

integration could bring great benefits to the population of Caucasian states, the deep mistrust and unresolved political-territorial problems, exacerbated by the issue of refugees, are obstacles along the way of peace and integration, the achievement of which, as the author predicts, will not be easy. Despite some imbalances and inaccuracies (not to mention quite a few typos), on the whole Cornell's book presents a useful source for Western readers' knowledge about the Caucasus and its present political problems.

VIACHESLAV A. CHIRIKBA

AMJAD JAIMOUKHA:

*The Circassians: a handbook.*

(Peoples of the Caucasus.) 384 pp. Richmond: Curzon Caucasus World, 2001.

This is the first modern account of the Circassians, once the largest North Caucasian people, whose ancestry lies lost in the mists of time and whose territory presently makes up part of the Russian Federation. The Circassians were known to Europe and the East in the past principally because of the beauty of their women ('a fair Circassian') and the legendary bravery of their men. The Circassian Mamluks had a lasting and significant impact on Egypt's history. But since the brutal decimation of Circassia by Imperial Russia and the forced emigration of the majority of its population to the Ottoman Empire, this nation has been mostly forgotten and neglected. One of the few works on the Circassians which appeared in the twentieth century is Aytek Namitok's *Origines des Circassiens*, (Paris, 1939). The book under review, by Amjad Jaimoukha, fills a substantial gap in Western readers' knowledge of this Caucasian nation.

The book encompasses nearly all aspects of Circassian history and life (people and land; history; politics and current affairs; the diaspora; economy; religion and beliefs; social structure; folklore; arts, crafts and architecture; music and dance; language and linguistic policy; literature; theatre, media and film). The useful appendices include Circassian proverbs and sayings, chronology, the Circassian pantheon and caste system, latinized Kabardian alphabet, extensive bibliography and index.

In the nineteenth century the territory of Circassia became a bone of contention between its two rival neighbours, Turkey and Russia. Eventually Turkey ceded Circassia, which it possessed only nominally, to Russia, thus presenting the latter with the uneasy task of conquering the Circassian territory. This period is among the most tragic chapters in the history of the Circassians; many were exterminated or forced to flee their homeland. The author justly mentions yet another aspect of that sad situation—the uncompromising and disastrous decisions taken by Circassian leaders, who preferred to lead their people to wholesale emigration, thus effectively giving up their homeland. If it were not for the ethnic cleansing of the indigenous population of the Western Caucasus (Circassians, Ubykhs, Abkhazians) in the nineteenth century, the recent history of this region, and indeed of the entire Caucasus, would have been quite different from what it is today.

There are still many gaps in our knowledge of Circassian history, even of the relatively recent Soviet period, such as the Baksan revolt of 1928 (p. 80). No less revealing is the fresh look at the question of Kabarda's 'voluntary' incorporation into the Russian Empire which, as the author argues, became

possible only after a series of military campaigns against the Kabardians. 'When General Yermolov, military commander of the southern Tsarist forces, arrived on the scene in 1816, Kabarda was on her knees. Four decades of open conflict had demoralized the people and left the land in ruins. The Kabardians suffered heavy losses' (p. 63).

There is a chapter devoted to Circassian communities in the diaspora, which are undergoing some revival owing to the resumption of contacts with their ethnic kin in the Caucasus and the increase in literacy and Circassian self-identity. The process of assimilation is nevertheless taking its toll, the majority of young Circassians in the diaspora being unable to speak their ancestral language. Their proficiency in the official languages (mostly Arabic or Turkish) does, of course, considerably enhance their career opportunities, and with no education in the native tongue (with some exceptions in Israel and Jordan), it is difficult to be optimistic about the future of the Circassian language in the diaspora.

The Abkhaz-Georgian war of 1992–93, which revived in the minds of many Circassians the dark days of their own history of suppression and foreign domination, played a crucial role in the re-emergence of Circassian identity, both in the Caucasus and especially in the diaspora. A considerable number of Circassians, Abazas and Chechens came to the rescue of their kindred Abkhazians and fought alongside Abkhaz forces. For the first time since the days of their struggle with Tsarist Russia, all the North Caucasian communities were united in a common cause, now around the Abkhaz issue, which 'allowed them for the first time to assume a strong political stance' (p. 105). The new leaders, who emerged on the wave of the support campaign during the Abkhazian war, reached a level of popularity exceeding that of the old Soviet apparatchiks, and their growing influence 'at times threatened to sweep the local authorities out of power'. But the Chechen scenario was not repeated in the Circassian republics. Despite their popularity, the new leaders were not experienced politicians, and as the old élites had reluctantly decided to support the pro-Abkhazian movement, such manoeuvrings helped them to retain and even consolidate their grip on power.

The Circassian language and oral literature, in particular the monumental Nart epics, received some attention from Western scholars, especially in the shape of the distinguished Georges Dumézil. The Nart sagas are 'the most essential ingredient of Circassian culture', comparable in importance to what Greek mythology is to Western civilization. A lesser known cultural phenomenon is the sophisticated Circassian chivalrous code of behaviour 'Adyghé Xabze'. Circassian literature written in the Cyrillic script flourished in Soviet times, though it had to comply with the official Soviet ideology and refrain from touching on forbidden themes. After the collapse of Communism, previously 'closed' topics came to the fore and could be discussed openly. Yet, a less positive consequence of the new freedom was the fact that the cosy collaboration of the Soviet State with the writers came to an end, and the subsidy system was scrapped: 'Market forces became important factors in shaping the literary life' (p. 282). The number of publications in Circassian in the post-Soviet period has consequently dropped dramatically.

In an appendix to the book the author presents his own proposal for a latinized Kabardian alphabet. The need for such an alphabet, which would arguably better serve the cultural needs of Circassians both in the Caucasus and in the diaspora, is indeed pressing, but the objective difficulty is the huge Circassian consonantal inventory. No less of a tremendous task is to convince Circassian societies at large, in particular the writers, of the necessity to

change the current writing systems based on Cyrillic, in spite of a real danger of interrupting the literary tradition.

New perspectives for Circassians, as well as for other small Caucasian nations, are being opened up with the spread of the Internet. Jaimoukha's successful activity in creating a Circassian website, which contains an impressive bibliography on Circassia and the Caucasus in general, is a graphic example of the new possibilities for the spread of information on the Circassians and for day-to-day communication between the Caucasian and diaspora communities.

In general, the book presents reliable, detailed and up-to-date information on the Circassian nation which will undoubtedly be welcomed by a very broad readership, including of course the numerous Caucasian diaspora communities.

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AHMAD TAFAZZOLI:

*Sasanian society. I. Warriors II. Scribes III. Dehqāns.*

(Ehsan Yarshater Distinguished Lectures in Iranian Studies No. 1.)

v, 71 pp. New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press (Distributed by Eisenbrauns), 2000.

*Sasanian society* is the global title of the three articles mentioned in the subtitle, which resulted from the late and sorely missed Professor Tafazzoli's Ehsan Yarshater Distinguished Lectures. Unfortunately the author himself could not prepare his lectures for the press. D. N. MacKenzie has done him this last service, and R. P. Mottahedeh has seen to the booklet's publication on behalf of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University as the first volume of the Yarshater Lectures Series.

The three parts of the book are: (1) Warriors, (2) Scribes and secretaries, and (3) *Dehqāns*. No general description of Sasanian society is given, and even the representation of these social and functional groups and classes is incomplete. One understands, however, the author's choice: had he included the Zoroastrian priesthood, the wealth of source material would have been overwhelming. Had he written about craftsmen, merchants and peasants, he would have had to make do with sparse testimonies.

Even so, a remarkable methodological gap between the first article and the two following cannot be overlooked. Tafazzoli describes in the chapter 'Warriors' (not aristocracy!) what can be said about the structure and components of the late Sasanian military organization: army, military posts, divisions of the army, ranks, war (i.e. terms for fighting and combat). Much of what is presented in this part of the book has also been said by others (e.g. about the colour of the warriors' clothes, p. 1). So this chapter is largely a reliable description of the state of the art, especially in matters of terminology. But I regard the two following parts 'Scribes and secretaries' and '*Dehqāns*' as the highlight of the book; the author displays his impressive command of all the relevant Middle Persian, New Persian and Arabic sources on Sasanian history.

Tafazzoli not only describes the contribution of these groups to the social system of Sasanian and post-Sasanian Iran, he also succeeds in identifying the names and determining the functions of their prominent representatives. It is no exaggeration to say that his book is an important contribution to a future prosopography of Iran in the first millennium A.D.