

AT THE CROSSROADS OF MEMORIES: STATE, REGIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE RUSSIAN-CAUCASIAN WAR AMONG CIRCASSIANS IN ADYGEA

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The traumatic experience of war has played a pivotal role in the history of the Circassians, an Indigenous people of the North Caucasus who suffered enormous population loss and displacement due to the Russian Empire's conquest in the nineteenth century. Despite this historical trauma, not all members of the Circassian community oppose modern Russian military expansion in Ukraine driven by colonial ambition. To understand why this is the case, the article examines the contestation between the state memory regimes that have been silencing the memory of the Russian-Caucasian War (1763–1864) and the counter-memory of the Circassians who preserve the memory of its atrocities. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, it shows how Circassian authorities and individuals adapt to the current regime, which discourages ruminations on the significance of the Russian-Caucasian War while elevating the memory of the Second World War and emphasising the importance of interethnic unity. The paper argues that by establishing and sustaining a hierarchy of memories and identities, the Russian state cultivates loyalty and patriotism among its ethnic minorities, who are compelled to prioritise their identity as Russian citizens over their ethnic affiliations and grievances.

KEYWORDS: Circassians, Russian-Caucasian War, memory, Russia, North Caucasus

INTRODUCTION

In April 2022, a renowned filmmaker of Circassian descent condemned in his Instagram post¹ Russia's atrocities against civilians in Ukrainian Bucha, imploring Russian

1 The author began the post by expressing concerns about the safety of his family members who still lived in Russia and received threats because of his anti-war stance. Shortly afterward, he deleted

citizens to earnestly reflect on the ongoing aggression launched by their country. He finished his emotional post in the following way:

I would like to address separately the residents of the North Caucasus, in particular, the Circassians [...] who support this nightmare. We all know and honour the date 21 May 1864. For most of us, this is a great tragedy. As a result of the war, Russia made us its colony, killing hundreds of thousands of civilians. Do you really not see any parallels between the genocide of the Circassian people and what is happening in Ukraine now? (April 2022, archived Instagram post, translation mine)

The date 21 May 1864, referred to by the author, marks the last day of the Russian-Caucasian War (1763-1864²), which had devastating consequences for multiple Indigenous communities, particularly the Circassians, who fiercely resisted the encroachment into their territories. Realising they would not submit to the empire, Russian officials decided to “cleanse” the Black Sea coast of this “harmful” and “undesirable” population (Holquist 2001). Terror, including torching villages and massacring civilians, was used as an instrument to drive them from their lands. The survivors had to either resettle in the territories designated for them by the Russian authorities or relocate to the Ottoman Empire. The majority opted for the latter, and an estimated 500,000 to one million Circassians departed for the Ottoman Empire by sea, with at least tens of thousands drowning or succumbing to hunger and disease along the way (Perovic 2018, 58).

Unsurprisingly, the Russian-Caucasian War still plays a pivotal role for the Circassians, scattered between their North Caucasus homeland and diasporas around the world. Their shared tragic history has become an important part of the identity of many modern Circassians (King 2007) and has been used as a tool for advancing nationalist assertions (Catic 2015; Zhemukhov 2012). Circassian activists have appealed to the Kremlin to recognise the nineteenth-century Circassian genocide by the Russian Empire, but their pleas remain unanswered. The unwillingness of the Russian state to accept an uncomfortable interpretation of these events creates intractable tensions that, as of this date, surround the so-called “Circassian question”.

the post, which I had archived, presumably due to pressure placed on his family. Therefore, to protect the author’s anonymity, I have refrained from mentioning his name.

2 There is a discrepancy between the periodisation and the naming of the war in Russian and Circassian historiographies. In the former, it is referred to as “the Caucasus War” (1817–1864), while the latter calls it “the Russian-Caucasian” or “the Russian-Circassian War” and uses a broader timeframe of 1763–1864. See Zhemukhov (2012) for a discussion.

Notably, as the cited post suggests, not all Circassians draw connections between Russia's historical and modern military colonial aggressions. This is evident in the wide range of reactions that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has evoked among the Circassians. It has deeply resonated with activists in the diasporas, sparking renewed efforts to draw international attention to the plight of their ancestors. In 2022, a US-based Circassian journalist Fatima Tlis addressed the European Parliament, making direct comparisons between Russia's annexation of the North Caucasus and its invasion of Ukraine. In 2023, Adel Bashqawi, a Jordan-born Circassian author, released a book with the telling title, *Circassia and Ukraine: Two Nations Even Russian Genocide Can't Destroy*. Some of those in the homeland (e.g., civic activist Ibrahim Yaganov) also pointed to parallels between their tragic history and the Russian offensive in Ukraine, urging Circassians not to participate in the war on the Russian side. These voices were quickly silenced as the Russian government increased its crackdown on anti-war dissent. In the meantime, Circassian authorities, local official media, some educational institutions and civic organisations in the national republics where the Circassians reside (Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia) have demonstrated strong support for what Russia terms a "special military operation" to "denazify" Ukraine³.

Responding to the questions posed by this special issue, the paper ethnographically explores how the modern Circassians talk about their historical trauma and what factors might make the Russian war against Ukraine comprehensible to them given their history. The focus is on Adygea, the second smallest national republic in the Russian Federation, with a population of almost 440,000 people⁴ and Circassians greatly outnumbered by Russians (22% vs 61%). Compared to Kabardino-Balkaria, where they make up the majority of the population (57%), the Circassians in Adygea rarely express dissent vocally or visibly against federal policies and decisions, including those that concern their collective memory. Perhaps because of its size and non-remonstrative stance, the way the "Circassian question" is dealt with in this republic has so far received scant scholarly attention in English. The current paper addresses this gap, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how past and present Russian wartime conflicts are perceived by ethnic minorities in Russia. It demonstrates that by creating a hierarchy of identities and memories, the state ensures its ethnic minorities, including those who have reason to harbour resentment towards Russian authorities, perceive themselves as loyal citizens, who prioritise their civic identity over ethnic belonging and painful memories.

3 For instance, see GTRK Adygeia (2022). This news report depicts youth in Maykop, Adygea, showing their support for the "special military operation" in Ukraine by holding Russian flags and forming the letter "Z", a symbol of the Russian invasion

4 Statistical data in this and the following sentence is taken from the 2010 All-Russia Population Census.



The modern map of the North Caucasus. Adapted from https://wikitravel.org/shared/File:Caucasus_regions_map.png

Data used in this article were collected as part of an extensive ethnographic project that explored the language maintenance practices of Circassians in Adyghea. Data collection, including interviews, questionnaires, social media posts, school observations and archival work, was conducted in the summer of 2019 and between August 2020 and June 2021 (see Minakova 2023 for a detailed description of the collection). Although the research questions did not directly concern the Russian–Caucasian War, the subject surfaced in about one-third of the gathered data. Realising that this theme is highly relevant to the community, I added a corresponding tag while coding my data. For this article, I conducted a critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003) and an interactional and cultural analysis (Schrauf 2016) of this data, selecting several interview excerpts to illustrate my observations regarding how the participants talked about their traumatic past.

In order to understand how Circassians today engage in discussions about the Russian-Caucasian War, the article begins with an overview of how this conflict has been presented within the memory regimes of the USSR and Russia. I then examine how modern authorities in Adygea navigate between paying tribute to their ancestors – murdered or deported in the course of the Russian-Caucasian War – and aligning with the present federal agenda, which stresses the importance of harmonising inter-ethnic relationships (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of December 19, 2012) and forging a sense of unity among the peoples of Russia. Finally, I provide a close analysis of two individual interviews where participants extensively reflect on the historical trauma of the Circassians, shifting between discussion of past events and their reverberations in the present. The concluding section argues that exploring identities fostered by the state through the state-driven politics of memory can aid in understanding the different attitudes of Russia's ethnic minorities to the ongoing war in Ukraine.

DEALING WITH A DARK PAST: INTERPRETATIONS OF THE RUSSIAN-CAUCASIAN
WAR AND CIRCASSIAN ETHNIC CLEANSING IN THE SOVIET AND RUSSIAN REGIMES
OF MEMORY

The article proposes treating the atrocities committed against the Circassians by the Russian Empire as one of the country's "dark pasts". Dixon (2018, 19) defines the term as "large-scale or systematic human rights atrocities" such as "genocide, mass killing, ethnic cleansing, colonialism, and slavery [...], for which the state bears some responsibility, either directly or as a successor to the regime that perpetrated the crimes". Since acknowledging dark pasts poses various risks, including threats to the country's positive self-image, silencing claims of wrongdoings is common for states that rely on a sanitised past to solidify the nation in the present. By establishing "official memory regimes", that is, state-controlled mechanisms for shaping historical recollection (Bernhard and Kubik 2014), such countries, of which modern Russia is an illustrative example, strategically highlight events instrumental in creating a sense of unified national identity while marginalising or suppressing dark pasts that can undermine this goal.

Dixon (2018) stresses that the relationship between a country and its dark past is dynamic and multidirectional. An official memory regime is frequently challenged by "counter-memories" that promote divergent commemorative narratives, "representing the views of marginalized individuals or groups within the society" (Zerubavel 1995, 11). Regime changes typically entail "the reformulation of collective identities", which cannot occur without re-evaluating a country's past (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 8). At these turning points, dark pasts might re-emerge at

the demand of oppressed groups or be repurposed by the state to reach new political goals. As the rest of this section demonstrates, the Russian/Soviet state interpretations of the Russian-Caucasian War have undergone significant changes, from glorifying the resistance of the mountaineers to denying the very fact that the Russian-Caucasian War ever happened. Radical political transformations after 1917 and in the 1990s did shed light on historical injustices against the Circassians, but subsequent political retrenchments stifled their efforts to openly discuss their past.

In the early Soviet Union, when the Bolsheviks sought to gain the trust of ethnic minorities by promoting non-Russian nationalism and denouncing tsarist oppression, the Russian advancements into the North Caucasus were condemned as colonial expansion. The resistance of the North Caucasus peoples, particularly the Circassians, was praised as a heroic “struggle for freedom” and “independence from alien Russians” (Siukhov 1926, 2). In the mid-1930s, however, Stalin proclaimed that “non-Russian mistrust had been overcome” and introduced the concept of “the Friendship of the Peoples” of the USSR (Martin 2001, 451). Consequently, the role of the Russian people, their history and culture was elevated, while the importance of ethnic minorities receded into the background. Within this context, the resistance of the mountaineers was officially labelled “reactionary”, “nationalist” and serving the interests of “English capitalism and the Turkish Sultan” who aimed to spread anti-Russian sentiments in the Caucasus (Adamov and Kutakov 1950). This dramatic change in the master narrative was “a crushing blow to the North Caucasians” since it harmed the development of their cultures and resulted in the repression of scholars studying the Russian-Caucasian War through an anticolonial lens (Karcha 1958, 115-116).

Under Khrushchev and Brezhnev, the official discourse put greater emphasis on “unity”, centuries-old “brotherly friendship” and “rapprochement” between the peoples of the USSR. Since the atrocities of the Russian-Caucasian War did not fit this narrative, Soviet officials, aided by historians, invented a myth about the “voluntary joining” of the peoples of the North Caucasus to Russia, ignoring or denying the occurrence of the Russian-Caucasian War (see Polovinkina 2001; Shnilerman 2006). In 1957, the republics of Adygea, Kabardino-Balakaria and Karachai-Cherkessia celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of this “voluntary joining”. The year 1557 was selected as the starting point of this “friendship” since in the mid-sixteenth century several Circassian princes formed a temporary alliance with Muscovy to fight against Crimean Tatars. This fact assisted in building a “politically correct” image of the past, reinforcing the narrative of a long and peaceful coexistence between the Russians and the Circassians.

During *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the 1980s, the myth of “voluntary joining” was debunked, and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 allowed the North Caucasian

peoples to challenge the official memory regime with their counter-memory. For example, local authorities and intelligentsia in Adygea openly criticised the silencing of historical facts about the Russian-Caucasian War and explored ways to deal with and talk about their past trauma. In the meantime, Circassian scholars uncovered and published archival materials revealing details about the deportation of the Circassians (e.g., Kumykov 1994). The discourse soon led to concrete actions: in 1992 and 1996, respectively, the authorities in Kabardino-Bakaria and Adygea officially recognised the Circassian genocide. Furthermore, in 2005, an appeal, albeit unsuccessful, was made to the Russian federal authorities to acknowledge the genocide against the Circassians (see Zhemukhov, 2012).

The 1990s witnessed a sharp rise in ethnic and territorial tensions in the North Caucasus. In response, the first president of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, issued a statement, acknowledging the severe losses sustained by North Caucasians in the nineteenth century. Yeltsin (1994) described the war as “the courageous struggle of the peoples of the Caucasus not only for survival on their native land but also for the preservation of their unique culture and the best traits of their national character” (translation mine). The statement might have seemed like an important step towards bridging the official and counter-memory of the Circassians. Yet, as highlighted by Urushadze (2018), Yeltsin’s address should be understood within the context of the imminent First Chechen War (1994–1996) as an attempt to appease and contain separatist movements in the Caucasus. The 1994 statement underscored that the memory of the Russian-Caucasian War should serve as a “warning against new tragedies” and proclaimed the North Caucasus an inseparable part of Russia.

After a period of nascent democracy in the 1990s, Russia reverted to political recentralisation in the 2000s, establishing a new regime of memory. As observed by Walker (2018, 9), Vladimir Putin embarked on a “mission to fill the void left by the 1991 collapse and forge a new sense of nation and purpose in Russia” by manipulating the past and elevating the victory in WWII “to a national founding myth”. Framed as both a common triumph and grief, the victory provides a powerful source of pride for the country’s diverse ethnic groups, whose ancestors fought and died in the war. Essentially, it serves as a tool for promoting militarised patriotism and interethnic unity, setting an example of how people of different nationalities should come together to defend their country (see Vähä 2002).

In contrast, the history of the Russian-Caucasian War can potentially undermine the unification agenda and is therefore marginalised. For instance, in school history textbooks, the war is discussed, if at all, in very neutral terms (Urushadze 2018), with the episode of Circassian ethnic cleansing omitted. Furthermore, in recent years, Circassian activists have had trouble organising marches in commemoration of the victims of the Russian-Caucasian War (see Hansen 2019). Local officials, who

since 2004 have been appointed by the Kremlin in cooperation with the regional parliaments, have created different obstacles to prevent this event, viewing it as a form of grassroots political activism. The hosting of the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, located on Indigenous Circassian land and remembered by them as “a site of suffering and death” of their ancestors (Richmond 2013, 161), further underscores the federal authorities’ disregard for the collective memory of the Circassians (see Petersson and Vamling 2017).

Amidst this political climate, local authorities in Kabardino-Balkaria, Adygea and Karachai-Cherkessia have distanced themselves from the nationalist sentiments of the 1990s and adopted an accommodationist stance, demonstrating loyalty to the Kremlin (see Zhemukhov 2012). Questions about the Circassian genocide are currently raised by the Circassian diaspora while receiving much less emphasis in the North Caucasus. Nevertheless, the counter-memory of the Russian-Caucasian War persists, frequently resurfacing in various forms and at different levels despite decades of suppression and the present repressive political environment.

THE RUSSIAN-CAUCASIAN WAR IN MODERN LOCAL OFFICIAL DISCOURSES

Unlike the Kremlin, the government in Adygea (as well as in Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia) cannot avoid expressing their stance on the Russian-Caucasian War as it plays a central role in the history and self-identification of the Circassians (Urusadze 2018). Since the 1990s, authorities in Adygea have been holding annual memorial ceremonies to pay tribute to the Circassians deceased and displaced as a result of the conquest. In 2013, the “Monument of Memory and Unification” was opened in Maykop, the capital of Adygea, to commemorate the victims of the war. The official name of the monument reflects the message that the local authorities wish to convey to the population: while remembering the painful past, both Circassians and Russians need to cherish the present peace and strive to prevent the recurrence of similar tragedies.

In recent years, official speeches, mass media broadcasts and social media posts made on 21 May – the last day of the war, known among the Circassians as the Day of Remembrance and Mourning – have consistently followed a similar pattern. After recognising the past sufferings of the Circassians, a statement is made about the importance of the present peace and interethnic unity. An Instagram post by the head of the Republic of Adygea, Murat Kumpilov, clearly demonstrates this shift in focus:

Every year on 21 May, we pay tribute to our ancestors, bow our heads in memory of the victims and, with a heavy heart, reconsider the scale of that terrible tragedy, which left an indelible mark on the history of Adygea.

Looking to the past, we increasingly realise the significance of the values of peace and harmony, the preservation of unity, so that our children and grandchildren can live on their land under a peaceful sky [...]. May our ancient land never see war! (Kumpilov 2021, translation mine)

Such rhetoric promotes a harmonising discourse, indicating that in commemorating 21 May, the Circassians do not seek revenge or justice but pay tribute to their painful past while maintaining a positive and hopeful outlook on the present and future. By presenting the Day of Remembrance and Mourning in this light, local authorities acknowledge the significance of the Russian-Caucasian War for the Circassians while remaining loyal to the federal centre, distancing themselves from the political activism and calls for recognition of the Circassian genocide voiced in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Notably, modern official statements and reports refrain from naming the aggressor responsible for the destruction and deportation of the Circassian population. To illustrate, the conquest of the Caucasus is usually referred to by local officials as the “Caucasian War” instead of the “Russian-Caucasian” or “Russian-Circassian War” preferred by parts of the Circassian community (see Zhemukhov 2012). For local authorities, the use of these alternative names might contribute to the “ethnicisation” and politicisation of the past conflict, potentially escalating interethnic tensions in the republic (see Khanakhu and Tsvetkov 2015). Furthermore, official statements avoid identifying the adversary while talking about the suffering of the Circassians. For example, in a news report about the memorial concert held in Maykop in 2021, the narrator of the main local TV channel stated that it was “fate” that “ruthlessly ground the Circassian people in its millstones and scattered them all over the world” (@gtrkadygeia 2021, translation mine). This phrasing shifts the focus away from the victim-perpetrator paradigm, portraying the hardships of the Circassians as unavoidable and dictated by fate.

Similar tendencies are observed in how the memory of the Russian-Caucasian War is dealt with in public schools in Adygea. Unlike during Soviet times when the topic was forbidden, modern children do learn about the Russian-Caucasian War as schools started participating in commemorating the Day of Remembrance and Mourning in the 2010s. As reported by the interviewed teachers of Circassian language and literature, there are “*besedy*” (conversations) about the Russian-Caucasian War for the Circassian children encouraged by the local authorities. Students also learn about the war from literary works by local writers that they study in Circassian literature classes. One teacher respondent shared that in discussing this sensitive topic, she emphasises that what happened to the Circassians in the nineteenth century was “nobody’s fault”. Instead of looking for culprits, she steers the conversation

towards the deep love of the Circassians for their homeland, emphasising that those who stayed, made “a wise decision”, to use her words.

Another teacher stated that she highlights to her students that it was a “tsarist” policy that exiled the Circassians from their homeland. This emphasis helps to distance these events from the present and avoid ruminations about the responsibility of the modern Russian state for the wrongdoings of the past. She also stresses the attachment of the Circassians to their land, asking children how they would feel if someone forced them to leave their homeland. Thus, rather than creating tensions and generating anti-Russian sentiment, the topic of the war is used to teach students about appreciating their homeland and rationalising the choices of their ancestors, including those who fought to the death, those who refused to surrender and left, and those few who stayed and became subjects of the Russian Empire.

Certainly, schools are not children’s only source of information about the Russian-Caucasian War. They can easily learn about it from the Internet, finding a range of interpretations, or from their parents and relatives who might hold views different from those sustained by the official narrative. In recent years, schoolchildren have been preparing video projects for the Circassian Day of Remembrance and Mourning. Some are shared on schools’ official social media accounts. In several of the reviewed videos, students referred to the conquest as the “Russian-Caucasian War” and included an image⁵ frequently used by the Circassians in the diaspora that depicts the conflict as a genocide of the Circassians. Like the term “Russian-Caucasian War”, the word “genocide” is currently discouraged in the official discourse in Adygea. Having access to alternative sources of information, students, however, might be exposed to less euphemistic ways of talking about the war and make them part of their own narratives.

Overall, in commemorating the war, local authorities must strike a balance between recognising the traumatic history of the Circassians and expressing support for the federal government’s aim to stabilise interethnic dynamics. To achieve this, they employ a tactic similar to Russia’s own approach to addressing some of its other dark pasts (e.g., Stalin’s repressions). Specifically, the memory of past wrongdoings is appropriated with the goal of supporting the present agenda and “learning the correct lessons from history” (McGlynn 2023, 20). The rhetoric of modern official statements echoes Yeltsin’s 1994 address to the peoples of the North Caucasus. It stresses the devastating impact of the Russian-Caucasian War and urges the Circassians to work towards maintaining peace. Unlike in discourses within the diaspora, officials in Adygea do not demand accountability but use the memory of the war to align with the state’s efforts to foster a sense of unity and stability.

5 The image can be found at www.pinterest.com/pin/241787073717537316 (accessed 16.07.2024).

REOPENING OLD WOUNDS: INDIVIDUAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE RUSSIAN-CAUCASIAN WAR

Although the local government in Adygea portrays the Russian-Caucasian War as an event of the distant past, contrasting it with the “harmonious” present, federal and regional policies and decisions often reopen old wounds. For example, authorities of the Krasnodar and Stavropol regions have recently erected monuments throughout the North Caucasus that celebrate the generals of the Russian-Caucasian War. Some (e.g., General Alexey Ermolov and General Grigory Zass) are infamous for carrying out atrocities against the local civilian population (see Richmond 2013). These historical figures are also commemorated in the names of streets, museums, and even commercial products (e.g., mineral water branded “General Zass”). While in narratives constructed by Russian authorities, they are presented as “heroes”, the Circassians and other peoples of the Caucasus consider them the “murderers” of their ancestors (see Foxall 2013). The appearance of their monuments and names in city landscapes and on the market provokes outrage among the Circassians and reveals cracks in the façade of modern interethnic “harmony”.

Similarly, the selection of Sochi as the host city for the 2014 Olympics raised questions among the Circassians in Adygea. Sochi holds symbolic significance as the site where, on 21 May 1864, the Russians held their victory parade and where Circassians “died by the thousands as they waited for ships to take them to the Ottoman Empire” (Richmond 2013, 2). Thus, while not directly opposing the games, a significant number of Circassians believed that this decision offended the memory of their ancestors (Khanakhu and Tsvetkov 2015). Addressing the issue, President Putin claimed that “the Circassian factor” was being used by the West in an attempt to deter Russia and thanked the Circassian leaders in the Caucasus for being “wise” and supporting the Olympics (Smertin 2014). That is, instead of acknowledging that the games evoked painful memories among some part of the Circassian population, the president dismissed these concerns as foreign provocations and reverted to the narrative of interethnic agreement.

Despite denial by the federal authorities, such insensitive reminders about the Russian-Caucasian War do trigger resentment among even those Circassians who do not associate themselves with ethnic activism and identify as patriotic citizens of Russia. In what follows, I offer two examples of how this resentment surfaced in two individual interviews.

The War That “Never Happened”

Timur is a 55-year-old Circassian male who grew up and lived all his life in Adygea. Having worked for a long time in tourism, he is deeply knowledgeable about the history of the republic. He brought up the topic of the Russian-Caucasian War while

discussing the differences in attitudes to the Circassian language and culture before and after *perestroika*. In the excerpt below, Timur describes the time it was forbidden to talk about the war (see Appendix A for transcription conventions):

1. **Timur (T):** [...] well I don't want to drag [you] into these depths in these historical
2. let's say events [...] but as a result (1.0) of quite clear and
3. well-known events at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries
4. **(Interviewer-I: uhum)** when there were massive population movements here
5. **(I: uhum)** the map so to speak changed and everything became
6. completely different (0.5) but (2.0) back in those Soviet times like I said even
7. these facts were silenced **(I: uhum)** they are not even-
8. it was forbidden to talk [about them]
9. **I:** [it was forbidden to talk about the Caucasus war⁶ then?
10. **T:** uh?
11. **I:** about the Caucasus War it was forbidden to talk?
12. **T:** but it never happened **(I: ah ((soft chuckle)))** it never happened and there were
13. no Circassians here **(I: hmmm)** there was this doctrine that since olden times
14. historically ↑epochally the Cossacks had lived here
15. (0.5) well it's ridiculous of course [...] [INT, 10/2020]

At the beginning of the excerpt, Timur seems hesitant to discuss the war and the Soviet policy but decides to continue anyway. He then carefully monitors his language, avoiding such words as “war”, referring to it instead as “well-known events”, and “deportation”, which he describes as “massive population movements”. His euphemistic word choices are also accompanied by mitigation markers “let's say” (line 2) and “so to speak” (line 5), which serve to decrease transparency, attenuate the effect of one's speech and distance the speaker from the utterance (Caffi 2005). By constructing his speech in such a way, Timur engages in self-silencing (see Malewska-Szałygin 2021). He is broaching an “unsafe” topic, the discussion of which had been forbidden for a long time, and explores my reaction to it. Studies show that the Russians and the Circassians have different attitudes towards the Russian-Caucasian War, with the former tending to downplay its significance and deny its aggressive character (Khanakhu and Guchetl 2013). The sensitive nature of the topic and my identity as a Russian make Timur cautious about his word choices.

In line 9, I interrupt Timur and ask directly if he is saying that it was forbidden to talk about the war. Timur prompts me to repeat the question, after which, he responds with irony, saying that the war never happened. According to the pretence

6 At the time of the interview in 2020, I was unaware of the potential significance of different designations for the war among the Circassians and used the name I encountered most frequently in official discourses in Adygea.

theory of irony, by using irony, “a speaker is pretending to be an injudicious person speaking to an unintended audience”, expecting the interlocutor to “discover the pretense” (Clark and Gerrig 1984, 121). In lines 12–14, Timur pretends to be a transmitter of official Soviet memory, which postulated in the 1960s and 1970s that the Russian-Caucasian War never happened and presented the Cossacks as the Indigenous population of the Black Sea coast. My interjections and chuckle indicate I recognise Timur’s irony. He mocks the Soviet doctrine, stressing words and finding three different ways to say that the Cossacks were the original inhabitants of the North Caucasus, a statement that he describes as “ridiculous”.

As argued by Clark and Gerrig (1984), irony suggests a shared knowledge between speaker and listener, which results in increased intimacy. Indeed, after this exchange, Timur’s language became less evasive as he expressed his indignation at the Soviet policy of silencing inconvenient history. He then stated that the current situation was not much better:

1. **T:** well what can I say (0.5) up to the present day
2. at the federal level - between you and me this all continues (1.0)
3. well I will give a simple example [...] I think it was actually
4. beyond blasphemous to choose exactly this
5. place and hold [exactly
6. **I:** the Olympics?
7. **T:** well the Olympics in Krasnaia Poliana (**I:** uhum) everyone who
8. understands at least something in history realises the role of
9. Krasnaia Poliana (**I:** uhum) in those (0.5) unpleasant trust me bloody events
10. (**I:** uhum uhum) and well at the right moment they gave the idea
11. in such a way to the main person who - well, I’m sure he basically
12. never knew about it probably (0.5) °simply due to the fact that he
13. didn’t know° (**I:** uhum) and to the the whole world- there we are -
14. this immediately caused a lot of objections, rejection (**I:** uhum)
15. (1.0) it’s like to arrange Saint Vitta dance on the bones of the ancestors

Line 2 illustrates Timur’s greater comfort discussing current injustices with me, as evidenced by his use of the expression “between you and me”. He then talks about the decision of the Russian authorities to hold the 2014 Olympics in Sochi (also called Krasnaia Poliana). In contrast to vague and indirect language in the previous excerpt, Timur takes an openly negative and judgemental stance, calling the decision of the federal centre “*sverkhkashchunstvenno*” (beyond blasphemous). I interrupt him and name the event to show that we indeed have a shared understanding and that his trust is justified. In line 9, Timur still uses euphemistic language, calling the war “unpleasant events” but adds a more expressive adjective “bloody”.

Timur then speculates about how the decision to hold the Olympics in Sochi was made. In his understanding, President Putin, whom he does name directly but refers to as “the main person”, was simply uninformed about the significance of Sochi to the Circassians. In saying this, Timur shows that he does not blame the president for creating a situation that outraged Circassians all over the world. Describing the Olympics in Sochi metaphorically as dancing “on the bones of the ancestors”, he further indicates his highly negative attitude towards it and brings to the fore the discrepancy between the tragic historical events and recent festivities that took place on the same ground.

These excerpts illustrate that the Russian-Caucasian War is still a highly sensitive topic. To discuss it, interlocutors might want to first establish trust and explore each other’s views, for example, through self-silencing. Indignation at holding the 2014 Olympics in Sochi presupposes criticism of the federal government that chose this location. However, Timur does not name those responsible for disrespecting the collective memory of the Circassians and even takes the blame away from the president. His views resemble current official discourses in Adygea that focus on the pain of the Circassians without making accusations. This suggests that dissatisfaction with the lack of recognition of the Circassians’ traumatic past does not necessarily translate into dissent. The next section provides further evidence for this observation.

“I Like to Speak the Truth as It Is”

Goshnago is a 70-year-old woman whom I met in the local archive while conducting my research. Having learned about the topic of my project, she volunteered to give an interview. Unlike Timur, Goshnago did not spend time exploring my views about the Russian-Caucasian War and did not try to soften her language. She noted that she “liked to speak the truth as it is”, even if it was unpleasant or did not align with the official narrative. She brought up the topic of the war early in the interview, explaining that the Circassian language is disappearing because the Circassians are a minority in Adygea, an outcome of the conquest and the Soviet territorial arrangements. In the following excerpt, she discusses how part of the traditional Circassian territory was transformed into a separate region and named after a tsarist admiral who served in the Russian-Caucasian War:

1. **Goshnago (G):** [...] they called it Lazarevskii region and immediately
2. erected the bust of Lazarev (1.0) (**I:** uhum) so this is the one under whose
3. leadership (0.5) blood was flowing like a river (**I:** uhum)
4. the Circassian blood (1.0) (**I:** uhum) this is the one under whose leadership
5. it was allowed to rape children- girls from eight years old (1.0) ((inhales))

6. [...] I just recently read about it- he gets a monument here we ↑go
7. (I: uhum) (0.5) Zass who issued this order – there is his monument in Labinsk-
8. books are written about them ↑streets are named after them [...] [INT, 07/2019]

Goshnago contrasts the unspeakable atrocities committed under the commands of Russian military leaders and the current politics around constructing and naming monuments that glorify them. She begins with a general expressive description (“the Circassian blood was flowing like a river”), punctuating her speech with frequent pauses and stressing words, thereby signalling her heightened emotive involvement and creating a dramatic effect (Selting 1994). She then moves on to provide horrific details of the Russian invasion. The authorised rape of children, which she talks about in line 5, stands as the epitome of shocking barbarity exhibited by the Russian army. As she speaks, Goshnago raises her voice several times, which indicates her indignation and contributes to the high emotional intensity of the moment.

Throughout the interview, Goshnago used similar emphatic speech to discuss how the Circassians were further expelled from their territories due to Soviet territorial restructuring. She also criticised Soviet narratives that claimed that the Russians brought “civilisation” and “culture” to the peoples of the North Caucasus. Despite her critical stance, towards the end of the interview, Goshnago started normalising the decisions of the authorities that resulted in the current minority status of the Circassians:

1. G: the absolute majority of those living here are Russians (I: uhum)
2. (1.0) [...] I read somewhere that it was done deliberately –
3. such was the policy-very far-sighted by the way (0.5) I am not bashing it =
4. if they are the winners→ the winners do everything as it should be
5. done (1.0) and during the Soviet time→ try that - to bring
6. so many nationalities to one denominator = it's not that easy [...]
7. and I'm grateful to the Soviet power = it was a completely
8. different time (0.5) it's (1.0) people were loved→ equality was the goal →
9. everything was normal = wonderful (I: uhum) I really regret about the Soviet Union
10. I: about its dissolution?
11. G: yes↓

In lines 1–3, Goshnago refers to the tsarist policies that aimed to replace the autochthonous population of the Black Sea coast with Cossacks, considered loyal to the state. The outcomes of this policy are visible to this day; therefore, Goshnago approvingly calls it “far-sighted”. What she states next is evocative of the common Russian saying “*pobeditelei ne sudiat*” (winners are not judged). Despite realising

its devastating effect on the Circassians, Goshnago demonstrates her understanding of the tsarist policy and normalises it, saying that “the winners do everything as it should be done”. This indicates her acceptance of the plight of the Circassians and rationalisation of the tsarist and, later, Soviet population policies.

She then speaks highly of the Soviet Union’s nationality policies that managed, as she puts it, to bring its multiethnic population to a common denominator. She most likely refers to the efforts to impose a “supranational” Soviet identity on different ethnic groups, aimed at surpassing nationalist, ethnic and religious interests (see Vähä 2002). In lines 5–9, Goshnago’s tone gradually escalates from implied approval to explicit praise of the Soviet Union, where, in her words, “everything was wonderful”. This statement, which stands in stark contrast to her earlier criticism, indicates that Goshnago idealises and prioritises the unity of the peoples of the former USSR over her counter-memory of the injustices committed against the ethnic group with which she identifies. As the following excerpt illustrates, she continues to value unity in the present, claiming that ethnic boundaries in Russia are easily overcome by the surge in patriotism prompted by external threats:

1. **G**: The US is even at war with Russia (0.5) when these moments arise →
2. (0.5) they do not understand that patriotism in us rises two- threefold [...]
3. we all Russians and non-Russians (1.0) can instantly come together as one fist
4. (**I**: uhum) and will make things hot- we still have experience (**I**: uhum)
5. that you can’t even imagine- they think they broke down the USSR [so]
6. they will break down Russia [...]

Goshnago presents the United States as a common enemy, against which all multi-ethnic peoples of Russia stand united. She highlights that ethnic differences become irrelevant in the face of a common threat to the country. Her rhetoric becomes combative (“come together as one fist”; “we will make things hot”), and her use of personal pronouns creates a clear boundary between “them”, the Americans, and “us”, the peoples of Russia, regardless of ethnicity. “Experience” in line 4 must refer to the victory in WWII, which, as explained earlier, is used in modern Russia to cultivate militarised patriotism.

Goshnago’s understanding of patriotism, rooted in Soviet-era discourse about the struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States echoes ideas currently propagated by state-sponsored media. Asserting that the very existence of Russia is threatened by American imperialism and the expansion of NATO, they are calling on its population to come together and defend Russia’s sovereignty, which is allegedly at stake in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Goshnago’s thinking indicates that Soviet indoctrination and current propaganda have been quite effective. Despite

being aware of and critical of the historical mistreatment of the Circassians, she sets aside her grievances and prioritises her identity as a citizen of Russia over her counter-memory of the trauma inflicted upon her people.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The article examined how the topic of the Russian-Caucasian War is addressed at three different levels in Russia, seeking to understand how painful memories of the past might interact with the perception of Russia's contemporary aggression in Ukraine. As illustrated, after the 1990s and early 2000s, when the Circassians started to voice their counter-memory, Putin's unification efforts clamped down on these efforts, silencing or dismissing their concerns. Pro-Kremlin authorities in Adygea cannot afford to remain silent about the impact of the Russian-Caucasian War but approach it in a manner that does not aggravate the federal government, emphasising the importance of interethnic agreement in the present. Against this backdrop, individual narratives about the war present a less harmonious outlook and raise issues about the federal and regional politics of commemoration and the use of Circassian lands for international festivities. My participants mocked past memory regimes while still silencing themselves or, on the contrary, bringing to the fore their counter-memory of the war and its horrific details. Expressing resentment about the lack of recognition of the war's atrocities at the federal level, they did not criticise the authorities and even justified them.

Importantly, the fieldwork was conducted in 2019–2021, before Russia waged a full-fledged war on Ukraine. Nonetheless, the analysed interview excerpts provide important insights into how some Circassians position themselves within the Russian state and how they might react to conflicts in which it is involved. The analysis illustrates that at least for some members of the Circassian community in the North Caucasus – presumably the older ones who went through Soviet education and are relying on state-controlled TV as a main information source – loyalty to the state takes precedence over ethnic grievances. The official memory regime, which elevates victory in WWII and downplays dark pasts, creates a hierarchy of identities and memories, ensuring that individuals' civic identity and memories of their relatives' contributions to the fight against fascism are not undermined by ethnic affiliation. Even in the case of the Circassians, who have weighty reasons to hold grudges against the federal centre, this strategy appears effective.

To return to the question of the Circassian filmmaker cited at the beginning of the article, not all Circassians see similarities between Russia's past and modern colonial expansions, nor do they compare the plight of their ancestors with that of modern Ukrainians. For some Circassians in Adygea, the current invasion

of Ukraine is not perceived as colonial expansion. Rather, as the state propaganda insists, it is viewed as an existential and perennial fight against Western hegemony and fascism, aimed at preserving Russia's sovereignty and, more globally, safeguarding traditional human values. In this light, Circassians do not see themselves as a colonised and oppressed minority but, rather, as patriotic citizens of Russia who must "come together as one fist" to protect their country, as their relatives did during WWII. This orientation creates a deep ideological divide between them and Circassian activists in diasporas, who often take an openly anti-Russia stance. Whenever the latter draw increased attention to the question of Circassian genocide, the federal government frames their claims as external provocations that seek to destabilise Russia. By using the external threat argument, the official discourse taps into the North Caucasus Circassians' identity as Russian citizens, presenting diaspora activism as a manipulative politicisation of the past that can have dire consequences today.

To be sure, the article provides just a glimpse into what might make the Russian invasion of Ukraine justifiable to Circassians and other ethnic minorities in Russia. There are other motivations to approve and even participate in the war – financial gain, for example. There are also numerous Circassians in the homeland who, mindful of their own history, do not support the invasion of Ukraine but are unable to express their dissent openly due to potential repercussions. Their perspectives and memories, unaccounted for in this article, can become the subject of future ethnographic investigations when such research becomes possible and safe in Russia.

Nevertheless, the paper offers an important contribution to this special issue by highlighting the necessity for closer examination of memory and identity hierarchies in modern Russia to better understand the dynamics of resistance and accommodation within its multiethnic groups. Following Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, both foreign and domestic political analysts have engaged in discussions about the possible disintegration of the Russian Federation fuelled by the outrage of ethnic minorities disproportionately affected by the invasion and historically oppressed by the state (e.g., Coalson 2023). While the offensive indeed mobilised some ethnic activists within Russia and abroad, prompting reflection on their histories and current marginalisation within Russia, there are no solid grounds for assuming that their campaigns have significantly threatened the current regime. Those who grew up and were educated in the Soviet Union were trained to downplay their ethnic identities and counter-memories as the official regime elevated Russian culture and promoted a totalitarian view of history. Modern Russia follows in these footsteps, using education and media to sanitise its past and perpetuate a hierarchy of identities and memories for new generations. Certainly, the existence of diasporas, experiences of living and studying abroad and the accessibility of alternative, non-state-controlled sources of information all create challenges for this endeavour. Yet,

by resorting to repression, censorship and rhetoric about “external enemies”, Russian authorities have been able to contain ethnic dissent.

Although the counter-memories of ethnic minorities in Russia do not necessarily lead to open resistance to the oppressive state, reflections on their traumatic past are important for their self-identification, connection with diasporas and continuity as distinct cultural groups. It is reasonable to assume that such narratives, divergent from the official whitewashed version of history, will remain significant both for those in the diasporas and the homeland, persisting in some form even in the increasingly repressive climate in Russia. A change in regime will likely bring about different master narratives, possibly creating opportunities for reconfiguring the relationship between the state and local ethnic identities and, hopefully, bringing a sense of justice and closure to those still grappling with the consequences and safeguarding the memories of their repressed traumatic past.

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TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

(ADAPTED AND MODIFIED FROM CLAN MANUAL FOR THE CEAPP PROJECT)

The number inside the parentheses represents the length of the pause

= Contiguous utterances (latching)

[Overlapping utterances

Word indicates emphasis

-Abrupt stop in articulation, cut-off

↑ Rise in pitch

↓ Fall in pitch at the end of the utterance

→ Continuing intonation

◦ ◦ Soft speech

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