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Abstract

This article examines the evolution and significance of the genocide recognition initiative among Circassians at the turn of the twenty-first century. It argues that, on the most basic level, the Circassian genocide recognition initiative is an identity-driven project, resulting from a fear of extinction that grows out of the experience of being a vulnerable, ethno-national group living with memories of massacres, deportations, exile and fragmentation. Genocide, in effect, becomes a frame used to articulate a seemingly universal Circassian grievance—the fear of extinction—but one that manifests itself in diverse ways on the homeland–diaspora continuum.

ON 20 MAY 2011 GEORGIA BECAME THE FIRST COUNTRY TO recognise as genocide Tsarist Russia's nineteenth century mass deportations and massacres of the Circassians of the Northwest Caucasus. The unanimous passing of the genocide resolution by the Georgian parliament marked an important milestone for Circassian genocide recognition efforts, pursued in the post-Soviet era by both homeland and diaspora Circassians (Barry 2011). These efforts, seeking affirmation, apology and restorative measures from the Russian government, have not received a receptive response from Moscow and have gone relatively unnoticed internationally. However, since the 2007 decision by the International Olympic Committee to hold the 2014 Winter Olympics in Russia's North Caucasus city of Sochi, diaspora Circassians have effectively brought the issue of their genocide to international attention. The Sochi area holds a special place in Circassian collective memory as the location of the last Circassian resistance to Tsarist Russia's campaign of deportations and mass atrocities, and as the symbol of collective Circassian victimisation. More specifically,

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the Circassian nationalist narrative regards the location called Krasnaya Polyana, where the core of the Olympic infrastructure was built, as a mass grave containing the bodies of thousands of indigenous Circassians, mostly women and children massacred during the military campaign of the mid-nineteenth century.¹ It is believed that this campaign claimed the lives of over a million Circassians and exterminated some Circassian tribes completely. Virtually all Circassians were ethnically cleansed from their ancestral homeland and hundreds of thousands of survivors were expelled to the Ottoman Empire—symbolically through the seaport of Sochi. Compounding the historical irony, the year 2014 marked the 150th anniversary of the Circassian genocide, a ‘coincidence’ which many Circassians consider as further proof of Moscow’s historic and continuous anti-Circassian stance (Shenfield 1999, p. 154; Richmond 2008, pp. 74–80).

This article examines the growing importance of the recognition initiative among Circassians at the turn of the twenty-first century. It argues that, on the most basic level, the genocide recognition initiative is an identity-driven project, resulting from a fear of extinction that grows out of the experience of being a vulnerable ethno-national group, living with memories of deportations, exile and fragmentation. Two premises are central to the Circassian genocide recognition initiative. First is the idea that genocide recognition can serve as an effective strategy for advancing Circassian nationalist demands inside Russia and internationally, by lending moral weight and a sense of urgency to the demands for maintaining and enhancing Circassian self-determination rights. In fact, genocide recognition efforts have, from their inception in the late *perestroika* era, been part of a strategy to address the Circassian national question, which has revolved around the demographic–territorial predicament of a politically and linguistically fragmented group. By linking the precarious position of the Circassian transnation in the contemporary period to the nineteenth century Tsarist genocide, Circassians have insisted that Russia had a historical responsibility to rehabilitate the Circassians through restorative measures such as facilitating the return of diaspora Circassians and ensuring administrative and political unification of Circassians in their ancestral homeland.² The second premise central to the Circassian genocide recognition initiative is the idea that through centring national consciousness among Circassians on the nineteenth century genocide, the collective memory of the genocide can become a mechanism for strengthening Circassian national identity at a time when other cultural artefacts of Circassian identity are in decline. As with other assimilated diasporic groups, the commemoration of the Circassian genocide helps maintain, or even strengthen, a sense of identification with the threatened core national identity. The commemoration of what Vamik Vokan calls a ‘chosen trauma’ helps mobilise communal identity and prevent assimilation (Vokan 1998, p. 48).

This article begins by addressing the issue of Circassian genocide through a brief discussion of the historiography of deportations and their treatment by scholars from the perspective

¹ For a sample of this kind of narrative, see ‘14 Reasons for Opposing Sochi 2014’, available at: <http://nosochi2014.com/campaign/14-reasons-for-opposing-sochi-2014.php>, accessed 7 May 2012.

² ‘Transnation’ describes an increasingly common form of ethno-national existence, whereby an ethno-national group consists of two equally important and intertwined elements—the territorialised component, a homeland, regardless of whether or not it is a sovereign state, and a diaspora, comprised of the communities belonging to the nominal ethno-national group but scattered away from the homeland. The Circassian transnation is comprised of the Circassian homeland, situated in the northwest Caucasus and under Russian sovereign control, and Circassian diasporic communities in the Middle East, Europe and North America. The concept of ‘transnation’ has been developed by Khachig Tölölyan (2000) in his work on the Armenian transnation.

of genocide studies. It then discusses the politics of genocide recognition as an emerging practice in domestic and international arenas. The last two sections of the article analyse the Circassian genocide recognition initiative, focusing on the genesis of the initiative, the nature of the claims implicit in the initiative, and their regional and international implications.

The question of Circassian genocide

The Circassians, or Adyghe in their self-appellation, are descendants of the indigenous inhabitants of the Northwest Caucasus.³ After an armed resistance to Russian imperial conquest which lasted a century, almost all of the survivors, approximately one million, were forcibly removed from their land and deported to the Ottoman Empire. Anywhere between 30% and 50% perished from hunger, disease or violence, on overcrowded ships or in refugee camps on their arrival in Anatolia and the Balkans.⁴ These events have given rise to the contemporary accusations of genocide, allegedly committed by the Imperial Russian government against the Circassian nation.

The Circassian genocide recognition initiative is constructed around the argument that the Russian Imperial state committed genocide against the Circassian nation in the course of the Russo–Caucasian War,⁵ by exterminating a significant part of the indigenous Circassian population, deporting the vast majority of survivors to the Ottoman Empire, and destroying the Circassian state as a politico-administrative and historical entity. The argument, thus, underscores three constituent elements of genocide as defined in the Genocide Convention⁶: a protected group defined in cultural terms, in this case, a nation; intent to destroy the protected group in whole or in part; and, acts and processes constituting genocide, namely physical destruction, forcible deportations, and destruction of culture and political institutions.

The term genocide was not used to describe the fate of the Circassians in the nineteenth century until the late 1980s and early 1990s, when significant grievances revolving around the brutality not only of the more recent Stalinist, but also of the more distant, Tsarist past, and the struggle for historical truth started playing prominent roles in motivating nationalist mobilisation inside the Soviet Union. The struggle for historical truth manifested itself in a clash between the official Soviet history and the ‘counter memory’ of the historically repressed groups. In the North Caucasus, this clash concerned the historical relationship between Russia and the Caucasus, as well as the inter-ethnic relations among the peoples of the North Caucasus. The official Soviet

³ Historical Circassia covered western and central parts of the North Caucasus from the Black Sea and the Kuban River to the mouth of the Sunja and the Terek. The Circassians were divided into ethno-tribal groups, the most numerous of which were Abadzekhs, Besleneys, Bzhedughs, Temirgoys, Natukhays, Kabardeys and Shapsugh. On Circassian history see the following: Jaimoukha (2001), Richmond (2008) and Khodarkovsky (2011).

⁴ There exists a relatively rich historiography of Circassian deportations from the Caucasus and their exile into the Ottoman lands in the nineteenth century. Classics in the field include Berzhe (1882), Karpat (1979, 1985) and Pinson (1970, 1972). For a more recent account, see Cuthel (2003). Estimates on losses vary but they generally fall between one third and one half of a million, with Walter Richmond suggesting the higher figure (Richmond 2008, pp. 77–78).

⁵ The Russo–Caucasian war is also known as the Caucasian War (in the official Russian narrative) or the Russo–Circassian War (preferred by the Circassian narrative in order to emphasise that the war amounted to international conflict between two political entities, Russia and independent Circassia, whose independence was crushed through Russian conquest).

⁶ *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, UN General Assembly, 9 December 1948, Treaty Series volume 78, p. 277, available at: https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsig_no=IV-1&chapter=4&lang=e, accessed 23 September 2015.

version of ‘voluntary joining’ and ‘friendship of peoples’ was challenged by the alternative version of ‘forceful incorporation’ and ‘inter-ethnic competition’.⁷ Leading the challenge were Chechen, Ingush and Daghestani intellectuals and historians, who objected to the ideologically motivated falsification of the Mountaineers’ history, especially with respect to their legitimate national-liberation struggle against Tsarist imperialism.⁸ As Victor Shnirelman (2006) notes, one of the main demands of the growing nationalist movement in Chechnya–Ingushetia in 1988 and 1989 was the abolition of the concept of Chechnya’s ‘voluntary joining’ and the halting of the persecution of historians. In 1990, similar demands were made by Circassians at an academic conference held in the small town of Koshehabl, in which it was demanded that tsarist policies *vis-à-vis* Circassians be recognised as genocide and Circassians’ resistance as anti-colonial struggle for self-determination. The participants also called for the removal of all the symbols of Tsarist colonialism, especially Russian place names and memorials to military and state officials.⁹ The 1990s also witnessed the publication of important scholarly works, such as by Kasumov and Kasumov (1992), the Russian translation of Nihat Berzeg’s *Gerçek, Tarihi ve Politik Nedenleriyle Çerkes Sürgünü* (Berzeg 1996a) and Polovinkina (1999). All of these works engaged the issue of the genocidal nature of the Russian annexation of the Northwest Caucasus, and specifically, of Circassian massacres and deportations in the context of the final subjugation of Circassia.

Outside the Soviet Union, historians studying the Russo–Caucasian wars concerned themselves with the questions of subjugation, resistance, migration, both voluntary and forced, including violent expulsions and deportations. Scholars such as Kemal Karpat, Nihat Berzeg, İzzet Aydemir, Mark Pinson, Paul Henze, Justin McCarthy and Brian Glyn Williams have studied Muslim migrations from Russia into the Ottoman Empire, confirming the devastating effects of the Russian subjugation of the North Caucasus on the local population, and thus paving the way to future studies concerned specifically with the genocidal nature of this subjugation (Pinson 1970, 1972; Aydemir 1973; Karpat 1979, 1985; Henze 1990; Berzeg 1996b; McCarthy 1996; Williams 2000). Only in the last two decades have scholars in the West begun to directly address the question of genocide with respect to the Russian treatment of the Circassians in the nineteenth century. Stephen Shenfield’s 1999 chapter ‘Circassians—A Forgotten Genocide?’ (Shenfield 1999) was a ground-breaking contribution in the sense that it

⁷ The concepts of ‘voluntary joining’ and ‘friendship of peoples’ had several functions as elements of a legitimising narrative of the Soviet state. Voluntary joining was intended to displace the memory of expansion, conquest and subjugation by emphasising, on the one hand, the long history of cooperation between North Caucasus peoples and Russia, and on the other, the role of the ‘Russian protectorate’ against sinister designs of the Ottoman, Persian and British Empires. Thus, anniversaries of the joining of the various peoples of the North Caucasus with Russia were celebrated: in 1957, Adygheia, Cherkessia and Kabarda celebrated the 400th anniversary of the joining with Russia; in 1974 North Ossetia celebrated the 200th anniversary of joining, while in 1981, the celebration of the 200th anniversary of ‘voluntary joining’ of the Chechens and the Ingush took place. Friendship of peoples was intended to legitimate the contemporary territorial-administrative demarcation in the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia as it was consolidated following the return of the repressed North Caucasus nations from internal exile (see Shnirelman 2006, pp. 283–84).

⁸ In a series of academic conferences, as well as in other public forums, Chechen, Ingush and Daghestani historians and intellectuals criticised and challenged the ‘voluntary joining’ thesis. This resistance to the official historical narrative was preceded, and also accompanied, by a resistance to other symbols of Russian colonialism and Soviet repression, including monuments commemorating Russian conquest of the Caucasus, and the renaming of towns and villages (Shnirelman 2006).

⁹ This scholarly conference, dedicated to the history of Adyghe–Circassians in the nineteenth century, was attended by scholars from Circassian autonomous territories, and explored issues such as the nature of Tsarist colonial policy in the Northwest Caucasus in the second half of the nineteenth century, the history of Russo–Adyghe relations, and the causes and nature of the Caucasus war (1817–1864). The proceedings of the conference were published as *Cherkessia v XIX veke*, Maikop, 1991.

was the first to raise the question of Circassian genocide directly and to analyse the Circassian case with respect to the three constituent elements of genocide, although, interestingly, without referencing either the Convention or other definitions of genocide.¹⁰

Peter Holquist treats the question of ‘final subjugation’ of the Caucasus in the context of a modernising state, and specifically Russia’s modernising military, which in the nineteenth century became the champion of ‘demographic warfare’ (Holquist 2001, p. 117). Contrasting the Circassian campaign with earlier instances of demographic warfare, Holquist asserts this campaign’s breadth and systematic nature marked a new departure in the eyes of the campaign’s contemporaries. Although Holquist avoids using the term ‘genocide’, resorting instead to ‘extermination’, his emphasis on intention, coordination, precision and thoroughness of execution implies a genocidal character of the campaign. Building on the works of Shenfield and Holquist, Mark Levene has dealt with the Circassian case (Levene 2005). Placing the genocidal campaign to subdue Circassia in the context of the imperial-colonialist project of a declining empire, Levene emphasised the nexus of modernisation, geopolitics and grass-roots, clan-based rebellion as the most salient factor in accounting for genocide (Levene 2005, pp. 293–302).

In contrast to both Holquist and Levene who have placed Russian genocidal tendencies in the context of liberal modernisation and state-building projects, Geraci (2008) posits a continuum of genocidal beliefs and practices which have characterised a complex and multifaceted project of Russian imperial conquest over the centuries, becoming truly destructive and violent only under the circumstances of extreme geopolitical rivalries.

The most detailed account of the Circassian campaign as an episode of ethnic cleansing by a colonial state is provided by Irma Kreiten. Although avoiding the term ‘genocide’ and, like Holquist, resorting instead to ‘ethnic cleansing’, Kreiten (2009) emphasises two crucial constitutive elements of genocide present in the Circassian removal: first, intent and coordinated effort by Russian military and state officials; and second, acts of removal, including military terror and systematic destruction of the Circassians’ economic means of existence.

Finally, the most recent work to tackle the question of genocide with respect to Russian subjugation of the Circassians is Walter Richmond’s (2008). Richmond’s argument in Chapter 4, ‘The Caucasus War’, provides an outline of the ‘cumulative radicalisation thesis’ of the Russian imperial state.¹¹ In essence, the argument suggests that the destruction of Circassians in the Northwest Caucasus did not result from firm ideological commitments of the imperial leadership, but from the chaotic logic of policy-making of a colonising state in a volatile geopolitical context. As Richmond suggests, over the course of a prolonged military campaign, the Russian imperial state came to see Circassians as impossible to integrate into the imperial socio-economic and political system, as major competitors for land and wealth, and as agents of the empire’s enemies, especially Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire (Richmond 2008, pp. 51–80). Emphasising the premeditated nature of deportations and the absence of a plan to annihilate the Circassians, Richmond concludes his analysis of the Caucasus War with the

¹⁰ Shenfield (1999, p. 154) analyses Circassian nationhood and identity (as a protected group), makes references to the ‘warrant for genocide’ (intent), and details the various acts of subjugations, removal and destruction (acts constituting genocide).

¹¹ First developed by Hans Mommsen to explain the Nazi state’s genocide of European Jews, the cumulative radicalisation thesis shifts focus away from ideological commitments of the political leadership and towards the chaotic logic of the process of policy-making and the enabling societal structures which facilitate mass murder (Mommsen 2015). As an explanatory strategy, cumulative radicalisation thesis was applied to other instances of mass murder, including Donald Bloxham’s work on the Armenian genocide (2005).

argument that the Russian treatment of the Circassians represents ‘a unique crime against humanity’ and is consistent with at least one aspect of genocide as defined in the Genocide Convention, namely part (c), ‘[d]eliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part’ (Richmond 2008, p. 80).

The scholarly works surveyed in this section, specifically those by Shenfield, Kreiten and Richmond, contain references to, and examples of, eyewitness accounts of the Circassian genocide, including accounts of survivors, perpetrators and various witnesses, such as journalists and diplomats. Perhaps the most important source of survivors’ stories and eye witness accounts is the Georgian State Archive in Tbilisi, which contains a wealth of archival material of Russia’s wars in the Caucasus, including Circassian deportations and massacres.

As the question of Circassian removal and massacres receives more scholarly attention, the question is bound to be answered in different ways by different scholars, given that new definitions of genocide continue to be introduced. To the extent that many scholars, and even more activists, maintain that genocide is morally worse than other types of mass murder, the quest for authoritative labelling of the Circassian tragedy as genocide will remain alive. This is why the uncoupling of genocide’s empirical dimension from its legal and political dimension remains imperative. In the case of the Circassians and their ongoing struggle for self-determination which has instrumentalised demands for genocide recognition, this uncoupling will prove to be very difficult, just as it has been with respect to Armenian and Ukrainian demands.¹²

The politics of genocide recognition

During the period 1988–1989, the Soviet Union experienced a veritable explosion of nationalist mobilisation in the Baltic, the Transcaucasus, Ukraine and Moldova, facilitated by Gorbachev’s policy of *glasnost*’ and the political liberalisation it produced (Beissinger 2009). In the North Caucasus, an integral aspect of nationalist mobilisation was the ‘revolt of social memory’ (Shnirelman 2006), as groups such as Chechens, Daghestanis and Circassians challenged the official Soviet history of Russia’s role in the Caucasus and demanded a re-evaluation of this role against the backdrop of their own counter memories (Derluguian 2005; Shnirelman 2006). The Circassian genocide recognition initiative has its roots in these efforts to rehabilitate manipulated and suppressed memories of the historically repressed groups, and should be seen through the lens of Charles Taylor’s ‘politics of recognition’. At the same time, the marshalling of political demands by the Circassians on the basis of genocide-centred victimhood has been consistent with the way other ethno-national groups have used genocide claims and recognition for the purpose of achieving specific political goals.

In his influential essay, Taylor (1992) argued that a number of strands in contemporary politics turn on the need or the demand for recognition. The demand for recognition, Taylor maintains, is given urgency by the supposed links between recognition and identity, both personal and collective. For groups that have been victims of mass atrocities, the trauma associated with such victimisation often becomes an important aspect of their identity. Collective identities of Jews and Armenians in the contemporary period are inextricably linked to the trauma of the Holocaust and the 1915 Genocide. From the perspective of Taylor’s

¹² Several works of history provide detailed accounts of deportations and massacres of the Circassians, including eye witness and survivor accounts. Those works include Mufti (1944), Allen and Muratoff (1953), Trakho (1956) and Brooks (1995).

politics of recognition, recognising group victimisation which is at the centre of genocide recognition initiatives is imperative, since victimisation is an integral aspect of group identity. As Taylor reminds us, '[d]ue recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need' (Taylor 1992, p. 26).

While Taylor's identity-recognition nexus helps us understand the need and demand for the recognition of past injustices and victimisation, the politics of recognition does not explain why groups engage in what Evgeny Finkel describes as 'the search for lost genocide'—the propensity to label past suffering as genocide and the efforts to have it recognised as such by relevant political and legal actors domestically and internationally (Finkel 2010, p. 51). The quest for authoritative labelling of past suffering as genocide is shaped by two factors: first, the moral and normative power of the genocide argument, and the widespread notion that genocide is morally worse than other types of mass murder; and second, the recent international trend of facing up to the past and of repairing historical injustices, which has given new impetus to genocide claims. Both of these trends have played into the hands of nationalist projects since, as Lea Brilmayer (1995) reminds us, claims that nationalists typically make are centred more on the moral merits of their interaction with others and less on a presumed entitlement arising from the fact of nationhood. In this context, ethno-national groups have increasingly used genocide claims and recognition for the purpose of achieving specific political goals. Thus, groups controlling geopolitically vulnerable states have used genocide claims to counter the geopolitical and cultural hegemony of regional powers, as is the case with the Baltic states and Ukraine *vis-à-vis* Russia, to counter irredentist and secessionist threats to their territorial integrity, as is the case with Azerbaijan and Georgia (Finkel 2010), or to legitimise territorial expansion and occupation as is the case with Israel (Zertal 2005; Zertal & Eldar 2007). Similarly, groups aspiring to control the state in ethnically divided societies and to remake state institutions in accordance with their own interests and identities have used genocide claims to delegitimise the competing claims of other groups, by representing their own group as entitled to the state in question as reparations for their victimisation during genocide. These processes have been observed in the case of both Bosnia and Rwanda, where Bosniak and Tutsi elites have used genocide-centred victimological narratives to legitimate institutional models and practices opposed by the competing claimants, Serbs and Croats in Bosnia, and Hutus in Rwanda (Lemarchand 2007; Catic 2009).

Furthermore, secessionist groups have also used genocide claims to delegitimise host states by emphasising the impossibility of peaceful coexistence between the group and the state, and framing independence as the only option. This has been the case with Kosovo Albanians in their struggle for independence from Serbia, as well as in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in their struggle for independence from Georgia (Grotsky 2012). And finally, diasporic groups experiencing pressures of acculturation and assimilation have used memories of tragic victimhood to reinforce a fragile and threatened identity (Novick 1999). Thus, the Holocaust has been seen as virtually the only common denominator of US Jewish identity in the late twentieth century, and similarly, the reconstructed memories of the Armenian genocide or the Ukrainian Holodomor can be seen as identity markers designed to confront increasing communal anxieties of the Armenians and the Ukrainians in diaspora.¹³

¹³ On Ukrainian diaspora and its sense of victimisation, see Satzewich (2002) and Himka (2005); on Armenian identity, see Bakalian (1993).

These illustrations reinforce the point that the most important agents of genocide recognition have been ethno-national groups, regardless of whether they control 'their own' states or constitute stateless minorities or diasporas. More often than not, genocide recognition has been a political project in which both states and diasporas associated with a given ethno-national group participate and often coordinate their efforts, as Armenian, Ukrainian and Bosniak genocide recognition initiatives illustrate. In this regard, the concept of the transnation, introduced by Khachig Tölölyan (2000) to designate a totality of homeland and diasporic communities associated with a single ethno-national group becomes a useful analytical tool for examining the politics of genocide recognition. Transnations have a territorialised segment located in the ancestral homeland, which may or may not constitute an independent (national) state, and a diasporic segment, consisting of at least two, but usually more locations of dispersion. In Tölölyan's conceptualisation, transnation is a network marked, on the one hand, by relationships between the homeland and its various diasporic communities, and on the other, by relationships among the various diasporic communities themselves. This network is shaped by the image of a single, unified nation and the actual practices of its various fragments. A genocide recognition initiative is one such practice that reinforces the image of a single, unified nation, against the reality of cultural and political diversity and fragmentation. It serves as a frame used to articulate a seemingly universal grievance faced by the whole transnation, but one that manifests itself in diverse ways on the homeland–diaspora continuum. The following section examines the genesis of the genocide recognition initiative among the Circassians.

The Circassian transnation and the genesis of the genocide recognition initiative

Official Georgian recognition of the Circassian genocide represents a very significant gain for the Circassian efforts to obtain wider genocide recognition, and is intended to put pressure on Moscow, and ultimately lead to Russia's recognition. Two phases of the recognition initiative are discernible. The first phase coincided with the first decade of Russia's independence under Yel'tsin's presidency, and was characterised by greater autonomy enjoyed by Russia's provinces *vis-à-vis* the centre and greater openness of the Russian political system. The primary agents of the recognition initiative were homeland-based institutions, such as the executives and the legislatures of 'Circassian republics' in the Caucasus—Adyghea, Karachay–Cherkessia and Kabardino–Balkaria—as well as various civil society organisations in those republics. Although largely a homeland-led initiative, diaspora played a significant role during this phase, especially as the International Circassian Association (ICA), the first pan-Circassian governance structure since their mass exile from the Caucasus, played an important role in Circassian affairs both in the homeland and internationally. The second phase saw its evolution into a largely diaspora-led initiative, increasingly dominated by the Circassian American diaspora, specifically after the 2007 announcement of Sochi as the 2014 Olympic Games venue. The second phase of the initiative coincided with the Putin presidency, and was, in many ways, a direct response to the implications Putin's policies had for the Circassians.

The initiative to obtain genocide recognition for the tragedy that had befallen the Circassians in the nineteenth century was, from its inception, motivated by the contemporary concerns of the Circassians, and constitutes an important axis of Circassian post-Soviet nationalist awakening. The nationalist mobilisation of the Circassians in the Caucasus took place in the context of a local intellectual backlash against Soviet official history facilitated by *Glasnost*,

amidst rising ethnic tensions and growing challenges to the constitutional unity of the Soviet state. Several aspects of this mobilisation are worth noting in order to better understand the origins and the dynamic of the genocide recognition initiative. On the eve of Soviet disintegration, the Circassian national question revolved around the territorial-demographic conundrum, as only one tenth of Circassians lived in their ancestral homeland in the Caucasus, while the majority of the group were dispersed outside, primarily throughout the Middle East, but also in Western Europe and North America. As a territorially fragmented minority, the Circassians inhabited the three republics in which they constituted a titular nation—Adygea, Karachay–Cherkessia and Kabardino–Balkaria—and thus enjoyed certain rights and protections granted to titular nations under the Russian, but originally Soviet, system of ethno-federalism.¹⁴ In politico-administrative terms, the Circassians in Russia were recognised not as one national group but as four: Adyghe; Cherkess; Kabardians; and Shapsug. They did not constitute a majority in any of the titular republics, and in Kabardino–Balkaria and Karachaevo–Cherkessia they shared power, ‘Lebanese style’, with the other titular nations.¹⁵ The presence of a large Russian population in all three republics made their position even more precarious. The onset of Circassian nationalist mobilisation can be traced to Kabardian–Balkar and Cherkess–Karachay rivalries in the two republics where the Circassians shared indigenous status with the two Turkic groups. The inter-ethnic rivalries arose as Balkars and Karachay sought symbolic and political restitution of their historical victimisation during Stalin’s 1944 deportations, and their demands, which also included demands for the restoration of ethno-territorial autonomies enjoyed in the early Soviet era, threatened to further fragment the Circassians of the Northwest Caucasus.¹⁶ To complicate matters further, adjacent to these Circassian territories lived their ethno-linguistic kin, Abaza and Abkhaz, whose national struggle will become increasingly linked to that of the Circassians. Two distinct, but to some extent mutually complimentary and overlapping political alternatives emerged to deal with these peculiarities of the Circassian national question at the time of growing political uncertainty. The first was that of pan-Caucasian unity, and it envisioned the creation of a North Caucasian federation, uniting politically small nations of the North Caucasus. The second was that of Circassian unity, and it envisioned unification of diaspora and homeland Circassians in their ancestral lands in the Caucasus.

¹⁴ The three republics in which Circassians constitute a titular group have, since their inception in the early Bolshevik era, been shaped by the vicissitudes of Soviet ethno-federalism. On ‘Circassian republics’ inside the Russian Federation, see Smeets (1995), Hewitt (1999), Matveeva (1999) and Richmond (2008).

¹⁵ In the literature on divided societies, ‘Lebanese style’ political organisation refers to a model of government, also known as consociationalism, that divides power along confessional or ethnic lines. For instance, in Lebanon, power is divided along confessional lines, in Bosnia along ethno-confessional lines, while in Kabardino–Balkaria and Karachaevo–Cherkessia the dominant principle is ethnic.

¹⁶ Karachaevo–Cherkessia and Kabardino–Balkaria were created as autonomous provinces in 1922. In 1926, the former was split into the Karachay autonomous province, and a Cherkess National District, later to become itself a province. In 1943, the Karachay became the first people of the Caucasus to be subjected to collective punishment for alleged collaboration with the Nazis. The punishment entailed mass deportations into Central Asia and dissolving of their territorial autonomy. After the rehabilitation of the Karachay in 1956, they were allowed to return but their autonomy was never fully restored. The common Karachay–Cherkess autonomous province of the early 1920s was reinstated. Similarly, after the deportations of the Balkars in 1944, Kabardino–Balkaria, which in 1936 became an autonomous republic, was renamed a Kabard autonomous republic. After the rehabilitation of the Balkar in 1956, the previous situation was restored. The effects of incomplete rehabilitation of the Karachay and the Balkars will continue to plague inter-ethnic relations in the North Caucasus in the post-Soviet era.

One of the hallmarks of nationalist mobilisation in the late Soviet era was the nationalising policies implemented in union republics, consistent with the identity and the interests of the dominant, titular nation. Georgia was one such republic, whose late 1980s policies of cultural Georgianisation—a throwback to the eras of Menshevik and Stalinist suppression of Georgia's national minorities—were resisted by the Abkhaz.¹⁷ Georgian treatment of the Abkhaz assumed wider, regional significance, as they led among the Circassians, to a spontaneous association with the Ubykh, a Circassian group whose culture and language had become extinct following their expulsion from the Caucasus. Seen as a symbol of a historical trend of political and cultural colonisation which threatened the small peoples of the Caucasus, Georgian policies towards the Abkhaz incensed the North Caucasian peoples, and especially Circassians, into joint political action. In 1989, the first congress of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, convened at the initiative of the Abkhaz National Forum, established the Assembly of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (AMPC), to be headed by a Kabardian academic, Musa Shanibov. In 1991, at its third congress held in Sukhumi (Abkhazia), the AMPC evolved into the Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (CMPC), which was declared to be the legitimate heir of the Union of Mountain Peoples that had emerged in 1917. The CMPC included representatives of 16 peoples from the North Caucasus (among these were Adyghe, Abaza, Kabardians, Cherkess, Shapsug and Abkhazians, as well as Chechens and Ossetians), while the Turkic nations (namely Balkars, Karachay, Kumyks and Nogays) refused to participate.¹⁸ This refusal by the Turkic groups was the beginning of inter-ethnic competition over the future political arrangements for the North Caucasus, including the conflicts between the Karachay and the Cherkess and the Balkars and Kabardians over the politico-administrative arrangements in the 'shared' republics (Cornell 1998; Matveeva 1999, pp. 82–8; Richmond 2008, pp. 133–44).

Although Circassian leadership, not least Musa Shanibov, emphasised the promotion of North Caucasian unity in light of 'outside threats' and the advancement of the interests of all North Caucasian peoples as the pillars of the CMPC, pan-Circassian concerns took the centre stage. The collaboration between the Adyghe and the Abkhaz in the context of CMPC, since its founding, and especially since the intensification of the Abkhaz–Georgian conflict in 1992, is a testament to the centrality of Circassian ethno-national rather than North Caucasian regional dimension. This collaboration and the dynamic CMPC engagement with the Abkhaz issue stand in contrast to the tenuous relationship between the Chechens and the Adyghe and to CMPC's inactivity during the Chechen war. Under Shanibov's leadership, CMPC became a key player during the Abkhaz–Georgian war, as it provided crucial political and military support for the Abkhaz cause, and arguably ensured the viability of the self-declared but internationally unrecognised Abkhaz state.¹⁹ The response of the CMPC to the Chechen issue, including Chechnya's bid for independence and the ensuing Russian invasion of the republic, was markedly different. Circassian leaders within the CMPC were not indifferent to the fate of Chechnya and other North Caucasus peoples, and some acted decisively in their attempt to find a peaceful solution to regional conflicts and to stave off Russian military intervention in Chechnya (Bram 2004, p. 84). However, the Chechen leadership's preference

¹⁷ On the genesis of the Abkhaz–Georgian conflict, see Hewitt (1999).

¹⁸ On the origins of the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus and its activities, see Oguz (2004); see also George Derluguian (2005).

¹⁹ On the salience of the Abkhaz–Georgian war to Adyghe–Circassian mobilisation, see Derluguian (2005, pp. 233–47, 267–73).

for full sovereignty and independence for the North Caucasus republics, and their reliance on political Islam in their struggle for independence, were at odds with pan-Circassian interests, which called for linking the future of the CMPC, at least for the time being, with Russia, and saw the CMPC as embodying the ideals of national liberation antithetical to political Islam.²⁰ In 1992, the ‘Circassian republics’ ratified the Federation Treaty, which upgraded their status to that of constituent federal republics, and which reinforced the model of ethnic federalism, granting wide ethno-territorial autonomies to Russia’s ethnic republics (Kahn 2002). Chechen’s rejection of the Federation Treaty was seen as a matter of hubris and bad judgment, rather than a matter of survival on the same footing as the Abkhaz struggle for independence in light of Georgia’s repudiation of Soviet-era ethno-territorial autonomies and the pursuit of nationalising policies. For the territorially fragmented and numerically small Circassian groups, regional federalisation in the form of the CMPC inside the Russian federal framework was consistent with their preference for territorial unification with their ethnic kin, without antagonising Moscow or the local Russian population in Northwest Caucasus (Oguz 2004, pp. 44–56).

The actualisation of the second political alternative in the context of Circassian nationalist mobilisation, one based on Circassian unity, followed the same timeline as the establishment of CMPC. In 1989, at a meeting in the Netherlands, Circassian diaspora representatives raised the idea of establishing an organisation uniting all Circassian communities throughout the world. In 1991, at the first congress of Circassian representatives from the homeland and diaspora, held in Nalchick (Kabardino–Balkaria), the International Circassian Association (ICA) was established, the first pan-Circassian governance structure since the nineteenth century Circassian exodus from the Caucasus.²¹ The ICA united the various groups of the Adyghe, the Abkhaz and the Abaza, and thus represented a pan-Circassian organisation, drawing on both common ethno-linguistic heritage, and the shared experience of exile. The Abkhaz issue was of central importance in the context of the ICA as well. The Adyghe–Abkhaz partnership, which was the cornerstone of the CMPC, was augmented further within the ICA, given especially a much larger role played by the Circassian diaspora in Turkey, where the Adyghe–Abkhaz distinction was much more blurred.

The ICA emerged as the veritable national movement of the Circassians, embodying on the one hand, the features characteristic of national movements historically, such as efforts to define, promote and protect Circassian national identity, and on the other, the elements characteristic of the era of globalisation and transnationalism, such as the peculiar ways of ‘imagining’ and experiencing Circassia through the technologies of late capitalism and post-modernity.²² The movement brought together the aspirations of Circassian exilic nationalism, centred on the diaspora’s yearning for a homeland, and the struggle of homeland Circassians for decolonisation, centred on the politics of memory and ethno-national revival. The ICA was intended to be a forum for addressing issues affecting the Circassian transnation, through a homeland–diaspora partnership formed on the basis of a network of elected members

²⁰ On the relationship between Islam and Circassian identity, see Bram (2008); see also Derluguian (2005, p. 271).

²¹ On the origins and activities of the ICA, see Bram (2004).

²² ‘Virtual Circassia’ like, for instance, ‘Virtual Kurdistan’ can exist as a result of the revolution in technology and communications, which has enabled constant Circassian encounters in cyber-space, as well as fast and affordable means of transport which facilitate real homeland–diaspora, as well as intra-diasporic, encounters. On the notion of ‘virtual Kurdistan’, see Watts (2004).

representing Circassian–Adyghe republics and the various diaspora communities. From its inception, the ICA had three distinct, but very much interrelated objectives: first, Circassian cultural renaissance, focused in particular on linguistic matters, namely on issues of language standardisation and revival, but also on questions of identity and history; second, current political issues, affecting Circassians in the Caucasus, especially the Circassian–Adyghe republics, as well as Abkhazia; and third, affirmation of genocide, including restorative justice mechanisms aimed at mitigating the effects of exile through return of diaspora Circassians (Bram 2004, pp. 70–2).

Genocide claims and political demands

Although the ICA played an important role in the recognition initiative, the initiative was largely a homeland-based endeavour during this phase. Moscow was the primary target of the Circassian recognition initiative, and the lack of receptive response from Moscow prompted the Circassians to widen the targets of their recognition initiative to include, first, international organisations such as the United Nations and the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation, and later other states, specifically Georgia. The genocide recognition initiative was framed first and foremost as a restorative justice mechanism, and had two interrelated but distinct aims: first, to set the historical record straight and honour the memory of victims, and second, to deal with the ongoing effects of a long legacy of destruction, fragmentation and division, which was further exacerbated by continuous assimilation and acculturation both in the homeland and in the diaspora. With respect to the former, the initiative called for the Russian government to recognise and condemn the genocide of the Circassians, and to ensure that this event will be officially memorialised in public venues. With respect to the latter, the initiative called for specific measures aimed at addressing demographic, territorial and ethno-cultural challenges, namely ethno-territorial consolidation of Circassians in Northwest Caucasus, the right of return for diaspora Circassians, and the revival and protection of Circassian identity in the homeland and in the diaspora.²³

As a demand for restorative justice, the recognition initiative appealed primarily to Russia's historical duty rather than any legal obligation arising from a body of domestic or international law. The initiative explicitly suggested that Russia was not considered to be a legal descendant of the Russian Imperial state, and that the current regime was not legally

²³ For goals of the recognition initiative, see 'Ob osuzhdenii genotsida Adygov (Cherkesov) v gody russko-kavkazskoi voiny', Verkhovnyi Sovet Kabardino-Balkarskoi SSR, Postanovlenie ot 7 fevralya 1992, available at: http://www.elot.ru/main/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1699&pop=1&p, accessed 1 March 2012; 'Ob obrashchenii k Gosudarstvennoi Dume Federal'nogo Sobraniya Rossiiskoi Federatsii', Gosudarstvennyi Sovet—Khase Respubliki Adygeya, 29 aprelya 1996, available at: http://www.elot.ru/main/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1698&pop=1&p, accessed 2 March 2012; 'Vystuplenie General'nogo Sekretarya Mezhdunarodnoi Cherkesskoi Assotsiatsii (MChA) A. Okhotova na 53 sessii Komissii Organizatsii Ob"edinennykh Natsii (OON) po pravam cheloveka', 24 marta 1997, *Gazeta 'Khabze'*, 27, July, available at: http://www.elot.ru/main/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2533&pop=1&p, accessed 1 March 2012; 'Vystuplenie predstavatelya MChA T. Kazanokova na IV Sessii komissii Organizatsii Ob"edinennykh Natsii (OON) po pravam cheloveka v rabochei gruppe po men'shinstvam', 28 maya 1998, *Cherkesskii mir*, 2, available at: http://www.elot.ru/main/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2537&pop=1&p, accessed 1 March 2012.

responsible for the crime of genocide or other crimes against humanity which had affected the Circassians in the course of the Russo–Caucasus wars. However, in outlining the mechanisms of restorative justice needed to address the injustice against the Circassians, the initiative appealed explicitly to legal precedents from Russia’s recent past, and to the larger body of post-World War II international law. Thus, demands for granting the Circassians the status of a nation-in-exile and for facilitating the return of diaspora Circassians to the Caucasus appealed to the Soviet and post-Soviet rehabilitation of repressed or punished peoples.²⁴ The Soviet experience of ethnic cleansing and collective punishment of whole groups, although consistent with the larger European experience of this period, was also unprecedented insofar as these policies were occasionally reversed and the exiled and ethnically cleansed were allowed to return to their homelands. Moreover, Circassian demands also appealed to the duties and obligations arising from international law, specifically the Genocide Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.²⁵ It also appealed, albeit indirectly, to the right of return found in numerous bodies of international law. The initiative referenced the precedents of genocide recognition with respect to other cases of genocide recognition, citing specifically the case of Russia’s official recognition of the Armenian genocide, and calling for Moscow to do the same for the Circassian case.²⁶

Throughout the 1990s, the Russian state remained unwilling to address Circassian demands pertaining to genocide claims. Its official position, in essence, reaffirmed the official Soviet narrative regarding the incorporation of the Caucasus and the nature of mass Circassian exile. Russia’s refusal to recognise the genocide and enact restorative justice measures demanded by the Circassians was, to some extent, motivated by the stigma associated with being considered responsible for genocide, if only by virtue of being a historical successor of the perpetrating entity. The main reason for its staunch opposition to Circassian demands pertaining to genocide has to do, however, with potential economic costs, and more importantly, with political risks associated with enacting restorative measures on the grounds that nineteenth century events constitute genocide. In making demands regarding rectification of Tsarist Russia’s crimes and injustices against the Circassians, the genocide recognition demands made reference to the 1991 Law on the Rehabilitation of the Repressed Peoples as precedent and model for the kind of restorative measures Russia should have enacted in order to rehabilitate the Circassians (Bougai 1996, pp. 207–12). The 1991 Law, which builds upon the earlier, Khrushchev-era efforts at rehabilitating groups victimised by Stalin’s mass deportations and the redrawing of

²⁴ For appeals to the 1991 Law on the Rehabilitation of the Repressed Peoples, see ‘Ob obrashenii k Gosudarstvennoi Dume Federal’nogo Sobraniya Rossiiskoi Federatsii’, Gosudarstvennyi Sovet—Khase Respubliki Adygeya, 29 April 1996, available at: http://www.elot.ru/main/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1698&pop=1&p, accessed 2 March 2012.

²⁵ ‘Vystuplenie General’nogo Sekretarya Mezhdunarodnoi Cherkesskoi Assotsiatsii (MChA) A. Okhotova na 53 sessii Komissii Organizatsii Ob’edinennykh Natsii (OON) po pravam cheloveka’, 24 marta 1997, *Gazeta ‘Khabze’*, 27, available at: http://www.elot.ru/main/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2533&pop=1&p, accessed 1 March 2012.

²⁶ ‘Obraschenie Adygeiskogo respublikanskogo obshchestvennogo dvizheniya “Cherkesskii kongress” k Gosudarstvennoi Dume Federal’nogo Sobraniya Rossiiskoi Federatsii’, Federal’noe Sobranie Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 1 iyulya 2005, available at: http://www.elot.ru/main/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2544&pop=1&p, accessed 4 September 2011; see also Gordin (2007).

administrative boundaries in the 1940s, promised territorial redress for the deported groups, who were previously allowed to return from internal, Soviet exile.²⁷ It needs to be stressed here that important differences exist between Stalin's and Tsarist deportations, and that these differences explain Moscow's reluctance to rehabilitate the Circassians using the 1991 Law as a model. Stalin's deportations, motivated by security concerns, were punitive in character, aimed at deporting 'punished peoples' into internal exile, and arguably intended to be temporary, while the redrawing of boundaries intended to obliterate their ethnic homelands involved the redrawing of internal boundaries of the Soviet state. In contrast, Tsarist deportations were motivated by the logic of settler colonialism, aimed at removing Circassians as competitors for land and resources, and intended to be permanent, while the violent incorporation of Circassian territories was intended to permanently extend the territorial jurisdiction of the Russian state over the North Caucasus. As a restorative justice mechanism, the 1991 Law was based on the acknowledgment that Stalin's deportations and redrawing of borders that accompanied them were in violation of constitutional principles of the Soviet state, and that the right of return and recreation of the administrative *status-quo-ante* deportations were owed to the deported groups as a matter of justice. From the perspective of the Russian state, applying this law to the Circassian case would have amounted to admitting that the nineteenth century deportations and subjugation of historic Circassia constituted crimes against humanity and illegal conquest. This, in turn, would have provided additional legitimacy to Circassian calls for the right of return for diaspora Circassians, as well as their call for territorial reordering or independence of Circassian territories as restitution for the injustice endured. For a state devastated by the Chechen war and marked by the continued threat of secessionism in the North Caucasus, the question of Circassian genocide remained an anathema. Russia's official position regarding Circassian genocide claims, and especially its refusal to aid in facilitating the return of diaspora Circassians, was an important factor accounting for the fact that the Circassian 'Zionist moment' did not materialise. But equally important here has been the lack of will among diaspora Circassians across the well-established and integrated Circassian diasporic communities to make sacrifices in order to settle in the Caucasus.²⁸

By the end of the 1990s, the genocide recognition initiative seemed to be in limbo, as the Russian state tamed Circassian nationalism through infiltration and cooptation of community

²⁷ The legacy of Stalin's deportations continues to fuel inter-ethnic conflict in the North Caucasus and strain relations between the regions and the central government. With respect to the 1991 Law, deported peoples see it as crucial to their full rehabilitation, while Moscow opposes elements of the Law, namely territorial rehabilitation, for fear of further fragmentation and instability. See Dzadziev (2005); and 'The Kremlin Rejects Ingushetian Territorial Rehabilitation', *Kommersant Daily*, 23 September 2005, available at: <http://www.kommersant.com/doc.aspx?id=611481&idr=439>, accessed 2 October 2012.

²⁸ The primary obstacle to mass return of Circassians has to do with the fact that diaspora Circassians were well-integrated in societies in which they found themselves since their mass exodus from the Caucasus, and did not face immediate, existential threats that would make it easier to abandon their 'host-states' for the new life in the Caucasus. Undoubtedly, Russia's willingness to facilitate return would have greatly assisted Circassians wanting to re-settle in their ancestral homeland, as the case of Kosovo Circassians in 1999 suggests. A comparison with the case of the Jewish 'return' to Palestine in the 1930s and 1940s, or the more recent return of Crimean Tatars to Crimea in the 1990s and 2000s provides good illustration. Jews returning to Palestine in the 1930s and 1940s faced obstacles equally, if not more, challenging than the Circassians returning to the Caucasus. But the original Zionist movement was propelled by the vulnerable position of Jews in diaspora. The unanticipated, mass return of Crimean Tatars in the post-Soviet era, to the Crimean homeland in Ukraine, occurred despite numerous political, legal and economic obstacles to their return, since for many returnees life in Central Asian exile was not much better. On issues pertaining to Circassian return, see Shami (1998) and Bram (1999).

leaders, and as it began a process of political centralisation at home, and regional and global posturing abroad.

President Putin's centralisation drive, aimed at streamlining Russia's asymmetrical federal structure, strengthening the power vertical and empowering the centre *vis-à-vis* the provinces, was bound to have wider-ranging consequences for the Russian system of federalism, and in particular for Russia's autonomous ethnic territories, including the three republics where Circassians constituted a titular nation.²⁹ In essence, the combined impact of federal reform threatened ethnic minorities with 'extinction' through the elimination of ethnic homelands as expressions of ethnic identity, and of institutional mechanisms limiting the impact of ongoing russification. Perhaps the most tangible threat to Circassian identity inside Russia came with the prospect of merging the Republic of Adyghea, 'the last Circassian homeland', with Krasnodar Krai, and with the attacks on policies of positive discrimination laws for the indigenous Adyghe minority. The vulnerable position of Circassians inside Russia was further exacerbated by growing inter-ethnic tensions which pitted Circassians against other indigenous minorities, such as Balkars and Karachays, as well as against the Russian majority. The mobilisation of Circassian nationalism around the protection of Circassian autonomy in the context of Russian ethno-federalism began to attract Moscow's attention at the turn of this century, especially as Circassians began to call for administrative restructuring which would enable their ethno-territorial consolidation in the Caucasus in some form of 'greater Circassia'.

The consolidation of Russian statehood at home was accompanied by the drive to restore Russia's great power status, with a special emphasis on reasserting Moscow's influence in the vital southern tier, the unstable arc stretching from the Caucasus through Central Asia to Afghanistan. In this regard, Putin's policies sought to invigorate the Russian 'Monroe Doctrine', which envisions the former Soviet Union's geopolitical space as Russia's vital sphere of interest (Skak 2001; Nygren 2008, pp. 119–61). The North Caucasus has figured prominently in this project of Russian power consolidation, as it is the home to federal units and ethnic groups perceived by the centre to represent the greatest threat to Russian territorial integrity in the form of secessionism, to its political order and societal security in the form of Islamic terrorism, and as the area of fierce geopolitical competition from regional and global powers, including the United States. Consolidating Russian control over this region became crucial from the perspective of both domestic and foreign policy, and the choice to hold the 2014 Olympics in the North Caucasus city of Sochi was Moscow's signal that, following the period of intense instability associated with two wars in Chechnya, the region was pacified and stable.

The 2007 announcement of Sochi as the venue for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games gave a new lease on life to the Circassian genocide recognition initiative, ushering in the second phase of recognition efforts. In this phase, the Circassian diaspora, and specifically the Circassian–American diaspora centred on the Circassian Cultural Institute in New Jersey, became the dominant force in the recognition efforts. In addition to this shift from homeland to diaspora as the primary agent of the recognition initiative, another shift associated with the second phase of recognition is of great importance. During the first phase, recognition efforts aimed at

²⁹ On Putin's reforms and their impact on Circassian autonomy in the Caucasus, see Hille (2010, pp. 276–83), Richmond (2008, pp. 151–71).

engaging Russia as a partner in achieving the goals of Circassian national revival, namely mass repatriation, unification of Circassian territories, and protection of cultural rights in Russia and abroad. During the second phase, however, recognition efforts, especially those centred on the NoSochi campaign, aimed at delegitimising Russian rule over Circassians and their lands. Just as Georgia's nationalising policies *vis-à-vis* Abkhazia in the later 1980s and early 1990s were seen through the lens of genocide, Putin's reforms and continued Russian control over North Caucasus were increasingly seen as a threat to the survival of the Circassian ethnos.

Circassian diaspora and the internationalisation of Circassian genocide recognition efforts

The Circassian diaspora became involved in the genocide recognition initiative largely through the activities of the International Circassian Association in the context of intensified Circassian encounters following the end of the Cold War. However, the emergence of the diaspora as the driver of the initiative at the turn of the twenty-first century has been shaped by a combination of two factors: first, the failure of efforts of homeland Circassians to obtain recognition from Moscow and to engage Moscow in a dialogue over the Circassian national question; and, second, the post-Cold War developments which facilitated nationalist revival of diaspora Circassians.

The nationalism of diaspora Circassians in exile crystallised around five key elements—homeland, exodus, exile, assimilation and return.³⁰ Several post-Cold War developments facilitated nationalist mobilisation of diaspora Circassians around these five elements. First, the growth of transnational networks, including diasporic and ethnic, nurtured by a revolution in technology and communications have enabled greater cultural and political interactions among the Circassians. This has been a significant development given that the fragmentation of homeland Circassians finds its equivalent in the diaspora, where Circassians have been divided along linguistic, political and ideological lines, and where the most important markers of Circassian ethnic identity, in particular language, have been in consistent decline.³¹ The emergence of Circassian diasporic civil society has facilitated the debate on the vital questions facing the diaspora, namely issues of assimilation, loss of language, the preservation of culture, as well as the struggle for self-determination.

Second, the fall of the Soviet Union opened up the possibility of return and of homeland-based Circassian revival (Bram 1999), not unlike the return of Crimean Tatars to their ancestral homeland in Crimea.³² The precariousness of Circassian identity in exile, resulting from assimilationist policies of host states or general trends of acculturation, has led the diaspora to rely on the homeland as a repository of values and practices that can be nurtured and maintained, and if necessary, restored in and by contact with the homeland. This attitude has inspired the returnist movement in Turkey in the 1970s, and continues to motivate the returnist discourse despite the many contradictions which have characterised Circassian diaspora–homeland and intra-diasporic encounters in the post-Cold War era, exposing in the process a complex, textured and polyvalent Circassian identity.

³⁰ For the analysis of manifestations of Circassian nationalism in exile, see Alankus and Taymaz (2010), Shami (1998). For a more personal account of Circassian encounters, see Natho (2010).

³¹ Given the decline of the Circassian language and the lack of a common written standard, communication among various diasporic segments (Turkophone and Arabophone) is seriously hampered, as is communication between diaspora and the largely Russophone homeland.

³² For an excellent account of diasporic nationalism and the return of exiled nations, see Williams (2001).

Third, changes inside the host states and within Circassian diasporic communities themselves have also acted as an important enabling factor. Inside Turkey, home to the largest Circassian community in the world, the emergence of a dynamic identity politics in the 1990s had significant implications for the Circassian diaspora. At the turn of the twenty-first century, an inward looking focus on cultural identity, confined to the sphere of Circassian cultural associations, was being complemented by an outward looking focus on political demands made against the Turkish state. Those demands called for greater cultural and political rights for Circassians in Turkey,³³ but they also called on Turkey as a host state to take up Circassian causes beyond the borders of Turkey, especially in the Caucasus. Although lobbying efforts by Circassians largely failed at the foreign policy level, as Turkey carefully navigated the new geopolitical reality in the Caucasus, such political mobilisation has had implications for Circassian identity and its production inside Turkey.³⁴ The question of Circassian genocide recognition inside the Circassian diaspora in Turkey is an extremely complex affair, shaped by the politico-ideological divisions inside the diaspora, as well as the perennial Armenian question in Turkish domestic and foreign policy.

The ‘coming of age’ of the secondary diaspora in Europe, and especially in the United States, is another important development accounting for Circassian nationalist mobilisation after the Cold War. Inside Europe, where the ‘secondary diaspora’ is primarily derived from the larger body of Turkish migrant workers, Circassian activism has emerged as part of the European politics of identity, and has relied on lobbying respective national and EU institutions regarding Circassian issues, including that of genocide recognition. It is, however, the small Circassian diaspora in the United States that has emerged as the most vocal on the subject of genocide, having successfully internationalised the question of genocide recognition.

The element of the Circassian diaspora in the United States, centred on the New Jersey-based Circassian Cultural Institute (CCI) and committed to internationalising the Circassian question, constitutes a powerful player in the context of Circassian genocide recognition efforts. The CCI has embraced genocide recognition as a strategy for advancing a broader nationalist agenda—one that is as much about the revival of Circassian identity and rehabilitation of Circassian history as it is about Circassian territory and sovereignty in the Caucasus.³⁵ With aspirations to be a leading national research and documentation centre, spearheading the struggle for genocide affirmation, the primary goal of CCI is to give the Circassians an opportunity to express their history and identity in their own voice, and take ownership of their future. In this regard, the CCI has pursued genocide recognition as both a political and an academic project, building partnerships and alliances with political actors influential in advancing Circassian issues,³⁶ but also with the scholarly community interested in studying and researching the events associated with Circassian victimisation during the Russo–Caucasian

³³ Circassian demands have been consistent with demands of other ethnic minorities, such as Bosniaks, Albanians, and especially, the Kurds. The most important gains have been those in the area of language (see Baris Altintas 2012).

³⁴ For an overview of Circassian cultural association in Turkey and their activities, see Toumarkine (2000). On the evolution of Circassian diasporic nationalism in Turkey, see Dogan (2010). On the influence of Circassian (Caucasus) groups on Turkish foreign policy, see Celikpala (2006).

³⁵ Group interview with Ali Berzeg, Zack Barsik and Iyad Youghar of the Circassian Cultural Institute, Wayne, New Jersey, 27 January 2012; interview with Ali Berzeg of the Circassian Cultural Institute, Wayne, New Jersey, 28 January 2012.

³⁶ Jamestown Foundation is CCI’s most important partner in this regard.

war.³⁷ Building upon an existing genocide recognition initiative, and partnering with select Circassian diaspora groups, the CCI has become instrumental in the NoSochi campaign, mounting protests internationally and publicising the question of Circassian genocide to world audiences. The CCI has successfully used the Sochi Olympics to bring the Circassian issue to international attention, by tying Russia's historical crimes with the current violations and mistreatments in the North Caucasus, and calling on the international community to boycott the Olympic Games scheduled to be held, against all conventions, in the 'land of Circassian genocide'.³⁸

The Circassian diasporic community centred on CCI has been uniquely positioned to lead the genocide recognition initiative by virtue of its own history, as well as by virtue of the political context provided by its host state. On an important level, the work of the CCI builds upon the legacy of Circassian *émigré* activism during the Cold War. Comprised of Circassians displaced from the Caucasus in the course of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian Civil War and later of World War II, the Circassian *émigré* colony in the US during the Cold War was part of the larger universe of East European *émigré* groups, who in the 1940s and 1950s mobilised politically against the Soviet Union. Perhaps the most significant Cold War legacy shaping the work of CCI is that of the Captive Nations project, an anti-Soviet (and anti-Russian) project spearheaded by the US government in cooperation with East European *émigré* groups.³⁹ Referring primarily to nations under Soviet rule, the aim of the Captive Nations project was to weaken the Soviet Union by supporting nationalist independence movements among the major non-Russian peoples that lived within the borders of the Soviet Union and Russia. The idea of using, in the struggle against the Soviet Union (and Russia), the numerous non-Russian nations that inhabited the basins of the Baltic, Black and Caspian seas, was championed by Poland's Marshall Pilsudki, under whose leadership the idea became policy known as Prometheism and implemented in the interwar period.⁴⁰ The influence of the Captive Nations project and of the principles of Prometheism itself, on CCI activism is discernible in both the discourse and practice of CCI. The narrative strategies used by CCI in advancing the Circassian agenda emphasise national emancipation as a way to divest Russia of her conquests, while geopolitical strategies employed make use of both Cold War partners

³⁷ CCI has partnered with Rutgers University's Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights which runs the Forgotten Genocides Project. One of the cases covered in this project is the 'Genocidal Pacification' of the Circassians in the Russian Caucasus. More information is available at: <http://www.ncas.rutgers.edu/center-study-genocide-conflict-resolution-and-human-rights/mid-nineteenth-century-genocidal-pacifica>. In addition, CCI has also reached out to the International Association of Genocide Scholars, using the association to promote awareness and the need for research of the Circassian case but also exploring the possibility of obtaining an official resolution similar to the ones the Association passed with respect to late Ottoman genocides, including the Armenian.

³⁸ Consistent with CCI's anti-Sochi mobilisation, the organisation has used both the Vancouver Winter Olympics (2010) and the London Summer Olympics (2012) to raise the issue of Circassian genocide. These efforts, along with the annual commemoration of the Circassian Genocide Day on 21 May across the Circassian world, have undoubtedly brought the Circassian issues to wider international audiences. Several prominent media outlets ran programmes on the Circassian anti-Sochi movement, including *Newsweek* magazine, *The Economist*, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, to name a few.

³⁹ On the Circassian connection with the Captive Nations Project, see Natho (2010, pp. 378–96).

⁴⁰ Pilsudski's policy relied on the anti-Communist Caucasus leaders in exile across European states from 1925 to 1939, concentrated in the Promethean League of the Nations Subjugated by Moscow. On the Promethen movement in Polish foreign policy, see Woytak (1984); see also Snyder (2005).

(some conservative elements in the US foreign policy) and ‘Promethean nations’, namely Georgia, but also the Baltic states and Poland.

Inside the United States, CCI has partnered with the Jamestown Foundation, a policy think-tank with deep roots in the Cold War era. The Jamestown Foundation has played a prominent role in championing the interests of the peoples of the North Caucasus, reviving in the process the Cold War era anti-Soviet and anti-Russian discourse, and relying on the work of Cold War-era diplomats and scholars, including Paul Henze⁴¹ and Paul Goble.⁴² The Foundation’s work pertaining to the North Caucasus is part of its larger focus on Eurasia, and in particular, on the preoccupation with Russia’s revival and influence in this geostrategically important region. In an effort to delegitimise Russian sovereign control over the North Caucasus and Russian hegemonic aspirations in Transcaucasia, the Jamestown Foundation has embraced, and in some ways coopted, the Circassian genocide recognition agenda. Starting soon after the International Olympic Committee announced that the 2014 Winter Olympics would be held in Sochi, the Foundation and its associates began mobilising a campaign aimed at bringing the Circassian issue to the centre of scholarly and policy attention (Goble 2007). In this context, the Foundation has helped organise a series of conferences dealing with Circassian issues, with a goal of internationalising the Circassian question against the backdrop of the Sochi Olympics, as an urgent question of international security.⁴³

The CCI and Jamestown Foundation have relied on Georgia, a pivotal ‘Promethean’ state, in their efforts aimed at Circassian genocide recognition. Georgia’s engagement with the Circassian issues, and specifically, Georgia’s official recognition of Circassian genocide in 2011, must be seen in the context of a broader post-Soviet restructuring of political and security relations in the Caucasus, and in particular, of the Russo–Georgian conflict, which is essentially a conflict over Georgia’s pro-Western orientation. Although Georgia’s military defeat in Abkhazia in 1992 resulted in the near total collapse of Georgian statehood and Georgia’s subjugation to Russia, the weakening of Russia precipitated by its loss in the first Chechen war allowed Georgia under Shevardnadze to pursue a pro-Western course domestically and internationally. The second Chechen war marked the onset of Russia’s renewed efforts to reassert its control over the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia, and the events of 9/11 enabled Russia to redefine the war in Chechnya as a struggle against international terrorism rather than a war for securing its sphere of influence in the Caucasus.

⁴¹ Paul Henze, a consultant for the RAND Corporation, was a CIA station chief in Turkey and Ethiopia during the 1960s and 1970s and served in the Carter administration as a deputy to National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. He is best known for his provocative book arguing that the Soviet Union had engineered an attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II.

⁴² A scholar and researcher of Soviet nationalities issues, Paul Goble was an analyst on Soviet Nationalities, Department of State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Central Intelligence Agency and a special adviser on Soviet Nationalities Problems at the US Department of State. He was also a member of the Estonian International Commission for Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity, established in 1998 to investigate crimes against humanity committed in Estonia or against its citizens during the Soviet and German occupation, such as Soviet deportations from Estonia and the Holocaust in Estonia. The work of the Commission was used as part of the Estonian and larger Baltic states’ efforts to cast Soviet occupation of the Baltics, both during World War II and after, as acts of genocide (see Finkel 2010).

⁴³ Jamestown Foundation, in cooperation with the Circassian Cultural Institute and the Ilia State University in Georgia, co-organised three conferences dedicated to the Circassian genocide: in Washington, DC in 2007, at Harvard in 2008 and in Tbilisi in 2011.

To the extent Russia's attempts to reclaim its sphere of influence in Transcaucasia depended on continued Russian control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, they clashed with the agenda of Georgia's political elite around President Saakashvili, committed to the restoration of Georgian statehood and Georgia's regional leadership role. Saakashvili's first priority in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution was the re-establishment of Georgia's territorial integrity and political sovereignty in the two breakaway republics. Determined to confront Russia from a position of strength, Saakashvili sought to enlist the help of the Euro–Atlantic alliance in an effort to enhance Georgia's political and military position *vis-à-vis* Russia. In 2008, Western recognition of Kosovo (February) and the NATO summit in Bucharest (April), during which the US called for Georgian and Ukrainian NATO membership, strengthened Russia's resolve to re-establish its sphere of influence over the former Imperial and Soviet borderlands, leading to further escalation of Russo–Georgian tensions, and culminating in the five-day August war (Cornell & Starr 2009).

Saakashvili's regime embraced the Circassian issues as part of a strategy of advancing its foreign policy agenda (Taymaz 2012). The anti-Sochi campaign embraced by Georgia was an opportunity to hurt Russia's image by emphasising this country's problematic past (genocide and conquest) as a prologue to an unstable future (political instability, wars and terrorism). Moreover, mobilising against Sochi was an opportunity to make gains on the Abkhaz question. Holding the games in Sochi had a direct impact on Georgia as the 'Olympic boom' in infrastructure and tourism was likely to benefit Abkhazia, increasing its reliance on Russia, and further decreasing Georgia's influence in this break-away region. Moreover, Saakashvili's regime backed the Circassian genocide recognition initiative with an eye to creating an Adyge–Abkhaz split as a way of further damaging the Abkhaz cause. Finally, Georgia's aspirations to become a regional power in the Caucasus and a pivotal state in the 'Promethean arc' containing Russia have been served by the Circassian question. The Circassian question has allowed Georgia to rally the North Caucasus peoples, already dissatisfied with Russia's rule, against Moscow.⁴⁴

Conclusions

The Circassians are not the only group to charge Moscow with genocide, having been preceded by the Ukrainians and the Baltic peoples,⁴⁵ all for Soviet-era atrocities. Nor are they the only

⁴⁴ The creation of the 'First Caucasian' (Pervy Kavkazsky, PIK, available at: <http://pik.tv/en/shows/vglyad-s-kavkaza>) television channel aimed specifically at the North Caucasus, the waiving of visa requirements for residents of the North Caucasus republics and the recognition of the Circassian genocide reinforce the point that the Georgian government under Saakashvili is pursuing a strategy aimed at challenging Russian influence in the region. The well-known Georgian political scientist, Aleksandr Rondeli, commenting on the resolution on the genocide, explains it in terms of Georgia's wish to improve its image in the North Caucasus (see Rondeli no date). On Georgia's 'North Caucasus pivot', see Oliver Bullough (2010).

⁴⁵ Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians, along with the Ukrainians, started pushing for genocide recognition in the early days of the Cold War. Ukrainian efforts focused on the 1932–1933 famine in Ukraine, or Famine–Genocide as it has become known in recent years, while the Balts have focused on Stalin's deportations of ethnic Balts. Throughout the 1940s, these groups benefited from Raphael Lemkin's work on the law prohibiting the 'new' crime of genocide and from the anti-Communist stance of the US administration. In fact, a strange symbiosis developed between these groups, Lemkin and the US government. In need of financial support for his research and public engagement regarding the Genocide Convention, Lemkin often received financial support from the Ukrainian and Baltic *émigré* organisations. This fact, along with his goal of obtaining US support for the Convention, accounts for Lemkin's willingness to extend the discourse of genocide to strategically include all Soviet crimes (see Weiss-Wendt 2005).

Caucasian group to raise the issue of genocide to regional and global levels, having been long preceded by the Armenians, for the 1915 Ottoman genocide of the Armenians. Other Caucasian groups, specifically the Azeris, Abkhazians, Chechens, Georgians and Ossetians have also raised the issues of genocide pertaining either to Soviet-era crimes—man-made famines and deportations—or to recent, post-Cold War era ethnic conflicts (Finkel 2010; Grodsky 2012). In fact, Circassians are latecomers to the project of genocide recognition, and have only recently begun to develop their own ‘genocide vernacular’, joining in a growing trend of groups embracing the genocide discourse as a powerful marker of identity and a preferred strategy for marshalling nationalist claims.

The Circassian case of genocide recognition emphasises the centrality of politics as the motivating factor for both those demanding recognition, as well as those granting or withholding it. The genocide recognition initiative has been a central feature of Circassian ethno-national revival in the post-Soviet era, and especially of the project of reconstituting the Circassian homeland. This project of reconstituting the Circassian homeland has started as a primarily ethical project, focused on reversing the effects of exile of a vanquished people and of erasure of Circassian presence, both in terms of tangible and intangible culture. Hence, Circassian demands in the early 1990s have focused on calls for return of exiled Circassians, as well as on the revival of Circassian toponyms and increased protection for the Circassian language. While the ethical dimension of the project of reconstituting Circassia remained salient, it was the political dimension that began to dominate, focused on the centrality of the homeland’s territory to national survival, and the need to exert political control over the homeland’s territory. The Circassian embrace of genocide discourse needs to be seen from the perspective of Lea Brilmayer’s arguments about the sources of nationalist claims in the context of competing inter-ethnic relations and political rivalries. As Brilmayer (1995) reminds us, claims that nationalists typically make are centred more on the moral merits of their interactions with others and less on a presumed entitlement arising from the fact of nationhood. Genocide discourses represent the most authoritative moral claims a group can make, regardless of whether these are made against other competing groups, a state with which the group is engaged in a political conflict or other audiences, such as the elusive ‘international community’ on whose support a group may be counting.

Russia’s refusal to accommodate Circassian calls for recognition stems from the serious geopolitical implications of the genocide question and is inextricably linked to the geopolitical rivalries and competition over spheres of influence, involving Georgia, Turkey and the United States. It is also very much a function of Russia’s troubled democratisation and renewed authoritarian tendencies. The process of repairing historical injustices has accompanied transitions to democracy of formerly authoritarian states such as Argentina and Chile, or has been a sign of renewed democratic commitment of settler democracies such as Australia, Canada and the United States. Here, the case of the Turkish stance *vis-à-vis* the question of Armenian genocide is instructive for Russia. The denialist stance maintained by respective Turkish governments stems from the dictates of *machtpolitik*—the issues of territorial integrity and state sovereignty—and international pressure, including recognition by many other states, has so far not tipped the balance in favour of *moralpolitik*. The one force that has had an impact in moving the discussion of the Armenian genocide forward inside Turkey has been Turkish civil society, empowered by the greater democratisation and liberalisation of the 1990s, and

arguably, in the case of the Circassian question, the domestic changes inside Russia rather than external pressure will be crucial (Gordin 2007).

Finally, Georgia's recognition of Circassian genocide is not a result of deep moral convictions of its leadership and its commitment to ethical foreign policy. Rather, Georgian recognition, just like Russia's refusal to recognise, is also linked to the geopolitical rivalries and competition over spheres of influence, involving Russia, Georgia, the United States and Turkey. Georgia's recognition of the Circassian genocide in light of its continuous refusal to recognise the Armenian genocide—a development which would antagonise its ally and trading partner, Turkey—or to deal with allegations of crimes against humanity and genocide in Abkhazia and Ossetia, is quite consistent with the behaviour of other states which have engaged in the politics of genocide recognition. Both France and Russia recognise the Armenian genocide of 1915, while refusing to extend genocide recognition to events from their imperial/colonial pasts, specifically for the Algerian and Circassian massacres of the nineteenth century, respectively.

As predictions go, it is relatively safe to assume that the Circassian genocide recognition initiative is here to stay. Victimhood remains a powerful source of national pride and an important marker of identity, as the resilience of Armenian and Ukrainian genocide recognition initiatives suggest. However, it is also relatively safe to assume that obtaining wider recognition is going to be difficult, politically controversial and will likely not result in meaningful redress for the Circassians.

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