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“A Homeless People” (on the Circassian genocide)

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The Circassian Genocide, by Walter Richmond, Rutgers University Press, 2013

Like so many aspects of the Caucasus’ past, Circassian history is known only in the broadest of outlines to regional specialists and not at all to most outside observers. The destruction of the Shapsug, Abkhaz, Adyghe, Ubykh, and Kabardian peoples – collectively called Circassian and resident for millennia on the north shore of the Black Sea – did not occur in a single historical moment. Nor was it ever wholly complete. The annihilation transpired over generations, and traversed the vast territories of the Russian and Ottoman empires during their most expansive phases.

Given its multi-ethnic character and transregional geography, the task of narrating what Walter Richmond refers to as the Circassian genocide presents a unique challenge to the historian. How do you tell the story of any process, let alone a genocide, that occurred across centuries?

The simplest answer is that you don’t. You don’t tell it in the way stories are usually told, from beginning to end, because such tragedies are simply too traumatic for conventional narratives to handle.

And yet, as Richmond demonstrates, a tragedy that resists narration can nonetheless be conveyed through language, provided the storyteller has the requisite knowledge and skills. As he recounts the Circassians’ traumatic encounter with colonial modernity (in the form of invasion and prolonged war with tsarist Russia), Richmond eloquently exposes his readers to the deportation of hundreds of thousands to Ottoman territories during the 1860s; the final defeat of Circassian resistance to Russian rule on 21 May 1864; and the expulsion of the already deported Circassians from the Balkans by Russian troops in the 1870s.

The demise of colonial rule did not bring about a lessening of hostilities toward the Circassians. Richmond’s narrative progresses from the traumatic 19th century through to the suppression of those who settled in Turkey during the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the Circassians’ tumultuous efforts to establish communities in Transjordan, Syria, and Palestine. One of the most tragic moments comes in the wake of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, when Israel leveled Quneitra, a village Circassians had built in the Golan Heights, before returning this territory to Syria.

With the fortunate exception of the Circassians’ largely successful assimilation into Jordanian society during the second half of the 20th century, Richmond’s chapters chart a uniquely tragic history, and leave the reader dispirited by the colonial ambitions and geopolitical agendas that conspired to crush the Circassian peoples and assimilate them into larger imperial formations. Opening with the contemporary period, Richmond moves backward in time to the tsarist incursions into the northwest Caucasus in the early 19th century, then proceeds through the destruction of Kabardia by Russian General Aleksey Yermolov and the 1860s expulsions to the creation of a global diaspora, and, finally, the tragedies awaiting those Circassians who stayed behind in the homelands. His rubrics are especially useful when they are spatial rather than chronological, and when the geography he constructs traces the global implications of this colonizing process.
The author, who heads the Russian studies program at Occidental College in Los Angeles, is particularly to be commended for integrating Circassian history into a broader narrative of the history of the North Caucasus. With the deep knowledge one would expect from a scholar who has published extensively on the region, Richmond details the traumatic deportations experienced by the Turkic Karachays who lived peacefully alongside the Circassians for centuries until the Soviet period. His observation that, due to their own brutal expulsion, the Karachays “have little sympathy for the Circassians’ plight” helpfully complicates his compelling account of the Circassian catastrophe with intimations of the parallel genocides that darkened the pasts of many Caucasian peoples.

Most notably, these include the 1944 deportations of the Karachays, the Balkars (another Turkic people who live in regions near those of the Circassians), Crimean Tatars, Meskhetian Turks, Kalmyks, and, most famously, the Chechens and the Ingush. Richmond uses these intertwining histories to elucidate how Soviet social engineering prevented the formation of cross-ethnic solidarity among Caucasian peoples, and to explain why conflict in this region so frequently transpires along artificially fabricated ethnic lines.

What is to be done with these long histories of systematic and systemic abuse? Can the lessons of the Circassian tragedy yield new understanding, actionable policies, or redress for victims? Will the Circassians, now scattered across the Middle East, Europe, and North America, ever attain their political demands to return to the land they once called their own? Instead of seeking to conclusively answer such questions, Richmond’s probing narrative provokes readers to link past, present, and future in light of their own understandings – to piece the Circassians’ fragmented history into a coherent whole that initiates healing. This narrative technique is well suited for an account of genocide and potentially valuable beyond the Circassian case – for Chechnya, for example. Another advantage of Richmond’s innovative method is its demonstration of the relevance of the Caucasus’ pasts to its present and future.

As with many Caucasian peoples, the Circassians are plagued by a crisis of representation. Nearly everything that is known about them by the general public within and outside Russia is mediated by Russian (or other foreign) sources. The preponderance of imperial perspectives on Circassian history carries with it a mandate to look beyond such frameworks. In this work as well as in his earlier, comprehensive study, The Northwest Caucasus: Past, Present, Future (2008), Richmond has initiated this process of moving beyond the Russian focus, using local and little-utilized sources to revise and add nuance to colonial narratives. Along with drawing in Turkish sources, Richmond introduces us to colonial-era Circassian intellectuals such as Sultan Khan-Girey, Shora Nogmov, Dmitry Kodzokov, and Adil-Girey Keshev who dedicated themselves to preserving Circassian culture as Russian imperial power gradually eroded it.
For the later Soviet period Richmond’s canvas of local sources is more limited. Major Circassian voices such as the Kabardin writer Tembot Karashev and Abkhazian Bagrat Shinkuba are left out. Particularly regrettable is the absence of Shinkuba, whose harrowing portrait of the extermination of the Ubykh in his historical novel The Last of the Departed (1974, English translation 1982) should be required reading for everyone interested in the Circassian genocide.

Richmond also understates the contribution made by Soviet scholarship to keeping certain forms of local culture, especially local languages, alive in the northwest Caucasus. (His assertion that “the peoples of the North Caucasus would find their languages under assault for the rest of the Soviet period” may be accurate for the northwest, but it bears noting that scholarship on the languages of Daghestan and Chechnya-Ingushetia, in the northeast Caucasus, was substantially advanced during the Soviet period.) Still, these are minor omissions in a masterful and gripping narrative of a centuries-long tragedy that has never before been told as forcefully in English as it is in the pages of this book.

It would be gratifying if the copious narratives of genocides in the region were someday to be replaced by narratives of the ways in which new meanings have been crafted from traumatic pasts. Unfortunately, it is premature to hope for such a paradigm shift. In the best of possible futures, Richmond’s groundbreaking account of the Circassian genocide – along with recent studies by political scientist Georgi Derluguian, anthropologist Paul Manning, and historian Austin Jersild that similarly emphasize vernacular forms of intellectual life over purely Russian narratives – will make possible new, post-colonial, post-genocidal ways of writing about the Caucasian past. The particular gift of Richmond’s contribution is the compassion with which he relates traumatic events, and the wide geographic canvas his book traverses, encompassing Russia, the Levant, the Hejaz, and the Balkans.

Richmond’s method pioneers a new approach to the problem of representing genocide, while offering a unique understanding of the intimate relationship between the Circassian past and present. To paraphrase the Adyghe memorial stone cited at the opening to The Northwest Caucasus – surely Richmond’s motto for his second book as well as his first – the best we can do in the face of the traumas of Circassian history is to “remember the past, live in the present, and think of the future.” As this proverb suggests, even as The Circassian Genocide mourns the dead, it uses memory to make possible another future.

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