

Changing the boundaries of knowledge

Talking about the silence and the break

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Abstract

This article aims to explore how boundaries of knowledge are problematized and changed by diasporic communities in the age of globalization. It deals with how the Circassians, a Muslim non-Turkish ethnic group in Turkey, redefine and transform the knowledge of their own identity, history and diasporic experience in the post-Soviet conjuncture. The article explores the narratives of the Circassian activists on the break and the silence as mechanisms of diasporization and diasporic strategies not only to claim agency for Circassians in the Ottoman Empire and the Republican Turkey but also to redefine Circassian identity and diasporic history. Furthermore, with these narratives, Circassians in Turkey, since the 1990s, have challenged, changed and problematized the boundaries of knowledge which pertain to Turkish politics, official historiography and diaspora politics in general.

Introduction

We remember just like it happened yesterday... We are the children in exile from a war that continued for decades. This sea, this land and this sky are our witness.¹

Since the 1990s diaspora, a relatively old term, has gained new meanings: it has become a tool for social science to investigate the hybrid, transnational and global sites of identities and politics which challenge the national order of things, the naturalized and normalized understanding of the world of nations as a discrete partitioning of territory (Malkki 2001: 55). Rather than referring to particular experiences of certain particular communities, the concept of diaspora has now become crucial for social science to rethink the concepts of “ethnicity”

¹ From the declaration of a Circassian organization in Turkey that was published on some of the nationwide newspapers in 2002. Available at the website of DCP, *Sürgünde Yas*, <http://demokratikerkesplatformu.org/surgun.htm> [Accessed February 2010].

and “nationalism” in the context of shifting borders, processes of globalization and the production of diasporas (Shami 1998).

By challenging the conceptual limits imposed by national and ethnic/racial boundaries (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996) and delineating how the local and global have become intertwined in the processes of globalization (Axel 2004: 47), the notion of diaspora opens up new spaces and debates that enable us to understand the dynamics of transnational politics, cultural and economic processes that are shaped through the interplay of globalization, diversity and hybridization. As globalization signifies not only the mobility of people beyond national boundaries and borders but also the problematization of boundaries and borders that creates the possibility of a condition of post-nationality which is marked by the production of “diasporic public spheres” and “nonterritorial principles of solidarity” (Appadurai in Shami 1998), this article aims to explore how boundaries of knowledge are problematized and changed by diasporic communities in the age of globalization. It deals with how the Circassians, a Muslim non-Turkish ethnic group in Turkey, redefine and transform the knowledge of their own identity, history and diasporic experience in the post-Soviet conjuncture, which overlaps, with the processes of globalization. The article explores the narratives of the Circassian activists on the break and the silence as mechanisms of diasporization that have become available with the processes of globalization through which boundaries of knowledge and borders of nation-states and national identities are being challenged by the Circassians in Turkey since the 1990s.

After a brief examination of the history of Circassians in Turkey as a diaspora whose formation is an ongoing process, it will focus on the narratives of contemporary diaspora activists on the break and the silence with reference to semi-structured in-depth interviews with Circassian activists and intellectuals conducted in Ankara and Istanbul between February 2007 and June 2008. I consider the interview “a site of knowledge construction,” and the interviewee and interviewer “co-participants in the process” (Mason 2002: 227). Furthermore, the interview responses are treated in this article not as giving direct access to “experience” but as actively constructed “narratives” involving activities which themselves demand analysis (Silverman 2000:36), the ultimate of which is *verstehen* in the Weberian sense. Exploring the narratives of Circassian activists on the silence and the break, this article argues that since the 1990s Circassian activists have reclaimed and reconstructed the diasporic past and changed the boundaries of knowledge that pertain to ethnic community, history and nation-state.

Circassian diaspora in formation

The Circassians, who refer to themselves as Adyge, are the indigenous people of the North-West Caucasus² who were exiled to the Ottoman lands in the

² This article uses the word “Circassian” in a larger sense, as a historical category rather than the name of an ethnically homogenous group. The term Circassian here includes Adyge (including the Kabardian, Shapsug, Hatukuey, Beslenei, Bzedoug, Abzakh and so on) and other tribes (Chechens,

nineteenth century as a result of the Russian expansion into the Caucasus and support from the Ottoman Empire. As the largest wave of immigration was to Anatolia, the Circassian community in Turkey today is considered to be the largest Circassian community when compared with Syria, Jordan and Palestine/Israel and other diaspora communities formed through secondary immigrations to Germany, Holland and the United States.

After the immigration, during the second half of the 19th century, Circassians became part of the political apparatus and the Ottoman elite: employed within the armed forces and the government, the Circassians' relationships with their homeland were also seen as a potential gateway for the propaganda of Pan-Islamist thought in Russia (Avagyan 2004: 98).

As the Second Constitutional Period (1908) implied the formation of a public sphere in the Ottoman Empire in general, it led to the emergence of Circassian organizations and publications in particular. The Circassian Union and Mutual Aid Association (*Çerkes İttihat ve Teavün Cemiyeti*), established in 1908, declared its aims to be informing Circassians culturally, supporting trade among Circassians and providing the land to be harvested, in addition to serving in the protection of the constitutional regime (Aksoy 2003). In 1911, the association published the first Circassian newspaper *Ğuaze*, in Turkish and Adyge, which was published weekly and consisted of eight pages. It also established the first Circassian school, *Özel Çerkes Örnek Okulu*, in Istanbul within which there were courses on Circassian history and geography, Circassian language and literature, French, art, music, Circassian pronunciation, Turkish, sewing, gymnastics, and modern dances (Aydemir 1991: 123). The schools and educational activities of Circassians of the Ottoman era remained unique instances: in the new republic there was to be no publicly used Circassian school, textbook or course until the 2000s.³

In 1910, another organization, the Immigrants Commission (*Muhacir Komisyonu*), was established. The Commission initially dealt with cultural activities such as producing alphabets, and elementary books for reading and writing, and exploring the areas of settlement of North Caucasian tribes in the lands of the empire etc., and then worked for the Committee of Union and Progress in the Caucasus (Avagyan 2004: 132). In 1914, another organization called the North Caucasian Association (*Şimali Kafkasya Cemiyet-i Siyasiyesi*) was established and stated its aims to be defending and protecting the national rights of the groups of the North Caucasus, establishing national solidarity and cooperation among these groups, developing the national character, developing sciences and applied sciences and especially national education, encouraging art

Abkhaz groups). Though Chechens and Abkhaz are not considered to be Adyge, these groups are historically and spatially inseparable from the Adyges of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey. Therefore, despite the debates on the term Circassian and the variations with which the term is used in the Caucasus and other diasporic communities, this study on Circassians in Turkey employs the term Circassian as a historical rubric for peoples originally from North Caucasia, most of whom had been settled in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century.

³ Starting from the 1990s, during the 2000s the Turkish state initiated certain policies regarding ethnic groups and the issue of EU membership enlarged the space within which non-Turkish ethnic groups in Turkey are able to express themselves.

and trade, protecting orphans and families in need of help, increasing the national population by struggling with diseases, and protecting the purity of the line (*soyun saflığı*) (Turan 1998: 243).

Related to the Circassian Union and Mutual Aid Association (*Çerkes İttihat ve Teavün Cemiyeti*) the Circassian Women's Mutual Aid Society (*Çerkes Kadınları Teavün Cemiyeti*) was set up in 1918. Between 1920 and 1923, the organization published the magazine *Diyane*, which means “Our Mother” in Circassian. *Diyane* stated that it aimed to be “a torch for intellectuals” and called on “our young people to research our national presence in history, language, literature, music and social life and to develop this presence” (Diyane 2004: 5). In 1922-23, the society was involved in integrating the North Caucasians who took refuge mainly in Istanbul during the Russian civil war (Bezaniş 1994: 63).

Throughout the period between the second half of the nineteenth century and 1920, relations between the Ottoman state and the Circassians were mostly harmonious. Circassians were well accepted in government institutions such as the palace, the bureaucracy and the military since the Ottoman state's foreign policy which identified Czarist Russia as an expansionist force that was threatening the Ottoman lands was in harmony with Circassian interests in the Caucasus. Hence, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with extensive participation in state institutions, the Circassian identity was embedded in Ottoman identity.

However, the alliance and the harmony of Circassians with the political system were about to change in the 1920s with the transformation from the multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire to the nation-state. The end of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey meant the end of the fellowship on which Circassian-Turkish relations were based.

Developments during the Turkish War of Independence constituted the turning point for the Circassians. During the war, two Circassian groups became visible; those who were in favour of Independence and who later became leading figures in the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, such as Ali Fuat Cebesoy, Rauf Orbay, Yusuf İzzet Paşa, Bekir Sami, etc.; and those who, with their loyalty to the Caliphate and the Sultan, were against the government in Ankara, such as Ahmet Anzavur who, interestingly enough, was crushed by yet another Circassian, Çerkes (Circassian) Ethem, the militia leader during the early years of the war.

However, two developments that took place towards the end of the war shaped future perceptions of the Circassians' role in the war. First, following his opposition to the formation of a regular army, Çerkes Ethem was considered to be among the groups who were opposed to the War of Independence and hence the new nation-state. Thus the Çerkes Ethem affair emerged with the elimination of independent guerrilla forces in favor of a regular army, and Çerkes Ethem, the hero of the early years of the War of Independence, was transformed into “the traitor” of the new republic.

Second, a small group of Circassians from the Marmara region set up an organization, *Şark-ı Karip Çerkesleri Temin-i Hukuk Cemiyeti*, in Izmir in 1921. They stated that the final source of annihilation for the Circassians had been the forced Turkification policies of the Committee of Union and Progress; that

Circassians had been forced to fight first in the 1914-18 World War and then in the War of Independence; and that they were at the time being forced to support “the throne of Mustafa Kemal” (Tunaya 1952). The association then declared its loyalty to the Greek forces.

As the second development is apparently less well-known, the results of the Çerkes Ethem affair, though it is seemingly unrelated to ethnic and national causes as far as Circassians in Turkey are concerned,⁴ are regarded as having been destructive for the Circassians in Turkey. Still a taboo in Turkish history, the affair had profoundly affected the Circassian diaspora in Turkey. In 1923, the residents of 14 Circassian villages, approximately 10,000 people, in Western Anatolia were deported to the country's eastern provinces, though they were allowed to return subsequently.⁵ Moreover, Circassians had been implicitly and explicitly considered to be relatives of Çerkes Ethem for a long time: association of the name Circassian with “treason” led Circassians in some regions to hide their Circassian origins as much as possible. Those whose Circassian origins were known recall that they had sometimes been called “grandsons / granddaughters of the traitor Ethem”. Though Çerkes Ethem has not been called “the traitor” in the history books since in recent, the identification still persists.⁶

As early as 1923, all Circassian organizations were closed down by the Turkish government. Following the announcement of the Law on the Maintenance of Order in 1925, the newly formed nation-state proved to be suppressive as far as the press was concerned. In 1934, even the circulation of foreign emigrant magazines, such as the Circassian magazines *Promete* and *Kafkas* produced in Europe and aimed at communicating with the Circassian diaspora in Turkey, was prohibited (Bezanis 1994: 76). During the one-party period, between the 1920s and the mid-1940s, the Circassians lost all their social and political power and visibility as an ethnic group in terms of organizations and publications.

⁴ Ironically, Çerkes Ethem was also unhappy about the label “Çerkes” that was associated with his name. He states: “There were several Circassian commanders whom I served. They were not called Circassian. The way they used to call me, the label Circassian has been one of the injustices that I have been exposed to throughout my life” (Kutay in Şener 1986: 119).

⁵ In 1923, in response to the deportations, Mehmet Fetgeray Şoenu, a Circassian intellectual, wrote a letter to the Turkish Grand National Assembly (*Çerkes Meselesi Hakkında Türk Vicdan-ı Umumiyesine ve Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi'ne Arıza*). He stated: “Circassians do not seek independence in this country. They are not here to take over some parts of Turkey. This should be known by all. All should believe this as much as they believe that God exists. ...If it was the Turks who embraced those poor people who were expelled from their countries, ...the one who encouraged them...was a sultan at the time” (M. F. Şoenu, *Çerkes Meselesi*, (Bedir Yayınları: İstanbul, 1993), 41.

⁶ In 2006, in Manisa, a city in Western Anatolia, a local newspaper used the title “Don't Forget the Treason.” The article was written in response to attempts of some Circassian organizations to bring Çerkes Ethem's tomb which is currently in Jordan to Turkey. According to the article, the historian-author A. Nedim Çakmak stated “it is certain Circassians who cannot regard Turkey as their homeland. It is an illness. The grandsons/daughters of Anzavur and Ethem could not embrace this homeland...Turkey should not forget about that treason.” Because of this article, the newspaper was sued by a Circassian. [The legal petition was also put on the website of *KAF-FED* (Federation of Caucasian Associations of Turkey). Available at:

http://www.kafkasfederasyonu.org/haber/federasyon/2006/hbr_rs/dava_dilekcesi.pdf [Accessed September 2009].

Starting from the 1950s the Circassians established new organizations and published several magazines such as *Yamçı*, *Kafkasya*, *Marje*, *Nart*, *Kafkasya Yazıları*, and *Kamçı*, which became unique sites of communication – apart from organizations and personal networks. Until the 1960s, Circassian organizations and magazines appeared under the guise of North Caucasian “Turks”, and were shaped by anti-communism and timid discourses on ethnicity and ethnic identity (Bezaniş 1994: 141).

Starting from the mid-1960s, the discourse of the activists in these organizations changed: the idea that Circassians were a Turkic tribe was rejected; the idea of return/repatriation and threats of assimilation and Turkification became the dominant themes; slogans such as “our god is our freedom, our temple is the homeland” and “to serve a foreigner and neglect one’s own interests is an error” were increasingly used (Bezaniş, 1994: 141). As the politically turbulent decade of the 1970s led to the emergence of two groups within the community, namely the *devrimci* (revolutionaries) who argued that Circassian rights could only be attained through a socialist revolution and the *dönüştü/göçcü*, (“returnists”) who advocated a return to the homeland (Shami 1998: 624), the military regime of 1980 closed down all associations and closely scrutinized those representing non-Turkish cultural movements (Toumarkine 2000: 405). By 1984, however, the Circassian organizations as well as those of other non-Turkish communities had been re-opened and their activities were resumed.

Processes of diasporization in the 1990s

Though there has always been a group that has embraced activism within the Circassian community in Turkey, the Circassian diaspora has gained visibility and publicity since 1990 in a particular historical context that has become available through processes of globalization and the post-Soviet conjuncture. Solely within that context, the Circassian diaspora in Turkey claimed and to some extent gained visibility in the public sphere. Hence rather than being taken for granted, the diasporic identity of the Circassians in Turkey is an emergent phenomenon that should be explored in terms of the processes of globalization and diasporization.

The meanings and effects of the post-Soviet conjuncture, namely the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, have been twofold for the Circassian community in Turkey. On the one hand, with the politics of the 1990s, the geography and peoples of the diasporic homeland have become accessible to the Circassian diaspora. Though there were some instances and memories of communication with the Caucasus, which had continued during the turbulent 19th century and intensified in the 1960s as a result of the return movement that argued for the necessity of returning to the homeland, for most of the Cold War era there were almost no actual and systematic relationships with the homeland. In the 1990s, the chaotic, haphazard and unexpected encounters with the diasporic homeland in the Cold War era were replaced by direct access to the homeland and regular relations and visits.

The post-Soviet conjuncture, coupled with the developments in communication technologies, has implied a revival of Circassian identity and politics.

Starting from the 1990s, the Circassian diaspora in Turkey has started to use new channels of communication. In addition to the magazines published by Circassians, since the late 1990s, the Circassians have utilized e-mail discussion lists, blogs, websites and currently, Facebook groups which have been the grounds for communication and larger debates on diaspora politics and diasporic identity.

The 1990s proved to be significant also in terms of the organizations of the Circassian diaspora in general. After several congresses with the participation of many groups of Circassians from different countries and the homeland, the World Circassian Federation was established in the mid-1990s. In Turkey, the *Kaf-Der* (Caucasian Association), which was established in 1993 as an umbrella organization, constituted the largest Circassian associational network in the country until 2004 when it was replaced by a larger organization, *KAF-FED* (Federation of Caucasian Associations of Turkey).⁷

Hence the post-Soviet conjuncture and processes of globalization have proved to be a fertile ground for diaspora politics at the international and local levels as far as organizations and communications are concerned. Furthermore, the end of the Soviet Union, which meant the expansion and liberalization of networks between the diasporic homeland and diaspora communities in terms of scope and extent, has been simultaneously coupled with the rise of ethnic identities in Turkey. Within this context, Circassian identity, which had been limited to the activists and their associations up to that time, has become more pronounced, visible and public, which has also been reflected in the production and reproduction of culture by the Circassian diaspora in Turkey. For instance, during the 1990s major nationwide newspapers and magazines focused on the Circassians: many celebrities publicly and “proudly” announced their Circassian origins. For the first time, in 1995, a Circassian music cassette, *Çerkes Ezgileri* (Circassian Melodies) was produced for consumption on the national market (Toğuzata 1995); it was soon followed by *Çerkes Halk Şarkıları: Wered 1*⁸ (Circassian Folk Songs: Wered 1) (Doğan 2000).⁹

On the other hand, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath have challenged all the Circassian activist groups in Turkey and the existing discourses with regard to identity, culture, diasporic homeland and ethnicity. In the 1990s, no revolutionaries were left and the utopia of return was challenged by the changing meanings of homeland: rather than being the mythical land that was narrated in nationalist poems and texts, the diasporic homeland has now become a real territory (Shami 1998: 643) with real and multiple problems and agendas.

⁷ In addition to the former *Kaf-Der* and *KAF-FED*, the two other major associations are the Caucasus Foundation (*Kafkas Vakfı*) and the United Caucasus Federation (*Birleşik Kafkasya Dernekleri Federasyonu*), both of which can be considered relatively right-wing.

⁸ *Wered* means song in Circassian.

⁹ *Circassian Folk Songs* was also advertised on television, which was something totally novel for Circassian artifacts that had always been produced for in-group consumption. When it first appeared in the national market, there were some debates in Circassian e-groups on how to make it more popular. Commercially, *Circassian Folk Songs* had not been very successful since it had not gone out for in-group consumption. Despite that, it was still received as a source of pride by the Circassian community; they were proud that they had a professional music artifact. For the Circassians in the e-groups, it served as proof that their culture could be professionally studied, reproduced and marketed. In 2008, *Çerkes Halk Şarkıları: Wered 2* was also on the market (Doğan 2008).

Despite the initial enthusiasm about the homeland, return, and repatriation, putting these ideals into practice has proved to be challenging for the Circassians in Turkey.

Hence, in the 1990s the Circassian diaspora in Turkey survived a transformation on three interrelated levels. The first level concerns the diasporic homeland: post-Soviet encounters and relations with the homeland have become different from relations during the Cold War. The second level is related to relations with the host community: Circassians' relations with the Turkish state and the ways Circassians situate themselves in terms of ethnicity and citizenship in Turkey have been transformed. The third level is the transformations on the community level, and concerns the transformations of the Circassian community's constructions of its past and future in line with these developments. This paper attempts to focus on the third level and explores how the boundaries of knowledge on the diasporic history and identity have been challenged and changed in the 1990s.

The break: the forgotten generation

Starting from the 1990s, Circassian activists have recounted on the break, which considers the transformation from a multi-cultural and multi-lingual empire to a nation-state based on one language, one ethnic group and one religion to be significant for the Circassians in Turkey. In the view of the activists, the break between the Ottoman Empire and the new Republic had been destructive for the Circassians and other non-Turkish ethnic groups in the newly formed Turkish Republic: as the newly established republic lost its urban bourgeoisie with population exchanges, migrations and wars, so the Circassians also lost its own urban bourgeoisie and intellectuals. Starting from the 1990s, the activists have explored the period between the end of the War of Independence and the 1950s: no organization was established by the Circassians in Turkey; the alliance between the state and the Circassians, Circassian soldiers, bureaucrats and intellectuals became invisible and, hence, the first generation of Circassian activism which started with the Second Constitutional Period became invisible, with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Thus the transformation from the empire to the new nation-state implied a significant break for the Circassians in Turkey, which resulted in their invisibility as an ethnic community. Some Circassian activists explain this loss and the removal of Circassian intellectuals and elements from the public sphere through the removal of the Ottoman Empire and "anything Ottoman" as "the other":

The other of the Turkish identity has never been the West... The other has been constructed as the Ottoman, the ancient regime. Till recent times this has continued... Based on this, Circassians were associated with the Ottoman Empire: being Circassian was inconvenient. When someone spoke in that way, I thought a lot about it. In Circassian families that were urbanized and politicized in the relatively early years, the Circassian elements vanished. They were especially from the Republican People's Party [CHP]. The person I met dated back to the RPP for two generations; his father passed nothing on to his children; they only

knew that they were somehow Circassian, but nothing else. One day his child asked him the reason for this behavior, and he said that being Circassian meant being Ottoman.¹⁰

Another interviewee explains this removal as the voluntary assimilation of urban Circassians and explores the emergence of the second generation of activists and intellectuals after the 1960s:

Then they embraced a voluntary assimilatory process; they became silent. Though they were a significant group in terms of number, the Circassian bourgeoisie voluntarily became assimilated. After the 1960s, as urbanization started, we, people from rural areas discovered the city; and after that, intense attempts began on getting organized. For instance, you can see that in any meeting of any association: 99 percent of the activists over 30 years old were born in villages. It is impossible to find urban activists... The negative side of the massive assimilation of our feudal and intellectual groups is that our cultural heritage has gone with them because they owned it. The good side is that, among those who remained, the class hierarchy has vanished.¹¹

As far as contemporary Circassian activists are concerned, the break is significant not only because it has meant the loss of one generation of Circassian intellectuals and activists but also because it has shaped their contemporary activism and knowledge about Circassians as an ethnic group in Turkey up to the 1990s. Most of the Circassians interviewed for this study highlighted the fact that throughout the 1960s and 1970s they were unaware of Circassian organizations, newspapers or their activities during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. The Circassian Union and Mutual Aid Association, established after 1908 and closed down in 1923 by the republican regime, the first Circassian school in Istanbul, the Circassian Women's Mutual Aid Society, the newspapers *Ğuaze* and *Diyane*, were all beyond the knowledge of the second generation of Circassian activists that emerged after the 1950s:

We were not aware of these organizations or newspapers. Today we are beginning to learn and think about them. But back in those days we had no idea. Now I realize that I used to know the people who were in those organizations. But they did not talk about it. And we never asked. I wish we had asked.¹²

*Unfortunately this is a reality. Of course I heard about it. But we had absolutely had information about those organizations. The people active in those organizations and who wrote in those newspapers mentioned it a little. But they kept it to themselves like a privilege. I don't know whether or not they intended to do that. I don't want to blame them but this is the practical conclusion. They could not present this to us, and they did not. I came across the *Ğuaze*¹³ newspaper in 1978. This was too late. I should have learned about it at least in 1968.¹⁴*

¹⁰ Hakan, interview by author, 3 July 2007, İstanbul.

¹¹ Cahit, interview by author, 23 May 2007, İstanbul.

¹² Meral, interview by author, 7 June 2007, İstanbul.

¹³ *Ğuaze* was the first Circassian newspaper, and was published in 1911 by the Circassian Union and Mutual Aid Association (*Çerkes İttihat ve Teavün Cemiyeti*).

¹⁴ Metin, interview by author, 5 February 2008, Ankara.

Hence, according to the contemporary activists, the Circassian associations which were established after the 1950s and the activists of that time started anew without any idea of the previous Circassian organizations during Ottoman era. In contemporary narratives, the lack of knowledge of a Circassian school, organizations and newspapers in existence during the Ottoman era deprived Circassian activists of a hundred-years-old history of activism and organizations and information on the experiences of the Circassian urban bourgeoisie which was part of the Ottoman administrative elite. Without the acknowledgement that they were the continuation of a group of Circassian organizations and intellectuals active during the Ottoman era, Circassian activists of the republican era spoke, thought and organized as if they were “the first”.

The reinvention of the first generation and the narrative on the break came in the 1990s. Since then, the ashes of a Circassian history that stretches back to the Ottoman era are being found and explorations into the past have been quite shocking for Circassian activists. Regarding the educational activities of the Circassian Union and Mutual Aid Association, one of my interviewees explains how he came across the remnants of the association in the 1960s:

At the beginning of the 1960s, we went to Düzce with a friend; we were going to stay there. Since Düzce is closer to Istanbul, there were a great many books, newspapers, magazines; there are still a great many leftover sources there. A woman told us that the Ğuaze newspaper had been sent to their houses, she had read it, and there had been books delivered. She told us that they had read those books in the schools; they had had Circassian mathematics books in Düzce. I just did not believe it, and I would not have believed it if I had not seen a diploma in the Circassian language. The Circassian Union and Mutual Aid Association and many associations were established, though they were small... For sure, all of them became invisible. I asked the woman whether or not they still had some of the books. My friend started to laugh, because that was his neighborhood. She said that they used to have them; we were talking half in Turkish and half in Circassian, she was in her sixties, she said that there were none left. I asked what had happened to them. She said that the books were in Circassian, a lot of people were executed in that region, and there were stocks of the books to be delivered to other locations. I asked whether or not even one book was left. She told me that the women tore all of them to pieces; she said “We women tore them to pieces. They were made of good quality paper, so it was hard to tear them. Finally, we threw them into the oven in the garden.”¹⁵

The Circassian Union and Mutual Aid Association is therefore remembered today as a Circassian organization that was not only closed down in 1923 but also whose remains were also destroyed, sometimes voluntarily by the Circassians themselves following certain political events during the transformation from the empire to the nation-state. It is seen as an organization whose memory gained invisibility as a result of the break.

With the narrative on the break, the importance of the Circassian Union and Mutual Aid Association became a theme among the Circassian diaspora activists of the 1990s. Interestingly, after the 1990s when the Caucasus became accessible to the Circassians in Turkey, they came across not only relatives, villages and

¹⁵ Rüstem, interview by author, 8 February 2008, Ankara.

memories of the displacement there but also the footprints of these organizations of the Ottoman era: “For instance, schools in the Caucasia had been established by that organization. When I went to the Caucasus I met elderly people who had been educated in those schools. I met some in one of the villages... In that school Turkish was also taught, apart from the fact that the books were published in Turkey.”¹⁶

Research on these organizations, publications, and translations of the newspapers and documents produced at the time is now being carried out by Circassian activists and intellectuals. For instance, *Ğuaze*, the first Circassian newspaper published in 1911, is now – between 2008 and 2010 – being translated into Turkish. Family albums are now being explored to follow the tracks of these first-generation activists. Contemporary activists today find their origins not in the 1970s but in the early 20th century, not in a nation-state but in a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire.

To the extent that activists of the 1990s and 2000s discover, explore and recount the break, they are constructing a history of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey and also discovering agency, activism and organizations beyond the nation-state. For the Circassian activists in Turkey, recounting “the break” means reconstructing a new past shaped not only by the policies of the nation-state but also by the first generation of Circassian activists who displayed agency in the Ottoman era. To that extent, they envisage a new past for themselves, which reminds them of their existence and political activism in the Ottoman Empire. Recounting the break, they can go beyond the nation-state and find there an active diaspora, which had been an historical and significant actor.

Furthermore, the Circassian activists also appropriate agency not only by exploring the Circassian associations in the Ottoman era but also by reversing the official Turkish historiography on the transformation from the empire to the nation-state. They do this by claiming certain roles in the historical transformation to the nation-state.

For instance, the Circassian activists and intellectuals in Turkey challenge the official historiography, which had associated the name Circassian with, Çerkes (Circassian) Ethem, a so-called traitor figure in Turkish national history for decades. Since the 1990s, Circassian researchers have tried to contradict that stigmatizing identification. Although Circassians have joined in other wars before and since after the War of Independence, one of areas of the contemporary research in the Circassian diaspora in Turkey is the role of Circassians in the War of Independence, which is historically considered to be the constitutive war of the Turkish Republic (for such a study, see, for instance, Ünal 1996). Similarly most of the Circassian people today refer to their “grandfathers who have shed their blood for this country” in order to claim equal rights of citizenship *vis-à-vis* any possibility of ethnic discrimination.

These claims find their opposites in Turkish national historiography which is not only silent on the “claimed” participation of Circassians in the War of Independence but also regards the Çerkes Ethem affair as a turning point when the “traitors” are eliminated from the national cause. As Circassians activists,

¹⁶ Köksal, interview by author, 28 August 2007, İstanbul.

since the 1990s, have challenged and reversed the national historiography by claims of participation in the War of Independence, they have also rejected the title “traitor” with regard to the Çerkes Ethem affair not as historically invalid but as politically incorrect. As an example, a reader’s letter to a newspaper in 1990 complains about, and rejects the use of, the name Circassian:

It has been stated that Çerkes Ethem is a traitor, that he escaped, that he stabbed the country in the back (‘vatani arkadan bıçakladı’)... When they say as strong as a Turk (‘Türk gibi kuvvetli’), they give Yaşar Doğu as an example. However, Yaşar Doğu is a Circassian. So why is it Çerkes Ethem and not Çerkes Yaşar Doğu? These are issues that make many people like me sick at heart. (Öke 1990).

Reversal of the official historiography by means of claims of participation in the nation-building process allows Circassians to define themselves as constitutive elements of the Turkish Republic and legitimizes their diasporic claims. Exploring the multiple dimensions of “the break”, Circassians today challenge the official historiography of Turkish nationalism and claim multiple roles in Ottoman history and in the history of the Turkish Republic.

The silence: “Reconciling with history”

Closely related to the break is the demand of Circassian activists and intellectuals to “unveil the silence” of the Circassians in Turkey. The people interviewed for this study mentioned the silence when I asked them what they had heard from their relatives and elders about particular instances (such as the displacement, the Çerkes Ethem affair, the ‘Citizen Speak Turkish’ campaigns¹⁷ etc.). Mostly the answers were “they refused to talk”, “they would just stare, look far away and they would not talk.” By the Circassian activists interviewed for this study immigration from the Caucasus is remembered as an event on which their elders kept their silence:

We used to know that we are a different nation since our childhood. The tragedies that they used to mention in their chats were not told to the young people. They never talked about the diseases and problems that they had during the immigration. But at some moments we used to hear by accident. Well, they kept their silence; they did not transform that experience for their children. They did that deliberately so that the children would not be demoralized, or depressed.¹⁸

The activists explain the silence that they have attributed to their elders by the notion of fear. According to the Circassian activists, their elders kept their silence because of their fears as a community. Despite their narratives about Circassian embeddedness in Turkish politics and the state-formation process, Circassians are

¹⁷ The ‘Citizen Speak Turkish’ campaigns that started in 1927 and continued in the 1930s urged the citizens of Turkey to use the Turkish language. Hence during this period the Turkish language was considered a significant factor in defining the Turkish nation.

¹⁸ Timuçin, interview by author, 25 August 2007, Çanakkale.

frequently defined by Circassian activists as a community that is fearful. For instance, Kaya claims that:

As opposed to our awesome courage on an individual level, we have an awesome communal fear... Our reflexes on the communal level are very timid. Circassians have produced cadres at the radical margins in Turkish political life regardless of ideology. Well, they have produced cadres as extreme as the sniper/triggerman [tetikçi], but when something about them happens, they get appalled and frightened.¹⁹

While the fear is defined as something not new but quite old, the narrative on silence itself is quite new. Starting from the 1960s and intensifying in the 1990s, activists have questioned and challenged the silence of previous generations by unveiling it, like Hasan who remembers and reconstructs his encounters with the older people in his youth:

We went to the village and tried to collect information about the Circassians. Sometimes we talked to older people. Back then, what shocked me most was the unwillingness of the older people to talk about this, they were openly avoiding it... There is fear, there is still fear. It is like when you do not want to talk about a distasteful event. Especially when talking to the older people, they used to start by saying 'Look, we are living in Turkey and we, too, are Turks.' They were the same people who told us that we were Circassians. When we came back from school saying that we were Turks, they used to say 'No, son, we are Circassians.'²⁰

For the contemporary Circassian activists, silence in itself tells us a lot about the Circassians in Turkey: it is the indicator of the pain, the trauma, the displacement, the fears of being the migrant again, and “the shame of being the migrant, the guest”. As these are the historical possibilities that might have affected Circassians in Turkey, it is apparent that the very act of remembering, voicing and unveiling the silence is empowering as far as the activists are concerned: Circassians are regarded as a community which can exist only if the silence is unveiled. A poem in 1975 in a magazine published for Circassian readers calls for such a diasporic voice to unveil the silence:

*This is the return of the Circassian
To Circassianhood
This is the growth of the crops...
The eyes are sharper
And this time the vision is very clear.
This space should be ours,
This game should come from us.
And our voice should be as loud as it can be.
This time we should talk.
This is the time.
We should write,
Shout,*

Tell. (Karden 1975)

¹⁹ Kaya, interview by author, 7 June 2007, İstanbul.

²⁰ Hasan, interview by author, October 2007, Abkhazia.

The demand for a diasporic voice to break the silence became public when the Caucasian associations and certain Circassian activists took the year 1864 as the year of the “Great Circassian Exile” (*Büyük Çerkes Sürgünü*), which has been symbolically commemorated every year, on May 21, since the 1990s. Since 2001, statements on Circassian exile became public notices in some of the nationwide Turkish newspapers. One of these statements declared:

Up until this day, we have survived, fought and died for others. Up until this day, we have become the heroes for others' ideologies, religions, aims and interests. Up until today, we have sung the songs of others, danced their dances. Up until today, we have had others' dreams. From now on, we are asking ourselves: will that continue?... Will we be indifferent to our removal from history? Will we be quiet while all of our tribes are disappearing like the Ubykhs? The Black Sea was a sea of death and exile for us. We want to be reconciled with the Black Sea. We want to be reconciled with our history and geography. We want to reconcile with ourselves, our culture and we want to exist. We want our songs and our dreams.” (From the declaration of the Democratic Circassian Platform (DCP), on May 20 2001 that was published in some of the national newspapers and paid for by donations from Circassians.)

Reconciling with history means ending the silence and sharing the experiences of Circassians as a non-Turkish ethnic group in Turkey and as a diaspora. Reconciliation with history is envisaged by means of publicly appropriating and reconstructing the Circassian past. Thus, starting from the 1990s, Circassian activists and intellectuals are searching for mechanisms of changing the boundaries of knowledge about Circassians. To that extent they are challenging and changing not only the boundaries of knowledge on Circassians but also official historiography and nationalism in Turkey.

Conclusion

Since the 1990s, Circassian activists in Turkey have appropriated multiple roles in the history of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish nation-state through the themes of the break and the silence. A reconstructed past based on the themes of the silence and the break transforms the Circassians in Turkey from being a group with no actual historical or geographical links to the homeland, other diasporic communities or the host country into an historical entity which has relationships with the homeland, transnational networks and the host community.

As the Circassian diaspora is now linked to the homeland and other diasporic communities politically, economically and culturally through touristic travel, conferences, social and political organizations, cyber space, etc., the narratives on the break and the silence also locate Circassians in the history of the host community and state. Voicing and unveiling the break and the silence becomes a diasporic strategy not only to claim agency for Circassians in the Ottoman Empire and the Republican era but also to redefine Circassian identity and diasporic history. Since the 1990s, the Circassians in Turkey have become a diasporic group with a history and a voice to talk about it, and the diasporic

voice changes and reconstructs the boundaries of knowledge about Circassian society, history and identity.

From such a perspective, the Circassians in Turkey are an instance of exploring how boundaries of knowledge pertaining to identity, inclusion, exclusion, ethnicity, past and present are challenged, deconstructed, reclaimed and reconstructed within the processes of diasporization and globalization. By means of these processes, Circassian activists and intellectuals, since the 1990s, have challenged, changed and problematized the boundaries of knowledge which pertains not only to a non-Turkish ethnic group in Turkey but also to Turkish politics, official historiography and diaspora politics in general.

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