

Welcome, Not Welcome

The North Caucasian Diaspora's Attempted Return to Russia since the 1960s

VLADIMIR HAMED-TROYANSKY

In 1968, a Jordanian man, 'Abbas Mirza, visited Kabardino-Balkaria, a mountainous autonomous republic in Soviet Russia. He was of Kabardian (eastern Circassian) descent, and his ancestors had emigrated to the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century. He was one of the first overseas Circassians and, indeed, any foreigners who were allowed to enter the North Caucasus since the onset of Soviet rule. Soviet authorities invited his family to visit Kabardino-Balkaria to see for themselves the progress that had been achieved under communism. Mirza did not have the best time on his trip. At some point during the carefully curated Soviet tour, he started asking questions about “the Communists”: “What kind of rights do they have in the Soviet state? Do party members and nonmembers have a similar lifestyle? Are there any Communists who believe in God? What happens to religious people in this country? Do children of party members and of nonmembers get along?”¹ Mirza did not receive satisfying answers to his questions. He was then relieved of his cash when someone stole the equivalent of 800 USD in Soviet, Turkish, Syrian, and Jordanian currency, which the man had brought with him. At the end of his less than stellar trip, 'Abbas Mirza told the Soviet organizers: “I regret deeply that I traveled

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¹ Tsentr dokumentatsii noveishei istorii Kabardino-Balkarskoi Respubliki, Nalchik, Russia (TsDNI KBR) f. R-865, op. 1, d. 33, l. 3 (11 July 1968).

[to the Caucasus].... What will I tell people in Amman? I will, first of all, tell them that people there are kind, cheerful, hard-working, hospitable, and achieve the seemingly impossible, but they drink a lot, there are no mosques, and religion is relegated to society's margins.... After all the good and bad that we saw, I doubt that my children and I would ever want to come here again."²

Mirza's disappointing trip to the Caucasus rests on two historical developments. First, since the 1860s, North Caucasian Muslims—including Circassians, Chechens, Ingush, Ossetians, Balkars, Karachays, and others—lived not only in the Caucasus but throughout the Middle East. About a million North Caucasians had left tsarist Russia for the Ottoman Empire.³ A century later, several million of their descendants were citizens of Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Israel. Most of them learned Turkish or Arabic, while preserving their native languages in their villages. Second, in the late 1960s, the Soviet government started quietly reaching out to the North Caucasian diaspora with the hope of spreading Soviet influence to the Middle East. The North Caucasian diaspora had had little communication with the homeland since World War I. At the height of the Cold War, North Caucasians in the Middle East were allowed to reestablish ties with the Caucasus, under the watchful eye of the Soviet government.

This article examines a transnational relationship between the North Caucasian diaspora in the Middle East and its homeland within Russia since the 1960s. It focuses, first, on Soviet-sponsored tours to the Soviet Caucasus for North Caucasian activists from Jordan, Syria, and Turkey and, second, on the diaspora's efforts to repatriate to the Caucasus under Soviet and Russian rule. I argue that the Soviet government's outreach to the North Caucasian diaspora fell short of diasporic activists' expectations, disappointed with the realities of life under communism and the Soviet government's opposition to repatriation. Yet this limited engagement electrified an entire generation of North Caucasian activists in the Middle East and paved the way for more assertive transnational Circassian activism and calls for repatriation after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet government's engagement with overseas diasporas of some of its constituent Muslim nations offers a new angle on global Soviet history

² Ibid., I. 6 (11 July 1968).

³ On the emigration of North Caucasians, see Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, "Imperial Refuge: Resettlement of Muslims from Russia in the Ottoman Empire, 1860–1914" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2018); David C. Cuthell, "The Circassian Sürgün," *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2003): 139–68; and Abdullah Saydam, *Kırım ve Kafkas Göçleri, 1856–1876* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1997).

at the height of the Cold War. The Kremlin's relationship with emigrants from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, especially their western regions, was fraught with tension. Soviet authorities regarded those who left the motherland and refused to repatriate as traitors, while many emigrants rejected the legitimacy of Soviet rule in their homelands. The Soviet government's relationship with an older, 19th-century diaspora of North Caucasians in the Middle East was of a different kind: a more benign and carefully orchestrated affair, through the mediation of republican-level Communists. It heralded the Soviet government's deployment of soft cultural power in the Middle East, capitalizing on the diaspora's devotion to its homeland. During the Cold War, Moscow had been steadily building alliances in the Arab world, with Egypt, Syria, and Iraq firmly in the Soviet camp by the mid-1960s. The Arab-Israeli War of 1967, which resulted in Israel's six-day defeat of the Soviet-backed Arab coalition, marked a moment of crisis in Soviet diplomacy, after which the Kremlin recommitted its attention and resources to rebuild its influence in the region.⁴ The rapprochement with the North Caucasian diaspora gathered pace shortly afterwards, as the Soviet government attempted to court a small but influential constituency in the Arab Levant and Turkey to shore up its positions in the Middle East.

This article further contends that North Caucasian repatriation has been championed by the diaspora, not the state. Repatriation stalled because the power to make decisions on immigration rested with top-level authorities in the federative structure of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Republican-level authorities in the North Caucasus generally favored the repatriation of their co-ethnic diasporas, especially in Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygea, and Karachay-Cherkessia since the early 1990s. The central government, however, consistently opposed the right to North Caucasian repatriation, a policy that transcended both the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.⁵

⁴ On Soviet policies in the Middle East, see Mohamed Heikal, *The Sphinx and the Commissar: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Influence in the Middle East* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East: From World War II to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Alexey Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁵ On the Circassian and Abkhazian return to the Caucasus since the 1990s, see Seteny Shami, "Circassian Encounters: The Self as Other and the Production of the Homeland in the North Caucasus," *Development and Change* 29, 4 (1998): 617–46; Shami, "Prehistories of Globalization: Circassian Identity in Motion," *Public Culture* 12, 1 (2000): 177–204; Chen Bram, "Circassian Re-Immigration to the Caucasus," in *Roots and Routes: Ethnicity and Migration in Global Perspective*, ed. Shalva Weil (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999), 205–22; Jade Cemre Erciyes, "Return Migration to the Caucasus: The Adyge-Abkhaz Diaspora(s),

The North Caucasian diaspora's relationship with the Caucasus brings closer modern histories of Russia and the Middle East and extends the timeline of late imperial migrations. In recent years, historians have demonstrated remarkable mobility between the Russian and the Ottoman empires. Thousands of pilgrims, slaves, prisoners of war, intellectuals, and refugees traversed the domains of the tsar and the sultan.⁶ Migration and communication across the border seemingly dissipated after World War I, and we know little of the connections that former Russian subjects in the Middle East preserved with their homelands in the Soviet and post-Soviet worlds. Rigorous nation building and national history writing in the 20th century had obscured transnational histories of migrants and their descendants. This article explores the afterlives of imperial-era migrations, when the Ottoman and Romanov empires were both long gone and the refugee diaspora negotiated the terms of its relationship with the Caucasus.

Emigration from the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire, 1850s–1914

Mass migrations of Caucasus Muslims to the Ottoman Empire began in the late 1850s during Russia's military campaign against autonomous Muslim communities living on the northern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains. The conflict is known in Russian historiography as the Caucasus War (1817–64) and sometimes described within the Circassian diaspora as the Russo-Circassian War (1763–1864). In the final stages of the war, the Russian military conducted an ethnic cleansing of western Circassians to solidify Russia's control over the strategic part of the Black Sea coast and to complete the conquest of the Caucasus.⁷ By the end of the war in

Transnationalism and Life after Return" (PhD diss., University of Sussex, 2014); and Anzor V. Kushkhabiev, *Problemy repatriatsii zarubezhnykh cherkesov: Istoriia, politika, sotsial'naia praktika* (Nalchik: Kabardino-Balkarskii nauchnyi tsentr Rossiiskoi akademii nauk [KBNTs RAN], 2013).

⁶ On Muslim mobility between the Russian and Ottoman empires, see Lâle Can, *Spiritual Subjects: Central Asian Pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the End of Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020); Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024); Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); James H. Meyer, *Turks across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Will Smiley, *From Slaves to Prisoners of War: The Ottoman Empire, Russia, and International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁷ Peter Holquist, "To Count, to Extract, to Exterminate: Population Statistics and Population Politics in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia," in *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, ed. Terry Martin and Ronald Grigor Suny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111–44; Willis Brooks, "The Politics of the Conquest of the Caucasus, 1855–1864," *Nationalities Papers* 24, 4 (1996): 649–60.

1864, about half a million western Circassians were either expelled, or were prompted to emigrate, to the Ottoman Empire. About 90 percent of the indigenous Circassian population had left the Caucasus.⁸ Since 1864, the North Caucasus region has been part of the Russian Empire, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), or the Russian Federation.

Emigration from the Caucasus proceeded through the end of tsarist rule. Several hundred thousand Kabardians, Abkhazians, Karachays, Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Ossetians, Avars, Dargins, and Kumyks left Russia for the Ottoman Empire. Many were pushed out by tsarist land reforms, an extension of the “peasants’ reform” of 1861 in Russia proper, which had transformed land tenure and ownership and phased out slavery throughout the Caucasus in the 1860s.⁹ Many Muslim village communities had lost their previously communally held land or were forced to relocate from the mountains to low-lying areas.¹⁰ Others left because they perceived Russian rule as illegitimate and an assault on their religious freedoms. Many Caucasus Muslims emigrated after the failed uprisings against tsarist governance. In 1865, 23,057 Muslims, primarily Chechens, left for the Ottoman Empire after the revolt of 1864, following the imprisonment of the Qadiri Sufi shaykh Kunta Hajji.¹¹ In 1867, 19,342 Abkhazians fled after the uprising of 1866 against heavy taxation and the abolition of the Principality of Abkhazia.¹² In 1877, a series of revolts broke out in the Caucasus in support of the Ottoman Empire in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78, which were suppressed by the Russian government and led to the emigration of 30,000–50,000 Abkhazians and smaller groups of Chechens

⁸ The western Circassian population in the Caucasus numbered around 571,000 in 1835, 52,100 in 1867, 45,100 in 1882, and 38,300 in 1897 (Vladimir M. Kabuzan, *Naselenie Severnogo Kavkaza v XIX–XX vekakh: Etnostatisticheskoe issledovanie* [St. Petersburg: BLITZ, 1996], 173, 198–99, 202–4).

⁹ Liubov Kurtynova-D’Herlughan, *The Tsar’s Abolitionists: The Slave Trade in the Caucasus and Its Suppression* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Tugan Kh. Kumykov, *Sotsial’no-ekonomicheskie otnošenii i otmena krepostnogo prava v Kabarde i Balkarii (1800–1869 gg.)* (Nalchik: Kabardino-Balkarskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1959).

¹⁰ On Russian land reforms in the Caucasus, see Vladimir O. Bobrovnikov and Irina L. Babich, *Severnyi Kavkaz v sostave Rossiiskoi imperii* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2007), 211–28.

¹¹ Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, “Population Transfer: Negotiating the Resettlement of Chechen Refugees in the Ottoman Empire (1865, 1870),” in *Russian-Arab Worlds: A Documentary History*, ed. Eileen Kane, Masha Kirasirova, and Margaret Litvin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 60–68. For published sources, see Grigorii A. Dzagurov, ed., *Pereselenie gortsev v Turtsiiu: Materialy po istorii gorskikh narodov* (Rostov-on-Don: Sevskavkniga, 1925), 7–148.

¹² Georgii A. Dzidzariia, *Makhadzhirstvo i problemy istorii Abkhazii XIX stoletia* (Sukhumi: Alashara, 1982), 278–95.

and Dagestanis.¹³ Overall, between the late 1850s and World War I, about a million Muslims from the North Caucasus left Russia for the Ottoman Empire.¹⁴

The Ottoman government maintained an open-door policy for all incoming Muslim refugees from Russia. It resettled North Caucasian Muslims throughout the empire: from Kosovo in the west through the eastern Balkans, Anatolia, and Kurdistan to Iraq and Transjordan in the east. During the peak of Circassian expulsions in 1863–64, about half of the refugees settled in Anatolia and half in the Balkans. After the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78, all North Caucasians had been expelled from newly independent Romania and Serbia and autonomous Bulgaria and had been resettled by the Ottoman government, for the second time, in Anatolia and the Levant. Circassians from the Balkans, who had become “double refugees” within a single generation, founded new villages, including Amman, which is now the capital of Jordan and the largest city in the Levant.¹⁵ Today the Circassian diaspora in Turkey is estimated at between two and three million people and is the second largest non-Turkish minority, after the Kurds. Up to 100,000 Circassians live in Syria, 30,000 in Jordan, and 4,000 in Israel.¹⁶ Smaller communities of Chechens, Abkhazians, and other North Caucasians reside in Turkey, the Levant, and Iraq.

In 1861, the Russian military instituted a ban on the return of North Caucasian refugees from the Ottoman Empire. Russian consulates rejected Muslims’ petitions to return and would not issue visas to visit the Caucasus.¹⁷ In internal correspondence, tsarist authorities painted returnees from the Ottoman Empire as either “vagabonds,” resettling whom would drain the imperial treasury, or Muslim “fanatics,” who had been disloyal to the Russian tsar and could not be trusted again.¹⁸ The official justification for the ban was that North Caucasian refugees’ lands

¹³ Ibid., 356–80.

¹⁴ For overviews of demographic estimates, see Austin Jersild, *Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845–1917* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 25–27, 171–72n102.

¹⁵ Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, “Circassian Refugees and the Making of Amman, 1878–1914,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, 4 (2017): 605–23.

¹⁶ Zeynel Abidin Besleney, *The Circassian Diaspora in Turkey: A Political History* (London: Routledge, 2014), 31–32.

¹⁷ Tugan Kh. Kumykov, *Problemy Kavkazskoi voiny i vyselenie cherkesov v predely Osmanskoi imperii, 20–70e gg. XIX v.: Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov*, 2 vols. (Nalchik: Elbrus, 2001–3), 1:124–29.

¹⁸ Sakartvelos sakhelmtsipo saistorio arkivi (National Historical Archive of Georgia, SSSA) f. 545, op. 1, d. 2836, ll. 2–5 (7 September 1870); Kumykov, *Problemy Kavkazskoi voiny*, 1:123 (19 May 1861), 2:72–73 (6 June 1861).

had already been distributed among their fellow indigenous Muslim communities, Cossack troops, or Slavic immigrants, and returnees had nowhere to return.¹⁹ The ban on the North Caucasians' return persisted through the end of tsarist rule and, for all intents and purposes, survived beyond the Bolshevik revolution.

Return migration is criminalized when a state to which displaced communities wish to return does not wish to readmit them. It usually occurs when returnees are an ethnic or religious minority and their homeland is occupied. The most common reasoning for bans on return is ideological, as the government deems prospective returnees undesirable for its project of state building or nation making. Bans are often justified in legal terms, holding the returnees' citizenship or terms of their departure as grounds to deny admission and repatriation. The Russian government effectively denaturalized North Caucasians who had left the Russian Empire. Tsarist authorities assumed that Muslims attempting to reenter the Caucasus from the Ottoman side had already become Ottoman subjects, with the burden of proving otherwise resting on the returnee.²⁰ According to imperial Russia's penal code, entering the subjecthood of another state was punished by the "eternal expulsion from the state's domains," and, on these grounds, apprehended returnees were usually deported.²¹ Many North Caucasians returned in secret by crossing the Ottoman-Russian border without authorization from either government. While Russian authorities deported most returnees, they allowed exceptions when the scope of unauthorized return was too large for the government to handle. For example, up to 15,000 Abkhazians, or about a fifth of the entire population, returned to Abkhazia between 1878 and 1881.²² Overall, up to 40,000 North Caucasian Muslims returned and were readmitted to the Caucasus by World War I.²³

After the collapse of the Russian and Ottoman empires, migration of North Caucasians across the Soviet-Turkish border subsided. In the interwar era, North Caucasian transborder identities became a liability. In the 1930s, the Soviet government unleashed repressions against several ethnic groups, whose kin lived outside of the Soviet Union, including Poles,

¹⁹ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv (RGVIA) f. 38, op. 7, d. 382, ll. 148–151 ob. (29 May 1862); SSSA f. 416, op. 3, d. 1095, l. 1 (2 October 1863).

²⁰ Kumykov, *Problemy Kavkazskoi voiny*, 1:124–29.

²¹ Russia's Penal Code of 1845, art. 354; Penal Code of 1885, art. 325.

²² Dzidzariia, *Makhadzhirovo*, 381–406.

²³ On Muslim return migration to tsarist Russia, see Hamed-Troyansky, "Imperial Refuge," 379–439, estimate on 429; and James H. Meyer, "Immigration, Return, and the Politics of Citizenship: Russian Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, 1860–1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, 1 (2007): 15–32.

Germans, Koreans, and Finns. In the age of Stalin's paranoia about internal enemies and saboteurs, North Caucasian families had to cut off all ties with their relatives abroad. Meanwhile, on the Turkish side of the border, the new government in Ankara all but outlawed non-Turkish Muslim identities and closed all North Caucasian organizations and publications in 1923.²⁴ Turkish nationalists referred to Turkey's North Caucasian citizens as "Caucasian Turks." Until the 1950s, North Caucasians could not openly express their non-Turkish identities, including wearing national costumes or speaking their native languages in public.²⁵ Neither Soviet nor Turkish authorities allowed cross-border family visits and correspondence for North Caucasians. The period between 1923 and the 1950s, marked by repression, left few crumbs to trace transnational North Caucasian activities. Diasporic accounts confirm that, in this period, North Caucasians in the Middle East lost whatever contacts had remained with their families in the Caucasus.²⁶

Welcome to the Soviet Caucasus, 1965–1991

In the 1960s, the Middle East emerged as a primary arena for the Cold War. After decades of suppressing mobility and communication across the Caucasus borders, Soviet authorities reasoned that the vast North Caucasian diaspora could help them extend Soviet influence in the Middle East. The Kremlin's relationship with diasporas of the former Russian Empire and the Soviet Union was notoriously difficult. During the inter-war era, White Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, and North Caucasian exiles in Europe emerged among the strongest anti-Soviet voices, damaging the Soviet image in the West. During World War II, many Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, and Ukrainians fled their homelands occupied by the Red Army. Many of them were forcibly repatriated to the Soviet Union, while others spent long years in displaced persons camps in Germany,

²⁴ On the complex relationship between the Circassian diaspora and early Turkish nationalists, see Ryan Gingeras, "Notorious Subjects, Invisible Citizens: North Caucasian Resistance to the Turkish National Movement in Northwestern Anatolia, 1919–23," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40, 1 (2008): 89–108; and Caner Yelbaşı, "Exile, Resistance and Deportation: Circassian Opposition to the Kemalists in the South Marmara in 1922–1923," *Middle Eastern Studies* 54, 6 (2018): 936–47.

²⁵ On Circassians in Turkey, see Besleney, *Circassian Diaspora*; Caner Yelbaşı, *The Circassians of Turkey: War, Violence and Nationalism from the Ottomans to Atatürk* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2019); and Ayhan Kaya, *Türkiye'de Çerkesler: Diasporada Geleceğin Yeniden İcadı* (Istanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2011).

²⁶ Interview with D. A. Sh. and H. A. (Amman, 20 August 2014); Setenay Nil Doğan, "Formations of Diaspora Nationalism: The Case of Circassians in Turkey" (PhD diss., Sabancı University, 2009), 188–91.

Austria, and Italy, refusing to return under Soviet rule.²⁷ In 1955, the Soviet government founded the Committee for the Return to the Motherland in East Berlin to propagandize repatriation for eastern European exiles. In 1963, it was reestablished in Moscow as the Committee for Cultural Relations with Compatriots Abroad, reorganized again and better known since 1975 as Rodina (Russian: Motherland). This organization opened a branch in Kabardino-Balkaria in 1966. Shortly afterwards, the Rodina association reached out to Circassian organizations in Syria and Jordan and prominent members of the Circassian diaspora in Lebanon, Turkey, Kuwait, West Germany, and France, inviting them to visit the Caucasus.²⁸ The Rodina office in Kabardino-Balkaria's capital city of Nalchik would remain the keystone of the Soviet Union's engagement with the Circassian diaspora in the Middle East.

Between 1967 and 1970, the first delegates from Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and West Germany visited Kabardino-Balkaria. Many visitors were activists in North Caucasian diasporic organizations and, if not always ardent Communists, often well disposed to the Soviet Union. Upon arrival, foreign delegations met their Communist Party-vetted guides and embarked on preplanned tours, jam-packed with such ideological delights as visits to new industrial plants, textile workshops, clinics, schools, residential neighborhoods, and a cheese factory in Nalchik.²⁹ Foreign visitors were expected to marvel at the technological progress and social equality achieved by North Caucasian populations through the genius of communism. Soviet authorities hoped that foreign North Caucasians would carry this message home and become cultural agents of the Soviet regime in Damascus, Amman, and elsewhere.³⁰

Tours for the North Caucasian diaspora were part of Soviet cultural diplomacy toward revolutionaries, intellectuals, and artists in the Global

²⁷ Seth Bernstein, *Return to the Motherland: Displaced Soviets in World War II and the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023); Mark R. Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta: Soviet Refugees and America's Role in Their Repatriation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Julius Epstein, *Operation Keelhaul: The Story of Forced Repatriation from 1944 to the Present* (Old Greenwich, CT: Devin-Adair, 1974); Anna Holian, *Between National Socialism and Soviet Communism: DPs in Postwar Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

²⁸ TsDNI KBR f. R-865, op. 1, d. 7 (1966), d. 21 (1968); Anzor V. Kushkhabiev, "Sotrudnichestvo Kabardino-Balkarskogo otdeleniia Sovetskogo komiteta po kul'turnym sviaziam s sootchestvennikami za rubezhom s zarubezhnymi cherkesskimi diasporami v epokhu sotsializma (1966–1991)," *Kavkazologiya*, no. 2 (2022): 127–47, here 132.

²⁹ TsDNI KBR f. R-865, op. 1, d. 21, 25, 33 (1968–69).

³⁰ TsDNI KBR f. R-865, op. 1, d. 42 (5 January–12 August 1869), d. 47 (30 April–6 October 1869).

South.³¹ Its most prominent agent was the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee, founded in 1955 to support global liberation movements and build alliances with anticolonial movements and postcolonial states that would come to form the Non-Aligned Movement.³² Soviet authorities started including the capitals of their “Muslim” republics in Central Asia and the South Caucasus—particularly Tashkent, Dushanbe, and Baku—as destinations for delegates from Muslim-majority countries. Visits to the southern republics of the Soviet Union were meant to impress upon foreign visitors that the Soviet model of industrial and social progress was compatible with Islam, as well as to counter accusations of Russian colonialism in the Muslim world.³³ Tours for foreign North Caucasians followed the same ideological matrix but drew on a less developed infrastructure. The North Caucasus remained off limits to foreign visitors throughout the Soviet era, and activists from the North Caucasian diaspora were among few foreigners who received permission to enter.

The first North Caucasian delegations came from the Arab Levant, and most of their members spoke positively about their experiences upon their return, or, at least, so they reported back to Nalchik and Moscow. They commonly noted that North Caucasians in Syria and Jordan knew little of the Soviet Union and feared communism, and that they themselves were impressed by Soviet factories and hospitals, free university tuition, and how “free” North Caucasian women were.³⁴ For many descendants of refugees, who had been expelled and barred from returning to the Caucasus since the 19th century, visits to the Caucasus were deeply personal. In 1969, Jawdat Khatib Shupash, representing Jordan’s Circassian Charity Association, brought from Kabardino-Balkaria to Amman six bottles of

³¹ On foreign visits to the Soviet Union, see Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Alexander Hazanov, “Porous Empire: Foreign Visitors and the Post-Stalin Soviet State” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2016); Eva Oberloskamp, *Fremde neue Welten: Reisen deutscher und französischer Linksinтеллектуeller in die Sowjetunion, 1917–1939* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2011); Matthias Heeke, *Reisen zu den Sowjets: Der ausländische Tourismus in Russland, 1921–1941* (Münster: Lit, 2003); and Jean-François Fayet, “La VOKS: La société pour les échanges culturels entre l’URSS et l’étranger,” *Relations internationales*, no. 114/115 (2003): 411–23.

³² Philipp Casula, “The Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee and Soviet Perceptions of the Middle East during Late Socialism,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 59, 4 (2018): 499–520.

³³ Masha Kirasirova, “Sons of Muslims’ in Moscow: Soviet Central Asian Mediators to the Foreign East, 1955–1962,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 4 (2011): 106–32, here 107; on cultural diplomacy toward the Muslim world, see also James Pickett, “Soviet Civilization through a Persian Lens: Iranian Intellectuals, Cultural Diplomacy, and Socialist Modernity, 1941–55,” *Iranian Studies* 48, 5 (2015): 805–26.

³⁴ TsDNI KBR f. R-865, op. 1, dd. 42, 47 (1969).

the signature “Nalchik” brand mineral water, two kilograms of Kabardino-Balkarian soil, and corn, as a symbolic statement that the diaspora held sacred its homeland’s waters, land, and all that grew on it.³⁵

News of the gradual opening of the Caucasus to diasporic North Caucasians slowly spread through the Middle East, with many requests to visit the homeland submitted to Soviet embassies. Not everyone understood the process of visiting a state that was highly restrictive to foreign tourists. One young Circassian man from Kuwait wrote to the Soviet authorities, in English, requesting they find him a sponsor so he could visit Kabardino-Balkaria.³⁶ The invitations to the Soviet Union were made by the Soviet government, through the Rodina association, and never by private Soviet citizens. By and large, Soviet authorities prevented visitors from interacting with Soviet citizenry outside of their preplanned itineraries and rarely approved the visitors’ requests to meet with their long-lost families or visit their ancestral villages.³⁷

Not everyone was impressed with how the Soviet government ruled their homeland. Upon their return to Amman, several Jordanians criticized the Soviet government and allegedly told their fellow Circassians that the Russians owned everything in the Caucasus.³⁸ Soviet authorities knew of this because pro-Soviet Jordanian Circassians reported on their “ungrateful” co-nationals who dared to engage in what they perceived as “anti-Soviet propaganda.”³⁹

The North Caucasus, to which the Soviet government invited diasporic dignitaries from the Middle East, had a convoluted political geography, steeped in political grievances and trauma. By the 1960s, the region held as many as four autonomous Soviet Socialist republics (ASSRs)—Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Dagestan, and the Chechen-Ingush ASSR within the RSFSR. The autonomies within the Soviet Union were granted on the basis of ethnicity. In the North Caucasus, several major ethnic groups were clustered together within the same unit or split into different ones. The Adyghe-speaking people, or Circassians, had resided within three Soviet administrative units: the Kabardino-Balkarian ASSR and the autonomous oblasts (AOs) of Adygea (within Krasnodar Krai)

³⁵ Anastasiia A. Ganich, *Cherkesy v Iordanii: Osobennosti istoricheskogo i etnokul'turnogo razvitiia* (Moscow: Institut stran Azii i Afriki Moskovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta [ISAA MGU], 2007), 156.

³⁶ TsDNI KBR f. R-865, op. 1, d. 42 (1969).

³⁷ Doğan, “Formations of Diaspora Nationalism,” 197–201; Erciyas, “Return Migration to the Caucasus,” 34.

³⁸ TsDNI KBR f. R-865, op. 1, d. 26 (7 June–6 November 1968).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, op. 1, d. 43 (11 May 1969).



The diasporic newspaper *Kamçı* (Whip) introducing the administrative geography of the Soviet North Caucasus (plus Abkhazia and South Ossetia) to Turkey's North Caucasians, 1970

and Karachay-Cherkessia (within Stavropol Krai). Adygea had an ethnic Russian majority. Circassians shared their other two autonomous units with Turkic communities, Balkars and Karachays—both of which had been deported to Central Asia during World War II, alongside Chechens and Ingush, under trumped-up charges of collaboration with Nazi Germany.⁴⁰ Only in 1957 were they allowed to return to the Caucasus and share their autonomous units with Circassians. To make things more complicated, Soviet authorities designated the Circassian people as four distinct “nationalities”: Kabardians, Adyghe, Cherkess, and Shapsugh, with two state-sponsored languages, Kabardian-Cherkess (eastern Circassian) and Adyghe (western Circassian). Soviet authorities intentionally kept Circassians apart through ethnographic categories, whereas dispersed Circassian settlement and the politics of local communist parties shaped the region's fluctuating internal borders and multitier autonomies.⁴¹

⁴⁰ On deportations from the Caucasus, see Jeronim Perović, *From Conquest to Deportation: The North Caucasus under Russian Rule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Jeffrey Burds, “The Soviet War against ‘Fifth Columnists’: The Case of Chechnya, 1942–4,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, 2 (2007): 267–314.

⁴¹ On nationalities policy in the Soviet Union, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,

The intricacies of Soviet governance in the Caucasus were puzzling to many, and some North Caucasian diasporic activists volunteered their advice to Soviet authorities on what the administrative map of the Caucasus should look like. In 1967, a high-ranking official in one Turkish Circassian organization wrote to Kabardino-Balkarian Communists, in Turkish: “Why don’t the Caucasus Adyghe unite with other [Circassians] speaking the same language and form a small republic, similar to Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis? What is the meaning of scattered communities under the names of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Adyghea? Why is education there not in the native [Circassian] language, as it is for other non-Russian nationalities?”⁴² These legitimate, if naïve, questions reveal that diasporic activists were little familiar with the history of Soviet governance in the region. A Soviet censor drew a big question mark on the margins and prefaced the letter with the note “There is a lot of nonsense here” (Rus. *zdes’ mnogo erundy*).⁴³

The Soviet outreach to the North Caucasian diaspora coincided with an ideological shift among North Caucasian activists in the Middle East. North Caucasian organizations started reappearing in Turkey after the country’s transition to the multiparty system after World War II. The North Caucasian Turkish Culture and Solidarity Association was founded in Istanbul in 1951, followed by the Caucasian Cultural Association of Istanbul in 1952 and the North Caucasian Cultural Association of Ankara in 1961.⁴⁴ In the Levant, the main diasporic organizations were the two Circassian Charity Associations, founded in Amman in 1932 and in Damascus in 1948.⁴⁵ Since the mid-1960s, the ideology of returnism (Tur. *dönüşçülük*) gained traction among young North Caucasian

2001); and Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); and in the Caucasus, see Krista A. Goff, *Nested Nationalism: Making and Unmaking Nations in the Soviet Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021); Timothy K. Blauvelt, *Clientelism and Nationality in an Early Soviet Fiefdom: The Trials of Nestor Lakoba* (London: Routledge, 2021); and Vladimir G. Shnaider, *Sovetskaia natsional’naia politika i narody Severnogo Kavkaza v 1940–1950-er gg.* (Moscow: Direkt-Media, 2015).

⁴² TsDNI KBR f. R-865, op. 1, d. 13, l. 24 (1967).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, l. 20 (1967).

⁴⁴ The Caucasian Cultural Association of Istanbul has roots in the Society of the Hand of Friendship, founded in 1946 by Circassians, Crimean Tatars, and Azerbaijanis (Besleney, *Circassian Diaspora*, 89–91, 106–8).

⁴⁵ On Circassians in Jordan, see Seteney Shami, “Disjuncture in Ethnicity: Negotiating Circassian Identity in Jordan, Turkey and the Caucasus,” *New Perspectives* 12 (1995): 70–95; and Ganich, *Cherkesy v Iordanii*. On Circassians in Syria, see Anzor V. Kushkhabiev, *Cherkesy v Sirii* (Nalchik: Vozrozhdenie, 1993), 111–53; and Muhammad Kheyr Isma’il, *Dalil al-ansab al-sharkasiyya: Dirasa fi asl al-sharkas wa tarikhuhum wa ansabuhum wa*

activists in Turkey and Syria, many of whom moved to cities from the countryside and rejected the views of the old urban elites. The returnists' primary goal was the preservation of North Caucasian identities. They insisted that the only way for their communities not to assimilate in Turkish or Arab cultures would be to repatriate to the Caucasus.⁴⁶ An alternative ideology among left-wing North Caucasian activists was "diasporism" (Tur. *kalışçılık*, lit. remainism), which stipulated that the North Caucasians should remain in the Middle East, where their minority rights could be safeguarded as long as their host country goes through its own socialist revolution.⁴⁷ The ideology of returnism, while never gaining much support outside of urban circles, became a major force in the politics of North Caucasian diasporic associations in Turkey, Syria, and Jordan. It affected how the North Caucasian diaspora at large grappled with its assimilation and thought about its identity and relationship with the Caucasus since the 1970s.

The Soviet-sponsored tours of the Caucasus fueled the appeal of returnism among the diaspora, especially in Turkey. For the Soviet government, gaining support of the massive North Caucasian diaspora in Turkey, which was a US ally and NATO member-state since 1952, was the most desirable objective.⁴⁸ The first Circassian activist from Turkey, İzzet Aydemir, visited the Soviet Caucasus in 1969. During his visit, he met with Kabardian writers, whose work he would later publish for the Turkish-based Circassian audience, laying the groundwork for sanctioned interactions between the Circassian-speaking intelligentsia on both sides of the Iron Curtain.⁴⁹ Aydemir was the leading returnist ideologue in Turkey and published the diasporic magazine *Kafkasya Kültürel Dergi* (Journal of Caucasian Culture, 1964–75), which promoted the idea of rapprochement with the Soviet Union to the fairly conservative rural North Caucasian diaspora, suspicious of the atheist Soviet government.⁵⁰ Aydemir's visit

amakin tajammu'akum fi al-jumhuriyya al-'arabiyya al-suriyya (Damascus: Dar al-Salam, 1993).

⁴⁶ Besleney, *Circassian Diaspora*, 108–11.

⁴⁷ I use terminology proposed by Besleney, *Circassian Diaspora*, 111–12. Setenay Nil Doğan calls the two groups returnists (*dönüşçü* or *göççü*) and revolutionaries (*devrimci*) ("Formations of Diaspora Nationalism," 53).

⁴⁸ On Soviet-Turkish relations, see Onur İşçi, *Turkey and the Soviet Union during World War II: Diplomacy, Discord and International Relations* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2020); and Samuel J. Hirst and İşçi, "Smokestacks and Pipelines: Russian-Turkish Relations and the Persistence of Economic Development," *Diplomatic History* 44, 5 (2020): 834–59.

⁴⁹ Besleney, *Circassian Diaspora*, 109.

⁵⁰ For example, the journal published a favorable report about a trip of Syrian Circassian activists to Kabardino-Balkaria in 1967 (*Kafkasya Kültürel Dergi*, no. 4, 18 [1968]: 9–10).

paved the way for Soviet invitations to Circassian delegations from Turkey. By the 1970s, Soviet authorities expanded their tours beyond the Kabardino-Balkarian ASSR to the two “Circassian” AOs and the Abkhazian ASSR, within Soviet Georgia. In 1975, Abkhazian leaders from Turkey visited Abkhazia on the first Soviet-sponsored trip. In 1977, the North Caucasian Cultural Association of Ankara sent a Circassian delegation to the capitals of all three Circassian administrative entities: Nalchik, Maikop, and Cherkessk, respectively of Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygea, and Karachay-Cherkessia. The widely circulated accounts of the delegates’ journeys further promoted the idea of the diaspora’s eventual return.⁵¹

In the 1970s, returnist activists in Turkey established the new Turkish-language journals *Kamçı* (Whip, 1970), *Nartlar’ın Sesi* (Voice of the Narts, 1972–76), and *Yamçı* (Woolen Coat, 1975–77). These journals published detailed reports by visitors to the Caucasus about their experiences.⁵² The visitors often thanked their hosts and wrote about the vitality of North Caucasian cultures in the homeland, an issue of particular concern to the diaspora in Turkey, where younger North Caucasians were losing their ancestral languages and all diasporic publications were in Turkish. These accounts, whether they turned their readers into returnists or not, had transformed the Caucasus from the long-lost homeland into a real destination, return to which seemed within grasp.⁵³

The Soviet rapprochement with the North Caucasian diaspora amplified the diaspora’s hope to gain the right of return but ended in disappointment. Diasporic activists may have been encouraged by recent precedents of ethnic repatriation and return to the Caucasus. Immediately after World War II, the Soviet government approved mass repatriation of foreign Armenians to Armenia, considered repatriation of Iranian Georgians to Georgia, and relocated tens of thousands of ethnic Azerbaijanis from Armenia to Azerbaijan.⁵⁴ In the late 1950s, the Soviet government allowed several deported ethnic groups—including Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, and Karachays—to return from Central Asia to the North Caucasus. However, the Soviet government consistently rejected mass requests for repatriation of foreign North Caucasians. In 1967, 3,000 Circassian families who had been displaced from the Golan Heights after Israel’s occupation of Syrian

⁵¹ Erciyes, “Return Migration to the Caucasus,” 34–35.

⁵² See, e.g., Nihat Bidanuk, “Kafkasya gezisini anlatıyor,” *Yamçı*, no. 2 (1975): 23–27; no. 3 (1976): 18–28; no. 4 (1976): 19–24; no. 5 (1976): 17–25. Bidanuk, born in Syria, repatriated to the Soviet Union in 1980.

⁵³ Erciyes, “Return Migration to the Caucasus,” 34.

⁵⁴ Goff, *Nested Nationalism*, 75–81.

territory asked the Soviet embassy in Damascus to allow them to return to the Caucasus. Soviet authorities refused their request. The Soviet government had previously rejected or left unanswered petitions from Syrian Circassians in 1937, 1946, and 1958 and continued doing so in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵⁵ Many Syrian Circassians ended up immigrating to Paterson, New Jersey, which is now home to the largest North Caucasian diaspora in the Americas.⁵⁶ In the 1970s, about 300 Turkish Circassians submitted to the Soviet embassy a request for repatriation, to little effect.⁵⁷ Likewise, the Soviet government did not respond to repatriation requests from Jordanian Circassians in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵⁸

The Soviet authorities misjudged or willfully ignored what North Caucasian activists were hoping to get out of their visits to the Caucasus. The Soviet government, whose initial legitimacy in the Caucasus rested on being everything that the tsarist government was not, in the end upheld the old tsarist ban on the North Caucasians' return, although it never presented its policy that way. Repatriation from overseas was never part of Soviet migration policy in the North Caucasus or foreign policy in the Middle East.⁵⁹ The Kremlin did not create a legal pathway for North Caucasian repatriation. Hence the paradox of Soviet engagement with the North Caucasian diaspora: Moscow welcomed the diaspora's activists to the Caucasus if they would return to, and ideally be Communists in, the Middle East but would not allow them to stay and be Communists in the Soviet Union.

From the mid-1960s on, the Soviet government granted individual permissions to return to only several dozen North Caucasians. Some of them had long been active in leftist organizations in the countries of their birth. As early as 1965, a Jordanian Circassian, Abdul Yafauna (Iafaunov), left Sweileh for Nalchik.⁶⁰ Two years later, another Circassian from Jordan, Semih Thabisim (Samikh Tkhabisimov), was allowed to repatriate to Nalchik; he would later teach Arabic and Turkish at Kabardino-Balkarian State University.⁶¹ In the early 1970s, several Syrian Circassians were

⁵⁵ Kushkhabiev, *Cherkesy v Sirii*, 132–34, 147–50; Kushkhabiev, *Problemy repatriatsii*, 72.

⁵⁶ Kadir I. Natho, *Circassian History* (New York, 2009), 530–39.

⁵⁷ Erciyes, "Return Migration to the Caucasus," 35.

⁵⁸ Kushkhabiev, *Problemy repatriatsii*, 72.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

⁶⁰ "Vernuvshiesia v Adyge" (sic), *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 23 October 2013.

⁶¹ TsDNI KBR f. R-865, op. 1, d. 14 (1967), d. 43 (1969); *Kafkasya Kültürel Dergi*, no. 4, 16 (1967): 46.

allowed to repatriate to Maikop.⁶² According to oral recollections, several Chechen families repatriated from Jordan to the Soviet Union.⁶³

The Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs) had far more authority on immigration than the ASSRs. Correspondingly, titular nationalities of the SSRs were more likely to be repatriated than other ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. The largest repatriation program in the Caucasus was for diasporic Armenians. Following the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire, many survivors fled to territories that would form the Armenian SSR. The authorities of Soviet Armenia consistently supported Armenian repatriation and lobbied Moscow for approval. The Soviet government, by and large, approved of Armenian repatriation to bolster Armenia's population and nation building and, after World War II, to assert itself as a "guarantor of Armenian rights."⁶⁴ By 1925, 13,539 Armenian survivors of the genocide resettled in Armenia from Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Greece. By 1936, the number of Armenian repatriates reached 42,200.⁶⁵ Between 1946 and 1949, up to 110,000 Armenians—primarily from Syria, Lebanon, Iran, and Greece—arrived in Armenia.⁶⁶ Notably, most Armenian repatriates hailed from communities that had lived in the Ottoman Empire and Iran for centuries. Armenian repatriates ended up playing a major role in postgenocide nation building and the construction of Armenia's capital city of Yerevan.

The repatriation of titular nationalities ran into trouble when higher authorities did not approve. After World War II, the government of Soviet Georgia attempted to repatriate Fereydan Georgians, a Muslim Georgian-speaking community in central Iran, who had last lived in Georgia in the

⁶² Duğ Orhan Doğbay, "Rusya ve 'Kamu diplomasisi' matruşkasi: Rodina'dan DÇB'ye" (25 November 2018), <http://kuzeykafkasyacumhuriyeti.org/yazar/dug-orhan-dogbay/rusya-ve-kamu-diplomasisi-matruskasi-rodinadan-dcbye.html>; interview with Ömer AYTEK KURMEL (Istanbul, 3 August 2021).

⁶³ Reportedly, in 1963, 1967, and 1970; interview with F. F. Sultan (Zarqa', Jordan, 17 August 2014).

⁶⁴ Goff, *Nested Nationalism*, 62.

⁶⁵ Jo Laycock, "Developing a Soviet Armenian Nation: Refugees and Resettlement in the Early Soviet South Caucasus," in *Empire and Belonging in the Eurasian Borderlands*, ed. Krista A. Goff and Lewis H. Siegelbaum (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 97–111. Other estimates suggest 75,000 Armenian repatriates between 1921 and 1940 (Loretta Kh. Ter-Mkrtichian, *Armiane v stranakh arabskogo vostoka* [Moscow: Nauka, 1965], 51).

⁶⁶ Jo Laycock, "Armenian Homelands and Homecomings, 1945–9: The Repatriation of Diaspora Armenians to the Soviet Union," *Cultural and Social History* 9, 1 (2012): 103–23, 118n2; Sevan N. Yousefian, "The Postwar Repatriation Movement of Armenians to Soviet Armenia, 1945–1948" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2011). For various estimates, see Goff, *Nested Nationalism*, 257n64.

early 17th century. The idea of repatriation enjoyed strong support among Soviet Georgia's leadership and public and some support among Fereydan Georgians themselves, but the Iranian government opposed it. Moscow refused to endorse repatriation to avoid jeopardizing its relations with Iran. Only in the early 1970s did Moscow, in consultation with Tehran, approve Tbilisi's request for limited repatriation. One hundred and nine Fereydan Georgians repatriated to Georgia; most of them eventually returned to Iran.⁶⁷ In another instance, as early as 1925, the government of Soviet Abkhazia planned the repatriation of 750 Abkhazians from Greek Macedonia, at the community's request. Abkhazia was an SSR, although in an unusual union with the Georgian SSR since 1922. The process of repatriation stalled and was abandoned by 1931, when Abkhazia was downgraded to an ASSR within Georgia. The ASSR authorities in Sukhum (renamed Sukhumi in 1936) lost the power to make decisions about immigration, which was transferred to the SSR authorities in Tbilisi.⁶⁸

The case of Circassian repatriation to the Soviet Union faced an even greater challenge. The ASSRs and AOs in the North Caucasus operated within the RSFSR. Circassian officials, even if sympathetic to the plight of their co-ethnic diaspora, had to coordinate any repatriation with Moscow. Yet the ability of Circassian Communists to present a strong case was compromised, compared to that of Armenian, Georgian, and Abkhazian authorities. Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia had an awkward political equilibrium between two ethnic groups, while Adygea was majority-Russian. Circassian Communists did not have the luxury to press for a repatriation campaign that had limited local support and little chance of approval on the federal level. Meanwhile, the Soviet government did not consider its outreach to the North Caucasian diaspora within the framework of repatriation, as the latter was typically a domestic policy goal of SSR authorities. Moscow viewed the North Caucasian diaspora solely as a tool of foreign policy to help increase Soviet prestige abroad.

The Soviet government continued to sponsor visits by the North Caucasian diaspora until the end of Soviet rule. The Turkish coup of 1980, which led to the suspension of North Caucasian associations in Turkey and persecution of anyone with ties to the Soviet Union, cut off communication between Turkish Circassian activists and Soviet authorities in the North Caucasus. The Rodina association's focus shifted again to the Arab world. In the final Soviet decades, the outreach to the North

⁶⁷ Claire P. Kaiser, "Lived Nationality: Policy and Practice in Soviet Georgia, 1945–1978" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2015), 267–90.

⁶⁸ Dzdziariia, *Makhadzhirstvo*, 500–1; Erciyev, "Return Migration to the Caucasus," 29.

Caucasian diaspora was particularly pronounced in higher education. The Kabardino-Balkarian authorities offered scholarships to diasporic youth from Jordan starting in 1968 and from Syria in 1969 to pursue higher education in their republic.⁶⁹ By 1989, 130 Circassians from Syria and Jordan studied in universities in Kabardino-Balkaria.⁷⁰ The Rodina association slowly reached out to other North Caucasian diasporic communities. In 1982, it invited Syrian Dagestani delegates to Soviet Dagestan. The next year, the first Dagestani students from Syria and Jordan arrived to study in Dagestan's universities.⁷¹ Yet the diasporic associations' repeated requests for Soviet commitment to legal return remained unfulfilled. The promise of mass repatriation came only with the collapse of Soviet rule.

North Caucasians' Return from the Middle East since 1991

In the age of perestroika and glasnost, civil rights organizations in Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygea, and Karachay-Cherkessia called on the Soviet government to allow the repatriation of their co-ethnic diasporas in the Middle East. For many nationalist activists, the repatriation of foreign North Caucasians would mean not only the Soviet Union's condemnation of tsarist-era displacements but also a demographic boost to indigenous North Caucasian populations vis-à-vis Slavic immigrants. Repatriation was a linchpin of emergent Circassian nationalism, or a movement for the cultural—if not political—unity of Circassian people.⁷² The Rodina association opened offices in Adygea in the late 1980s, North Ossetia in 1990, and Dagestan in 1991.⁷³

The breakup of the Soviet Union only strengthened the calls for repatriation of the diaspora from the Middle East to the Caucasus. The International Circassian Association, founded and headquartered in

⁶⁹ Kushkhabiev, "Sotrudnichestvo Kabardino-Balkarskogo otdeleniia," 138.

⁷⁰ Diana F. Maksidova, "Iz istorii deiatel'nosti Kabardino-Balkarskogo otdeleniia obshchestva 'Rodina' (1985–1990 gg.)," *Arkhiv i obshchestvo*, no. 4 (2001): 150–54. On earlier histories of Middle Eastern students in the Soviet Union, see Masha Kirasirova, "The 'East' as a Category of Bolshevik Ideology and Comintern Administration: The Arab Section of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East," *Kritika* 18, 1 (2017): 7–34; and James H. Meyer, "Nâzım Hikmet and the First Generation of Turkish Students at Moscow's Communist University of the East," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 5, 2 (2018): 195–218.

⁷¹ Amirkhan Magomeddadaev, *Emigratsiia dagestantsev v Osmanskuiu imperiiu* (Makhachkala: Dagestanskii nauchnyi tsentr Rossiiskoi akademii nauk [DNTs RAN], 2001), 2:143–44; Bela Boiarova, "Vozvrashchenie iz Sirii domoi," *Makhachkalinskie izvestiia*, 9 February 2018.

⁷² Sufian Zhemukhov, "The Birth of Modern Circassian Nationalism," *Nationalities Papers* 40, 4 (2012): 503–24.

⁷³ Ganich, *Cherkesy v Iordanii*, 155–56.

Nalchik in 1991, was the first organization to bring together Russian-based and overseas Circassian activists.⁷⁴ The organization counted implementation of the diaspora's right of return among its chief objectives. Meanwhile, the administrations of Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygea, and Karachay-Cherkessia, which had all become (and the latter two upgraded to) autonomous republics within the Russian Federation, passed legislation that welcomed overseas Circassians home. The federal government, however, did not exempt repatriates of North Caucasian origin from standard immigration and naturalization requirements for foreigners. Foreigners of North Caucasian descent were free to apply for tourist and work visas and then for residency but without any reference to their repatriation on an ethnic basis. To naturalize, in accordance with Russia's Citizenship Acts of 1991 and 2002, foreign applicants must legally reside in Russia for at least five years, demonstrate proficiency in Russian (added in 2002), and renounce any other citizenship.⁷⁵ Nor did the federal government invest in an infrastructure to facilitate the integration of the Arabic- and Turkish-speaking diasporas into Russian- and Circassian-speaking society in the Northwest Caucasus, which further dampened repatriation efforts.⁷⁶

The federal government sanctioned only one case of mass repatriation, in 1998–99, when it allowed Circassians from Kosovo to return to the Caucasus under a humanitarian exception. The Ottoman government had settled Circassians in Kosovo in the early 1860s. Circassians remained in Kosovo under Ottoman rule and then through different iterations of Yugoslavia. During the Kosovo War of 1998–99, the few remaining Circassians found themselves trapped in a crossfire between Kosovar Albanian and Serbian forces. Under heavy lobbying by the International Circassian Association and the Adygea authorities, the Russian government allowed 174 Kosovo Circassians to immigrate to Adygea in 1998–99. They founded a new returnee village, named Mafekhabl (Circassian: Village of Happiness).⁷⁷

The opening of the North Caucasus to the outside world in the 1990s generated much enthusiasm among the “returnist” generation of the 1970s

⁷⁴ On the International Circassian Association, see Beslenev, *Circassian Diaspora*, 116–20; and Zhemukhov, “Birth of Modern Circassian Nationalism,” 508–10, which traces its establishment to Munich in 1991. Planning for it started at a conference in the Netherlands in 1990.

⁷⁵ Russia's Citizenship Act of 1991, art. 19, par. 2; Citizenship Act of 2002, art. 13, par. 1.

⁷⁶ On repatriation politics in the 1990s, see Anzor V. Kushkhabiev, *Ocherki istorii zarubezhnoi cherkesskoi diaspori* (Nalchik: El'-Fa, 2007), 260–70; Ganich, *Cherkesy v Iordanii*, 159–67.

⁷⁷ Gazii Chemso, *Vozvrashchenie: Istoricheskii ocherk* (Maikop: Adygeia, 2000).

and the younger activist generation in the Middle East. Thousands of diasporic North Caucasians boarded planes and buses to visit the Caucasus. It was the first time in over a century that most diasporic Circassians could legally visit and reimmigrate in the North Caucasus. In 1993 alone, about 3,000 foreign Circassians moved to Nalchik and 1,000 to Maikop.⁷⁸ The early excitement soon turned into disappointment for many. The returnees' observations mirrored those of earlier visitors on Soviet-planned tours: their native languages, which they feared were being subsumed by Turkish and Arabic in the diaspora, faced a slow decline in the Caucasus in favor of Russian; and many religious traditions and indigenous ways of life had faded under Soviet rule.⁷⁹ Those who had long nurtured the dream of returning to an idealized homeland, where they could rejuvenate and restore their cultural identity, found that some aspects of their identity were better preserved in villages in rural Turkey.

Making a home in the post-Soviet Caucasus was not an easy feat. Returnees, although welcomed by local authorities, were regarded as foreigners by the population at large. Those who had long been marked as "Circassians" or "Abkhazians" in the Middle East now found themselves "Turks" or "Arabs" in the Caucasus. Returnees were distinct from local populations in dialect, cuisine, and cultural norms, as well as a lack of institutional know-how in navigating post-Soviet society and the Russian-language bureaucracy.⁸⁰ Moreover, the collapse of Russia's economy and the escalation of armed conflicts throughout the Caucasus in the 1990s made the return a heavy sacrifice for repatriates, many of whom enjoyed comfortable middle-class lives in Turkey and Jordan. Many returnees chose to leave for their countries of birth. By 2000, only 2,335 foreign Circassians resided in Kabardino-Balkaria and Adygea. Most of them were issued temporary residency permits by republican authorities, and less than a quarter started the naturalization process. Many repatriates were Circassian activists and intellectuals, deeply committed to the ideology of returnism, and entrepreneurs seeking to establish transnational businesses between Russia and Turkey or Jordan.⁸¹

The federal government's reluctance to allow mass repatriation and facilitate smoother immigration for individual North Caucasians brings

⁷⁸ Sufian Zhemukhov, "Circassian World: Responses to the New Challenges," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 54 (2008): 6.

⁷⁹ Bram, "Circassian Re-Immigration to the Caucasus."

⁸⁰ Jade Cemre Erciyes, "Diaspora of Diaspora: Adyge-Abkhaz Returnees in the Ancestral Homeland," *Diaspora* 17, 3 (2008): 340–61; Doğan, "Formations of Diaspora Nationalism," 201–18.

⁸¹ Kushkhabiev, *Ocherki istorii*, 303, 307.

into focus post-Soviet Russia's complicated relationship with its imperial history. The multiethnic Russian Federation, an uneasy heir of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, invests heavily in the historical narrative of its many peoples' voluntary union. The issue of repatriation of overseas North Caucasians throws wide open the sensitive question of what happened in the final stages of the Caucasus War.⁸² By the 1990s, many public intellectuals in the North Caucasus regarded the events of 1863–64 as an ethnic cleansing of the Circassian population at best and a genocide at worst.⁸³ For Moscow, calls for repatriation meant furthering public awareness of, and debate about, Russia's imperial conquest of the Caucasus and atrocities against the region's Muslims. The parliaments of Kabardino-Balkaria and Adygea recognized the Circassian genocide in, respectively, 1992 and 1996. The Russian federal government has never recognized it as such and, on the contrary, has opposed campaigns for genocide recognition. Recognition of the Circassian genocide became an international issue, to the displeasure of the Kremlin, in the 2010s. First, Georgia recognized the Circassian genocide in 2011; then, during the Winter Olympics of 2014 in Sochi, diasporic Circassian organizations made international headlines with calls to recognize the genocide and boycott the Olympics, which probably hardened the Kremlin's perceptions of the Circassian diaspora.⁸⁴

Threats of secession in the Caucasus further undermined the prospects of mass repatriation. In the 1990s, the Russian federal government's overarching goal was to preserve territorial integrity in the wake of the Soviet collapse. Nowhere was the threat of secession more acute than in the North Caucasus. In 1994, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria unilaterally proclaimed independence, which Russia refused to recognize, leading to the Chechen Wars of 1994–96 and 1999–2000. In the neighboring South Caucasus, three more secessionist conflicts erupted, as Abkhazia and South Ossetia split from Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan. Secessionist movements enjoyed limited support from the diaspora. During the War in Abkhazia of 1992–93, many overseas Abkhazians and Circassians fundraised and traveled to fight on behalf of

⁸² On the historiography of the Caucasus War, see Bobrovnikov and Babich, *Severnnyi Kavkaz*, 112–35, 307–26.

⁸³ On Circassian deportations as genocide, see Walter Richmond, *The Circassian Genocide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013); and A. Kh. Kasumov and Kh. A. Kasumov, *Genotsid adygov* (Nalchik: Logos, 1992).

⁸⁴ Maja Catic, "Circassians and the Politics of Genocide Recognition," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, 10 (2015): 1685–708; Lars Funch Hansen, "iCircassia: Digital Capitalism and New Transnational Identities," *Journal of Caucasian Studies* 1, 1 (2015): 1–32.

the Abkhazian national cause.⁸⁵ Then, during the Chechen Wars, many diasporic Chechens supported the Chechen separatist movement by providing financial and logistical aid to Ichkeria, and some Chechens from the Middle East came to the Caucasus as foreign fighters.⁸⁶ Since the 1990s, the Kremlin has viewed the North Caucasian diaspora as an unreliable factor in Caucasus politics.

The Syrian civil war, which broke out in 2011, initiated a new wave of self-initiated Circassian and Abkhazian return. Thousands of Syria's Circassians, Chechens, and Dagestanis fled to Turkey and Jordan, where they often relied on kinship ties with local North Caucasian communities and diasporic charity networks. The Syrian refugee crisis also reenergized Circassian civil society in Russia, as local activists facilitated the evacuation of Syrian Circassians and lobbied the Russian government, which has provided critical support to the government of Bashar al-Assad, to allow the repatriation of Syria's North Caucasians. By early 2018, about 5,000 Syrian Circassians had arrived in the North Caucasus on tourist and work visas; 2,000 of them remained in Russia, many being undocumented, and others moved on to Turkey and Europe.⁸⁷ The Russian government, while a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, rarely grants refugee status to asylum seekers. As of 1 January 2023, Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs had counted only 277 refugees, including 2 Syrian nationals, in the country.⁸⁸ Syrian Circassian refugees in Russia received support from some republican agencies—for example, the Adygea-based Center for the Adaptation of Repatriates—but mostly relied on help from Circassian benefactors and nongovernmental organizations. These included the Kabardino-Balkaria-based Peryt (Circassian: Leading) and Zhegu (Circassian: Hearth), which issued invitations and helped secure visas and find accommodation for Syrian Circassians; and the International Circassian Association, including its Adyge Khase (Circassian: Circassian

⁸⁵ Besleney, *Circassian Diaspora*, 123–26.

⁸⁶ The first two foreign ministers in Dzhokhar Dudaev's government, prior to the war with Russia, were Jordanian Chechens, Shamil Beno and Yusef Shamsuddin. For diasporic fighters, see Vanora Bennett, *Crying Wolf: The Return of War to Chechnya* (London: Picador, 1998), 445–58; Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31, 5 (2008): 412–33.

⁸⁷ Murat Gukemukhov, "Cherkesiia: Vozvrashchenie," *Ekho Kavkaza*, 19 January 2018. See also Andrey Korotayev, Leonid Issaev, Yevgeniy Ivanov, and Alisa Shishkina, "A Troubled Return to the Homeland: Syrian Circassians in Southern Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* (22 December 2022), doi.10.1080/09668136.2022.2153803.

⁸⁸ Additionally, 6 Syrians were recognized as forced migrants (*vynuzhdennyye pereselentsy*), and 192 had temporary asylum (Federal State Statistics Service, report of January 2023, 214, <https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/osn-01-2023.pdf>).

Council) member organizations in Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, Adygea, and Krasnodar Krai.⁸⁹

Russia's stance on repatriation differs from that of Abkhazia. The Abkhazian government encouraged the return of ethnic Abkhazians, primarily from Turkey and Syria. Abkhazia fought a war of independence against Georgia in 1992–93 and is not recognized as a sovereign state by most members of the United Nations, with the exception of a handful of states, notably Russia. The Abkhazian government has not been constrained by Moscow's federal immigration policies, unlike the Circassian republics in the North Caucasus. It passed liberal legislation to encourage the immigration of its ethnic diaspora. Abkhazia's nationality legislation, enacted in 2005, recognized all ethnic Abkhazians worldwide, irrespective of their residence or other citizenships, as citizens of Abkhazia.⁹⁰ Following Abkhazia's war with Georgia, a quarter-million Georgians—over half of Abkhazia's population—fled or were expelled from the country. The law of 2005 is part of the Abkhazian state-sanctioned program to homogenize the population and to stem the demographic decline. By 2015, 520 Syrian nationals had immigrated to Abkhazia, including 180 Abkhazians and the rest Circassians; 390 of them remained in Abkhazia, while others either returned to Syria or continued on to other countries.⁹¹

Although the Russian Federation has a robust program for resettling “compatriots” (Rus. *sootechestvenniki*), foreign North Caucasians were not allowed to take advantage of it. In 2006, the Kremlin launched the State Program for Voluntary Resettlement of Compatriots Abroad. The Russian government defined compatriots as foreigners who were part of nations that historically lived on the territory of the Russian Federation and “who made a free choice in favor of spiritual, cultural, and legal ties with the Russian Federation.”⁹² Compatriots are eligible for expedited immigration and naturalization and state-funded resettlement benefits. Between 2006 and 2021, over a million people immigrated under the compatriot legislation. The legislation does not specify compatriots' ethnic or national origin. In practice, most compatriots have been ethnic Russians (or native Russian speakers) from Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Tajikistan, Armenia, and Moldova.

⁸⁹ Anzor V. Kushkhabiev, “Cherkesskii vopros v deiatel'nosti kabardinskikh obshchestvennykh ob"edinenii v nachale XXI veka,” *Kavkazologiya*, no. 2 (2021): 112–34; Islam Tekushev, “Cherkesskii vopros' v 21 veke,” *Caucasus Times*, 3 November 2017.

⁹⁰ Law of the Republic of Abkhazia about Citizenship of Republic of Abkhazia (adopted 24 October 2005, signed 8 November 2005), art. 5, http://presidentofabkhazia.org/en/vize_president/dejatelnost/zakon.pdf.

⁹¹ Islam Tekushev, “Rodina tam, gde ne zhdali,” *Open Democracy*, 11 January 2016.

⁹² Law on Compatriots Abroad of 24 May 1999, art. 3, par. 1.

Foreign North Caucasians had not been accepted under this legislation, and few regions of the North Caucasus were approved for resettlement under the compatriot repatriation scheme.⁹³ Only in 2018 did the federal government approve the resettlement of compatriots in Adygea and Karachay-Cherkessia; in 2019, this permission was extended to Kabardino-Balkaria. Following repeated inquiries by Circassian activists, in 2019, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs signaled that Syrian Circassians could be regarded as compatriots, but local activists have criticized the red tape and a lack of commitment by federal authorities to resettle foreign North Caucasians.⁹⁴ Only two Turkish, two Jordanian, and three Syrian citizens were allowed to immigrate as compatriots to Adygea in 2019.⁹⁵ Meanwhile, within three months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russian authorities moved about 4,700 Russian-speaking refugees from the annexed Ukrainian territories to the North Caucasus, including over 1,100 refugees to Adygea.⁹⁶ Most potential repatriates in the Middle East still lack a clear path to return to the Caucasus and to naturalize as Russian citizens.



The Soviet government's invitation to North Caucasian diasporic activists to tour the Caucasus in the late 1960s opened a new era in the relationship between the North Caucasian diaspora in the Middle East and its old homeland. Neither the Soviet Union nor the North Caucasian diaspora gained what they hoped out of the carefully planned visits. The diaspora did not turn into Communists overnight and had little influence on official relations between Moscow and Ankara, Amman, and Damascus in the 1970s and 1980s. Soviet authorities, while happy to showcase their new cheese factories, had no intention of allowing mass repatriation from the Middle East. Nevertheless, this fraught relationship led to meaningful change for the diaspora, as its activists reestablished contacts with the Caucasus and patiently promoted the idea of return. In the 1990s,

⁹³ On repatriation politics in the 2010s, see Kushkhabiev, "Cherkesskii vopros"; and Svetlana I. Akkueva and Kasbolat F. Dzamikhov, "On the Characterization of the Circassian Diaspora (On Materials of the Russian Caucasian Studies)," *Karadeniz Arařtırmaları*, no. 15 (2018): 79–101.

⁹⁴ Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "O pravakh adygov-sootechstvennikov v Sirii," Regnum.ru, 7 August 2019.

⁹⁵ Anna Gritsevich, "Cherkesy iz Sirii okazalis' za bortom programmy pereseleniia sootechstvennikov v Adygeiu," *Kavkaz-Uzel*, 14 February 2020.

⁹⁶ "Severnyi Kavkaz prinial pochti piat' tysiach bezhentsev iz Ukrainy i Donbassa," *Vestnik Kavkaza*, 28 May 2022; "V Adygeiu iz Ukrainy i Donbassa pribylo 1,100 bezhentsev," *Kommersant*, 25 May 2022.

the cause of repatriation, as part of a broader movement for historical justice and greater autonomy, became popular among intellectuals and officialdom in Russia's republics of Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygea, and Karachay-Cherkessia and Georgia's breakaway republic of Abkhazia. After the end of Soviet rule, return to the Caucasus, while administratively burdensome, became possible for individual North Caucasians.

The Russian government's opposition to the return of North Caucasians from the Middle East has persisted since the late 19th century. The federative structure of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation slowed down repatriation efforts, as the federal government in Moscow held the final authority on immigration issues, outranking autonomous governments in the North Caucasus. The North Caucasian diaspora's ongoing fight for the option to return testifies to the tortured history of mobility between Russia and the Middle East.

Dept. of Global Studies
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, CA 93106 USA
vhtroyansky@ucsb.edu