

The Northwest Caucasus

Past, present, future

Walter Richmond

Central Asian Studies Series

The Northwest Caucasus

This is the first book to present a comprehensive history of the Northwest Caucasus. Based on extensive research, it describes the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus, which have a significantly different ethnic makeup and history than the Northeast (Chechnia and Daghestan). The book examines their struggles for survival against repeated invasions and their ultimate defeat at the hands of the Russians. It explores inter-ethnic relations and demographic changes that have occurred in the region over time with a particular focus on the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, incorporating recently published archival materials concerning the deportation of the Abazas, Circassians, and Ubykhs to the Ottoman Empire by the Russians, which is treated as the first act of ethnic cleansing in modern history. The book also closely examines the struggles the Northwest Caucasus peoples continue to undergo in the post-Soviet era, facing pressures from organized crime, religious extremism, and a federal government that is unresponsive to their needs. It emphasizes the strategic importance of the region, lying on the northeastern shore of the Black Sea directly on the border between the “Christian” and “Muslim” worlds. Overall, it will be of interest to scholars of Russian history and politics, Caucasus and Central Asian studies, genocide studies, international relations and conflict studies.

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Foreword

For those of us who study the Caucasus there is often present in our minds, no matter what part we focus upon, an abiding sorrow at the turmoil and suffering that have afflicted this region. Even the public in the West can appreciate these feelings in so far as most are aware of the two recent Russo-Chechen wars, the first conducted under the late Boris Yeltsin and the second under Vladimir Putin. Some may even be aware of the wholesale deportations that swept the region during World War II under the direction of Josef Stalin, born Dugashvili, himself from the Caucasus and of Ossetian and Georgian extraction. A few lay people may also be aware of romanticized accounts of the nineteenth-century resistance to Tsarist expansion mounted by the Daghestanis and Chechens under Imam Shamil. Only professionals, however, seem to be aware of the ferocious war that swept through the Northwest region of the Caucasus at roughly the same time as Shamil's resistance in the Northeast, and which ended with the defeat and ethnic cleansing of virtually all of the Circassians and their kin, the Ubykhs, Abkhazians, and Abazas, so that today only remnants of these once numerous peoples survive as divided entities in their former homelands, while the vast majority persist with neither political nor cultural coherence as minorities in Turkey and the Middle East.

Dr. Richmond is the first scholar to examine the history of the Northwest Caucasus in depth through an exhaustive study of virtually all the Russian sources and accounts. He has been able to take our vision of this region and its peoples back to remote antiquity. What he shows is a vista of stress and privation afflicting the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus from a remote period. The present plight of these peoples takes on an aspect of the incredible, not because of any issue of veracity, but because their sheer survival in any form at all down to the present day seems astounding given what Dr. Richmond shows us of their past. What emerges from his work is a detailed account of a group of small, distinct peoples subject to the ambitions and machinations of more powerful neighbors, while also, especially in the case of the Circassians and their kin, suffering from intense and multi-dimensional internal stresses, social, cultural, and economic. He shows clearly that, at times, this internal turmoil prevented the emergence of states or state-like entities in the region and seriously compromised any efforts at resistance to external forces. At other times, it is evident that the larger

actors, chiefly Russia and the Ottoman Empire, used the Northwest Caucasus as a region for testing the mettle and resolve of one another, without any regard whatsoever for the needs or hopes of the local peoples.

While the Northwest Caucasus to this day may be fairly characterized as obscure in Western minds, even in those who are preoccupied with the affairs of Russia and Eurasia generally, Dr. Richmond succeeds in giving us the perspective of Moscow or Istanbul towards this region. He has made it clear that henceforth any grasp of hegemonic ambitions from a regional power near to this region, be it a renewed Russia, a potentially expansive Iran, or a possibly resurgent Turkey, will focus on this region because of its significance as the geopolitical focus of western Eurasia: control the Northwest Caucasus and one can control the entire North Caucasus; control the north and one can control the entire Caucasus. With the Caucasus as a base, one can from the north project power and influence south into the Middle East and beyond. If the would-be power lies in the south, then the vast steppe region is open to hegemonic penetration. It is only the Northwest Caucasus that has the topography and ports that permit the easy logistics needed to realize such grand ambitions for a Eurasian power. It is this combination of position and geography that has given the region its tragic and remarkable history and which today continues to make it strategically vital, for the time being, to Russia.

This book is extraordinarily rich. Dr. Richmond begins his book with dramatic eyewitness accounts of the deportations of the nineteenth century and of World War II, followed by a brief account of present-day ethnic and political tensions that have resulted from them. As in almost every following chapter he makes an important observation in this Introduction: Russian rule contains a profound element of irony, because policies that, at their face value, are intended to protect ethnic identity and to insure inter-ethnic peace have in fact threatened such identities at the same time that they have exacerbated inter-ethnic conflict. Chapter 1, on the remote history of the area, starts with the archeology of the region and leads into accounts of the ancient Meotians, Sindians, and Bosporans, among other enigmatic but fascinating peoples, treated here in unprecedented detail. The Sindians are clearly a relic Indo-European people, (Indic *Sindh(ava)*, Irish *Sionnan* “Shannon”). We learn, for example, that one of their kings bore the name Gekatei, and that he and his wife, Tirgatao of the Iranian Iksomat tribe, were set in conflict with one another through the machinations of the Bosporan king, Satir. The Meots and Bosporans had extensive links with the Ancient Greeks, and the picture that emerges is a mixture of the exotic with the familiar. By contrast the Zikhs are the first linguistically identifiable Circassians to emerge in this era of the first millennium, and they seem to stand as a people apart. The Huns and the enigmatic Khazars make their appearances, followed by the rise and fall of the Kingdom of the Alans, the last flourishing of Iranian culture in the region and the ancestors of the present-day Ossetians.

Chapter 2, entitled simply “Culture,” is one of the most thorough accounts of these various cultures available. Herein many long-standing puzzles that have resisted solution by Western specialists become clear on the basis of extensive

Russian and native work utilized by Dr. Richmond. This chapter contains a complete account of all the ethnic groups in the region, along with all the tribes and sub-tribes of the Circassians, and others. This information can be found in no other Western source. Perhaps his most interesting achievement here is his thorough account of the kinship system and resulting social hierarchy of the Circassians, among the most complex known. The conflicts and turmoil that ensued in this culture due to its sheer complexity argues strongly against the currently fashionable view derived from the neo-Darwinian sociobiology that cultural institutions are adaptive. Whatever the origins of the elaborate Circassian social hierarchy, which was shared by the Ubykhs, Abazas, and Abkhazis, may have been and whatever adaptive role it may once have played, it persisted for centuries as an impediment to coherent defensive action and was by any sensible estimation maladaptive.

Chapter 3 begins with the aftermath of the disintegration of the Mongol Empire. The old ethnic names, Zikhs, Alans, etc., have vanished and modern ones have appeared. Along with the emergence of familiar peoples came the conflicts which would shape their history down to the present day. The Circassians in the west came under repeated and devastating attacks from the Crimean (Krim) Khanate and the Ottoman Empire. Genoese merchants appeared and played a benign role, but were eventually crowded out by the larger powers. Those Circassians in the east, the Kabardians, also suffered and sought an alliance with Russia, an emerging power. The political success of the Kabardians (a Kabardian princess even became a wife of Ivan the Terrible) and the consequent enhanced prestige of their *pshis*, "princes," would work against this incipient nation by aggravating the animosities inherent in their hierarchical society even more so than those found among their kin to the west. Russia proved to be an ally of vacillating commitment. When Persia began to assert herself in the region, Moscow's reaction was generally conciliatory at the expense of the local peoples. When Sweden went to war with Russia, the Circassians were left to the mercy of the Ottomans. The flight of serfs from the heartland of Russia to her margins in the Northwest Caucasus created the various groups of Cossacks. These settlers, usually admixed with locals, were to play a crucial role in the growing hostilities of the eighteenth century. Thus was set early on a tradition of shifting alliances, distrust, and ethnic rivalry that was to lead to the great tragedy of the Russo-Caucasian War of the nineteenth century.

The next three chapters cover in great detail the devastating war between Russia and the Northwest Caucasus. Efforts to incorporate the region into the Russian Empire began with the reign of Catherine the Great in 1762. Forts and Cossack settlements began to appear on the northern marches of the Circassian lands. The Russo-Turkish War of 1768–74 exacerbated relations between the Russians and the Circassians. These grew worse when Sheikh Mansur, a Chechen, led his warriors across the North Caucasus into western Circassian territory, where he was greeted as a hero. His rebellion was short-lived, however, (1785–91). Cossack raids began in earnest in 1800 and these gradually escalated into the full-scale warfare of the nineteenth century, ending with the ethnic

cleansing of 1864. This period of 102 years of conflict are characterized by peasant revolts among the various Circassian and Abaza tribes against their rulers. These princes often sought allegiance with Russia as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Kabardians were struck by plague. Treaties, truces, and petitions were all dishonored by both sides almost before their ink was dried. The Ottomans, their power waning in the region, still staged raids and offered false hopes. So too did the British, who offered the Circassians moral support, but little else. In this turmoil it is a wonder that the Russians did not conquer the region within a few months. That the conquest took over a century is testimony both to the fighting spirit of the Northwest Caucasians as well as to the ineffectuality of the Tsarist forces. After the devastating expulsion of most of the indigenous populace the fate of the remnants that remained behind is detailed through the rest of the Tsarist period and through the Soviet era.

Dr. Richmond begins by laying out the three great misconceptions that led Russia into what was for its soldiers a prolonged and devastating war and what was for the inhabitants of the region a tragedy without precedent. First, they assumed that the West Circassians were subjects of the Ottomans, which some inquiry would have shown not to be the case. Second, Russia failed to grasp the fluidity of alliances and allegiances among the various tribes of the region, a condition toward which she herself was in part a contributor. Third, she pursued her imperial ambitions without any knowledge of the culture or history of the region, relying instead upon a sense of her own cultural superiority and military might. What is striking is that, with the exception of the first assumption which can, of course, no longer hold in the absence of the Ottomans, the last two assumptions seem to have been true of the Kremlin's Caucasian policy even down to the wars that racked the Caucasus beginning in the 1990s. The failure of the Russian elite to learn from the history of the region, from the work and knowledge of its own specialists, is absolutely baffling.

Dr. Richmond offers demographic data on the devastating effects of the ethnic cleansing that began in 1864. With a few notable exceptions the generals who led the Russian forces in the final stages of this war planned this ethnic cleansing in terms that Dr. Richmond argues are genocidal by modern standards. Given the conduct at this time of imperial powers and large nations, such as the United States, such actions are reprehensible, but they were not unheard of. What is striking, however, is that the severe treatment of the Northwest Caucasian native peoples was to continue after the war had left them as relics on their own land.

During the remainder of the Tsarist period and throughout the Soviet era, Russian governance took the form of prejudicial and repressive treatment. The Northwest Caucasus, even in its decimated post-conquest condition, was never fully pacified, whether under stringent Tsarist measures inspired by the culture of imperialism or under the brutal measures dictated by the communist ideology of the Soviets. What emerges from Dr. Richmond's account is a striking failure of Russia down to the present day to evolve away from her fundamentally impe-

rial mentality, in contrast with developments in other former imperial powers. As far as the Northwest Caucasus is concerned, Russia is still locked in the nineteenth century. Laws and institutions ostensibly in place to ensure justice and human rights seem to function only in a superficial way and to be mere window dressing when local issues arise that cause concern to Moscow or to her representatives in the area. This frozen state of political culture calls for an explanation.

Conceivably, the lack of natural boundaries that enabled Russia to become history's largest contiguous empire also rendered the Russian heartland chronically vulnerable, thus elevating her military to an exalted position that rendered it effectively sacrosanct and beyond civil accountability. Such an untethered military tended toward corruption and autocracy. Russia's strategy of conquest, decimation, and incorporation also rendered external threats into internal ones, and froze her political culture into an outmoded pattern obsessed with security and trustful of no one. She stands alone without true allies and with latent suspicion toward all. This archaic character of her political and security cultures might therefore be seen as a consequence of her geography and of her history. That modern factors have rendered this old geographical dynamic obsolete does not seem to have taken root in the minds of the Russian political elite. The West's assurances of friendship and its articulation of shared interests have been undercut by her other actions intended to fill the power vacuum left behind by the USSR in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. During the Yeltsin era there was a prospect for a shift in the Russian worldview, but under Putin the military and security forces have come to the fore, so that Russia has reverted to her traditional posture along with a strong Slavic nationalist theme. This reversion bodes ill for both Russia's internal relations with her non-Slavic minorities as well as relations with the rest of the world, particularly with the United States. It also explains the enhanced repressive measures taken in the Northwest Caucasus and elsewhere. The old patterns have been set back in place.

The penultimate chapter deals with the period from 1986 to 2000, the period Dr. Richmond terms the "Rise of Nationalism." Here one finds an overview of the turmoil that emerged in the region at the end of the Soviet era and the emergence of the Russian Federation under Yeltsin. Particular problems are addressed, such as those of the Karachay and of Adygheia. While full-blown warfare has not erupted in the Northwest Caucasus, he makes it clear that the region is rife with the same tensions and heavy-handed ruling policies that have been its heritage for the past 300 years or more. If anything, the potential for sudden, extensive, and intense violence is greater now than at any time since the Russo-Caucasian War. Dr. Richmond again articulates three blunders that Moscow has made in assessing this region. First, Moscow, ethnocentrically, sees Islam as merely another local ideology and fails to appreciate its uncompromising moral force among adherents. Second, Moscow sees the local Islamic movements as monolithic, when in fact they are diverse and often poorly defined, rendering Moscow's policies in this sphere "crude" and ineffective. Third, Moscow, again ethnocentrically, assumes that Islam has a hierarchy of authority

resembling that in the Orthodox Christian Church. The result is the vesting of nominal authority in Muslim figures that are seen as dupes by the local population, whose needs and grievances thus go unaddressed. One might observe here that most Western capitals have made similar assumptions based on ignorance when dealing with Islam generally.

The final chapter notes the ebbing of strong nationalist aspirations, but discusses the ongoing, “frozen” crises of corruption and strife that beset the three titular republics of (from west to east) Adygeia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. The events documented fit well into older patterns despite the veneer of modernity. Moscow’s proclivity for direct interference in local affairs has if anything grown stronger under Putin, with an effort to abolish the republic of Adygeia, and with efforts to hand-pick local officials. Nevertheless, as the title of the chapter alludes to, the region is now in the twenty-first century and there are new factors. As a result of Tsarist policies, Moscow now faces a large diaspora of Northwest Caucasian peoples that fall outside her control and which contains many individuals of wealth or influence in their adoptive countries. An international organization has emerged, the International Circassian Organization or *Dunayem Adyghe Khase*, that represents the culture and aspirations of dispersed Circassians and their kin, and which has chapters in the Northwest Caucasus. The Internet facilitates cultural and political ties among this diaspora and has enabled the emergence in the past 15 years of a sort of virtual Circassian nation, in which other Northwest Caucasian peoples participate. The foment in the Muslim world also washes up against the Northwest Caucasus and threatens to trigger violence cloaked in religious terms. The Northwest Caucasus itself remains beset with problems that reflect the new modernity: educational issues, corruption issues, unemployment, maintenance of cultural institutions established during the Soviet era, poor infrastructure, and interference from the Kremlin.

As of 2006 when Dr. Richmond closed the research for this book, none of these issues had been resolved and prospects for future amelioration or mitigation appeared unpromising. One can only wonder what the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi will be like, since this city sits on the site of the 1864 center of ethnic deportations. It also occupies the center of the Ubykh territory, the one people of the Northwest Caucasus that are culturally and linguistically extinct. The other Northwest Caucasian peoples see them as the victims of Russian genocide. The Sochi Olympics will therefore take place in a hostile and politically unstable environment. Moscow’s role in this choice might best be seen as one more instance of its continued ignorance of and indifference to this region.

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Introduction

Remember the past, live in the present, think of the future.

Inscription on Memorial Stone, Adygeisk, Russian Federation

The Circassians

Circassia, the Northwest Caucasus, summer 1864:

On the road our eyes were met with a staggering image: corpses of women, children, elderly persons, torn to pieces and half-eaten by dogs; deportees emaciated by hunger and disease, almost too weak to move their legs, collapsing from exhaustion and becoming prey to dogs while still alive... Those alive and healthy had no time to concern themselves with the dying; the Turkish skippers, out of greed, overloaded their boats with Circassians they received payment for like cargo to the shores of Asia Minor, and like cargo threw anyone who showed the slightest sign of illness overboard. The waves threw the corpses of these unfortunate souls onto the shores of Anatolia... Scarcely half of those who set out made it to their goal.¹

On 21 May 1864 the Russians finally defeated the Circassians, and their allies the Abazas and Ubykhs, in one of the bloodiest struggles in the history of the Russian Empire. Over the next several years over 90 percent of the Circassians, along with the majority of Abazas and the entire Ubykh nation, were forced from their homeland to the shores of the Black Sea, where those who did not die of disease and starvation were loaded onto ships and deported to the Ottoman Empire.

Some 140 years later this date, known in the Northwest Caucasus as “The Day of Remembrance and Grief,” was marked in the tiny Republic of Adygeia by multiple events, including an address by Republic President Khazret Sovmen, who highlighted the particular significance the war still held for the Circassian people, the primary victims of this war, of whom:

The struggle for survival in their native land was the most tragic page in the century-old history of the Adyge (Circassian) people, who lived through

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that century in a state of war. This fratricidal war was also a tragedy for hundreds of thousands of Tsarist soldiers and Cossacks.

The degree of this national catastrophe is comparable to the fate of other peoples who have survived genocide, but the mass exodus of Adyghes, the vast majority of whom live outside the borders of their historical homeland, has no true analogue in world history. Today the Adyghes live in over 50 different nations of the world, comprising the second largest diaspora from the Russian Federation after the Russian people. For them Adygeia and Russia as a whole remains a beacon of hope for the preservation of national uniqueness, culture, language, and ethnicity itself.²

In the two main theaters in the Adygei capital, Maikop, Nalby Kuek's award-winning chronicle of village life during the Caucasus War, *Twilight of Hopes*, was shown throughout the day free of charge. Several new exhibits were opened in the republic's National Museum, and congregational prayers at the city's central mosque were offered for the souls of the war's victims. In the square between the mosque, museum, and the State Music Hall, a commemorative stone was erected marking the site of a future monument to the memory of the conflict which most Circassians refer to simply as "the War." At the "mourning rally" speeches were delivered by representatives of the government, the Circassian nationalist organization *Adyghe Khase*, and the Cossacks. Participants of a two-day conference dedicated to the war concluded the event by echoing the opinion of sociologist Ruslan Khanakhu that the study of effects of the war upon the indigenous peoples had only just begun.³

In Nalchik, capital of the neighboring Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, the spirit was more optimistic and seemed to look to the future rather than the past. A monument not only to the war but also to the Circassian people was unveiled: the Circassian *Pse Zhyg* (Tree of Life), its seven sets of branches wrapped together into an arrow pointing into the sky, representing seven generations, the traditional Circassian measure of familial relations. The completion date of numerous municipal projects coincided with the date, including the city's first Cathedral Mosque. A crowd of thousands attended the opening, which was hailed by both Muslim and Christian speakers as a symbol of reconciliation.

There were other observations as well. In the village of Ali-Berdukovsky in the Republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia, a procession of flag-bearers led a procession in front of a simple obelisk bearing an inscription in honor of the victims of the war. Further north in Stavropol, the Local Studies Museum opened an exhibition dedicated to the end of the war, while elsewhere in the North Caucasus sporting events were organized, cultural festivals begun, and a wreath of tulips was tossed into the Black Sea.⁴

The Karachai-Balkars

Karachai, the Northwest Caucasus, 2 November 1943:

At one o'clock in the morning ... our unsuspecting people were herded into "Studebakers" (we were given 30 minutes to gather our things), loaded into cattle cars, and under heavy guard – at machine gun point – were deported from our homeland.

People were brought in from the fields, from their herds in the mountains, wherever they could be found, without clothing or provisions, often with minimal means for survival.⁵

Balkaria, the Northwest Caucasus, 8 March 1944:

We were given 30 minutes to gather our belongings. At the time our father was at the Front (in Leningrad), mama was 32, grandma was 60, my brother four, and I was about nine. They allowed us to take some of our bed sheets, food and clothing. We were taken in "Studebaker" trucks to a loading station in Nal'chik and ordered into cattle cars. In our car there were around 70 adults and children. There were practically no men. The loading took place under the surveillance of soldiers of the NKVD.⁶

The Circassians are not the only people of the Northwest Caucasus to suffer a tragedy of epic proportions. In the final days of World War II Joseph Stalin declared the Balkars and Karachais – Turkic peoples of the high mountains – "traitor nations." With ruthless efficiency the closely related ethnic groups, along with other peoples throughout the Caucasus, were forced from their homes and sent to concentration camps in Central Asia, where they were forbidden to speak their native languages or practice any open expressions of their culture, and died in their thousands from dysentery, exhaustion, and abuse far from their ancestral homes. It would take 13 years for the two peoples to gain permission to return home, only to face suspicion and discrimination from those who remained behind or were moved into their homes after the deportation.

The Balkars commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of this tragedy three months before the Circassian "Day of Remembrance and Grief" with special exhibitions in the Memorial Museum of the Victims of Repression and Genocide of the Balkar People. People visited the grave of poet Kiazim Mechiev, who died in 1945 in exile. The publication of several new books on the deportation was announced, including a book of poetry written during and about the Stalinist years of repression. A mourning rally was also held to honor those who died during the deportation and to hear the horrific stories of survivors like Salikh Efendiev:

I don't remember too well, but we were on the road for about 17 or 18 days. It was very cold; we starved and were terrified. If someone died we would

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hide the body so the NKVD soldiers wouldn't see it, because they'd just throw it out of the car like a dog. At the stops relatives of the dead would give money to strangers for their burial. My little sister died on the road.⁷

The Circassians and Karachai-Balkars are only two of the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus who see the region from a unique and tragic perspective. For the Greeks and Armenians, the Northwest Caucasus is the land to which their ancestors fled to escape Ottoman oppression; for the nomadic Nogais, it is a land of exile to which they were deported in the 1950s to clear land for petroleum development; for the Russians, it is the home from which they have been forced to flee since the fall of the Soviet Union to escape ethnic discrimination and violence; for the Chechens, it is the refuge to which they have fled to escape war in their own homeland; for the Meskhetians, it is a stopover on their long journey back home to Georgia from their Stalin-imposed exile in Uzbekistan which ended with the pogroms of 1989, leaving them a stateless people with no rights anywhere in the former Soviet Union; and for the Cossacks, it represents a land that was earned at great sacrifice during their long service on behalf of the Russian Imperial government, and from which they were deported in the 1920s to make room for peoples the Bolsheviks considered more trustworthy.

Currently, the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus face an uncertain future in the most impoverished region of the Russian Federation, and as the Federal government continues to ignore the region's problems, the chances for violent conflict increase. However, unlike the turbulent Northeast Caucasus, where the Russo-Chechen Wars attracted the attention of the international community, the Northwest has been neglected. Still, the region has seen serious and potentially explosive events that threatened to expand into neighboring regions and even across international borders. In the summer of 1999, Karachaevo-Cherkessia narrowly avoided civil war after a heated election and subsequently suffered from regular terrorist attacks. In October 2005 armed militants aligned with Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev attempted to seize Kabardino-Balkaria's capital, Nalchik. Currently, militant Islamic groups are attracting adherents from disillusioned and unemployed youth, creating a potential future army of rebels. The Cossacks, still seeing themselves as the guardians of Christian Russia from the Islamic south, are becoming more nationalistic, and some have organized into vigilante bands that harass non-Russians. Should these developments push the Northwest Caucasus further into chaos, the North Caucasus could become gripped in violence from the Caspian to the Black Sea.

Geography and society

While occupying a relatively small area, the very geography of the region is so heterogeneous that it makes it difficult to refer to a single Northwest Caucasus. The northernmost areas, location of the cities of Maikop and Cherkessk, consist of rolling highlands rising from the Prikubanskaya, Mineralvodskaya, and Kabardinskaya Plains. The highlands quickly give way to the *Skalistii Khrebet*

(Rocky Ridge), with terrain ranging from sheer cliffs to broad plains. It is here that the mainstay of life in the Northwest Caucasus, herding, has been conducted for centuries. In this region, rolling hills with alternating pastures and forests cover the landscape, and rock outcroppings pock the countryside and hint at the region's mineral wealth.

The Rocky Ridge rises and blends into the Great Caucasus Range, with more than 40 peaks rising above 4 km. Canyons, sometimes reaching depths of 2 km, are cut by fast-moving rivers and divide the range into a series of massive clusters of mountains covered year round with snow and glaciers. Dramatic and rapid shifts in the weather cause heavy damage to the inhabitants, their herds and crops, and floods regularly claim human lives. In this environment, survival has depended upon unending labor and good fortune to produce the bare essentials.

The terrain of the Northwest Caucasus has had a tremendous impact upon the evolution of society there. The restriction of life to the valleys and the difficulty of communication and travel from one canyon to the next have impeded the integration of the numerous tribes and ethnic groups into larger political units. Even in small communities such as the Karachais, tribal distinctions and dialectical differences continue to the present, and ironically it was only Stalin's deportation of the Karachais and Balkars that gave them a strong sense of national unity. The Circassians were likewise divided into numerous tribes that spoke different dialects and actively resisted assimilation into larger ethnic communities.

On the other hand, the customs and traditional legal codes of the Northwest Caucasus peoples reflect the difficult conditions the terrain imposed upon them. The sacrosanct nature of the guest can thus be seen as a means of assuring safe travel through a land devoid of formal means of maintaining civil order. The concept of blood revenge, which often escalated into generations-long feuds, was an attempt to deter murder by threat of sure retaliation against the killer's entire family. Above all, the emphasis in customary law in the Northwest Caucasus upon reconciliation, including the responsibility of the injured party to accept such efforts under threat of ostracism of the entire community, was and continues to be a means of maintaining peace in small communities where law enforcement is otherwise non-existent.

The Northwest Caucasus is marked by not only physical, but also ethnic diversity. Many Circassians have made the lowlands and foothills their home from time immemorial, while others, as well as the Turkic Karachai-Balkars, found a safe refuge in the high mountains. Russian Imperial and, later, Soviet political policies disrupted the already tenuous channels of ethnic solidarity, and ultimately resulted in the creation of Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia, both of which currently exist as autonomous republics in the Russian Federation. The third republic, Adygeia, is completely encircled by the much larger, Russian-dominated Krasnodar *Krai* (territory) and separated from the other Circassian homelands by political borders. Another group of Circassians, the Shapseghs,⁸ live in Krasnodar *Krai* with no safeguards for their

6 Introduction

national interests. Thus, the two ethnic camps are divided into artificial, multi-ethnic republics in which they must compete with one another for limited resources, political and cultural autonomy, and their very survival as distinct ethnic groups.

Smaller groups face an even more critical struggle for survival. The Abazas, who fled the South Caucasus in the 1500s only to become a source of indentured servants for the peoples already in the Northwest, are rapidly becoming assimilated into the larger Circassian population while their Karachai neighbors restrict their efforts at autonomy. The Nogais have seen their districts become the dumping ground of Karachaevo-Cherkessia, with a resultant increase in infant and child mortality. Armenians, Greeks and other tiny populations have been discriminated against and even prevented from participating in elections. On the other hand the Cossacks, who are quite numerous in the region, were accorded fewer rights throughout the Soviet period because of their “non-indigenous” status.

Therein lies the paradox of the Russian Federation for the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus. By nearly universal consensus, two of the fundamental functions of Russian federalism are ethnic self-determination and the defense of the rights of ethnic minorities,⁹ and yet the political structure of the Northwest Caucasus has heightened ethnic tension and impedes the development of local culture. As the Circassian and Turkic peoples speak unrelated languages, Russian has become the lingua franca of the region, and the native languages are struggling to survive. Distrustful of one another, ethnic groups vote in blocs based upon nationality rather than issues, and the winners spend their time in pointless conflicts over limited resources. After having won their long-sought recognition as a distinct ethnic group, the Cossacks are beginning to assert themselves in their self-perceived role as guardians of “Christian” Russia. Smaller ethnic groups have little or no representation and often find themselves intimidated by their neighbors: in the 2003 presidential election in Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Karachai cadres were actively intimidating Cossack and Abaza communities, driving motorcades of up to 60 vehicles, complete with armed youths, through villages carrying posters of their candidate, incumbent President Vladimir Semyonov.¹⁰ On election day, ethnic Armenians were questioned and intimidated at the polls.¹¹

All of this is the result of a failure on the part of the Russian Federal government to recognize the force of history that weighs upon this region. For the North Caucasus, it is not simply enough to declare the end to imperialism and expect everyone to live in fraternal peace. Russian Imperial and Soviet policies had been directed for so long toward the assimilation of these peoples that the old economic, social, political, and legal structures in place there remain in full force, regardless of any decree coming from Moscow. In the Chechen case, it has led to separatism and civil war. In the case of the Northwest Caucasus, where no single ethnic group is large enough to constitute a majority, the result has been a reinforcement of old stereotypes, a culture of suspicion and ethnic confrontation, governmental impotence, and the most severe economic collapse

in the Russian Federation. In this bleak environment more and more young people are turning to extremism and rebellion as a way of expressing their discontent.

The subject of this study is not simply the history of the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus, but also an analysis of how this unfortunate state of affairs came about. While the answer might seem straightforward, only by fully understanding the challenges these peoples have faced, and more importantly how they perceive these challenges, can their current situation and their prospects for the future be fully understood and the potential for violent conflict be lessened. As Ismail Afaunov, Chairman of *Adyghe Khase*, stated in his address on the 140th anniversary of the end of Caucasus War, in order for the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus to survive the dramatic changes facing them in the present, all parties “must take an honest and direct look into the past, must comprehend all the tragic experiences of prior generations, all the mistakes of defeats and so called victories.”¹²

Additionally, the world needs to turn its attention to this neglected, yet strategic and highly volatile region. The Northwest Caucasus has been recognized for centuries as a crucial area, lying between Europe and Asia, on the border of the Christian and Islamic worlds, and events there have influenced policies in Russia, Georgia, Iran, and Turkey, as well as the United Kingdom and France. With important oil transport routes to both the north and south, the region’s stability is a concern to nations far removed from the region.

1 Origins

The overwhelming majority of the population of the Northwest Caucasus for centuries consisted of the Adyghe-Abkhaz ethnic group and, somewhat later, Iranian and Turkic peoples. Numerous invasions by nomads of diverse backgrounds and peaceful intermarriage with Georgian, Armenian, Greek, Slavic and other tribes not only brought new ethnic groups to the region but also created close familial and cultural ties between all groups. The history of one Northwest Caucasus people is to a great degree the history of all.

While much of the evidence is fragmentary and theories about the origins of the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus are far from definitive, many conclusions about the prehistory and early historical development of the region can be made. Likewise, despite numerous upheavals caused by invasions and conquests the emergence and development of the modern cultures of the Northwest Caucasus can be traced.

Circassians

The Adyghe-Abkhaz peoples are the most ancient residents of the West Caucasus. Sometime before 500 CE they split into four subgroups: the Abazas, Abkhazis, Circassians, and Ubykhs. The largest representative in the Northwest Caucasus is the Circassian (Adyghe) ethnic group. Currently, there are two distinct groups of Circassians. The Kabardians organized a feudal state which led to ethnic and linguistic consolidation by the sixteenth century CE. The western Circassians consist of the remnants of various tribes which were for the most part deported to Turkey in the 1860s, and who speak a variety of similar dialects distinct from Kabardian.¹

A large body of archeological, cultural, and linguistic evidence points to an ancient culture throughout the North Caucasus dating back to the Paleolithic Era.² This population probably served as the substrata from which all the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus emerged. Differentiations between Northwest, Northeast and South Caucasus peoples were the result of the influence of later arrivals who superimposed their cultural and linguistic features upon this original population. Further evidence indicates a stable indigenous civilization in the Northwest Caucasus for nearly 5,000 years. The general consensus of

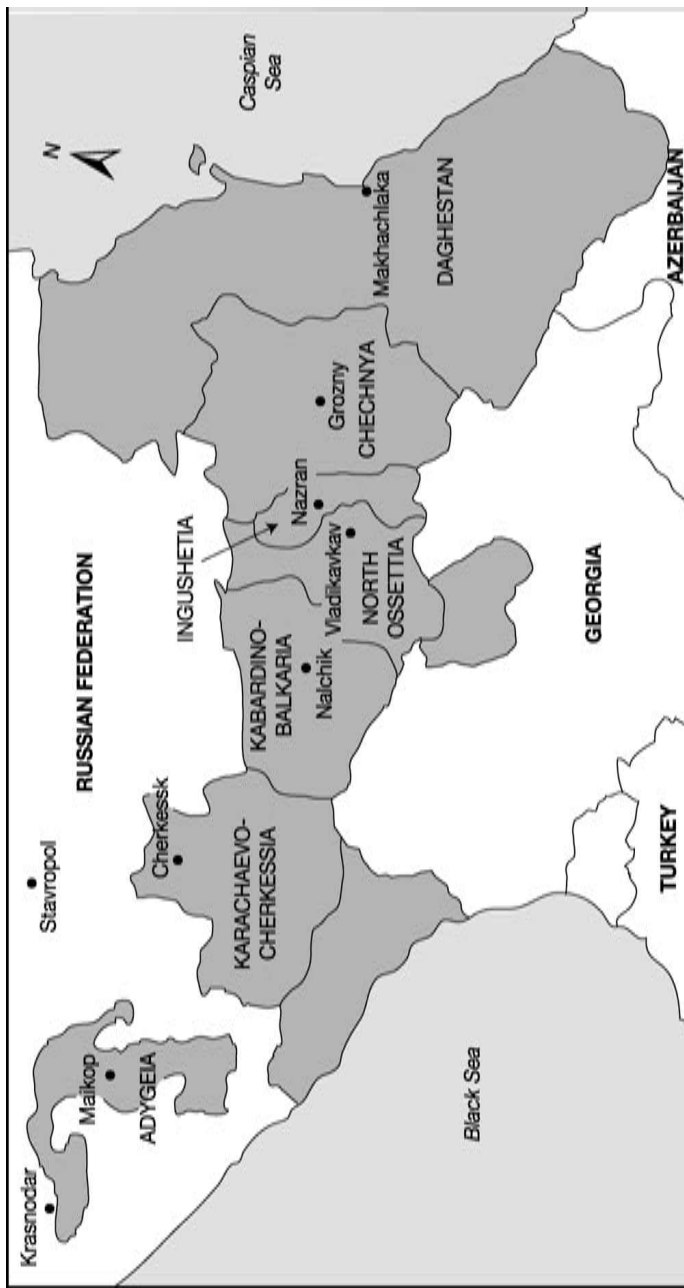


Figure 1.1 The modern North Caucasus region, including the Northwest Caucasus Republics of Adygeia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria (courtesy of adygaunion.com).

Russian anthropologists and archeologists is that these early inhabitants supplied a significant element of the Circassian, as well as Karachai-Balkar genetic pool.³ There is strong linguistic and archeological evidence that the immigrants who came to the Northwest were related to the Hatt people of north-central Anatolia, and who migrated eastward under pressure by the Hittites in the third millennium BCE.⁴

The Greek colonies

In the eighth century BCE the peoples of the Northwest Caucasus unified into the so-called Kuban culture, which stretched from the Taman Peninsula to Sochi in the south, and along the left bank of the Kuban as far as western Karachaevo-Cherkessia around the end of the second millennium BCE. Greek historiographers classified the peoples of this civilization into numerous tribal affiliations.⁵ The origin and significance of many of the Greek appellations are problematic and sometimes contradictory, and often the tribes were only known from second- and third-hand reports.⁶ These early residents of the Northwest Caucasus were farmers of wheat, barley, and millet, and breeders of cattle, sheep, horses, and pigs. The tribes along the Azov coast engaged in fishing as well. There appears to have been a well-developed social order, including wealthy families and social stratification throughout society.⁷ One tribe, identified by the Greeks as the “Meots,” had a ruling class, militias, and a professional military force.⁸ After the arrival of the Greeks, the two parties traded extensively, although antagonistic relations and armed conflict ultimately ensued. Nevertheless, the Greeks adapted to the conditions in which they found themselves and began to engage in agriculture as well. By the fourth century BCE large volumes of grain were being shipped from the region to Greece and other locations in the Mediterranean.⁹ There is also evidence that the Greek colonies became centers for artisans from among the indigenous population.¹⁰

The other major indigenous tribe, the Sinds, achieved greater prosperity than the Meots. Their territory stretched from the Black Sea coast near modern Novorossiisk to deep into the Caucasus lowlands and perhaps the steppes of southern Russia. Like the Meots, they engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry, and fishing. The Sinds developed agriculture to a level equivalent to the Greeks of Asia Minor, employing plows extensively. By the fifth century BCE the Sinds had developed a government and class system and established several cities to facilitate trade. The Sind capital was Gorgippia, located on the site of the modern city Anapa. Archeological data indicates significant Hellenic influence; there is even evidence that the Greek chorus became incorporated into Sind culture. Sind aristocrats surrounded themselves with the finest Greek artifacts and were buried with them.¹¹

Once the Greeks colonized the northern and eastern shores of the Black Sea in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, cities arose in rapid succession, the most important of which was Thanagoria on the Crimean Peninsula. A fusion of Greek and local culture resulted in a unique form of Hellenic civilization which