

*Circassia and Abkhazia, Their History and Character*

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Abstract

The Northwest Caucasus, home of various Circassian tribes, of the Abaza, and of the Karachai-Malkar people and hitherto quiescent, has lacked any states in its history, surviving with a distinct form of political and social structure. The Russian conquest of this region destroyed these traditional patterns. Ironically Russian rule has opened the way for the formation of modern states, despite some persistent obstacles. These pre-state conditions make the currently rising tensions in this area extremely dangerous. If war erupts in this region, Russia will find restoring peace extremely difficult and may risk losing the entire Caucasus.

1. Background

1.1 With turmoil in Chechnia (1999-present, 1994-96), incursions into Dagestan (1999, 1996), war in Karabagh (1989-94), war in Abkhazia (1992-93), fighting between North Ossetia and Ingushetia (1992), and war in South Ossetia (1990-92), the only portion of the Caucasus that appears stable is the Northwest, traditional home of the Circassians, Mountain Turks, and Abazas (Map 1). In fact, however, tensions are very high here and the potential for war has increased dramatically since the fall of 1999, when two candidates for the leadership of Karachai-Cherkessia (the status of which remains undetermined within the Russian Federation), one Derev, of Circassian origin, and one Semyonov, of mixed Karachai and Kuban Cossack pedigree, enlisted their

ethnic supporters in a contested election. Violence erupted between these groups. This violence continued after then Prime Minister Putin's efforts last fall to quell the rivalry between these two men, their followers in effect being no longer under their control. Tensions as of April 2000 are still dangerously high and seem to be the object of a campaign by certain media outlets in Moscow (Bitokova 2000) to sow the seeds of conflict.

1.2 This region of the Caucasus is crucial for Russia's continued hegemony in the North Caucasus, both because it lies athwart the proposed western end of the northern pipeline route and because it is home to several peoples of martial heritage who are every bit as truculent and unyielding as the Chechens. If warfare erupts here, then Russia is likely to lose control of the Caucasus altogether. Finally, with the malevolent oligarch Boris Berezovsky (see Lee Wolosky "Putin's Plutocrat Problem," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 79, no. 2, March/April 2000, pp. 18-31), having secured a Duma seat from this region in the December 1999 elections, any observer would have alarm regarding the region's stability.

1.3 The Northwest Caucasus has two features that seem to be contradictory. First, it has never had a trace of a state or state-like structure. Second, despite this lack of apparent organization it was evidently powerful because not only had it remained free of foreign domination for millennia, but it also put up a struggle against Tsarist domination that overshadowed the valiant efforts of the Chechens and Daghestanis. It managed to field resistance to the Russians from roughly 1801 until 1864, (see Paul Henze 1992), fully five years longer than that offered in the Northeast Caucasus by Imam Shamil, who surrendered in 1859. As might be expected an examination of this region will reveal some unusual features and some surprising possibilities for the immediate future.

## 2. Ethnic Simplicity of the Northwest Caucasus

2.1 The Northwest Caucasus is in fact ethnically simple, even though it is an integral part of the Caucasus, which is famed for its myriad peoples and languages. In the plains between the mountains and the Kuban river are found the Circassians, remnants of the dominant population of this region who spoke a language related to Abkhaz and quite distinct from any other. Today they fall within three jurisdictions. Running from west to east they are Adygheya, Karachai-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria (Map 2). All style themselves as “Adygheys,” even though there is a historical division between the Kabardians, who traditionally turned toward Moscow to seek protection from the Krim Khanate, and the rest, who were pro-Ottoman and therefore anti-Russian.

2.2 While some Circassian tribes extended up into the hills, the higher land was traditionally home to the Turkic-speaking Karachais and Malkars (often called Balkar). The Karachais were pro-Ottoman and anti-Russian, whereas the Malkars, for the same reasons as the Kabardians, were pro-Russian. Just to the south of the mountains, along the coast and extending up into the hills were the Ubykhs, who were pro-Ottoman and fiercely anti-Russian. As a small highland group, they were more typical of the populations of upland Georgia or Daghestan. They were transitional between the Circassians and the Abkhaz but considered themselves also to be Adygheys. Along the southern coast and extending up into the mountains were found the Abkhaz, close kinsmen of the Circassians who formed an extension of this cultural zone into what is now considered the South Caucasus. They had a northern branch, usually termed the Abazas, who were pro-Ottoman and anti-Russian. The Abazas are found chiefly in Karachai-Cherkessia with a few in Kabardino-Balkaria.

### 3. State-like Properties of the “Para-State”

3.1 What seems to have prevailed in this zone is a form of social organization which I term a “para-state.” By this I mean a pre-modern state-like entity, but not one that

necessarily evolves into a modern state the way a “pre-state” might be destined to do. This para-state had fifteen fairly homogeneous traits that were in most cases indifferent to the strict ethnic boundaries that prevailed, but in fact formed a zone of coherent “macro-ethnicity” (compare the ethnic theory in Smith 1998, pp. 170-198).

3.2 First, the territory, termed /ade@e%X/ in Circassian, /a%de@aGa/ in Ubykh, /aps\$ne%/ in Abkhaz, /a%bazas@Jta apna%/ was seen by the inhabitants as a diverse but nevertheless natural realm. The Mountain Turks had maintained their nomadic herding traditions and accommodated their grazing needs within this territory without hindrance from the Circassians.

3.3 Second, the region was defined by natural boundaries everywhere except in the east. The boundaries were the Kuban River in the north, the Black Sea in the west, and in the south the Caucasian massif (for the Circassians proper) or Ingur River in the south for the Ubykh and Abkhaz. Only the eastern boundary was fuzzy, where Kabardians ran up against the Iranian-speaking Ossetians.

3.4 Third, the languages, /ade@a%-bze/ (Circassian-tongue), /tWax@e%-bza/ and /a%ps\$wa a-bezs@Wa%/ (Abkhaz its-tongue) were seen as diverse but as contributing to a natural zone of communication and conceptualization. Such a linguistic zone is crucial for state formation (Anderson 1991, pp. 42-43, 134, 145). Only the Turkic speech of the mountain pastoralists set them apart, but various forms of Turkic (Ottoman and Crimean) constituted the linguistic sea in which Circassian and Abkhaz were embedded, so that the Mountain Turks were not seen as a disruption of the language space.

3.5 Fourth, traditions, /ade@é-Xa%bzé/ (Circassian-custom), Abkhazian /(a-mewsta%)-ke%bza/ ((the-work\deed)-custom), lent a strong sense of uniformity to the peoples of the region, one that extended even to the Mountain Turks. These traditions provided a ready store of visible symbols that united all the peoples of the region: dress, dance, respect for women, respect for elders, bravery, folklore, and epics

(the Nart sagas). Curiously, only the music diverged sharply between Circassians, Mountain Turks and Abkhaz.

3.6 Fifth, a sense of nationhood was reflected in the vital area of marriage and family. A Circassian, Ubykh, or Abkhazian could not marry outside the community, /a%de@e/, /s@J-a%w-de@a/, /a%ps\$w-(r)\a/, but could marry freely between the tribes.

3.7 Sixth, social order among the Circassians and Abkhaz also served to create a sense of coherent community. Both peoples had hierarchy societies with princes, nobles, freemen, and slaves or retainers (mostly prisoners of war). Here again the Mountain Turks stood apart, having had only clans.

3.8 Seventh, a common moral order united all groups in a sense of shared values and social etiquette. This order was based upon traditional law, known by the Arabic term of *adat* law. One of its most striking features was that of vendetta (Circassian /Re-sl&e-z@Je%-n/ blood-make-again-inf(itive), 'to draw blood again'; Abkhaz /a-s@Ja-we-ra%/ the-blood-do-inf, Abaza /s@Ja-we%-x-ra/ 'blood-do-again-inf, /s@Ja-x-a-x-ra%/ ' blood-press-at-again-inf, all 'to take blood (again)'; Ubykh /s@Wabz@J/, /gJebGJ/, /gJez@@@W/ all 'vengeance'). Despite its strong moral force and its perceived role as preventing one clan gaining ascendancy over another through sheer slaughter, vendetta in fact lead to continual social chaos and tension.

3.9 Eighth, a degree of economic specialization also minimized inter-ethnic competition and promoted a state-like pattern of resource development and utilization. The Mountain Turks were herders, supplying most of the region with meat and dairy products; the Abkhaz were agriculturalists; the Natukhay and Shapsegh Adyghey tribes, those closest to the coast and the Crimea were traders; the rest were horse breeders and small scale agriculturalists, who engaged also in apiculture and in crafts.

3.10 Ninth, for those with hierarchical societies the actual responsibility for resource management fell to the princes. Economic security was ultimately guaranteed by the

clan or “blood lineage” (Circassian /Re-pq/ blood-frame; Ubykh /-a-pqe%/ blood-frame; Abaza /Ra-p&q&/ (Circassian loan); Abkhaz /a%-s@J+t-ra/ the-blood+trace-kin.suffix = ‘race’).

3.11 Tenth, and quite in contrast to modern Western society, prestige for the individual was not a reflection of wealth. Rather, it depended not only on his or her individual attainments and faithfulness to social norms, but also for men upon the status of his father’s lineage, whether traditional (Circassian /R&é-é-qWé/ (/R&a%qWe/)man-connective-son), or within memory (Circassian /R&e-we%z@e/ man-trace, ‘descendants of a famous man’; Abkhaz /a%b-ye-pa-ra/ father-his-son-kin.suffix). Even the lowest stratum had opportunities for social prestige, largely through the institution of fosterage. The retainers of a princely family might be honored by being chosen to raise the son of a prince. In this way they become fictive family members of the royal lineage. It was an even greater honor if the young prince chose to stay past the age of 12, the age when he was supposed to return to his natural family. Such a prince was termed a “qane” in Circassian, (Circassian /qe-e-n(-e)/ social.horizon-in-remain-in, ‘one who remains’). A family whose foster child became a *qane* was seen to be an object of affection, to have shown moral integrity, and to have entered into a perpetual kinship bond with the noble lord.

3.12 Eleventh, social order was further bolstered by a hierarchy that was observed among the tribes themselves. In some cases the tribe took its name from a famous leader, similar to the lineage phenomenon of the Circassian /R&e-we%z@e/ man-trace, ‘descendants of a famous man’. The best example of this is the Besleney, the dominant Circassians of Karachai-Cherkessia, founded by one Beslen, a prince renowned for his bravery. The Kabardians enjoyed high status because of their greater wealth and sophistication, and because of a reputed link with the Egyptian Mamlukes, who were of Circassian origin. The tiny Ubykhs were also very high, apparently in part for religious reasons and in part because their women were highly skilled at herbal

medicine. By contrast the Natukhay, Shapseghs, and Mountain Turks were low on the local scale because of the lack of hierarchy in their societies. They were seen by the others as socially incomplete or deprived.

3.13 Twelfth, the region was characterized by a common social ethic of a general sort. This was one of strong autocracy blended with extreme individualism (a seeming contradiction by our terms). Social norms were enforced by intense peer pressure, but this also necessitated enough individual autonomy to assert such pressure. In an effort to preserve both personal and clan honor, the individual would cultivate personal reserve, but alternate this with ironic humour or outright mocking if contending with a rival or with a social miscreant. Both men and women could exchange such jibes without regard for gender. What was crucial was that the rebuke had to be measured and appropriate to the misconduct, and not be seen as maligning the target's honor generally. Further, those beneath a prince or noble would, at tribal gatherings, feel free to voice their opinions to their superiors, often with frankness and in some detail, though again taking care to avoid general insults. In both personal rebukes and in group protestations words had to be chosen carefully, lest mortal insult be taken, but social pressure was nevertheless admissible and indeed expected. Thus, this region was characterized by a strictly ordered warrior culture that was also permeated with both democratic individualism and a strong tradition of social participation, usually couched in humour and irony.

3.14 Thirteenth, the very security of this region was based upon this military-like social structure which characterized it. Tribes were organized for battle under their princes or, in the case of the trading tribes and the Mountain Turks, under respected elders. The Circassians elected a paramount battle leader (West Circassian /ps@Je-ma%fé/, Kabardian /ps!e-ma%XWé/, Ubykh /x@Je%-menXWa/, /aH-mans\$Wa%la/, all "prince-exalted\lucky"), whose job was not only to plan overall strategy, but also to apportion the spoils of war. During war vendetta was suspended.

The result was a rigid command structure coupled to an ethic of autonomous and ferocious personal conduct. The mind set for battle was one of cold, calculation coupled with frenzy (again, a seeming contradiction). (Most unusually, this warrior prowess, in comparison with that of other warrior peoples of the past, has been adapted to modern conditions. For example, the late King Hussein of Jordan used a Circassian brigade to drive out PLO radicals in September 1972. They were most effective.)

3.15 Fourteenth, the peoples in this region shared the crucial feature of common enemies, chiefly the Cossacks (from the mid-17th century onwards, see Ure 1999: 103). With the advance of regular Tsarist troops at the end of the 18th century the Russians became a common foe, even for the Kabardians, since Moscow had begun during the 18th century to back Ossetians land claims over those of the Kabardian princes, leading to the voluntary union of Ossetia with Russia in 1776. (This narrowing of its support base in the North Caucasus may have reflected a misguided effort on the part of Moscow to secure the pass to the South Caucasus, which lay in Ossetian lands, at the expense of its long standing relations with the Kabardians.)

3.16 All of these conditions induced state-like behavior over a wide zone of the Northwest Caucasus. The traditions and institutions were strong enough to enable the peoples involved to resist external threats. At the same time, however, any evolution toward a modern state-like form of organization was precluded in part because such a modern state was not needed. There is another factor, however, centralized rule, which is essential for state formation and necessarily imported. The modern nation state, once having emerged in England under local and unique conditions, seems to be a contagion that originated in 18th century England and is still spreading (see Greenfeld, pp. 30-87, 487). The same may be true of the pre-modern state (a "pre-state") form of the "kingdom," for Abkhazia alone in this cultural zone achieved kingdom status, and did so by importation.



#### 4. The Exception, The Kingdom of Abkhazia, a Centralized “Para-State”

4.1 The Kingdom of Abkhazia seems to have existed from the 8th to the 12th centuries CE (Bgazhba 1998: 59-66). Under the Roman Emperor Justinian (527-565 CE) a line of forts was built in the South Caucasus to protect the eastern frontier of the Empire from Persian incursions. This military structure seems to have laid the groundwork for a string of kingdoms to emerge across the South Caucasus, albeit those of Armenia, Georgia, and Alwania (also “Caucasian Albania,” now Azerbaijan) claim to have existed as early as the second century CE in some form. The Kingdom of Abkhazia emerged from this frontier structure in a medieval form, for within two hundred years (737) it is mentioned as having inflicted a shattering defeat upon an Arab army led by Marwan II. King Leon I (of the Armenian Bagration dynasty) emerged, with the support of the Byzantine Emperor Lev the Isaurian (another obscure indigenous people of the region, a name probably based on the Georgian word for ‘archer’) and of King Mir (a Persian name) of Kartli (present day central Georgia), to govern a large region encompassing what is now modern Abkhazia and the territory of the Laz (the northeast shore of present day Turkey around Trabzon).

4.2 His nephew, Leon II, in 788 or 797 became Byzantine governor of this realm. With the help of the Khazars, (a Turkic people who then dominated the Northern Caucasus), he seceded from the Byzantine Empire, which seems to have served as a *resentimentaliste* enemy (compare Greenfeld, pp. 177-180, 371-374), a resented foe or rival who is necessary to state formation. He expanded his realms to incorporate the Kartvelian peoples (Mingrelians and Imeretians) of what is now western Georgia, as well as the Laz who had lived under his uncle. Eventually these South Caucasian holdings came to overshadow the Abkhazian seat itself, so that the fate of this kingdom was to blend in with Georgia, which, ironically from the modern viewpoint, reached its zenith under an Abkhazian dynasty of Armenian origin.

4.3 This kingdom, along with its neighbors in the South Caucasus, succumbed to the

Mongols in the mid-13th century. Abkhazia then reemerges at the 13th-14th century boundary as a principality under the Chachba family (Mingrelian “Sharashia,” Georgian “Shervashidze” [editor’s note 4, p. 277, to Bgazhba]), which then entered into trading relations with the Genoese until 1475. At that point Abkhazia, though still a political entity, came under the sway of the emerging Ottoman Empire. To this day the Abkhazians still have a royal family, the Marshans, who now live in exile in Georgia.

## 5. Failure of the Circassians, Ubykhs, and Mountain Turks to Form a State

5.1 Given the existence of this Abkhazian kingdom in some form down to the present day, the failure of Circassians, Ubykhs, and Mountain Turks to the north to form a state becomes something of a conundrum. A number of features seem to have set the northern reaches of this cultural realm apart from the southern, Abkhazian one, enough so that neither kingdom or principality emerged.

5.2 First, the Circassians and Ubykhs did not have a Byzantine Empire to react against; they seem to have been just far enough away to avoid the imperial dynamics that seem to have triggered state formation in the South Caucasus.

5.3 Second, political propensities were split between the anti-Russian western part and pro-Russian center, though it is unclear how pronounced such a split was or what political forms it may have assumed.

5.4 Third, there was no mighty and lofty Byzantine Empire to trigger *resentiment* (Greenfeld, pp. 15-17), that condition of sharp and sustained envy that seems necessary to trigger the self-scrutiny and the revision of institutions and customs necessary to state formation. The Circassians, Ubykhs, and Mountain Turks seemed to have had many enemies, but no strong ones, none that called into question their way of life. Specifically, they lacked an enemy with a higher culture to emulate and none with an ideology from which to promote changes.

5.5 Fourth, they lacked urban centers, unlike the Abkhaz who had more or less

ordinary urban centers some of which stretched back into antiquity. Many of the villages in the north were strung out along rivers (Kuipers 1956: 511), much like a string of pearls, so that the inhabitants could use the water resources at the same time that they could avoid a concentrated assault on a massed center. These string villages seem to have lacked the social dynamics of more conventional urban settings.

5.6 Fifth, the princes were never able to consolidate power for the very reasons that made them powerful as a people. A civil war to consolidate power, pitting one prince against the others, would have created instability in the whole hierarchy. In effect, the princes needed one another to maintain their positions. Most importantly, external threats were virtually constant, so that no prince could take time to advance his own ambitions. (This is in marked contrast to the isolation of Japan, which permitted prolonged internecine warfare and the eventual emergence of a series of emperors.) The “exalted prince,” the elected war leader (§3.14), seems to have had the chief duties of planning strategy and crucially of apportioning the spoils. In order that he do the latter fairly and without any disruption to the social order that might arise from his favoring his own, such a leader had to be chosen from a lowly clan. He had to lead by valor, by compromise, and by consensus. This position, with its temporary and limited mandate, seems to have been ill suited for establishing an enduring role as paramount leader. (This pattern of lowly origins is still at work today with such successful Caucasian leaders as Vladislav Ardzinba of Abkhazia, who hails from the tiny Shuhh (/s@JeHW/) clan.) In these circumstances, there was also no obvious supreme leader who could be imposed by an outside power, as had been the case with the Abkhazian Leon I under Justinian.

5.7 Sixth, the Kabardians, who claimed descent from returning Circassian Mamlukes, of Egypt enjoyed high rank in the region (§3.12) and might therefore have served as a ruling elite for a state, but they aligned themselves with Moscow (§2.1) and thereby alienated their kin. This occurred at least by the 16th century, with the

marriage of one of their princesses to Ivan the Terrible as one of his wives, Maria Temrukovna, after Anastasia (Henze 1992, p. 72).

5.8 Seventh, the detailed internal structure of the society also militated against the emergence of a paramount leader. While loyalty to princes was a virtue, and ferocity in battle was a glory, the warrior ethic also promoted extreme democratic dynamics which were antithetical to overarching princely ambitions. The princes themselves lacked any internal security component to suppress popular sentiment. The nobles were only a chain of command; they were not enforcers. The chain of command itself was predicated upon broad socially based compliance. Moreover, in times of peace vendetta insured a constant, high level of social tension. (Note both Sheikh Mansur, 18th century, and Imam Shamil, 19th century, banned vendetta in the Eastern Caucasus, seeing in it a social chaos inimical to any higher state-like order (Reynolds 2000, p. 17).)

5.9 Other features also militated against the emergence of a kingdom in this region. Despite the linguistics cover concept of /ade@abze/, the languages were too diverse. Abkhaz may have faced the entirely different Kartvelian family, but political life was immersed in a world of Greek, part of the Byzantine legacy. There was no comparable linguistic matrix for Ubykh, the various dialects of Circassian (at least eight western and two eastern, one of which being Kabardian), and the unrelated Turkic of the mountains.

5.10 The economy was too poor to promote sufficient specialization. If a “threshold principle” (Hobsbawm 1990, pp. 31-32, ) held, then these peoples were simply too small to start up a nation without external help (*ibid.*, p. 102). What economic activity that did exist locally seemed unable to undergo consolidation in the face of regional specialization (mentioned above), which was also in part ethnically based. No coherent external economic relations existed to offer outside help in crossing this threshold, but only trade links with the Genoese (from the late 1200s or early 1300s), along with the Venetians, then the Ottomans from 1475 and the Russians, most of which were

conducted by the two tribes, the Natukhays and Shapseghs, which by virtue of their trading ethos lacked the princely hierarchies that would have enabled them to translate their economic links into political influence.

5.11 Further, dynastic links with the Ottoman Caliph and the Russian Tsar must surely have brought in external influences that would have sought to enhance local rivalries and prevent any consolidation. The Mamluke traditions of military allegiance (note the Circassian Mamlukes of Egypt, c. 1250s - 1450s) themselves would have removed from any arena of nascent unification large numbers of potential warriors who might have served a potential king.

5.12 The northwest realm remained in a state of traditional society with no institutions of culture or learning from which skilled elites might have emerged. The traditionalistic learning in this region was typical of pre- or para-states. There was gender specialization, with women arrogating to themselves medicinal and scientific-like knowledge, and crafts, while men arrogated to themselves martial arts and crafts, and horse-breeding.

5.13 There is only one transient exception to this pattern of para-statehood, and this was imported from Abkhazia. One old map, (unattributed and appearing on the back of old issues of *Adyghe zhwaghwe, The Circassian Star*), shows an Abaza "empire" of central Circassia (an apparent "near miss" on statehood)(Map 3). The dates of this are uncertain, c. 1400-1700). Centering around what is now Karachai-Cherkessia a central domain of the "Low(ow) Adze" is noted (/Lewéw a%-Ze/ older Circassian for 'Army of the Lowow'). This has gone quite unnoticed by scholars, but seems to be a military dominion under the noble Abkhaz family of the Lowow (/Lewéw/). It is best interpreted as an importation and extension of Abkhaz state patterns to the north. This Abaza (northern Abkhaz) state did not incorporate the eastern Kabardians or western, coastal Circassians. It seems to have enjoyed a fleeting existence and to have collapsed without successor, perhaps because of Kabardian ascendancy in the 17th and 18th

centuries.

## 6. The Russian Conquest

6.1 The Russian conquest of this region is best dated from 1801 to 1864 (Henze 1992). I shall not repeat the details of this episode, which strangely are less well known than those further to the east in Chechnia and Daghestan (Gammer 1994; Baddeley 1969), but its results were devastating (Berzeg, 1998; Brooks 1996; 1995). The culture was shattered, both from decimation in warfare and economic collapse. The war devastated the demography of the region. The princes surrendered in January 1864, (Henze 1992, pp. 99-105, especially. p. 105, notes 85, 90, and 93), and a civil war broke out between them and their freemen in February. At this time Tsarist authorities attempted to relocate whole populations to the plains in order to pacify the survivors. When most (80%?) resisted, the authorities expelled them that March, these being primarily the freemen and slaves who had taken up arms against their own nobility. All of the warlike Ubykhs, who had never surrendered, were expelled. The only nation offering any of these people a haven was the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans settled them, after much disease, hardship, and loss of life, around the Empire, some in Cyprus, but also many in Serbia where they were to suppress unrest. There these immigrants saw in the Serbs a familiar, Orthodox enemy, and set about their task with relish. This unsettled the European powers, offering evidence that the Ottomans might still be a strong player on the European stage. Therefore, at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, after the Russo -Turkish War of 1877-78, which was in part a failed attempt on the part of the recently deported Circassians, Ubykhs, and Abkhaz to regain their homeland (Henze 1992, pp. 104-105), most of this diaspora was resettled farther within Ottoman realms as garrison outposts.

6.1 That portion of the social hierarchy which was not destroyed by war with the Russians succumbed to the internecine war of February 1864. The traditional economic

patterns were destroyed. The established security patterns that had prevailed for so long were destroyed. The Circassian region was divided up in the Tsarist period into administrative units mostly centered upon cities: *otdel Ekaterinodarskij*, *otdel Majkopskij*, *otdel Batalpashinkij*, *otdel Pjatigorskij*, *okrug Nal'chikskij*, while the Ubykh and Abkhaz regions became the *gubernija Chernomorskaja*, the *okrug Suxumskij*. In the Soviet period the Circassian region became the domain of three territories with many Circassians nevertheless falling outside of these administrative zones: Adygheya (in the northwest) with Circassians and Cossacks, Karachai-Cherkessia (in the mid north) with Besleney Circassians, Cossacks, Karachais, and Abazas, and Kabardino-Balkaria (east end of northern zone) with Kabardian Circassians, Cossacks, Malkars, a few Abazas. Abkhazia, with Abkhaz, Cossacks, Russians, Mingrelians, and Svans, was in the first decade of Soviet rule a Union Republic, until 1932 when it was subordinated by Stalin to Georgia. The authorities created fictive ethnic divisions (Adyghey, Cherkess, Kabardians, Karachais, and Malkars) to go with the northern administrative divisions. No one, but the Western media when they occasionally report about this region, seems to pay any heed to these divisions except to see in them regional monickers.

## 7. Effects of Modernity `a la Russe

7.1 This conquest of the Northwest Caucasus was the greatest tragedy ever to befall its inhabitants. Nevertheless, the legacy of Russian rule has ironically had some beneficial effects. The occupation created urban centers, which were largely Cossack forts at first. The region was flooded with immigrants, mostly Cossacks, but also others, and yet these remained predominantly an urban population. These centers did undergo industrialization and thus served as economic magnets for the native rural population. In this new urban environment formal schooling emerged along with institutions of culture. Organs of governance were established along with political offices and elites. The early Soviet efforts at *korenizatsija* (establishing ethnic pedigrees

or “rooting”) led to codified local languages, while at the same time the imperial structure imposed a common civic language, Russian. Modern standards of excellence in learning and skill were eventually established and access to the outside world was offered. The price for such access during most of the era was assimilation.

7.2 Toward the end of the Soviet era, however, under Gorbachev the authorities created symbols: flags, anthems, cultural elites, and heroes (Colarusso 1991). Such gestures came, however, after a long period, which stigmatized Circassian, and other native identities. Unwittingly during their rule the Russians created one of the foremost preconditions for the emergence of a modern nation state: a resented enemy.

## 8. Persistent Cultural Obstacles to State Formation

8.1 There remain in this region, however, some persistent cultural obstacles to state formation. First, there is intense rivalry to fill the shadowy slots the old hierarchy left vacant by the turmoil of the war of conquest, not to mention by subsequent Tsarist and Soviet suppression. Standards of achievement are still Russian, specifically Moscow oriented, and this has created tensions between modernity, which is Russian-like, and traditionalism. Further, the authorities have promoted inter-ethnic tensions and these have now reached a serious level. All these aspects have acted as hindrances to the emergence of any aspirations for state formation among the population of this region, native or Cossack.

## 9. Prerequisites for State Formation (without the Threshold Principle)

9.1 Such an array of impediments would seem to be insurmountable, and yet ironically Russian rule has also created an array of preconditions for state formation (ignoring for the moment the threshold principle, that only regions of a minimal economic scale or size can achieve statehood without external help). These preconditions are cities, industry, formal schooling (in literacy, in humanistic pursuits,



and in industrial and intellectual skills), institutions of culture, medical facilities, improved health, a growing population, an agricultural base, resource exploitation, tourism, and organs of governance. There are even modern leaders of considerable stature, though these are Moscow “certified.” The local languages have civic potential, even for union (/ade@a%bze/, /a%ps\$wa abezs@Wa%/), and may be supplemented by Russian. The concept of a local territorial whole (/ade@e%X/, /aps\$ne%y/) has survived. Civic and *adat* law are both viable, that is to say that they are seen as applicable, or as choices for non-native and native individuals, respectively. Among the natives resentment is high of Russia, Cossacks, Ossetians, and Georgians, that is to say of all their neighbors. Even among the Cossacks, who have suffered time and again from Moscow’s distrust and depredations, there is confusion and substantial resentment of Russians proper, especially of those who have come to the region in the last fifty years and who have harboured pretensions to Cossack identity. Security skills exist, especially in the diaspora where Circassians often rise to high levels in the military. Finally, wealth has accumulated to some extent, again especially in some the diaspora communities.

9.2 While these factors alone will not launch a state-formation movement, they are essential to one, and might induce such aspirations among the better educated and disaffected. Surely war in the region will hasten the evolution of such aspirations, but if theories of state formation have any validity at all (see next section), there are enough basics now in place that state formation and the aspirations that drive it would seem almost to be an inexorable prospect for this region.

## 10. Prospects

10.1 An accurate assessment of the prospects for state formation is difficult, in part because we have no complete and proven theory of the emergence of the modern state. We have some notion of necessary conditions, as listed above, but no idea of the

sufficient conditions. What is clear, however, is that Russian destruction of the region has opened the way for modern state formation. No one should be surprised, therefore, if events unfold so as to lead to upheaval and nationalistic aspirations for statehood.

10.2 Some figures in Moscow (see Bitokova 2000), and prime suspicion falls upon Berezovsky (§1.2), appear to think that war in this region is in their interests, whether to erase trails of money laundering, or to sell arms, or to keep understandings between themselves and the military to perpetuate turmoil, or to find another theatre of war for the military that would be more tractable than the Chechen one. The motives are unclear even if the media tactics mentioned by Bitokova are by now all too familiar. The latest pretext for agitation appears to be the hundred odd souls that were repatriated from Kosovo (old Ottoman settlements that escaped the treaty of the Congress of Berlin) to Adygheya. This region, however, may well prove even more volatile and difficult to subdue than Chechnia. Some one in Moscow is tampering with real fire this time and does not seem to know it.

10.3 Should war erupt a nationalist movement would surely emerge among the various peoples of the region. As a rough guess, I would place Moscow's chances at reacting with severe suppression against any such aspirations at 90%. Such suppression would have a number of predictable effects, all of which would militate against Moscow's interest in the region.

10.4 At first nationalist aspirations would be at least trifocal: Cossack, Mountain Turk, and Circassian. These would form shifting coalitions, with the preponderant tendency being for the Circassians to align themselves against the other two, since they feel that they are the dominant people in the region, that it is rightfully "theirs" in some historical and social sense. Internecine strife would undoubtedly erupt, with Russia quick to bring in security forces. The immediate effect of such an action would be not only to entrench such nationalism, but to minimalize local rivalries within the region and, if security measures were long-term, which they would undoubtedly need to be,

then they might even suffice to unify nationalist aspirations against Moscow. Despite ethnic and historical differences the substantial grievances of the region against the center are shared by all. Moscow's actions would then reshape amorphous local resentment into a political agenda, in effect converting it into the political phenomenon of *resentiment*. The resulting *resentiment* would intensify. The aspirations for nationhood would likely shift over imperceptibly, under developing political agendas, into ones for outright statehood, and these of course would become both politicized by the locals and criminalized by Moscow. Repression would make the region vulnerable to radical agendas. Such developments might even tempt an ambitious Moscow Caucasian to become a local hero (recall Shevardnadze in Georgia, Dudaev in Chechnia). The net effect would be to create chronic instability in the whole region while placing a constant and expensive burden on the security organs of the Russian Federation.

10.5 Such turmoil would tempt rival states to penetrate the area clandestinely and would thereby render the region vulnerable to outside influences, some of which might be nominally Moslem and of a radical form. One should recall that according to the ethnically based census of 1989 the Circassian and Abkhaz diasporas in Turkey alone total roughly three and a half million people. Even if mass mobilization is out of the question, such a population would surely supply substantial money and even a significant number of volunteers to aid the homeland. Radical Islam is unlikely in any foreseeable circumstances to play a incisive role in this region, since it is not one where Moslem traditions are deeply entrenched. Such shibboleth-like concerns, however, are beside the point. Local martial traditions are strong enough, stronger than Islamic ones by local admission, to create a veritable cauldron of turmoil into which Russia would be pulled down for a very long time.

10.6 On the other hand, the 10% option to promote state formation would only be palatable to Moscow's political sensibilities if the resulting entity were to meet several

criteria: that it be foremost a unique regional phenomenon, so that no domino effect might ensue; that it be a weak multi-ethnic state; and that its dependency upon the center and upon its neighbors, Ossetia in the North Caucasus and Georgia in the South, be such as to lock it into a regional structure. The resulting entity would serve to stabilize the region (and if it were to include Abkhazia, it would serve to free Georgia of one of its crucial vulnerabilities to Russia). Under the present Russian constitution the formation of such a “modern vassal” state would present serious legal hurdles, but these might be soluble given the apparent drift of Russia back toward authoritarian ways. One extremely important product of such a state would be the promotion of a zone of prosperity in southern Russia by guaranteeing economic resources and markets, and by harnessing local individualism and initiative to the colossal agricultural potential of the region. The other extremely important effect would be the harnessing of powerful political forces, especially nationalism, to the interests of the center.

10.7 There are several aspects of the relationship between such a vassal state and Moscow that might be considered natural. Moscow could guarantee the security of such a small state. It could also provide the economic leverage to assist the new state, even though it might be a potentially prosperous one, to overcome the threshold principle. Such a state would be a steadfast ally of Moscow on the southern boundary, for both economic and security reasons. Third, such a tolerant and enlightened act of state formation would allow Moscow to have cost-effective control of the region at the same time that it minimized its penetration by outside influences and interests. Overall the effect would be to enhance Russian influence in this region.

## 11. Conclusions

11.1 To date, with the exception of Abkhazia, the Northwest Caucasus has been quiescent. Nevertheless, if theories of state formation have any validity at all, the logic of the area and the trends that are emerging bode poorly for continued peace there. If

war erupts, and it now appears that it may well erupt soon, then Russia will likely lose the entire North Caucasus, with the possible exception of North Ossetia, its old bastion and ally, and even this is vulnerable to turmoil with Ingushetia and Georgia. The loss of the entire Caucasus, with or without Ossetia, would unleash sharp recriminations and vast conceptual upheavals in the Russian political self-image. After all, conquest of the Caucasus was seen in the 19th century as a mandate for Moscow to extend Orthodox civilization across the lands of all the other "Tatars" in Central Asia (the Caucasians themselves being termed 'Tatars' in all of Russian literature on the region). Loss of the Caucasus would effectively revoke that mandate. The end result would most likely be a truculent and extremely nationalistic Russia, hostile to the West and bent upon regaining lost glory in a fashion that makes present similar sentiments pale by comparison. The policy thrust of the West, if faced with such a chauvinistic Russia, would of necessity have to shift from one of engagement to one of containment.

11.2 Therefore, despite its obscurity, the Northwest Caucasus deserves close and immediate attention from Western and Russian policy makers. Perhaps in this one instance catastrophe in the Caucasus can be averted before it is unleashed, rather than simply contained and allowed to endure in a state of wretchedness, unmitigated hostility, and unrelieved poverty, as has been the case with the other frozen conflicts of this tragic region.

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Map 1

Traditional Distribution of Peoples in the Northwest Caucasus



Map 2

Present Political Units of the Northwest Caucasus

Map 3

Old Map Showing "Army of the Low(ow)"  
from *Adyghe Zhwaghwe (The Circassian Star)*