

## JUNE 13, 1861: THE CIRCASSIAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

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The Circassians, who once lived happy and civilized lives in the fertile valleys and dense forests of the Caucasus as city-states that "made their own decisions (*zi wunafe zışij*)" [1], suddenly found themselves facing a calamity that would last for centuries. This began when Tsar Ivan the Terrible's dream of dominating the world by reaching the warm seas transformed into an official Russian state policy.

Russian attacks, which continued intermittently for nearly four centuries, generated a necessity to form broader political alliances among the Circassian city-states. "The Adyghe, who conducted their relations with neighboring tribes on the basis of brotherhood and kinship, made periodic attempts at political unification." [2].

Prince (*Pshi*)<sup>1</sup> Yinal's efforts to unite all of Circassia; Imam Mansur's and later his successor Imam Shamil's endeavors to unify the entire Caucasus; the unification initiatives observed in Circassia during the 1830s and early 1860s; the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus, established on May 11, 1918, and recognized by the great powers of the world; the CMPC (Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus), founded following the dissolution of the Soviet Union; and Dzokhar Dudayev's *Caucasus House* project are the first examples that come to mind regarding political unification attempts in the Caucasus during times of occupation.

In this brief article, we wish to bring up the Circassian State founded in Western Caucasus on June 13, 1861 -an important political initiative that we believe has not received the attention it truly deserves- and draw the attention of researchers to this historical event.

The "Xases" (assemblies), which had existed since ancient times and constituted one of the core dynamics of resistance during the Russian occupation, were targeted for rendering ineffective. "... Russia began to dissolve the popular assemblies in the western region and send gifts to tribal chiefs. The Abzekh *Pshi* presented the peace proposal offered to him in 1828 to the Assembly, and the Assembly, gathering in Shapsugya, decided after lengthy deliberations to declare the following manifesto to the whole world regarding the situation of the region, the hostility of the Russians, and the invalidity of the Treaty of Adrianople:

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<sup>1</sup> *Pshi*: A title generally given to princes or tribal chiefs in Adyghe society.

'How can the inhabitants of the Caucasus, who do not even consent to peace with the Russians, be considered their subjects?!...' [3]."

Following 1859, as Russian pressure in the west grew increasingly severe, leaders of the Ubykh, Abzekh, and Shapsug tribes convened a grand General Congress near Sochi (*Шъачэ: Shache*) in 1861. This General Congress was held without regard to social status, ethnic background, or religious differences. It witnessed the participation of delegates from the Hatukay, Natukhay, Bjedugh, Kemirgoy, and Kabardian regions -most notably the Shapsugs, Abzekhs, and Ubykhs- alongside Abkhaz and Abaza representatives. Military commanders, religious figures, and opinion leaders (*thamades*) also took part as delegates. This congress, which elected the Circassian National Assembly, adopted the following resolutions:

**Article 1-** Recent developments shall be announced to European nations.

**Article 2-**

- a) June 13, 1861, is the day the Circassians declared their independence.
- b) The National Assembly, which binds all Circassians, has been elected.
- c) Unity shall be maintained by force if necessary.
- d) 15 members have been elected to the Assembly of the Independent Circassian State by secret ballot.

**Article 3-** By decree of the Assembly, the country has been divided into 12 provinces, and a qadi (judge), mufti, mukhtar (village head), and chief of police have been appointed to each.

**Article 4-** The resolutions of the Assembly shall be implemented by these representatives, and taxes shall be collected by these officials. The expenses of five cavalymen have been leveraged upon everyone hundred households. The collected taxes shall be spent in the most efficient manner for national affairs by the hands of the representatives of the free Caucasus." [4].

In his work titled *Tarih-te Kafkasya* (The Caucasus in History) -which stands as one of the most reputable volumes written in the Turkish language within the field of Caucasian history- General Ismail Berkok (Jerishti) conveyed this momentous event briefly and superficially, likely intending to address it in greater detail in a future, independent study:

"... Great excitement and anxiety arose in Western Caucasus. To find a countermeasure against the initiatives of the Russians, the General Assembly convened. In this assembly, it was decided to send plenipotentiaries to London, Paris, and Istanbul, and the envoys had already set out. Concurrently, a six-member delegation from Dagestan arrived in Istanbul. In this manner, a group of plenipotentiaries representing the entire Caucasus gathered in Istanbul. These initiatives of the Caucasians led to the revival and development of a very potent political activity abroad." [5].

There are also sources that narrate the event but distort the reason behind the dissolution of the Circassian National Assembly; let us content ourselves with one example:

"In 1861, there was an attempt to establish a state in Northwestern Caucasus. In the 19th century, the Ubykhs, Abzekhs, and Shapsugs practiced democracy there. Due to the war, they resolved their internal disputes, formed an alliance, and began to resist the enemy. They captured four fortresses belonging to the

Russians. On this occasion, their alliance grew stronger. Muhammad Amin and Shamil played a major role in these alliances. Those holding high status among the public did not welcome this alliance. When Shamil was eliminated in 1859 and Muhammad Amin was captured, the former elite opponents began to support the alliance... In 1861, the Ubykhs, Abzekhs, and Shapsugs established an 'Assembly'. A 15-member committee was elected. A Ubykh *Thamade* (President), Haji Geranduk Berzeg<sup>2</sup>, instituted an assembly decree dividing the country into 12 provinces. The provinces also had their own assemblies. Russia, Turkey, France, and England were informed of these developments. 'When Russia became aware, it did not allow the assembly to function. When Turkey extracted the population from the region during the 1864 migration, this state came to an end. The initiative was appropriate in terms of location and timing, but they were sold out by their own chiefs.' [6]."

Such a tone might not be surprising for a writer of the Soviet era. However, the reality is this: the entity that prevented the Circassian State (founded on June 13, 1861) from functioning, and that personally destroyed this state by subjecting its people to a total massacre followed by a mass exile, was Tsarist Russia, which pursued a policy of "a Circassia without Circassians."

Circassians have traditionally resolved their social issues in democratic popular assemblies called *Xase*. However, the Great Freedom Assembly (*Шхьэфитыныгъэ Хэсэшхо: Shhafitinighe Xeseshxo*), which convened on June 13, 1861, possessed the character of a modern state with continuity, an institutional framework, and established legislative, executive, and judicial powers.



Gerandiko Berzeg Haji - Enhanced Original Photograph

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<sup>2</sup> Detailed research must be conducted regarding this great leader, who, much like the state he presided over, is not sufficiently known. As a starting point, see: Abrek Tugan, 'The Fable of the "Last Ubykh" and the Reality of Haji Giranduk Berzeg', *Kafkasya Gerçeği*, Issue: 2, Samsun, October 1990, pp. 14-18.

We may conclude this brief article, compiled for the purpose of raising awareness, by touching upon the fate of the Assembly and the legacy it left to the Circassian nation. In September 1861, when Russian Tsar Alexander II arrived in the Caucasus, a Circassian delegation led by the Assembly President, Gerandiko Berzeg Haji, met with him at a military camp near the Pharse River. The Circassian delegation proposed becoming subjects of the Tsar while remaining independent in their internal affairs on their own lands. However, Alexander II rejected this peaceful formula and delivered a stark, ruthless ultimatum: "*You will either surrender unconditionally and settle in the Russian swamps of the Kuban plains, or you will emigrate to Ottoman lands.*"

Following this imposition, the Circassian National Assembly resolved to fight to the bitter end to live freely in their homeland. However, against the overwhelming numerical and technological superiority of the Russian armies, the Assembly building was destroyed by the Russians. Consequently, the Assembly was forced to relocate first to Mutihua (Plastunki) and subsequently to Kbaada (Krasnaya Polyana). The Assembly directed the resistance until **May 21, 1864**, the date accepted as the fall of Circassia and the official beginning of the Great Exile that followed the great genocide.

On its 165th anniversary, all Circassians around the world respectfully commemorate June 13 as the symbolic day of national sovereignty, national unity, and the independent state-building will be displayed by the Circassian nation under a common parliamentary roof. On this occasion, on the 165th anniversary of the National Assembly, we commemorate with respect and gratitude all the founding leaders of the Circassian State, in the person of Gerandiko Berzeg Haji, the *Thamade* (President) of the **JUNE 13, 1861: CIRCASSIAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY** (*Шхьэфитыныгъэ Хэсэшхо: The Great Freedom Assembly*).

With the hope that the Circassian National Assembly, which convened on June 13, 1861, and the independent Circassian State that was established will be researched in full detail, bringing historical truths covered in ash into the complete light of day...

## References

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