

RUSSIA: The Circassians and the Sochi Olympics

SUBJECT: The choice of Sochi for the 2014 winter Olympics has triggered angry protests among the Circassians scattered in the Middle East, Turkey, and elsewhere, and threaten to bring a moral stigma to the games and to Russia.

SIGNIFICANCE: The indigenous peoples of the Northwest Caucasus, located south of the Kuban River, were largely killed or expelled in the course of warfare between them and Tsarist troops in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This large Diaspora has remained invisible and quiescent for nearly 150 years. The choice of Sochi as the site of the 2014 Olympics has caused these peoples to erupt in outrage and to unify around a common cause.

ANALYSIS: The Russian war to conquer the Caucasus was a prominent topic in European and Ottoman circles in the first half of the 19th century, but once Tsarist forces had triumphed the attention of the European powers shifted elsewhere. Those who had survived the Russian conquest of the Caucasus were largely forgotten. The Circassians and their kin, the Ubykhs, collectively called 'Adygheys' or 'Adygs,' and Abazas, collectively called here 'Circassians,' suffered massive casualties and large scale ethnic cleansing. They fled into the Ottoman Empire (see map).



Emigration routes of Circassians

The subsequent difficulties of the Ottomans and their successors served to obscure their fate. Tsarist and later Soviet efforts also obscured these peoples from view. As their Diaspora communities pursued separate destinies, they drifted apart to a limited extent and made accommodations with local habits and customs to varying degrees.

On July 4, 2007, the IOC chose Sochi as the site of the 2014 Winter Olympics. This choice could not have been better designed to bring these scattered peoples together in

outrage. To understand why requires some ethnic history of peoples until now little known in the West.

Historical Background: Relations between the Kabardians (Eastern Circassians) and Moscow were excellent in the 16th century, so much so that a Kabardian princess even wed Ivan the Terrible (reigned 1547 – 1584). As Cossacks settled near the North Caucasus, however, relations between Moscow and the locals began to deteriorate. Peter the Great (1682 – 1725), and later Catherine the Great (1762 – 1796) pursued intrusion into the Caucasus as a matter of policy. Under Alexander I (1801-1825), and Nicholas I (reigned 1825-1855) the campaign in the Caucasus became a full blown imperial war of conquest, concluded only during the reign of Alexander II (1855 – 81).



Circassian warrior

The Crimean War, 1853-1856, caused diversion of Russian forces away from the Caucasus theater, but at its conclusion Russian efforts in the Caucasus intensified. This is where Sochi and Krasnaya Polyana, the mountain venues for the Olympics, enter the history.

In the course of the war various Circassian tribes had been conquered or had capitulated. These faced a choice of either forced relocation to areas north of the Kuban or immigration into the Ottoman Empire. By 1861 the sole remaining tribes that were still resisting were the Shapsugh (or Shapsegh), the Ubykh, and a portion of the Abadzekh. The Ubykh, the most warlike and prestigious of the tribes, convened a council at its centre of Sochi, Ubykh for 'seaside.' There they proclaimed a united political domain with unified laws and 13 divisions, one for each tribe, or what was then left of such. The Tsarist forces subsequently captured this village and used it as a coordinating centre. On March 21 1864 (N.S.) four armies converged on Krasnaya Polyana, ('Atkhvaj in Circassian), and proclaimed victory, both of a cessation in large scale hostilities, and also in ethnic cleansing.

Aftermath: The War in the Caucasus was prolonged and brutal, but the Circassians seem to have suffered the greatest degree of casualties and depredations. The size of the original population and the number of casualties are a matter of conjecture, but reasonable estimates centre about an original population of two million, including the Abkhaz. An earlier emigration of 1859 saw roughly 200,000 leave. That of 1864 forced 500,000 into the Ottoman realms, half of whom seemed to have died en route. Those relocated within Russia amounted to between 120 – 150,000 people. Those left in the Caucasus itself amounted to no more than 90,000. More than 1 million seem to have been killed in the course of the war.

Whatever the actual numbers, the loss of life was devastating. Most scholars stop short of using 'genocide' for this catastrophe, but most note that Tsarist actions were new within Russian tradition. Circassian territory was subsequently divided into four republics inhabited by officially distinct peoples: Adygheya, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia, and the short lived Shapsughia. The Diaspora lives in, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, and Turkey with perhaps 3.5 million. Smaller communities can be found in Europe, and North America.

Circassian grievance: During the Soviet era the diaspora community lacked significant contact with its homeland. Cultural stress was heavy and language retention was low. The Ubykh have nearly lost their distinctive language and have acquired a symbolic status as "extinct." The others fear their fate and so speak of 'genocide.' Unquestionably, these people are in danger of vanishing.

Political effects of Sochi upon the diaspora: With the advent of the internet, the Circassians have emerged with a virtual identity and unity. A World Circassian Association has also emerged and has held annual meetings, some in the Caucasus itself. Despite such developments, Circassian politics has lacked cohesion. The decision of the IOC has changed all this irrevocably. The term genocide was first used by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization in 1997 in an appeal to Russia on behalf of the Circassians. Now it is used routinely, even by groups within the Caucasus, despite a range of opinion as to what to call their disaster. Petitions to recognize a Circassian genocide have been put before the Duma in 2005, before the European

Parliament, 2006, and before the Georgian Parliament, March 20, 2010. The Circassians have joined the ranks of others in seeking recognition of their grievances.

Political effects of Sochi upon Russia: Sochi and Krasnaya Polyana are in one of the least stable security zones on earth. Now the Russians have handed the Circassians a high platform on which to present their history and suffering. First reactions are not encouraging: a mezzo soprano in a Circassian gown appeared at the closing ceremonies of the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver, while the FSB has already suggested that opposing the Sochi games is by definition terrorism. The first gesture is tokenism; the second is counterproductive.

Russia fails to grasp that the majority of Circassians are beyond their control, and also computer savvy. In most cases the Circassians have risen to prominent positions in their host countries, so that these are unlikely to suppress them for Russia's sake.

Potential developments and solutions: One proposal coming from the Circassian Association is to stage parallel Circassian or Caucasian games. This seems to meet some sense of justice, but fails to address the deeper issues that have now been awakened. Other proposals echo those of the UNPO in 1997 for Russia to acknowledge the disaster that befell the Circassians, something Boris Yeltsin did in 1991 while stopping short of accepting blame, to grant dual citizenship, and to ensure the right of return. Russia is likely to attempt to discredit, block, or otherwise deny all Circassian claims and to spurn

all overtures. This could provoke a few to acts of terrorism. The Circassian cause would then be discredited, but Russia would face deteriorating security.

CONCLUSION: The Circassians have been galvanized into action. Sochi was a seat of their culture and 2014 marks the 150th anniversary of their expulsion. With wisdom and will this emerging crisis might be turned to mutual benefit. The Circassian's must drop term 'genocide.' The Russian's must tolerate peaceful opposition to the games. The Russians have the means to sustain Circassian language and culture. The Circassian Diaspora has the means to bring capital and business resources to the Caucasus. With such complementary strengths, Russia and the Diaspora should be able to build a strong, and long lasting relationship.