

What is a Circassian and Why Should We Care?
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Register Pajaronian

Ask anybody about genocides\227the deliberate attempt to wipe out\227in whole or in part \227an entire people, and they will come up with a depressing list. In the past century alone, we had an enormous part of the Armenian population of Ottoman Turkey, six million European Jews, and former Yugoslavian Bosnian Muslims murdered at the hands of the Turks, Nazis, and Serbs, respectively. Tutsis were murdered by Hutus in Rwanda and the people of Darfur province by the government of Sudan.

Although there was no word for genocide before the 1950s, until the UN defined this term, the practice goes all the way back to antiquity. The rule of warfare in antiquity was that the conqueror killed all men and boys and took women and girls into captivity. This effectively destroyed the conquered culture.

The first religiously motivated genocide in Europe was the crusade called by Pope Innocent III in 1209, against an entire society that practiced their own variant of Christianity, the Albigensians and Cathars. The conquered were given a choice: reconvert to Catholicism or die. Most were slaughtered.

The French crown in 1572 organized a massacre of French Protestants, the Huguenots, and killed or forced conversion on the entire community.

There was a de facto, although not organized genocide of Native Americans by their European conquerors. Under the Spanish, between forced labor and western diseases, they reduced a huge population to a pitiful remnant in the former Inca Empire. The British in Canada and the Americans in their new country were responsible for the attempted genocide (cleansing) through distributing blankets of people who died from Smallpox to the Indians, where it wiped out whole regions. Later, they destroyed the buffalo, which had been the main food of Plains Indians.

But one group of people who were subjected to genocide have suffered without anyone noticing\227until today. Historian Oliver Bullough\222s new book, Let Our Fame Be Great: Journeys Among the Defiant People of the Caucasus, may well be the first to bring this issue to light. The people were once called Circassians, who lived from the most ancient times at the southern end of the Caucasus along the shores of the Black Sea. We heard about them from the Greeks, who called them Scythians\227a wild tribe known for its beautiful blonde women who were fierce warriors. They first fell under the Persian Empire, then Ottoman Turks, and finally under the Russians, who colonized that region with their usual brutality.

According to Bullough, in the mid-19th century when the Russians were forging their empire from former Turkish and Persian lands and then across Central Asia, they committed a genocidal war on the Circassian tribes. Out of a population of two million, only half survived, totally demoralized. Their culture was absorbed by Georgia and by such cousin groups such as the Chechnyans and Ossettians.

The Communist Empire under Josef Stalin completed the genocide. He forced \223difficult \224 peoples into exile in distant Siberia, in which the majority died. After the Soviet Union fell, some of these exiles returned to their ancient homelands\227hungry for revenge. The Russians today are paying for the actions of their ancestors through terrorism\227which then elicits more brutality from the Russians.

There is one more role that the Circassians played in history that most people don\222t know. The beauty of these people made them very valuable in the Muslim slave markets of the Middle Ages. The women were coveted in harems and the men as slave-soldiers. When the deadly Bubonic Plague swept Asia and Europe in repeated waves, it took a terrible toll on the Circassians. Just as European powers were looking for slave labor for their new world empires, they had to look to the one area of the world that the plague had not decimated: Black Africa.

There would not have been Black slavery (at least outside of Africa itself) had there not been the Bubonic Plague. This system of slavery involved people who were identifiably different from their owners (unlike the Circassians), and became a caste system that was very difficult to uproot.

677 words

Laina Farhat-Holzman is a writer, lecturer, and historian. You may contact her at Lfarhat102@aol.com or www.globalthink.net.