

*A Nation of Generals and Assassins:  
Rethinking the North Caucasian Diaspora in the Late Ottoman Empire*  
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In recent years scholars have increasingly taken on the challenge of exploring the ways in which Russia and the Soviet Union has managed or administered its incredibly diverse Muslim population. An equally (or perhaps more) ambitious lot of historians have begun to delve still further into this relationship, focusing instead upon the ways in which Russian and Soviet Muslims comprehended and negotiated with the state. The intent of this paper is to take the conversation in a somewhat different direction. Rather than explore certain permutations of identity and belonging among Muslims within the Russian state, I would like to shift attention upon a segment of Russia's Muslim population who were, by and large, born in exile.

In the last century and a half, much has been written about the so-called the removal or deportation of Circassian or "Çerkes" Muslims from the North Caucasus. Rather than focus on the motivations or processes that led to the expulsion of Circassians, I would like to present some observations regarding the ways in which these former Russian imperial subjects built new lives in the diaspora. In particular, I would like to discuss how several small but vocal segments within the Circassian diaspora of Anatolia thought about the concept of home and homeland in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. At a moment when the political boundaries of imperial world between Russia, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires were being entirely redrawn, Circassians in the contemporary Republic of Turkey (as well as a multitude of other ethnic groups throughout the broader region) were presented with an unparalleled opportunity to articulate and choose where precisely they belonged within an emerging world of nation-states. Although this paper admittedly draws upon only a fraction of the debates underway in Anatolia in the years immediately following the Great War, I would submit that there were three competing visions of what the future held for the Circassians of Anatolia. Each vision discussed here did not have an equal number of supporters. More pointedly, internal or regionalist antagonisms, generational cleavages and class differences were decisive in influencing the perspectives held by both commanding and more marginal actors found within the Circassian diaspora. Much of what is examined here is a by-product of my previous research on the

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<sup>1</sup> Please do not cite without author's permission.

evolution of various Circassian communities found along the southern coast of the Marmara Sea.<sup>2</sup> The South Marmara (as I have dubbed it) was no isolated or anomalous corridor of Circassian life in Anatolia. I would contend instead that the communities situated along this strategically vital stretch of coastline represented, both physically and intellectually, the central front in the debate over the future of the Circassian diaspora in Anatolia.

### **Documents:**

#### Passage One:

#### Bekir Sami, Hakki Hami, Rauf Orbay and the Desire to Stay

Bekir Sami (Günsav) (in a letter to Circassians rebelling in the county of Karacabey, Fall 1919):

The National Forces are strictly concerned with an independent Turkey. We are grateful to the Ottomans who graciously accepted those Circassians who abandoned the Caucasus in the name of religion and all things sacred. I declare that it is necessary to condemn all actions that are not becoming of Circassian national history. At this time I am an Ottoman regimental commander, but I request of you, Circassians, as co-nationals and co-religionists, who love their nation, do not partake in any incident that is against the state. Do not partake in pillaging, stealing or any evil act resembling these things. I say to you, support the *Kuva-yi Milliye*! The Circassian notables who have listened to me speaking of these things have agreed and sworn allegiance.<sup>3</sup>

Hakki Hami and Rauf Orbay (before the Turkish Grand National Assembly, Fall 1921):

Hakki Hami: On Midilli a total of five, ten ruffians [*serseri*] have supposedly gathered. They supposedly represent demands in the name of the Circassians. I assured you gentlemen that from these individuals I know a few of them. These people are both a stain upon the name of Circassians and a stain on the name of all Muslims (Bravo!). At one time gentlemen you know that Circassians [now] living and working in Turkey were unwilling to put up with Tsarist oppression and took shelter in Turkey. They saw a great deal of compassion from the Turks and [saw] that they always possessed a distinguished kind of benevolence. They were cast upon the compassion of the Turk's bosom. Ever since that time the Circassians have not seen the slightest degree injury from the Turks. Perhaps Turks held them in far greater esteem and supported them in this nation (Bravo!) There is no suspicion that they are separate from the Turks and I declare that Turks and Circassians have become close relatives (Bravo!).

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<sup>2</sup> Ryan Gingeras, "Imperial Killing Fields: Revolution, Ethnicity and Islam in Northwestern Anatolia, 1913-1938," Doctoral Thesis: University of Toronto, 2006; "Notorious Subjects, Invisible Citizens: North Caucasian Resistance to the Turkish National Movement in the South Marmara, 1919-1923," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40.1 (February, 2008), 89-108.

<sup>3</sup> Muhittin Ünal, *Miralay Bekir Sami Günsev'in Kurtulus Savasi Anilari* (Istanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 2002), 230-231.

It is more than this gentlemen! Circassians, your government is not a base one like Greece. Do not commit such a vile act as to accept the patronage of any Christian state. And you should not accept that kind of debasement. One who accepts Greek protection or the protection of any other Christian [state] is not a Circassian and a Muslim. That person becomes a Christian. He is a person doubtful of his nation and his position (vaziyeti).  
Rauf Orbay: There cannot be a traitorous nation.<sup>4</sup>

Passage Two:

(Çule) Ibrahim Hakki and the Decision to Separate

The Declaration made by the Association for the Strengthening of Near Eastern Circassian Rights (November 1921):

The population of Circassians today residing in Anatolia is at the very least two million. Circassians defend and maintain their national traditions through language, customs, feelings and civilization... They are in the contemporary family of civilizations and are a part of the white race and the distinguished Aryan family...

Upon the collapse of the Arab government and upon the decision of the Egyptian government in Cairo, Circassians were continuously in the governments that were established in the Arab lands, North Africa and Syria for three centuries. In the Caucasus, which is their national homeland, the Circassians formed a republic [which was] independent administratively and politically. They are the famous fighters [who] continuously fought for twenty years against the Russian Empire, under the administration and command of the well-known Sheikh (*seyh*) Shamil, who saw the danger of the Russian invasion.

A population of two million Circassians from the northern and western Caucasus, which was composed of three million people, was suspicious of [Russian actions] and bit by bit emigrated to Turkey (at that time the Sublime Porte extended a protective invitation). The one million people that stayed in the North Caucasus have to today grown to a population of three million according to Russian statistics.

According to calculations, the two million Circassians who emigrated to Turkey would have risen to a population of between three to six million. Unfortunately, today it is closer to two million. The reason why is this: It is extremely clear that there were tragedies in transport as a result of mismanagement, which is impossible for the Ottoman government to deny. As a result of being sacrificed to these catastrophes, Circassians have been denied four million of its population.

Thirteen years before with the institution of constitutional rule, the Turkish administration became bereft of correct policies. Now filled with feelings [stemming] from Turkishism and Turanism, Turkish administrators followed at this unique moment in history a false policy of terrorism, by means of Turkification, towards the various Ottoman nationalities. With the destruction of the nationalities and the destruction of the

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<sup>4</sup> T.B.M.M. Zabıt Ceridesi Cilt 24. (Ankara: TBMM Matbaası,1960), 367.

vital security of non-Turks, the Circassians were stirred with a just grievance coming from a 'pure desire of self-preservation.' Because of these continuous calamities, Circassians have [moved towards] a national goal of self-preservation and commit themselves to armed resistance against the mass murder of the Circassian nation.

Because of this, Circassians have lost thousands of their precious children. Their property and animals have been stolen and their villages burned. In short, Circassians have been and continue to be in a state of defiance in this war despite being allotted no sanctuary and the destruction and seizure of their property.

However it is not [the case] that Circassians did not join the world war either as commanders or as soldiers with their farm animals. But like various other nations, they were forced by their feelings and by the law. Nevertheless a very small portion of Circassians joined the Anatolian revolutionaries (filled with false feelings) right after the ceasefire. Mustafa Kemal [says] his movement supports the foundation of the sultanate, yet the Kemalists are seen and understood as a movement against humanity and with false policies. Regretfully, a very small number of Circassians have entered into the service of this movement.

Circassians in the Sublime Porte, which continues to support the Caliphate, are especially working together with the Kemalists. Despite this self-sacrifice, [the Porte] still neglects Circassians. After not seeing that they will be saved, Circassians decided correctly and naturally to join the Greek army, which promises to preserve them, in the occupation zone. (There is no doubt that Albania and the Arab States similarly sought in foreign saviors well before). These Circassians, who have struggled for a year and a half and who have saved thousands of innocent Muslims and non-Muslims from mass murder, should be praised for their services.

The understanding Greek government, which is included in the highest levels of civilization and humanity among nations, recognizes no difference among Circassians, Armenians and especially Rum. It has provided for the welfare of Circassian immigrants and refugees in the form of substance and settlement.

It is fitting to remember, with thanks and with kind words, those who aid and extend trust to our countrymen taken as prisoners of war, those under the submission of Kemalist oppression and to the Circassian people living in areas under the administration of the military occupation since the days the Greek government set foot in Anatolia.

As a consequence of these kind actions, the Circassians hope and request that, because of their convictions, they be included in the understanding of civilization and their legal and human rights be defended. These things have been [discussed] face to face between the Circassians, which is a secular nation, and the Rum peoples.

The goals of this petition are:

A – Recognition of our national existence

B – To make known that the secular Circassian nation lives in constant danger.

C – To advance the demand that the Circassians wish to live as an element of peace under Greek protection in order to protect the Circassians of the Near East from the sins of the Turkish administration. [This is in response to] the Ottoman government which was a warring and tumultuous element in Europe and the Near East, both within and without, which denied a competent, modern and civilized administration and which collapsed because of the mismanagement of the Sultan over the last three hundred years. [This continued with] the constitutional government, which stood in the place of the Ottoman government, which insisted, under the extreme Turkists, that it did not recognize the human rights of non-Turks in Anatolia. This is an impossible denial of the truth according to the civilized world.

As a consequence, our congress requests a statement to the petitioners, who expects action with impatience, regarding the acceptance of our demands which are national [in nature] according to the Allied Great Powers and their partners.

1 – The application of the laws regarding the guarantee of human rights to minorities to all Circassians, laws that were accepted and proposed among the states following the war and that was to be brought into the Near East.

2 – The imposition of protection under the civilized Greek government [and] of the desired [fulfillment] of the predestined unity of the Circassian nation with the Rum nation, which has been agreed upon. The Greek government hopes by force to [further] the progress and development [of these two nations].

3 – The rendering on an indemnity from the Turkish government to the Circassian nation for all the damages incurred...

4 – The participation of our representatives in the peace conference in order to negotiate our national demands.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tarik Zafer Tunaya, *Türkiye’de Siyasal Partiler: İttihat ve Terakki, Cilt II* (Istanbul: Hürriyet Vakfı Yayınları, 1989), 589-591.