

## RETURN OF THE CIRCASSIAN WORLD: MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU

written for the return of the Circassian World Website on January 2018

by **Jade Cemre Erciyes**

When Metin Sönmez, the renowned creator of the CircassianWorld and AbkhazWorld Websites, besides many others, asked me to write an article for the return of the CircassianWorld by the beginning of 2018, after a break of more than 4, I got very excited. There were so many things to tell about what it meant for me in the past, what it means for me today, and what it will mean for academics, researchers or journalists working on the Circassian people the moment it becomes online. It is not that easy to start writing this article from its main topic for various reasons. First of all, someone, not much knowledgeable about Circassians may be reading this piece. Besides, I do not want to just narrate a self-reflexive story or a list of key points acknowledging the value of the CircassianWorld. I decided to design this paper as a resource for researchers who may, one day, be interested in the development of the Circassian scholarship. To reflect upon this, it is important for me to start with a short introduction about the earliest works on the Circassian people and the Caucasus<sup>1</sup>. This is followed by a short review of works focusing on the diasporisation of the Circassians – or in other words, the events of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>2</sup>. This part is a response to a question that I frequently hear in the diaspora which I had been meaning to write for a long time (and I do in my forthcoming book in Turkish). As the events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are usually squeezed into a single date “21 May 1864” but the reality is not that simple. I leave the detailed analysis to historians, but my effort is just to give an idea to uninformed readers. The second part of the article will be on the formation of the Circassian scholarship and some milestones (including various conferences and meetings) that I see as key to understanding the efforts that brought the scholarship to this day. I surely am missing some other crucial events or formations, but hopefully they will be added in time through your comments and suggestions. I will conclude with the Circassian World and at that moment I hope you will understand why this “Star Wars” referenced title suits well to this article.

### History

Earliest works referring to the Caucasus, eg. Herodotus (5<sup>th</sup> BC)<sup>3</sup>, and from 1<sup>st</sup> BC Strabon<sup>4</sup> and Plinius<sup>5</sup> (the later referring to Timos-thenes who lived two-hundred years before him) talk about the multinational and multilingual diversity of the region. In the 10<sup>th</sup> BC, Al Masudi, an Arab traveller and geographer, also wrote that “The mountain of el-Khaikh (Caucasus) is a large mountain, and is such extent that it comprizes a number of kingdoms and nations. In this mountain live seventy-two nations, and every nation has its own king and language which differs from the others.”<sup>6</sup>

**Circassians are from this land of multinational and multilingual diversity.**

However, the earliest accounts of Circassia and Circassian people appear many centuries later, first in the diary of Johannes de Galonifontibus (1404) and later in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in some European

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1 This part is re-written from my forthcoming book in Turkish entitled “Return to the Caucasus Mountains: Diaspora, Homeland, Identity”.

2 This part of the paper is re-written from my PhD dissertation J.C.Erciyes (2014), *Return migration to the Caucasus: the Adyge-Abkhaz diaspora (s), transnationalism and life after return*, available at <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/48871/1/Erciyes%2C%20Jade%20Cemre.pdf>.

3 Herodotus (450 BC to 420 BC), *The Histories* (English), <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseus/cgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=GreekFeb2011&query=Hdt.%201.203.1&getid=1>

4 Strabon (1903), "The Geography of Strabo. Literally translated, with notes, in three volumes." In, ed Esq. H.C. Hamilton, W. Falconer, M.A. Londra: George Bell & Sons. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>;

5 Pliny the Elder, (1855) *The Natural History -Book VI: An Account of Countries, Nations, Seas, Towns, Havens, Mountains, Rivers, Distances, And Peoples Who Now Exist, Or Formerly Existed*. 5. (5) “The Region of Colica, The Nations of the Achæi, and Other Nations in the Same Parts”; (John Bostock, M.D., F.R.S., H.T. Riley, Esq., B.A., Ed.). <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D6%3Achapter%3D5>

6 [https://www.slideshare.net/syamsul\\_noor/meadows-of-gold-and-mines-of-gems-by-el-masudi](https://www.slideshare.net/syamsul_noor/meadows-of-gold-and-mines-of-gems-by-el-masudi)

maps. Galonifontibus “(e)numerating the Caucasian peoples and languages, he perspicaciously demarcated Circassia (Zyquia sive Tarquasia), Abkhazia, Mingrelia and Georgia (J/Ioriana – the form Georgiania is known from the mid-13th century) as countries with separate languages.”<sup>7</sup> We see a place called Circassi on the north-east corner of the Black Sea, in the maps of Italian cartographers Agnese (1550), Gastaldi (1551), Ruscelli (1572), Ghisolfi (?) and Belgian cartographer Ortellius (1570). The 17<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman traveller Evliya Chelebi refers to a place called “Cherkezistan” or in more detail from an English translation he states that “(i)nside of Mount Caucasus is also Circassia inhabited by the tribes Kabartaí, Bestí, Púltakaí, Khatúkaí, Memsúkh, Bozadúk, Takakú, Zana, Shefáke and other Circassian tribes”<sup>8</sup>. The 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is a turning point in the lives of the Circassian people on the other hand, has various detailed accounts about the Caucasus including Bronevsky (1823)<sup>9</sup>, Taitbut de Marigny (1829)<sup>10</sup>, Potocki (1829)<sup>11</sup>, Han-Girey (1836)<sup>12</sup>, David Urquhart (1836), James Bell (1840)<sup>13</sup>, J. A. Longworth (1840)<sup>14</sup>; de Montpéreux (1843)<sup>15</sup>, Ditson (1850)<sup>16</sup>, Pearson (1859)<sup>17</sup> and Norman (1902)<sup>18</sup>. In these works and others, it is possible to see various transcriptions of the word Circassia including but not limited to Circassi, Circassie, Tcherkessia, Cherkessia, Cherkesses.

Circassia, in its widest understanding in these various accounts and maps– refers to the land between the Anapa castle (located in the current Russian city of Novorosisk) reaching out in the south-east to the river Bzyp (a river located within the Republic of Abkhazia today) and including the land frequently cited as Kabarta or Cabarda (current Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria of the Russian Federation). It has historically been the homeland of various peoples but mainly of those who spoke the North-West Caucasian family of languages: The Adyghe, Abkhazian and Ubykh. The western Adyghe dialect has widely been referred as the Circassian language, while the eastern Adyghe dialect frequently as Kabardian, but as a dialect of the Circassian language.<sup>19</sup> Many scholars disagree with the use of languages in explaining who are the Circassians as today what people understand of the Circassians differ widely by the scope or focus of the research they take. But that discussion is to follow shortly, after the explanation of the 19<sup>th</sup> century events that created the “Circassian diaspora” through a mass exodus.

Smeets claims that there was never a place called Circassia in history and that Circassians were never united under a single rule.<sup>20</sup> Up until the 16<sup>th</sup> century the North-West Caucasus was mainly

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7 Hewitt, G. Western travellers to the Caucasus, <http://www.circassianworld.com/circassia/historical-circassia/1630-western-travellers-to-the-caucasus-by-george-hewitt>

8 Evliya Çelebi, *Narrative of Travels in Europe, Asia, and Africa, in the Seventeenth Century, Volume II*, by Evliya, Çelebi, 1611?-1682? (Original in Ottoman Turkish: Seyahatname) [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/54255/54255-h/54255-h.htm#Page\\_158](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/54255/54255-h/54255-h.htm#Page_158)

9 Bronevsky, S. (1823) *Recent Geographical and Historical Information about the Caucasus [in Russian]*. Moscow: Imp. de Selivanovsky.

10 De Marigny, T. (1829) *Voyage Dans Le Pays Des Tcherkesses. Voyage dans les steps [sic] d'Astrakhan et du Caucase, Paris*, Vol. 1, pp. 355-356.

11 Potocki, J. (1829) *Voyage Dans Les Steppes D'Astrakan et du Caucase*. Paris: Merlin.

12 Han-Girey, S. (1978[1836]) *Historical-Ethnographical Essays "Notes on Circassians" [in Russian]*. Nalchik.

13 Bell, J. (1840) *Journal of a residence in Circassia during the years 1837, 1838 and 1839* <http://www.circassianworld.com/publications/e-library/1677-journal-of-a-residence-in-circassia-during-the-years-1837-1838-and-1839-by-by-james-stanislaus-bell-vol-i-ii>

14 Longworth, J.A. (1840) *A Year among the Circassians*. London: H. Colburn.

15 De Montpéreux, F.D. (1843) *Voyage Autour Du Caucase: Chez Les Tcherkesses Et Les Abkhases En Colchide, En Géorgie, En Arménie Et En Crimée*. Paris: Librairie de Gide.

16 Ditson, G.L. (1850) *Circassia: Or, a Tour to the Caucasus*. New York: Stringer & Townsend. <http://www.circassianworld.com/publications/e-library/1238-circassia-ditson>

17 Pearson, C.H. (1970 [1859]) *Russia by a Recent Traveller: A Series of Letters*. London: Cass.

18 Norman, H. (1902) *All the Russias: Travels and Studies in Contemporary European Russia, Finland, Siberia, the Caucasus and Central Asia*. London: Heinemann.

19 To see a discussion on the languages of the North-West Caucasian family see the George Hewitt's work entitled *Language*: [http://www.georgehewitt.net/pdf/Curzon\\_Language.pdf](http://www.georgehewitt.net/pdf/Curzon_Language.pdf)

20 Smeets, R. (1995) *Circassia. Central Asian Survey*, 14 (1), pp. 107-125. <http://www.circassianworld.com/circassians/who-are-they/1508-circassia-by-riecks-smeets>

inhabited by “tribal clanic societies” and suddenly became the “object of a major international conflict” between Ivan the Terrible on the one side and the Ottomans and Crimeans (Turks) on the other.<sup>21</sup> The regional situation was relatively calm in the 17<sup>th</sup> century but Russia, with the pretext of the Islamisation of the region, started infiltrating from Terek in 1763. This marks the start of the hundred year Caucasian wars, according to the North-Caucasians. The people of the North Caucasus fought with the Russians during the following 100 years until a majority of their population were deported from their lands.

In the spring of 1800 the Emperor let the Cossacks raid Circassia, after which some Adyge tribes faced raids, during which their crops were burned and their cattle and people stolen by Cossacks.<sup>22</sup> The end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were marked by repeated clashes between the Russian military forces and the mountaineers. The Ottomans, seeing they could not hold out any more, gave up the forts one by one to the Russians. In 1812 with the Bucharest Treaty, Abkhazia up to the river Bzyb was given to Russian control but Circassia and the Abkhaz remained unconquered.<sup>23</sup> Circassia was unconquered but surrounded by Russian forts both North and South, and some Adyge feudal rulers – but not their subjects – were already in cooperation with Russians, in the East as well. The only communication with the Ottoman Empire was through the sea, until the ports were taken under control and new forts were built in the following decades. In 1828 when Russia got full control of the Anapa fort, the Circassians were pushed into the mountainous regions and all their communications were cut. In the 1830s a plague hit the Caucasus, and especially in the Shapsygh region many people died. Besides, long-term clashes had already decreased their population.

It was in this period that Imam Shamil and the Murids were showing a strong hold in Eastern Caucasus (today’s Dagestan and Ingushetia) but, despite the support of the Ottomans to increase Shamil’s influence and the campaign for Islam to unite the tribes of the West Caucasus, this did not find a lot of support. In 1834, a Russian civil servant, Platon Zubov, proposed a pacification plan of the Caucasus through trade with Christian missionaries, deportation of the people to inner Russia and their replacement by Russian population, and finally their conversion to Christianity.<sup>24</sup> Transfer of the population was realised in the following decades. In 1837 Adler and in 1838 Tuapse and Sochi came under full Russian control. In 1839-1840, Russian Cossacks who were being settled in the region and were serving as part of the Russian military as mostly irregular forces, burned the agricultural fields, and drew the cattle to the Russian side of the line. In response, the tribes began to unite and attack the Russian forts; however, this only increased the Russian aggression in the region.<sup>25</sup> The Russians were fighting constantly in several regions of the Caucasus, in the east Shamil’s Murids were fighting to the death; in central Caucasus, the Adyge (Kabardians) were fighting against their own nobles together with their democratic neighbours, to gain rights on their tribal lands; in the west the democratic<sup>26</sup> Adyge tribes were fighting for their own lands where Cossacks were being settled; in Abkhazia mountaineers were living away from the control of Russians but holding the mountain passageways to the North Caucasus. Pearson noted “every rock

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21 Broxup, M. & Avtorkhanov, A. (1992) *The North Caucasus Barrier: The Russian Advance Towards the Muslim World*. London: Hurst, p. 2. [http://www.circassianworld.com/pdf/Russia\\_N.Caucasus\\_Broxup.pdf](http://www.circassianworld.com/pdf/Russia_N.Caucasus_Broxup.pdf)

22 Richmond, W. (2008) *The Northwest Caucasus: Past, Present, Future*. London: Routledge, p. 56.

23 See Allen, W.E.D. & Muratoff, P.P. (1953) *Caucasian Battlefields: A History of the Wars on the Turco-Caucasian Border 1828-1921*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 17-30.

24 Broxup, M. & Avtorkhanov, A. (1992), pp. 9-10.

25 Allen, W.E.D. & Muratoff, P.P. (1953), p. 50.

26 “With Russian incursion becoming an increasingly clear threat many Circassians realized that the termination of class hostility was necessary to resist ultimate conquest by the Russians” (Richmond 2008, p. 55). They established parliaments of elders (*khase*). Since it was not easy to deal with these tribes as they did not have nobles to convince, their process of colonisation had to be different and harsher, making Russia take extreme politics of isolation and suffering against them.

[in the Caucasian mountains] that the soldiers see is a fortress which they must storm or which is likely to be held against them on their return”<sup>27</sup>.

When Shamil<sup>28</sup> was captured in 1859, the hopes of the tribes were already down, since the promises of travellers like Bell and Longworth for diplomatic support from Britain had failed. The Ottoman Empire was breaking apart – it could no longer give military support – and they had lost a lot of people in the clashes of the last 100 years; also many were sold as slaves in this period. It was especially that year when mass deportation of the people of Circassia started; to ensure that people would leave, the Russian soldiers would “swoop down upon the folds and drive off all the cattle, leaving the inhabitants to escape and rouse the country”<sup>29</sup>. In 1861, a delegation of a unified Circassian Assembly met with Tsar Alexandre II in Kuban, but their demand not to be exiled was rejected.<sup>30</sup> They were either to leave for other parts of the Russian Empire, and thus die from the harsh climate conditions that they were not used to, as had happened with earlier deportations<sup>31</sup>, or they would get on the ships and leave for the Ottoman Empire.

Those who had a choice chose to leave for the Ottoman Empire. The last year of the war in Circassia (1863-1864) was the hardest and people were deported from their homes directly to the ships that were being paid on the number of people they took on board. Families were separated, children being taken away; also the elderly and those who were ill and not allowed to get on the ships were forced to leave for other parts of the Russian Empire. Many ships sank since they were overloaded for more money. The lands emptied of the mountaineers were given over to Cossacks, Greeks, Bulgarians and other people of the Tsarist Russia. In Abkhazia, the Abkhaz were not allowed to settle in the coastal areas, or in fertile lands, but everyone else was. It was in this period that a systematic resettlement of Mengrelian and Georgian population was taking place in this area.

On 21 May 1864, the Russo-Caucasian (also known as Russian-Circassian) War was officially announced to have ended and a celebration parade was organised in the terrain of Kbaada (today Krasnaya Polyanna where the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympics took place). The deportations continued throughout the year. Just 13 years after this, in 1877, the land between river Bzyb and Samyrzakan (current Abkhazian-Georgian borderland) also fell under full Russian control. This was after a landing of *muhadzys*<sup>32</sup> in the Abkhazian ports, uniting with the local mountaineers. The Russians feared the Turks would land large numbers of Circassian refugees and so they retreated, only to unite with the Russian forces in neighbouring regions and win over the region totally.<sup>33</sup> It was in this period, seeing the risk of having the Abkhaz near the cities, that the villages that were at close distance to the sea ports were emptied and the inhabitants put on ships, again to be sent to the Ottoman Empire. Shebzuhov argues that the events of the 19th century were not only the fault of Tsarist Russia, but also of “mountaineers, England, Turkey, nobles (feudal rulers) and clergy”<sup>34</sup>. To

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27 Pearson, C.H. (1970 [1859], pp. 130-131.

28 For a better analysis of Imam Shamil, see Gammer, M. (2003). Muslim resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan. Taylor & Francis.

29 Pearson, C.H. (1970 [1859], p. 131.

30 Polovinkina, T.V. (1999) *Circassia-My Pain [in Russian]*. Maykop: RIPO Adygeya.

31 There is a reference to the effect of earlier deportations in a newspaper article from 1999 by Dceref B., the Director of the Secret Archives in Kabardey-Balkar, who refers to this period's returnee settlement policies, of which I have come across a summary translation in Turkish translated from the summary in Circassian (Dceref, B. (1999) *Caucasus Foundation Bulletin*).

32 The name given to those who had migrated to the Ottoman Empire in the Russian literature and some Turkish and Arabic resources – means migrant in Ottoman Turkish.

33 Allen and Muratoff, 1953, *ibid.* p. 126; See also Dziridaria, G.A. (1982) *Mahadzyrstva and Problems of History of Abkhazia in the 19th Century [in Russian]*. Sukhum: Alashara, for further details of the events of 1876-77 in Abkhazia.

34 Shebzuhov, M.H., (1990) Current Problems of History of the People of the Caucasus [in Russian]. Proceedings of the Conference for the 70th Birthday of Z.V. Anchabadze, Sukhum: Alashara, p. 94

fully understand the processes of the time, scholars need to work on the archival documents of Russian and Ottoman Empires, as well as the British records.<sup>35</sup>

According to official Russian statistics, from 1858 till 1866, 500,000 people were sent to the Ottoman Empire, being settled in different parts from the politically unstable Balkans to Anatolia and the Middle East.<sup>36</sup> According to an appeal by the Cherkess Congress to the Russian Federation to recognise Circassian genocide, “official tsarist statistics show that more than 400,000 Circassians were killed, 497,000 were forced to flee abroad to Turkey, and only 80,000 were left alive in their native area”<sup>37</sup>. The number deported and scattered across the Ottoman Empire is not known, but is estimated to be more than a million, many of whom died on the way or just after their arrival due to disease and starvation.<sup>38</sup> It is estimated that all of the Ubykh, 90 per cent of the Adyge, and 60 per cent of the Abkhaz population left for the Ottoman Empire.<sup>39</sup>

On 10 June the Russian consul in Trabzon, General Kartsev wrote a letter to Moscow explaining the situation: the Batum consul had reported that there were about 6000 Cherkess and 7 was the death rate per day. Out of 249,000 people who arrived in Trabzon, 19,000 were dead; at the moment 63,290 Cherkess were there and of those 180-250 were dying daily. Of the 110,000 people that had arrived to Samsun, the death rate was 200 people per day. 4,650 of the people from Samsun were transferred through Trabzon to Istanbul and Varna, 40-60 had died daily. Since the beginning of May 1864, 30,000 of those who had arrived in Trabzon died.<sup>40</sup>

Kushabiev reports that, according to official Russian statistics, more than 150,000 Circassians were settled in the Balkans by 1876.<sup>41</sup> They were settled “along Tuna River to Serbian-Ottoman border and in Dobruca (current Romania) in order to set a line of defence”<sup>42</sup>. However, when the Serbians revolted against the Ottoman rule in 1876, they had to live through another war between the Ottoman Empire and the Russians, who supported the Serbians.<sup>43</sup> Together with the rest of the Muslim population, who were put under severe pressures by the non-Muslim rulers of the region (Austria-Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria), the majority of the Adyge and Abkhaz were forced to move, one more time, resettling in Anatolia or the Middle East.<sup>44</sup>

The above is just a general background on the history of the formation of the Circassian diaspora. Have you realised that many of the references in English are available on the Circassian World website? That’s no coincidence, with Metin Sönmez putting a lot of effort to collect together all key resources for researchers under this website. With majority of their population living abroad, an important scholarly work about the Circassian people has taken place in the diaspora. With their

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35 With the partial opening of the Ottoman Archives for scholars, there are some recent works on the existence of the Ottoman Empire in the Caucasus and its role in the events of 19th century.

36 Kasumov, A.H. & Kasumov, H.A. (1991) *Genocide of Circassians: From the History of the Struggle for Independence of the Circassians in the XIX Century* [in Russian]. Nalchik: Logos. Kумыков, Т.К. (1994) *Expulsion of the Adyge to Turkey: Consequence of Caucasian Wars* [in Russian]. Nalchik: Elbruz.

37 Cited in Goble, P. (2005) *Circassians Demand Russian Apology for 19th Century Genocide*, by Paul Goble, <http://www.circassianworld.com/articles/war-and-genocide/1156-circassians-demand-goble.html>

38 Shenfield (1999) *The Circassians: A Forgotten Genocide*, <http://www.circassianworld.com/circassians/who-are-they/1611-a-forgotten-genocide-stephen-shenfield>, Jaimoukha, A. (2004) *Circassians in Jordan*, <http://www.circassianworld.com/diaspora/middle-east/1249-the-circassians-in-jordan>

39 See Wesselink, E. (1996) *The North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey*, WRITENET, 1 May 1996, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6a6bc8.html> [accessed 30 October 2013] [Accessed in October 2013] p. 30.

40 Elmesov, A.M. (1991) *From the History of the Russian-Caucasian War: Documents and Materials* [in Russian]. Nalchik, p. 211, my translation.

41 Kushabiev, A.V. (2007) *From the History of the Cherkess Diaspora Abroad* [in Russian]. Nalchik: El-Fa, p. 58.

42 Arslan, E.Z., (2008) *Circassian Organizations in the Ottoman Empire (1908-1923)*. Istanbul: Boğaziçi University, unpublished MA thesis in History: p. 11 <http://www.circassianworld.com/analysis/1656-circassian-organizations-in-the-ottoman-empire-1908-1923-by-zeynep-arslan>

43 Demirel, M., (2010) *Bosnian Migrants in Turkey* [in Turkish]. In: Čaušević, E., Moačanin, N. & Kursar, V. (eds.). *Perspectives on Ottoman Studies: Papers from the 18th Symposium of the International Committee of Pre-Ottoman and Ottoman Studies (CIEPO) at the University of Zagreb 2008*, Berlin: Lit Verlag, pp. 137-138

44 Arslan (2008), p. 11

homeland being under the Soviet rule for most of the last century, many works on them in the homeland was written in Russian. Hence, majority of the English language academic works have appeared in the Post-Soviet period, when the international scholars and the diaspora gained access to the homeland, and the homeland populations gained some sort of cultural independency, their identity reviving both in the diaspora and the homeland. The dissolution of the Soviet Union marks an important milestone in the development of the Circassian scholarship. But before coming to other important milestones, I think it is important to talk about the variety of the “Circassian scholarship terminology”.

### Terminological Variety

Various works from various fields, different academic traditions, some with different political interest, some using different research techniques, some other basing their understanding to limited field sites/groups, created an important complication on key terminology relating to these people I have been referring to as Circassians up to now: Who are the *Circassians*? Are the events of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that caused their dispersion *exile*? Are they a *diaspora* and is the Caucasus their *homeland*? In the last decade the variety of answers just kept increasing and even got more complicated.

### Circassians

Many scholars use Circassian in their publications in English, and Çerkes in Turkish but their understanding of who this name includes is very variable. In its simplest form, Circassian is used as a synonym for the Adyghe<sup>45</sup> (Colarusso 1991<sup>46</sup>, Shami 1998<sup>47</sup>, Bram 1999<sup>48</sup>, Kaya 2005<sup>49</sup>, Besleney 2007<sup>50</sup>, Sahideko 2009<sup>51</sup>). A slightly wider understanding suggests Circassian refers to the Adyghe and their ethnic kin, the linguistically extinct Ubykh and the Abkhaz-Abaza<sup>52</sup> group (Shenfield 1999<sup>53</sup>, Jaimoukha 2004<sup>54</sup>, Chirikba 2006<sup>55</sup>, Miyazawa 2009<sup>56</sup>). Though there are some other definitions in between, you do not come across them in academic works (eg. including only the Ossetians to the last stated use). In its widest version Circassian/Çerkes is used to refer to all the North-Caucasian diasporas including the East Caucasian language speakers Chechens, Ossetians, or

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45 Adyghe is the self-designation of the people from the North-West Caucasus, speaking Adyghe language or as widely known in the literature Circassian language.

46 Colarusso, J. (1991) Circassian Repatriation: When Culture Is Stronger Than Politics. *The World & I*, November, pp. 656-669. <http://www.circassianworld.com/analysis/1216-circassian-repatriation>

47 Shami, S. (1998) Circassian Encounters: The Self as Other and the Production of the Homeland in the North Caucasus. *Development and Change*, 29 (4), pp. 617-646. <http://www.circassianworld.com/analysis/1205-circassian-encounters-shami>

48 Bram, C. (1999) Circassian Re-Immigration to the Caucasus. In: Weil, S. (ed.). *Roots and Routes: Ethnicity and Migration in Global Perspective*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, pp. 205-222. <http://www.circassianworld.com/diaspora/middle-east/1246-circassian-re-immigration>

49 Kaya, A. (2005) Circassian Diaspora in Turkey: Stereotypes, Prejudices and Ethnic Relations. In: Kuran-Burçoğlu N. & Miller S. G. (eds.). *Representations of the Others in the Mediterranean World and their Impact on the Region*, Istanbul: The ISIS Press, pp. 217-240. [http://www.circassianworld.com/pdf/Circassian\\_Diaspora\\_in\\_Turkey.pdf](http://www.circassianworld.com/pdf/Circassian_Diaspora_in_Turkey.pdf)

50 Besleney, Z.A. (2007) Diaspora Nationalism in the Age of Globalisation: Circassian Diaspora Politics and Diasporic Organisations in Turkey. Paper presented at: *Towards a New Generation of Scholarship on the Caucasus*, Sukhum, Abkhazia, October 30-31, 2007.

51 Sahideko, N. (2009) Circassian Return: May Those Who Have a Future Bloom [in Turkish]. Available from: [http://www.circassiancenter.com/cc-turkiye/tarih/269\\_cerkesdonusu.htm](http://www.circassiancenter.com/cc-turkiye/tarih/269_cerkesdonusu.htm).

52 To learn more about the Abkhaz-Abaza people see the Abkhaz World website: See [www.abkhazworld.com](http://www.abkhazworld.com)

53 Shenfield, S.D. (1999).

54 Jaimoukha (2004).

55 Chirikba, V.A. (2006) Abkhaz Community Abroad [in Russian]. Available from: [http://www.apsny.ru/community/community.php?page=content/community\\_a/community\\_a.htm](http://www.apsny.ru/community/community.php?page=content/community_a/community_a.htm) [accessed 2010]

56 Miyazawa, E. (2009) Some Consequences of the Re-Encounter with the “Homeland” on the Production of Local Knowledge: A Case of Circassians in Turkey. In: Özgür, E. (ed.). *The North Caucasus: Histories, Diasporas and Current Challenges*, Ankara: Kaf-Dav, The Social Science Research Council, pp. 91-105. <http://www.circassianworld.com/publications/e-library/1662-the-north-caucasus-histories-diasporas-and-current-challenges>

even Turkic languages speaker Karachai, etc. (Kaya 2004<sup>57</sup>, Aslan 2007<sup>58</sup>, Şahin 2007<sup>59</sup>, Aslan 2008<sup>60</sup>, Doğan 2009<sup>61</sup>). Beyond this discussion on who are the Circassians, there is also a variety of uses to refer to the people who call themselves Apsua or Abaza in their own languages, but widely known in the Caucasus as Abkhaz-Abazin or in the diaspora as Abaza (and mostly among fellow Caucasians – in-group identification). As this is not the topic of this paper, I want to note that I am discussing this in detail in my forthcoming book in Turkish, and hope to one day carry the discussion into English as well, now I will just note one thing: Majority of those who had different salient identities inside and outside of their diaspora communities, have started introducing themselves as Abkhaz in Turkey to non-Caucasian people only in the post-Soviet period and after the 1992-93 war which created a clear “homeland” with specific borders, legal institutions, and cultural existence as an independent entity. Though this is a clear cut milestone of change and separation, it has become a topic of “othering” and distancing in the last decade through new politics by leading members of the diaspora organisations.

As a sociologist I do not reject any of the above identification or explanation of identities, though during my PhD I have frequently been accused of preferring one over the other by different activists of academics. To go around this issue, I had decided to use the self-designations of the people that have been the focus of my PhD work– the Adyghe and Abkhaz in English and Russian; *Adige* and *Abaza* in Turkish and only using Cherkess and *Çerkes* in cases my informants clearly asked for such an identification using the widest sense of the term – all North Caucasian diaspora<sup>62</sup>. However, writing to the Circassian World website, I felt that it wouldn't be the right thing to do. So up to this point in this article I have used the word Circassian without any explanation of what it means but after explaining that it means a lot of different things and the context means everything, what shall I do? As the above references show, the Circassian World website includes all of the variety of uses – and new articles will be added to the site without any limitation in their understanding about who are the Circassians. Since the focus of this paper is Circassian World (despite a big introduction on the Circassian people which may also be easily proven limited by looking at various other works available on this website) I will continue to be using Circassian and let you, as the reader, choose how you wish to understand it.

## Exile

To refer to the 19<sup>th</sup> century movement and suffering of the Circassians, various terms have been used by different authors, scholars of different languages and traditions. Emigration (Aydemir 1988<sup>63</sup>, Henze 1990<sup>64</sup>, Bice 1991<sup>65</sup>, Habiçoğlu 1993<sup>66</sup>, Çiçek 2009<sup>67</sup>, Berber 2011<sup>68</sup>), *muhadzrstva*

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57 Kaya, A. (2004) Political Participation Strategies of the Circassian Diaspora in Turkey. *Mediterranean Politics*, 9 (2), pp. 221-239. <http://www.circassianworld.com/diaspora/turkey/1530-circassian-diaspora-turkey45>

58 Aslan, C. (2007) Existences of the Circassians in Turkey: Sampling Eastern Mediterranean. Paper presented at: Towards a New Generation of Scholarship on the Caucasus, Sukhum, Abkhazia, October 30-31, 2007. <http://www.circassianworld.com/publications/e-library/1662-the-north-caucasus-histories-diasporas-and-current-challenges>

59 Şahin, S. (2007) Legal Position, Political and Civil Rights of the Circassians in Turkey from an EU Point of View. Paper presented at: Towards a New Generation of Scholarship on the Caucasus, Sukhum, Abkhazia, October 30-31, 2007.

60 Aslan, C. (2008) How Diasporic are the Circassians in Turkey? [in Turkish]. <http://www.kafkasdiasporasi.com/yazar.asp?yaziID=1862> [Accessed in October 2013].

61 Doğan, S.N. (2009) Diaspora Nationalism as a Gendered Discourse: The Circassian Diaspora in Turkey. In: Özgür, E. (ed.). *The North Caucasus: Histories, Diasporas and Current Challenges*, Ankara: Kaf-Dav, The Social Science Research Council, pp. 106-122. <http://www.circassianworld.com/publications/e-library/1662-the-north-caucasus-histories-diasporas-and-current-challenges>

62 Erciyes J.C. (2017) Sovyet Sonrası 25 Yılda Türkiye'den Kuzey Kafkasya'ya Geri Dönüşün Dönüşümü: Köprüleri Yakmaktan Köprüler Kurmaya [The Transformation of Return from Turkey to the Caucasus in the 25 Years after the Soviet Union: From Burning the Bridges to Building the Bridges], *JOCAS*, 2 (4), p. 1-30 <http://dergipark.gov.tr/jocas/issue/28303/300757>

63 Aydemir, İ. (1988) *Migration [in Turkish]*. Ankara.

64 Henze, P.B. (1990) *The North Caucasus: Russia's Long Struggle to Subdue the Circassians*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND. <http://www.circassianworld.com/history/war-and-exile/1476-the-north-caucasus-p-henze-1990>

(Dzidaria 1982<sup>69</sup>, Aydemir 1991<sup>70</sup>, Hewitt 1993<sup>71</sup>, Hewitt 1999<sup>72</sup>, Vardania 2007<sup>73</sup>, Gurgulia 2010<sup>74</sup>), exodus (Kreindler et al. 1995<sup>75</sup>, Rosser-Owen 2007<sup>76</sup>), deportation (Colarusso and Richmond 2008<sup>77</sup>, Achugba 2010<sup>78</sup>), exile/big exile (Bjedug and Taymaz 1995<sup>79</sup>, Berzeg 1996<sup>80</sup>, Şaşmaz 1999<sup>81</sup>, Bram 1999<sup>82</sup>, Karpat 2001<sup>83</sup>), ethnic cleansing<sup>84</sup> (Kreiten 2009<sup>85</sup>) or genocide<sup>86</sup> (Kasumov and Kasumov 1991<sup>87</sup>, Shenfield 1999<sup>88</sup>, Aslan 2006<sup>89</sup>, Zhemukhov 2012<sup>90</sup>, Richmond 2013<sup>91</sup>) – all these terms have been used (sometimes interchangeably). These events, no matter what they are called had a traumatic impact on the Circassians and completely changed the population of the region.

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- 65 Bice, H. (1991) *Migrations from the Caucasus to Anatolia [in Turkish]*. Vol. 34 Ankara: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı.
- 66 Habiçoğlu, B. (1993) *Migrations from Turkey to Anatolia and Settlement [in Turkish]*. Istanbul: Nart Yayıncılık.
- 67 Çiçek, N. (2009) “English Biscuits to Unfortunate Circassians”: The Big Circassian Exile in British Archival Documents (February 1864-May 1865)” [in Turkish]. *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi*, 1 [online] Available from: [http://www.politics.ankara.edu.tr/eski/dergi/pdf/64/1/4-cicek\\_nazan.pdf](http://www.politics.ankara.edu.tr/eski/dergi/pdf/64/1/4-cicek_nazan.pdf)
- 68 Berber, F. (2011) The Migrations from Caucasia to Anatolia in the 19th Century, *Karadeniz Araştırmaları*, 31, pp. 17-49.
- 69 Dzidaria, G.A. (1982) *Mahadzyrstva and Problems of History of Abkhazia in the 19th Century [in Russian]*. Sukhum: Alashara.
- 70 Aydemir, I. (1991) *Circassian Intellectuals in Exile (Muhadzeret) [in Turkish]*. Ankara.
- 71 Hewitt, B.G. (1993) Abkhazia: A Problem of Identity and Ownership. *Central Asian Survey*, 12 (3), pp. 267-323.
- 72 Hewitt, G. (1999) Abkhazia, Georgia and the Circassians (NW Caucasus). *Central Asian Survey*, 18 (4), pp. 463-499. <http://www.circassianworld.com/circassians/who-are-they/1174-abkhazia-georgia-circassians-hewitt>
- 73 Vardania, G. (2007) Episodes from the Past of the Caucasian Diaspora (Abkhaz and Adyghe) [in Russian]. *Caucasus and Globalization [Kavkaz i globalizatsia]*, 1 (2), pp. 121–133.
- 74 Gurgulia, E.A. (2010) Diaspora: On the Interpretation of the Concept using the Example of Cherkess Diaspora [In Russian] In: Abuseitova, M. H., et al (eds.) *Young Orientalists of the Commonwealth of Independent States: Articles Collection*. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, pp. 179-192.
- 75 Kreindler, I., Bensoussan, M., Avinor, E. & Bram, C. (1995) Circassian Israelis: Multilingualism as a Way of Life. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 8 (2), pp. 149-162. <http://www.circassianworld.com/diaspora/middle-east/1244-circassian-israelis-multilingualism>
- 76 Rosser-Owen, S.A.I., (2007) *The First ‘Circassian Exodus’ to the Ottoman Empire (1858-1867), and the Ottoman Response, Based on the Accounts of Contemporary British Observers*. London: University of London. <http://www.circassianworld.com/history/war-and-exile/1134-the-first-circassian-exodus>
- 77 Colarusso, J. & Richmond, W. (2008) *The Conquest and Deportation of the Circassians*. In: Shenfield, S.D. (ed.). *The Circassians*. Johnson’s Russia List, Research and Analytical Supplement. [online] Available from: [http://johncolarusso.net/pdf/the\\_deportation.pdf](http://johncolarusso.net/pdf/the_deportation.pdf)
- 78 Achugba, T.A. (2010) *The Ethnic History of the Abkhazians in the XIX-XX Centuries. (Ethno-Political and Migration Aspects) [in Russian]*. Sukhum: ABIGI.
- 79 Bjedug, M. & Taymaz, E. (1995) *The Exiled Peoples Circassians [In Turkish]*. Ankara: Birikim.
- 80 Berzeg, N. (1996) *Circassian Exile: Real, Historical and Political Reasons [In Turkish]*. Ankara: Takav.
- 81 Şaşmaz, M. (1999) Immigration and Settlement of Circassians in the Ottoman Empire on British Documents 1857-1864. *OTAM*, 9, pp. 331-366.
- 82 Bram, C. (1999)
- 83 Karpat, K.H. (2001) The Status of the Muslims under European Sovereignty: The Exile of the Circassians and their Settlement in Syria [in Turkish]. *The Exile of the Circassians 21 May 1864 (Proceedings, Documents, Articles)*, pp. 78-111.
- 84 Ethnic Cleansing – one group forcefully expels another ethnic group from the land they occupy and repopulates it.
- 85 Kreiten, Irma. “A Colonial Experiment in Ethnic Cleansing: The Russian Conquest of the Western Caucasus, 1856–65.” *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 2–3 (June– September 2009): 213–241.
- 86 Legal Definition requires designation by the International Criminal Court (After Jewish Holocaust, Bosnian and Rwandan Genocides have been recognised). Circassian Genocide has been recognised only by the Republic of Georgia in 2013.
- 87 Kasumov, A.H. & Kasumov, H.A. (1991) *Genocide of Circassians: From the History of the Struggle for Independence of the Circassians in the XIX Century [in Russian]*. Nalchik: Logos. Kумыков, Т.К. (1994) *Expulsion of the Adyghe to Turkey: Consequence of Caucasian Wars [in Russian]*. Nalchik: Elbruz.
- 88 Shenfield, S.D. (1999).
- 89 Aslan, C. (2006) The Name of a Genocide: The Great Circassian Exile, *Uluslararası Suçlar ve Tarih*, 1(1), pp. 1-33 [in Turkish] Available from: <http://avrsya.etu.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/birsoykiriminadi.pdf> [accessed 2013].
- 90 Zhemukhov, S. (2012) The Birth of Modern Circassian Nationalism. *Nationalities Papers*, 40 (4), pp. 503-524.
- 91 Richmond, W. (2013) *The Circassian Genocide*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Another important thing to note here is that, it is now more widely referred as the “Circassian exile and genocide” in Turkey and elsewhere in the diaspora. Besides, some people prefer to use this to refer only to the suffering of the Adyghe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, trying to exclude Abkhazians. No matter how the academics, or the political leaders identify themselves and these events, as I explained before what happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is not an event that happened in a single day – 21 May 1864 – or to a limited group of people. Some Abazin (Abaza) who have been living among the Eastern Circassian speakers for over three centuries, as well as some Abkhaz (Apsua/Abaza) who were neighbours of the Shapsygh and Ubykh and seen as part of Circassia were dislocated from their lands immediately with the others by 1864. Hence some others were deported from their homes, from lands in current Abkhazia, 13 years after this, in 1877, while some already settled exiles in the Balkans were displaced again to be settled in Anatolia and Trans-Jordan in 1877 too. In this regard, no matter what their self-identification or period of deportation, the Circassian Exile (I prefer this usage as that is what is widely used among the rural diaspora that I have been working with) has displaced all the populations of the North-West Caucasus, and even some North-Eastern Caucasian populations, giving them a similar diasporic experience in Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Israel with local differences due to the variety of the languages they were speaking, identities they protected, and non-Caucasian peoples they interacted with in the earlier years of settlement in the diaspora.

### **Diaspora and Homeland**

Many researchers working on the Adyghe and Abkhaz diaspora (or Circassian diaspora) agree with the definition of a classical or victim diaspora due to the events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century dispersing them (Shami 1998, 2000<sup>92</sup>, Bram 1999<sup>93</sup>, Kaya 2004<sup>94</sup>, Vardania 2007<sup>95</sup>). There are some counter-arguments to these approaches. Aslan (2008)<sup>96</sup> argues that Circassians in Turkey live as diasporas but their high levels of participation (integration) in the social and political structures in their host country and their feelings of high concern for their host country (fatherland as referred by Aslan in contrast to motherland referring to the homeland) limit their diasporic characteristics. Jaimoukha (2004)<sup>97</sup> writes about a similar integration and cultural assimilation of the Jordanian Circassians. If they are assimilated or acculturated, then they do not preserve a distinctive identity from the host society. Still, it must be considered that, as Dr. Setenay Nil Doğan suggests<sup>98</sup>, there is a variety within the diaspora, in the way people identify with a diasporic identity, what it means to be Circassian, the conception of homeland, and the relation to the current place of settlement. Increasingly, the Circassians living in Turkey, like other diasporas, “proudly maintain their ethno-national identity, retain their homeland citizenship”, or in the case of Circassians - living permits, “openly identify as members of diaspora organisations, and are not reluctant to act publicly on behalf of their homelands and dispersed co-ethnics”.<sup>99</sup> However, occasionally the diasporic discourse and parallel to that the academic discourse is complicated by the arguments on where the homeland is, if it is the homeland, the motherland, the fatherland or the ancestral land for the Circassians. The discussion further develops, when homeland is referred as the Caucasus, Circassia or in relation to a more localised, current settlement– e.g. Maikop, Adygeya, Nalchyk, Kabardey

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92 Shami (1998) and Shami, S. (2000) Prehistories of Globalization: Circassian Identity in Motion. *Public Culture*, 12 (1), pp. 177-204. <https://circassianworld.com/analysis/1206-prehistories-of-globalization>

93 Bram (1999)

94 Kaya (2004)

95 Vardania, G. (2007) Episodes from the Past of the Caucasian Diaspora (Abkhaz and Adyghe) [in Russian]. *Caucasus and Globalization [Kavkaz i globalizatsia]*, 1 (2), pp. 121–133.

96 Aslan (2008)

97 Jaimoukha (2004).

98 I heard Dr. Setenay Nil Doğan state this idea of “variety within the diaspora” (also suggested by Pattie, S. (2005) *New Homeland for an Old Diaspora*. In: Levy, A. & Weingrod, A. (eds.). *Homelands and Diasporas: Holy Lands and Other Places*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, pp. 49-67) first time in an inspiring talk she gave at the Sakarya Caucasian Association in 2011; an idea she repeated many times in her other talks elsewhere; which also inspired my understanding of the variety of conceptualisation in relation to the Circassian people and experiences.

99 Sheffer, G. (2003) *Diaspora Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 3.

(notice that not Kabardino-Balkaria, but only Kabardey is used in the diaspora to refer to the eastern parts of the North-West Caucasus), etc. Again just taking your attention to this diversity I move on.

### **Academic Milestones**

The 1990s was a period when the diaspora was most active, but also was getting aware of the reality that there was not enough *fact based knowledge* to give to those who were seeking answers to understand the dynamics in the Caucasus. While seeking to understand the milestones for the Circassian scholarship, I realised that it was different for everyone. For the international scholarship, as a scholar working on return migration I see John Colarusso's 1991 paper on Circassian Repatriation<sup>100</sup> as the start of a new era. For an anthropologist or a feminist scholar, Setenay Shami's paper<sup>101</sup> from 1988 where she reflects on her positionality as a young women of Circassian origin, who is a researcher from the US, is the key resource. However, for some others, Paul Henze's 1992 paper entitled "Circassian Resistance to Russia"<sup>102</sup> may be seen as a milestone for the Circassian scholarship. I am sure, if I ask to linguists, political scientists, or other experts, each will suggest a different material. 1990s were marked with seldom works being published in English, with a few scholars doing extensive fieldwork in the Caucasus or the diaspora. I have already cited many of these key works while discussing the terminologies of the Circassian scholarship. There are also key formations that needs to be explained, and a couple of people whose valuable efforts should be recognised (there may be some people I am missing but I will be happy to add them along as the readers comment and share their experiences). First of such very important formations is Circassian Academia – an electronic email group for scholars interested in Circassian studies.

### ***Circassian Academia***

As Circassian scholars started to gain interest in the academic study of their peoples, three scholars' pathways crossed in the UK. Zeynel Abidin Besleney<sup>103</sup> – who would be leading a lot of other academic initiatives in the future - was a master student at UCL. Fethi Açıkkel was doing post-doc in LSE. Argun Başkan was doing an MA at the University of Kent. They came together, to meet, to discuss, to share the common ground for Circassian scholarship. Murat Papşu – another name we will see in other initiatives too- was based in Ankara at the time, and they came together with the UK scholars frequently in Istanbul or Ankara and the topic of discussion was always the same. Their different expertise, Fethi's deep theoretical knowledge, Zeynel's practical knowledge from his many years of diaspora activism, Murat's access to Russian language materials, Argun motivating them with his interest on the topic of academic cooperation; in the year 2003, they established an email group (under the yahoo.groups) called Circassian Academia. Many people joined into the group in the months and years that followed. Though networking was the focus, at first, the UK based scholars were helping those from Turkey with poor English writing skills for editing and publication of their work. That was a very important scholarly support. Another thing that the group focused on was to let all the members know of conferences and publications relating to the Circassian scholarship. There were all sorts of exchange and announcement in the group but as the number of members increased, each member was asked to follow the Chatham House Rules to create a safe environment to discuss critical issues as well.

I joined Circassian Academia, only at the end of 2004, while I was preparing for my masters degree fieldwork in Adygeya<sup>104</sup>. I met Zeynel during a field visit to the UK that I was doing for Oxford

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100 Colarusso, J. (1991)

101 Shami, S. (1988) Studying Your Own: The Complexities of a Shared Culture. In: Altorki, S. & El-Solh, C.F. (eds.). Arab Women in the Field: Studying Your Own Society, New York: Syracuse University Press, pp. 115-138.

102 Henze, P. (1992) 'Circassian Resistance to Russia' in Marie Bennigsen-Broxup (ed.) *The North Caucasus Barrier*, Hurst & co., 62-111. [www.circassianworld.com/pdf/Russia\\_N.Caucasus\\_Broxup.pdf](http://www.circassianworld.com/pdf/Russia_N.Caucasus_Broxup.pdf)

103 I am grateful to Zeynel Abidin Besleney and Murat Papşu for providing me the details on the establishment of CA.

104 See my thesis here: <http://www.circassianworld.com/analysis/1683-return-migration-to-the-caucasus-the-adyge-abkhaz-diaspora-s-transnationalism-and-life-after-by-jade-cemre-erciyes>

University and my own university, METU. It was interesting because I had sent an email to ODTÜ-KAF, my university Circassian society which included my UK host's contact details, stating that they were free to direct my message to any Circassian living in London. At the same time, I had read an article by Zeynel Besleney and was very keen to meet another scholar working on Circassian issues so was looking for his contact details. I had called his university to get a contact but they had not given me anything. However, my message to the ODTÜ-KAF e-group was taken seriously by my fellow Circassians, and was directed to people who had lived in the UK, including Fethi Açikel. Fethi had sent my message to Zeynel. On the day I had told my friend, I didn't think that I would be able to find this scholar in huge London city, her house phone rang. She told me the call was for me – and it was Zeynel. This seems like a very simple coincidence. As a scholar interested in Circassian issues, my life wouldn't be short of such "coincidences" but Zeynel Besleney, and later Metin Sönmez would be the most valuable people for establishing academic networks besides becoming valuable friends, who I almost always disturb with my questions without hesitation.

Unfortunately, at some point there were discussions in Circassian Academia, after some members posting political events arguing these should be to the interest of academics as well. Besides further developments which I will explain below, shortly the division among members on the definition of Circassians made the group become idle after 2013 (receiving only 30 messages in 2014, compared to 499 in 2008 when it made a peek, or 441 in 2011, 212 in 2012 and 100 in 2013). However, members of the Circassian Academia have organised one conference together and attended many others in the years that followed which I shortly explain later.

### ***Circassian World***

In 2005, seeing the lack of trustworthy information on the "Circassian World" in English, Metin had created the Circassian World website, where he aimed to collect all "worthy" works in English relating to "the Adyghe-Abkhaz history and culture"<sup>105</sup>. The Circassian World motto was "If our lives are to be short, then let our fame be great! Let us not depart from the truth! Let fairness be our path! Let us not know grief! Let us live in freedom!" a quote<sup>106</sup> from the "Nart Sagas from the Caucasus", a book by John Colarusso published in 2002<sup>107</sup>. John Colarusso was one of the earliest English writing scholars, interested in and did extensive fieldwork in the Caucasus and in the diaspora, who also contributed a lot to the Circassian World website from its earliest days. The website during that first year had two main sections: One was entitled Articles and Publications, the other Links. The Articles, Publications and Documents section had a couple of subtitles that show both the interest of the website and the scope of available works: Russian-Circassian War & Genocide; the North Caucasus; Mythology; General Articles & Documents; Abkhazia- Apsny; Language; Archaeology; Art; Articles and Documents in Other Languages (Russian, French, German, Turkish).

When it moved to [www.circassianworld.com](http://www.circassianworld.com) domain in 2006, Circassian World did have only about 100 resources, only about one fourth of these written by academics. Interestingly, looking back at them, I notice that only a single work "Prehistories of Globalization: Circassian Identity in Motion" (2000) was written by a female academic, by Setenay Shami – who I referred above. (There was also a link to Susan Layton's book "Russian Literature and Empire: The Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy", but that was listed only as a title with a short abstract not as a full text.) It is at this point important to note that the position of the women in the

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<sup>105</sup> This explanation and other quotes all come from some emails and archive materials that Metin Sönmez has kindly shared with me to better reflect upon that earlier period of the Circassian World which was at the time available at a free domain [www.circassianworld.5u.com](http://www.circassianworld.5u.com).

<sup>106</sup> This quote also later inspired a book title "Let Our Fame be Great: Journeys Among the Defiant People of the Caucasus" by journalist Oliver Bullough in 2011.

<sup>107</sup> Colarusso, J. (2014). Nart Sagas from the Caucasus: Myths and Legends from the Circassians, Abazas, Abkhaz, and Ubykhs. Princeton University Press. <http://www.circassianworld.com/publications/reviews/1641-nart-sagas-from-the-caucasus-review>

Circassian/Caucasian diasporas and homeland populations, as well as scholarly involvement of women in Circassian/Caucasian studies has been a topic of interest for a long time but only in the year 2018 we will be able to read a collection of works by women scholars and on a special issue by [Journal of Caucasian Studies \(JOCAS\)](#) entitled *Gender in the Caucasus and Diaspora*<sup>108</sup>. The issue will be edited by **Madina Tlostonova** – an important feminist scholar from Sweden who is of Caucasian origin.

Coming back to the Circassian World website, in the years that passed by, Circassian World has developed into a key resource website, which you could just suggest to anyone – academic or journalist, or a friend interested in the Circassian peoples, history and culture. It also had a Newsletter digest, which informed the members of the updates to the website, recent publications, controversial pieces, international news and events.

During the summer of 2008, just before the recognition of the Republic of Abkhazia by Russia, lots of things were happening in the Caucasus and the world heard only of the claims of the other parties. CircassianWorld during this time gave a lot of voice to Abkhazia, the main page of the website was changed to reflect upon the claims of recognition. It stated “Circassian World follows closely developments affecting the fate of our Abkhazian brothers and lends its strongest support to the struggle for the independence of Abkhazia. Abkhazia is Abkhazia...” After that, seeing the necessity to separate information relating to Abkhazia and the Abkhaz, to respond to the newly appearing interest on this country and its peoples, Metin created the Abkhaz World website. In the years that followed, the Abkhaz World has gained recognition as a valuable resource site promoting Abkhazia to the English speaking audience, and by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia, with a special decree, Metin Sönmez was awarded a “certificate of honour”.

Unfortunately, there was no official organisation to recognise the value of the Circassian World website but I know that like me, many scholars, activists and those who were aware of the effort Metin Sönmez needed to put and was putting in to keep the website up to date, tried to show their appreciation in every possible way. All of us, including many others who I didn’t know in person, were disappointed when one day in 2013 Circassian World became an empty parking lot. One person, using a web archive service, even created a Wordpress page till it would be back. His message in the about section was: “The original [Circassian World website](#) was an amazing resource for news and current affairs articles on the northern Caucasus region. Unfortunately it just disappeared!... The good news is that nothing on the internet ever really dies! Thanks to the [Web Archive](#) I was able to salvage most of the content of the original Circassian World website and repost it on this blog.”<sup>109</sup> Think about it, seeing the value of it, exactly one month after its closing, the Circassian World was re-created as an image of the earlier one. Even the image served scholars like me, who had found majority of the key resources from the Circassian World website.

### **Çerkes Araştırmaları/Circassian Research Group**

While in various works and events the discussion about who are the Circassians was going on, a group of people started to feel a need to distance the Adyghe from the other North Caucasian peoples both politically and scholarly. Besides, it was the time of the Sochi Olympics, when the world was showing interest in the Circassians. Metin Sönmez’s CW was living its high period. This led to the establishment of the Circassian Research Group in 2011 by Zeynel Abidin Besleney and Murat Papşu, together with Aytek Kurmel, who believed “Çerkes” or “Circassian” is historically the name of the Adyghe people and it should be used as such in the current academic and political discourse. Though the diaspora had already started to be divided by different associations and organisations for Adyghe, Abkhaz, United Caucasianists, pro-returnists and others<sup>110</sup>, this brought an end to the united front of scholars that were coming together through the Circassian Academia –

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108 See Call for Papers of the JOCAS Special Issue here: <http://dergipark.gov.tr/jocas/page/3719>

109 See <https://circassianworld.wordpress.com/about/>

<sup>110</sup> Please see the amazing scholarly work by Zeynel Abidin Besleney to better understand the roots of various divisions among diaspora organisations: Besleney, Z. A. *The Circassian diaspora in Turkey: a political history*. Routledge, 2014

which at first had the same intention of distancing the Adyghe studies from the rest of the Caucasian studies but as the number of people who studied the Circassian diaspora in its wider meanings was constantly increasing, it had become hard to transform the existing group. Çerkes Araştırmaları existed as a website collecting all works on the Adyghe/Circassians history in Russian, Turkish, English, and others; included an extensive archive of diaspora journals (that no other than Metin Sönmez scanned during his time at KAFDAV – an institution explained under the next title) but serves only in Turkish as of today. Still, for any Circassian studies scholar, I strongly suggest to go through this valuable resource website.

### **Other key formations**

There are three other key organisations I see as crucial for the development of the Circassian scholarship. The first of these is KAFDAV which I referred above. KAFDAV or in its longer English title “Caucasian Research, Culture and Solidarity Trust” was established in 2000 (though the process had started in 1997) with a target to unite scholarship and scholarly works, archival materials and museum worth artefacts all relating to the North Caucasus. In 2006, Muhittin Ünal, director since its establishment, retiring from his day job started to work for its organisation and development full time. Around this time, KAFDAV moved to its property at the center of Ankara, in Kızılay, and started its library digitalisation process. In this period, Agache Serap started working there, while Mole Levent Kaplan spent all his free days as a volunteer in registering the books, journals and documents that numbered 2000 at first and 5600 by 2013. Metin Sönmez also worked there for a couple of years. Later to them joined Albeg Murat Duman. All these people putting their time and efforts, without getting practically anything in return (even if they were paid a little livelihood or travel support occasionally, or a basic salary) managed to create the digital archive, as well as the biggest open library of works on the Caucasus in various languages that exists in Turkey with it holding 9662 books and journals for now.

Another development in Turkey has been the opening of the Düzce University Circassian (Adyghe) Language and Literature Department (giving both undergraduate and Masters level education) in 2013. Both people who speak Circassian language and who don't study there to become teachers and translators or experts. The department organised some academic events as well, including a big conference on the future of the Circassian language in 2016. There were some efforts to open an Abkhaz language department, but these failed due to unannounced reasons – but most likely political ones. There were also efforts to open Circassian language departments elsewhere but those have also been unsuccessful to date.

The third key event, according to me, happened after increased non-Circassian origin academic interest in the Circassian people in Turkey. It is the establishment of Bilgi-Çerkes, Bilgi University Circassian Study Group. Though their activities are going slow, in 2015 and 2016 some key events they organised showed a prospect of bringing politically divided Circassian scholarship together under a non-Circassian origin, welcoming academic space. Besides, Bilgi-Çerkes is structured in such a way that it is going to be in relation to various other ethnic and religious minority study groups at Bilgi University, which means that there is a hope for the Circassian scholarship to move beyond its own limits. Still, this is yet to be seen in time.

### **JOCAS**

One final crucial milestone that needs to be listed is the establishment of the first ever Circassian academic publication in Turkey – Journal of Caucasian Studies (JOCAS) in 2015. JOCAS was established, again by two names you have heard above many times– Murat Papşu and Zeynel Abidin Besleney, together with two scholars from Sakarya University, Ümit Ekin and Tufan Turan. These four people have been the editors for the last two years, publishing 5 issues in Turkish, English and Russian. JOCAS which from the beginning started as an open access, peer reviewed, international academic journal has been hosted in the Turkish DergiPark (Journal Parking) online system for over a year. Currently, Murat Papşu is the Chief Editor and I myself am the Editor of the journal. JOCAS's aims and scope is self explanatory of its value:

“As a subject of academic research the Caucasus is generally placed in the category of Russian Studies or considered as a hyphenated area study along with Central Asia as the Caucasus-Central Asian Studies. Strategic Studies looks at the region and its peoples from the angle of the presence and transportation of energy resources such as oil and gas, ethnic conflicts, and the national interests of various states. In Turkey, where the humanities are somewhat dominated by the field of historical studies, the Caucasus is studied within the context of either the Ottoman history or Turkic world. JOCAS aims to fill the void left between these fields and to provide an alternative academic platform to overcome misinformation and one-sided approaches in the study of the region and its peoples. By building a bridge between academics and researchers from various academic disciplines to extend and deepen the understanding of the Caucasian Studies through historical, sociological, political and economical research, JOCAS intends to contribute towards the recognition of the Caucasian Studies as an independent academic discipline.”

### **Conferences and Meetings**

In the past decade there has been many key meetings and conferences that has shaped the Circassian scholarship. For me, after meeting Zeynel Besleney in the UK, the real level of academic cooperation started at The European Society for Central Asian Studies (ESCAS) conference in Krakow, Poland in the year 2005 just before my fieldwork in Adygeya. I was presenting a work I had done for my University in Azerbaijan, and totally not interested in other presentations because I thought there wouldn't be a single panel on the Circassian people in a Central Asian Conference. At one lunch time, when I heard the person sitting next to one of my colleagues from Ankara said he is working on the Circassians, I felt that wonders will never cease! Cutting into their conversation I met Chen Bram from Israel, who has been a great friend and a colleague that I can discuss any issue, exchange ideas on various topics of interest and cooperate at various levels in relation to Circassian scholarship and beyond. Chen the same day introduced me to late Moshe Gammer, an amazing scholar also from Israel. Moshe, upon hearing my plans to do fieldwork in Adygeya invited me to write a paper from my research in a forthcoming volume he was editing. In an academic environment which doesn't appreciate young scholars, or scholars working on relatively little known peoples like the Circassians; and even women, that was a turning point for me.<sup>111</sup> I saw that scholars can cooperate. I believed that Circassian scholarship can turn into an internationally recognised area of study by ego-free, open-minded, all-generation, different expertise scholarly cooperation. Moshe was a great expert and scholar good at that. I always remember him with such a special place in the academia, though he is well known for his very important work on Imam Shamil, for me he is a person who could bring transnational scholars to produce a good book. His loss has had a great impact on the Caucasian research area, and on me personally who was lucky to have met him in person.

In the year I met Chen and Moshe, I was also attending Caucasus Courses (Kafkasya Dersleri) organised by the Caucasus Forum, an independent, Caucasian, youth organisation<sup>112</sup>. Though many of the people who attended that have not become part of the Circassian Scholarship, I think their effort to bring Turkish experts to talk about topics of their interest such as nationalism, diaspora, identity, was a one of its kind effort to understand Circassian and Caucasian issues by young people with an internationally recognised scholarship perspective.

In 2007, I moved to Abkhazia. Looking back at some old messages for this paper, I realised that this was a turning point not only for me personally, but for all the Circassian scholars I was in touch with as I could be a scholarly point of exchange with scholars living in the Caucasus. The first outcome came after a meeting in the spring of 2007 in Büyükada, İstanbul where we decided to

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<sup>111</sup> “The Republic of Adygheia: Perceptions of rights, freedoms and life chances of ordinary people” In: Gammer, Moshe (ed.) *Ethno-Nationalism, Religion and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*. Routledge, London, pp. 50-68. [http://apsnyteka.org/file/Jade\\_1\\_The\\_Republik\\_of\\_Adygheya.pdf](http://apsnyteka.org/file/Jade_1_The_Republik_of_Adygheya.pdf)

<sup>112</sup> Recently, at a conference in Malmö, Sweden, sociologist Dijan Özkurt made a very important presentation on the Caucasus Forum, analysing the organisation through theories of intersectionality. This shall be available online shortly.

organise the first Circassian Academia Conference in Abkhazia. Ergün Özgür, who became the editor of the publication<sup>113</sup> from the conference "Towards a New Generation of Scholarship on the Caucasus," held in Sukhum, Abkhazia, on October 30–31, 2007 was also the point of organisation in Turkey while I arranged everything in Abkhazia. The conference was co-organized by the SSRC (New York) and the Center for Strategic Studies (Sukhum) as well as the Circassian Academia. It was a very hard experience for me, as I had to organise everything without any money in my pocket, without proper Abkhazian or Russian language skills, and also, without proper understanding of the ways to communicate with an old generation of scholars in the Caucasus. In the years that followed, I learned both the languages and the ways, though still, I find myself perceived as a western scholar more than a Circassian scholar in most cases.

Circassian Academia members met again in 2009 in Büyükada but that time I couldn't make it. Murat Paşu has kindly shared his notes from this meeting with me, and it turns out that most things discussed have not been realised. 2007 CA Conference was a success, that stayed in the words of many scholars and ordinary people in Abkhazia for many years. However, the idea to make the conference every two years in a different location has failed, both due to the fact that no one was interested in taking the lead and also when my above mentioned division of the scholarship happened in relation to "who are the Circassians". Another meeting happened again in 2009 in Ankara where we discussed possibilities to cooperate for 3 research grant applications. These were also never realised, but I strongly felt this time the division was not only about those who thought differently about Circassians, but there was a weird tension between male and female scholars who attended that meeting. I think, after that, there has not been a separate meeting to do something together, but groups of people came together after key events, discussing further cooperation.

There are a few key conferences that some people from CA went all together in the years that followed: A Caucasian conference where as a scholar from Abkhazia I was rejected but still went as an audience, happened at St Andrews University, Scotland<sup>114</sup> in 2010 where there was a panel on the Circassians. Same year a group of scholars went to Barcelona, Spain with a panel on Diaspora Politics: Circassians in Turkey<sup>115</sup>. In 22-25 September 2011 the symposium on the "Circassians in the 21st Century: Problems and Opportunities" was organized by KAF-DAV bringing together Circassian scholarship in Ankara, Turkey. The book of proceedings published in 2014 in Turkish was edited by Sevda Alankuş and Esra Oktay Arı<sup>116</sup>. During the period of Sochi Olympics, most events organised had political interest at their core. Hence, in 2015 we see a totally new academic interest in the Circassians. On 9 May 2015, at Bahçeşehir University, a private university based in Istanbul, 1<sup>st</sup> Circassian Diaspora Conference was organised by a team led by Ulaş Sunata, a sociologist and migrationist who at the conference defined herself as a scholar "who had become a Circassian" during the extended fieldwork throughout Turkey by a TUBITAK fund they received. As I mentioned 2015-2016 saw a couple of meetings organised by Bilgi-Çerkes. In 2017, November 23-24, Circassian scholarship had a chance to come together at the "Circassians in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Identity and Survival" Conference organized by RUCARR, Malmö University, Sweden. Proceedings of this event will shortly be available online, but as a participant and a speaker at this conference, I have to say, this conference will mark the generational division within the Circassian scholarship – but let me elaborate on that after the publications.

### **May the Force be with the Circassian World**

When I asked Metin Sönmez who has contributed to the Circassian World website, he has given me so many names that I didn't know how to reflect on their support. So maybe it is important to

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<sup>113</sup> Available here: <http://www.circassianworld.com/publications/e-library/1662-the-north-caucasus-histories-diasporas-and-current-challenges>

<sup>114</sup> University of St Andrews Centre for Russian, Soviet, Central and East European Studies Annual Conference 'The Caucasus: Imagining Freedom, Negotiating Dominion' 16-17 April 2010

<sup>115</sup> World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies, Barcelona, July 19th - 24th 2010

<sup>116</sup> You can buy this book here: <https://www.kafdavyayincilik.com/arastirma/gecmisten-gelecege-cerkesler-kultur-kimlik-ve-siyaset>

explain how much of discouragement is out there for anyone doing such serious work, as Metin. I know a lot of things he lived through but I also know that he wouldn't like those to be publicly talked about. So let me reflect upon my own experiences. During the past 12 years I have shown scholarly interest in the Circassian issues, there has not been a single year, my scholarly existence was questioned. I was labelled as various things, being "spy/agent" taking the lead like any others working on the Circassians and speaking multiple languages. You are insulted, not only by "others" but also by fellow Circassians, scholars, activists who do not agree with the way you comprehend or explain things. You are shout at by strangers and by your friends. It is again your friends who give you the most critical comments, in the hardest to hear ways. If you are a perfectionist, like many of the Circassian scholars are, or like Metin is, you will spend days and nights seeking the best information to write even a short comment; sending messages to 20 people to take their opinion in order to respond to a negative argument in the most academic/scientific and humanist way; never complain about lack of finances to keep the project at your hand alive, and be sleepless, penniless, motivationless, but will appear in a Circassian *jeug* or a virtual circle of a Circassian network and say that the outcome itself is satisfying enough (as many people I have named it repeated many times in our private and public conversations).

We, also sometimes have to deal with our own prejudice, and be involved with most controversial people because it is necessary for the continuation of the international scholarly discussion. Sometimes, even your dearest supporters would try to distance themselves from you and what you do. For Metin, if he would be after an archival document, a map, a resource that is available to limited number of people behind some closed doors, or required funds, or he needed support for a cause he sincerely believed in, he would send personal messages to each and every person he had ever communicated, asking for their support, either in person or by suggesting to others, and happily he would in most cases receive very positive responses. Quoting from some reference letters that I happened to read, he would be identified as "*a leader among his fellow Circassians in the quest for insights and documentation pertaining to the history of his people*" or "*to elucidate the complex history of the Circassian people*". Metin Sönmez, is not just a webmaster, or a creator of websites like the Circassian World or Abkhaz World. His work has shaped, shapes and will shape the English speaking world's understanding of a relatively little known, mostly wrongly understood, generally superficially studied peoples and places, through a collection of not known, hard to find, meticulously collected materials. May the force be with him and the Circassian World. As he will need it to keep up this amazing work, that is the spark of hope for the Circassian scholarship. As all others out there, by the amazing work they do help the resistance of the Circassian scholarship in an unjust world of scholarly power relations...

\*This article has been written in a pretty short time. There may be some errors or missing links. Please feel free to send any comments and editing suggestions to: [jadecemre@gmail.com](mailto:jadecemre@gmail.com). I will be happy to discuss and update the manuscript to reflect better on the key issues covered here.