaimoukha, *The Circassians: A Handbook*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, p64. The following account is from the self-same book). The looming shadow of Russia and her gradual encroachment into their country convinced many Circassians of the importance of tribal solidarity. Counsels of British 'Envoys' in Circassia, especially that of Urquhart, were instrumental in fostering unity. The NW Caucasians established a federation that included twelve tribes, nine of which were feudalistic and three egalitarian ones.

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<sup>8</sup> See also G. Noradounghian, *Recueil d'Actes Internationaux de l'empire ottoman*, vol. 1, Paris, 1897, p261. [4 vols, 1897-1903]



Circassian flag, adopted in the 1830s.

Concerted campaigns were mounted in which some notable successes were scored and many fortresses were reduced to dust. This period of co-operation and optimism culminated in the declaration of independence of Circassia in 1836, which event became a landmark in Adiga history. Ismail Zeus, representative of the ‘Great Free Assembly,’ was sent to Turkey, Paris and London to solicit support. General mobilization was declared. The Circassian declaration of independence was published in 1836 in Portfolio. This was of particular significance as the Journal was closely associated with the British Foreign Office, and Circassia was shown as an independent country on the appended map edited by none other than Lord Palmerston, the British Foreign Secretary. Some three decades later fate delivered a crippling blow to Circassia and her children. Circassian independence was finally undone by the Russians in 1864. Most European press marked this bleak event and Urquhart suffered severe personal anguish.

### **The Dzeliqwe insurrection**

During the tsarist years, Kabarda was subsumed under the Stavropol Province. Cossack and Slav settlers found a new home in the north-eastern parts of Kabarda in the last years of the 19th century. There were about 70,000 Kabardians in Kabarda in the early years of the 20th century.<sup>9</sup>

In the years preceding WWI, feelings were running high across the whole empire against the ever more intrusive policies and imperialist institutions. In 1912-13, there was a minor revolt in Kabarda against Nicholas II called ‘Dzeliqwe War’, but it was quickly put down.<sup>10</sup> In the Soviet period, this uprising was looked upon

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<sup>9</sup> ‘[Kabardia](http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/JUN_KHA/KABARDIA.html)’, Encyclopedia Britannica, vol. V15, p619, 1911. Online Encyclopedia <[http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/JUN\\_KHA/KABARDIA.html](http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/JUN_KHA/KABARDIA.html)>. According to the article, Kabarda was then ‘part of the Province of Terek’.

<sup>10</sup> Bechmirze Pasch’е (ПашцІэ Бэчмырзэ) immortalized the Kabardian revolt of 1913 against Tsarist rule in the famous song ‘Dzeliqwe War’ («ДЗЭЛЫКЪУЭ ЗАУЭ»). Apart

favourably and was interpreted as a class struggle between the aristocracy and oppressed masses yearning to establish a socialist state. Russia escaped invective.

## **The Russian Revolution**

The Communist revolution of 1917 gave the North Caucasians the chance to reclaim their independence through the establishment of the North Caucasian Mountain Republic. In May of that year, the First North Caucasian Congress elected the Central Committee of the Union of the North Caucasus and Daghestan as a provisional Terek-Daghestan Government to prepare for an independent state. Both aboriginal North Caucasians and Terek Cossacks were united in this aim. The Central Committee met on July 28th 1917 in an extraordinary session to prepare for the Second Congress, which was scheduled to take place in the Daghestani town of Andi. The main resolution was the set up of a committee to prepare for the creation of a standing army. Local meetings were held in August 1917 to elect delegates to the Andi Congress. In Nalchik the meeting was attended by the Central Committee member Tawsulht'an Shakman (Shaqmen), a Kabardian. In Batalpashinsk (Cherkessk), Simon Basarya, an Abkhaz, supervised the meeting. In Hakurina-Habla in Adigea the meeting was attended by Circassian delegates and representatives of the Armavir Armenians from the village of Urupsk and Jews from Dzhekhanas. These two groups had been assimilated by the Circassians to some extent and identified with their cause. In September 1917, a provisional constitution was ratified by the Second Congress of the 'Union.' The Republic of North Caucasus seceded from Russia in 1917, and declared its independence on May 11th 1918. It signed an alliance with Turkey and was formally recognized by the Central Powers, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey, and by Great Britain. On June 8th 1918, a contingent of instructors from the Turkish Army arrived in Daghestan to organize a North Caucasian force. All members of this group were of North Caucasian origin, the leader being Ismail Berkuk, a Circassian. This force together with the help of fifteen Turkish divisions under Izzet Yusuf Pasha, another Circassian, routed the forces of General Bicherakhov. However, before consolidating the position of the North Caucasians, the Turkish Army had to withdraw from the Caucasus under the provisions of the armistice. Another attempt by diaspora North Caucasians to free their lands was blotched.

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from being the founder of modern Kabardian poetry, Pasch'e was a very versatile songwriter, in the best tradition of the Circassian bards (джэрыакIуэ). He made use of the traditional heroic song genre to convey his ideas, as in 'The Song of Wezi Murat' («УЭЗЫ МУРАТ И УЭРЭД»; 'Wezi Murat yi Wered'), an audio recording of which can be found at <<http://jaimoukha.synthasite.com/statue-of-maria-teimriqwe-yidar.php>>, sung by Zhiraslhen Ghwch'eI' (ГъукIэлI Жырасльэн).

Simultaneously with the setting up of the North Caucasian Republic, left wing Ossetian radicals, together with socialists from other North Caucasian peoples, established the Soviet Terek Republic, but it was soon overthrown by the Terek Cossacks. In September 1919, Kabarda, Ossetia, Chechnya and Daghestan declared the North Caucasian Emirate as an independent state under the conservative Sheikh Uzun-Hadzhi, a Naqshbandi Chechen who had led a revolt that succeeded in liberating some mountainous territories. He sided with the Bolsheviks against the nationalist Mensheviks. The communists recognized his government de facto and promised full autonomy. In September 1921, the Reds defeated the White Army. The communists reneged on their promises and abolished the Emirate soon after.

Both the short-lived North Caucasian Republic and Emirate were able to unite most North Caucasians under one banner, which is no mean feat by all standards. The peoples of the North Caucasus had been weary of Russian Tsarist rule and they longed for the creation of an independent republic in which their aspirations and dreams of freedom could come true. The Communist Revolution offered them the opportunity to cast off the oppressive yoke. However, these aspirations ran contrary to the schemes of the communists, and when the Red Army crushed White resistance, the North Caucasian Republic was violently destroyed. This period has become the point of reference when the emotive issues of North Caucasian unity and freedom are invoked.

There is a poignant lesson in this episode of North Caucasian history. Although both Reds and Whites were engaged in a mortal fight, both parties were united in their goal of destroying Caucasian independence and freedom. Each time the North Caucasians sided with some faction, they ended up with the short end of the stick. This pattern was to be repeated after the demise of the Soviet Union, when Rotskoy and Yeltsin, the bitter enemies, were united in their stance against Chechen independence. History keeps repeating itself. It is the wise who takes heed.

## **Post-Soviet developments**

### **International Circassian Congress & Association**

The first International Circassian Congress (ICC) was held in Nalchik on 19-21 May 1991. The Congress was attended by representatives of the Adige Xase in Kabardino-Balkaria, Adigea and the Karachai-Cherkess Republic, by delegates from the Abkhaz Popular Movement, the Motherland Association (Rodina or

Xekw), and by envoys from the Circassian associations and cultural centres in Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA. In this context, 'Circassian' denotes both Adiga and Abkhaz-Abaza.

One of the principal resolutions of the Congress was the establishment of the International Circassian Association (ICA; Дунейпсо Шэрджэс Хасэ; *Duneypso Sherjes Xase*). This body was formed of elected members representing the republics in the Russian Federation and the diaspora. Its main task was to coordinate efforts directed at setting up and developing cultural relations among all Circassian communities around the world. The ICA was tasked with the preservation and development of national culture and folklore, and promoting the status of Circassian, which had been under tremendous pressure.

The Congress declared that the ICA was to be entrusted with the study and solution of the general problems facing all Circassian peoples, the research into and writing of the actual Circassian history, guarantee of religious freedom, and the preservation of the national character of the Circassians. It also purported to offer all possible assistance to the Circassians who want to return to their ancestral lands, and to repatriate and restore all Circassian historical and cultural treasures that are dispersed around the globe.

The Congress ratified the charter of the ICA and elected the Association's leadership. The first president of the ICA was the late (Cherkess) Yura Kalmyk (КЪАЛМЫКЪ ЮРЭ), who later became Minister of Justice in the Russian Federation (until his resignation in 1995, in protest against the Russian invasion of Chechnya). It was decided that the centre of the ICA would be in Nalchik. The ICA published a journal 'Circassian World' in three languages: Russian, English and Turkish. The journal, which was intended to depict the situation of the Circassian, Abaza and Abkhaz communities and to foster consolidation, was distributed in the three Circassian republics and other Circassian regions, as well as in the diaspora. The journal was conceived by Kalmyk, one of the Circassian nationalist greats of the 1990s. It is still published in Cherkessk in the Karachai-Cherkess Republic.

### **Taming of Circassian nationalism**

By the mid-1990s, the Russians had been able to neutralize the Kabardian (and the wider Circassian) nationalist movement through foul means and by placing their 'men' in key positions in its leadership. Nationalist issues were excluded from official newspapers and media, and nationalist newspapers were guillotined. One of the main victims of the anti-nationalist drive was the newspaper *Sherjes Xexesxer*, which was geared to broach issues of concern to, and concerning, the

Circassian diaspora. The homeland Circassians were no longer allowed to discuss the matter of the 'Circassian diaspora', let alone conceive of schemes to lure their co-ethnics back home.

Most of those who rode the nationalist band wagon jumped off just before it was derailed and set on fire. Some of them even went on to become staunch henchmen in the implementation of Russian campaign against Circassian nationalists.<sup>11</sup> However, there is still a rump of sincere nationalists who still hold the ideals of the ICC and ICA.

### **Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus (KNK)**

In the early 1990s, the idea of a North Caucasian federation was revived as the vehicle for the people in the area to reach their political aims. The North Caucasians, especially the Abkhaz leadership, were aware of the limitations imposed by fragmentation and the advantages of concerted action. Georgia had been single-minded in demanding the abrogation of Abkhaz autonomy, and started to beat the drums of war. The Abkhazians sought safety by allying themselves with their Abaza and Circassian kin across the mountains. The Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the North Caucasus (KGNK) was recreated in 1990 to fill the vacuum left by the ebbing Soviet power. In October 1992 it changed its name to Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus (KNK). It was a voluntary conglomeration of the indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus, excluding the Daghestanis. Its principal aim was the (re-)establishment of the North Caucasian (Mountain) Republic. It had always been independent of, and sometimes at loggerheads with the local authorities, which were inimical to any form of political change.

At first, the KGNK enjoyed overwhelming popular support and it scored some notable successes. In August 1992 the Parliament of KGNK declared war on Georgia and pledged support for the Abkhaz. Together with the International Circassian Association (ICA) and the Congress of the Kabardian People, the KGNK mobilized the North Caucasians. On August 18th, an ultimatum was

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<sup>11</sup> Read 'The Institutional Face of Collaborationism: International Circassian Association', a lecture presented by Haci Bayram Polat at William Paterson University, New Jersey, USA, on 13 April 2008, for an opinionated account of the nationalistic role of the ICA. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.circassiansdiaspora.com/forum/showthread.php?p=151>> (accessed 3 September 2008). After the heyday of Circassian nationalism in the early 1990s, Russia worked ruthlessly to rein in the nationalist forces in Circassia through persecution, co-option, and appointing its own cronies as leaders of nationalist organisations.

issued by the KGNK parliament that if Georgian troops did not withdraw from Abkhazia, war would be declared. Yura Schenibe (Shanibov), President of KGNK, declared war three days later. A few thousand Abaza, Adigean, Cherkess, Kabardian and Chechen volunteers joined forces with Abkhaz army units. This intervention played a decisive role in the spectacular Abkhaz victory and cemented the ethnic unity of the NW Caucasians.

The onset of the Chechen war at the end of 1994 disrupted the tacit and coincidental alliance between Russia and the North Caucasians. Now that the tables were turned against them, the Russians showed their true colours. Russia, which had been turning a blind eye to the activities of the Confederation in Abkhazia, started to view them as a major threat to its domination in the North Caucasus when attention was switched to Chechnya. Thenceforward, neutralizing the pan-North Caucasian movement became a priority in Russia's Caucasian policy.

### **Other non-Russians demand independence**

It would be desirable and useful for Circassian intellectuals and elites to read Tony Wood's *Chechnya: The Case for Independence*, Verso, 2007. Online. Available [HTTP: <http://www.chechenpress.co.uk/content/2008/03/16/Chechnya\\_The\\_Case\\_for\\_Independence.pdf>](http://www.chechenpress.co.uk/content/2008/03/16/Chechnya_The_Case_for_Independence.pdf) (accessed 22 January 2009). Although there have been some problems between the Chechens and Circassians in the last fifteen years or so, the trajectories of the two peoples are essentially the same. The Chechen claim to a special status due to their being the largest nationality in the North Caucasus is nowadays untenable because the Circassians have overtaken the Chechens in the numbers game. The vast Circassian diaspora, despite everything that has been said about its shortcomings, is potentially the most critical factor in a post-Russian North Caucasus. A free North Caucasus would attract a significant portion of the Circassian diaspora to relocate back to the fatherland. In the past few years, the Circassian diaspora, especially in Turkey and Jordan, has demonstrated that it is a political force to be reckoned with. It is essential that the secular elites and intellectuals of the Circassians and Chechens should hold close relations to convey to the masses that North Caucasian unity is the path to a viable future devoid of Russian colonialism. [Perhaps the Circassians should heed Paul Goble's call to 'cultivate elites abroad' (['Beijing Olympics Have Brought Only Misery to China's Muslims'](#), Window on Eurasia, 7 May 2008) to engage the



nations of the world in dialogue concerning issues pertinent to their future.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the Abkhazians, the Circassians enjoy sympathy from many quarters of this globe.

Another group in the Russia Federation that has been vocal in its demands for independence are the Tatars of Tatarstan. For a concise article on the (most recent) Tatar demand for independence, refer to [‘Russian Actions in Georgia Show Why Tatarstan Must Be Independent, Activists There Say’, Window on Eurasia, 24 August 2008](#). Tatarstan was subdued and colonized by the Russians in the 16th century, fully three centuries prior to the occupation of Circassia by the Russians in the 19th century, yet the yearning for freedom has never been extinguished in the Tatar soul. Exchanging notes with Tatar ideologues is perhaps a worthwhile pursuit.

It is obvious that the Russians are worried about their soft underbelly in the North Caucasus. They are losing the numbers game in the region and their rough-shod attitude is alienating large sections of North Caucasian societies. It is highly unlikely that the ‘Russian’ North Caucasus will tolerate Russian imperialism much longer.

### **North Caucasian intellectuals and activists in the West in the 20th century**

Circassian intellectuals were active in the West in the 1920s, 1930s and 1950s, when, together with other North Caucasian elites, they spread the word about the atrocities committed by the Soviet regime in the North Caucasus and advocated North Caucasian independence and federalism. They were based in cities of countries most sympathetic with the cause of the North Caucasians: Warsaw, Prague, Paris, and Munich. They used to publish journals that articulated their secular ideologies and yearnings for freedom. In 1924 the monthly magazine *Kavkazski gorets* [Caucasian Mountaineer] was published in Prague. In the period 1934-1939, *Severni Kavkaz* [The North Caucasus] was published in Warsaw and the monthly magazine *Le Caucase. Kavkaz* [The Caucasus] was published in Paris. *L’Union Nationale des Émigrés de la République du Caucase du Nord* (The

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<sup>12</sup> [‘Window on Eurasia’](#) is a must-read for Circassians who are interested in the future of their country and how the West views the Circassian issue and provides a glimpse of the role that the West might play in the eventuation of an independent Circassian state. Overseen by the veteran Circassophile Paul Goble, the ‘Godfather of the independence of the Baltic countries’, it is one of a very small number of web posts in which the Circassians and their issues are given substantive coverage.

National Union of the Émigrés of the Republic of the North Caucasus) was most active in the 1920s and 1930s. The Information Bureau of the Party of the People of Mountaineers of the Caucasus (Bureau d'Information du Parti du Peuple des Montagnards du Caucase) published the book *Le Caucase du Nord* [The North Caucasus] in Paris in 1931.

However, it was the 1950s that witnessed the most intense North Caucasian activism in the West (most probably with support from Western governments in the framework of the Cold War). A number of journals were published, such as *The Free Caucasus. Svobodni Kavkaz* (1951-1954; edited by the Chechen legend Abdurahman Avtorkhanov), *United Caucasus* (1953-1954), and *Caucasian Review* (1955-1960; Institute for the Study of the USSR), all based in Munich. *Caucasian Review* was absorbed by *Studies on the Soviet Union*.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's (RFE/RL) Chechen service, which was inaugurated in the 1970s under Abdurahman Avtorkhanov directorship and discontinued late in the decade, was re-launched in April 2002, together with Circassian and Avar services. Moscow reacted negatively to this development, perceiving outside broadcasting to the North Caucasus in languages other than Russian as a threat to state security! (RFE/RL also publishes the weekly 'Caucasus Report', which is also available on line.) However, with the demise of this special crop of activists, born and raised in the North Caucasus, this ebullience of North Caucasian free spirit found perdition for lack of disciples to take up the torch.

Lustrous personalities and writers from the 1950s include R. Abaza, R. Adighe (pseud. R. Traho), R. Ashemez, V. Astemirov, T. Aydamyrkan (pseud. R. Traho), Haidar Bammate (born in Temur-Khan-Shura, North Caucasus, in 1890; published *Le Caucase et la révolution russe: Aspect politique*, Paris: L'Union Nationale des Émigrés de la République du Caucase du Nord, 1929), V. Djabagui, R. Karcha, P. Kosok (Kotsev, Kwetse), Aytek Namitok (Nemitiqw; published seminal books and articles and collaborated linguistically and culturally with the legendary Georges Dumezil), I. Natirboff, T. Tatlok, R. Tra(k)ho (used a number of pseudonyms). These great and highly charismatic men believed unconditionally and passionately in North Caucasian unity and federation (however, sometimes their passion got the better of them when certain themes were twisted a bit to fit the dogmas). Perhaps the fresher generations of North Caucasians should take several leaves from the unionist book to counteract the present-day fractiousness and antipathy. North Caucasian activism and activists in the West in the 20th century deserve further research.

The Federation of European Circassians 'EuroXase' is a modern manifestation of highly-civilized and secular activism in the West. However, this is purely a Circassian affair and other North Caucasians are not privy to the work of the organisation. The Circassians in the USA are also crystalizing (benign) activist means to put forward the Circassian case.

### **The independence imperative**

The Circassians should press their claim to independence and should also convince the world that they are ready to take control of the reins of their destiny. This would be the time for Circassian intellectuals and organisations to float and advocate the concept of Circassian independence. It is time to stand up and be counted. Failure to do so in a clear manner would mean the missing of a golden opportunity, and may perhaps indicate the extent of Russian success in containing and neutralizing the Circassian issue. However, the response of the Circassian youth augurs well for the future of the Circassian issue.

It could be that at a later stage following their independence the Circassians would want to enter into confederation with their Abkhaz kin. Relations with Russia need not suffer on account of Circassian independence. If Russia sheds its colonialist instincts and puts some trust in other nations, both Circassia and Russia would benefit as co-operative neighbours. Russia's geopolitical interests need not be adversely affected by the spread of freedom. The Circassians need to draw lessons from Georgia's behaviour in the last few years and chart a more prudent path, more akin to neutrality.

Alternatively, the West's strategic option to 'cut Russia down to size' (by leaving to the Russians only their historical lands and liberating all its colonies and giving them back to their rightful owners) would rid the North Caucasians of a bugbear that has been inimical to their peaceful existence for centuries. One understands that small peoples are easy prey and are point-blank targets for co-opting and manipulation. The Russians have been co-opting and manipulating the Circassian elites for centuries, and they are past-masters in this game. The Americans have recently entered the fray using highly sophisticated and attractive means to win the hearts and minds of the Circassians. One would expect the American endeavour to become even more vigorous in consequence of the recent events in the Caucasus and Russia's violent recalcitrance against increased American influence in the Caucasus. This crucial counter-balancing act is spearheaded by

the Jamestown Foundation, which has held landmark conferences dedicated wholly to Circassian issues.<sup>13</sup>

Freedom and independence for the Circassians have never been as tenable as they are now. The West's recognition of Kosovo's independence has opened the door for a Russian reciprocal recognition of Abkhaz independence. The Circassians and Chechens (and other peoples in Russia) can employ the same argument used by the West and Russia to claim independence. Of course, it would be extremely naïve to expect Russia to conform to such demands and declare the peoples who wish to be rid of its heavy yoke independent nations. Obviously, there is a difficult path to tread in this regard. The Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, whose specialty is thwarting North Caucasian aspirations for freedom, alluded to NGOs in the North Caucasus demanding independence as an undesirable outcome of the conflict. He specifically referred to 'the Russian North Caucasus'. Obviously, the colonial mind (and the subservient military and administrative juggernaut) is still at work to extirpate any notions of independence.

According to a report in [North Caucasus Weekly \(vol. 9, issue 33, 5 September 2008\)](#), a publication of the Jamestown Foundation, John McCain, the U.S. presidential candidate for the Republican Party in the 2008 election campaign, has suggested that the West should consider recognizing the independence of Chechnya and the other North Caucasian republics in response to Russian recognition of Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence. The report goes on to say:

This is not the first time that an American politician or government official has linked Chechnya with the issue of the two Georgia's breakaway republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In December 2007, Deputy Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Matthew J. Bryza said in an interview with the Azeri TV channel ANS that recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia could negatively influence the situation in the Russian North Caucasus, Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria [one of the Circassian republics with some 600,000 Circassian citizens, the largest concentration of Circassians in the world], Dagestan and North Ossetia... If anyone is really interested in what people in Chechnya and other parts of the North Caucasus

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<sup>13</sup> The Jamestown Foundation's website <<http://www.jamestown.org/>> is a treasure trove of information on North Caucasian issues.

think about their independence from Russia, one should first of all listen seriously to people in the streets and only after that to Ramzan Kadyrov's declarations. The interviews taken by Kavkazky Uzel demonstrate that if the United States ever recognizes Chechen independence, it could make the Chechens the best friends the U.S. has ever had. These interviews also confirm again that the issue of Chechen independence is still alive.

The Circassians must transcend vestiges of their narrow differences and embrace and engage the open world. The Circassian issue (in association with other, more pressing issues) is now being considered in the political world. The responsibility on the shoulders of Circassian intellectuals and politicians is immense. Are we ready to deal with independence matters? Can Circassians start talking to one another to attempt to present a united front and be up to the tremendous challenge.

Culture is a crucial unificatory catalyst in the case of the scattered Circassian communities that have been subject to disparate exotic influences for some 150 years. A solid grounding in Circassian culture and folklore is called for.

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