

7. This section is based on information from informants and the following sources: Michael J. Arlen, *Passage to Ararat* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975); Robert Mirak, *Torn Between Two Lands: Armenians in America, 1890 to World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Richard G. Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence, 1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) and *The Republic of Armenia*, vols. 1 and 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, 1982); Claire Mouradian, "L'immigration des Arméniens de la diaspora vers la Rusd' Arménie, 1946-1962," *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, no.1 (1979), and *De Staline à Gorbachev, histoire d'une république soviétique: l'Arménie* (Paris: Editions Ramsay, 1990).
8. This section is based on information provided by the Greek embassy in Washington, D.C., and on the following published sources: "Greece Prepares for Soviet Migrants," *The Financial Times* (London) (January 7, 1990), 2; "The Pontians Are Coming," *Athena* (Athens) (February-March 1990), 223; "The Descent of Tens of Thousands," *Athena* (Athens) (February-March 1990), 339-340; "Foreign Ministry, Red Cross on Pontian Resettlement," *The Daily Bulletin* (Athena News Agency) (March 10, 1990); "EC to consider Aid for Pontian Resettlement," *The Daily Bulletin* (Athena News Agency) (April 5, 1990); "Council of Europe Loans Announced," *The Daily Bulletin* (Athena News Agency) (April 6, 1990).
9. This section is based on information provided by Dr. Kent R. Hill, executive director of the Institute on Religion and Democracy; Serge Duss of World Relief; and William C. Fletcher, University of Kansas, and on W.C. Fletcher, *Soviet Believers: The Religious Sector of the Population* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1981), and *Soviet Charismatics* (New York: P. Lang, 1985); Kent R. Hill, *The Puzzle of the Soviet Church: An Inside Look at Christianity and Glasnost* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1989); and Walter Sawatsky, *Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1981).
10. Soviet and international politics in the post-World War II period have been reported widely in the press and in a large body of writings on the subject that do not require citation here.
11. See, for example, "Winter Wanderers: Europe Braces for Immigrants from a Hungry and Chaotic Soviet Union," *Newsweek* (December 15, 1990), 34-36; "Donations Gladly Accepted," *Time* (December 19, 1990), 59; "West Europe Braces for Migrant Wave from East," *The New York Times* (December 14, 1990), 6; "Moscow Predicts 1.5 Million Will Move East," *The New York Times* (January 27, 1991), 4Y; "The Russians Are Coming," *The Economist* (October 20, 1990), 11-12; and Leon Aron, "The Russians Are Coming ... and the West Needs an Immigration Policy That Makes Sense," *Washington Post* (January 27, 1991), C1.

Meskhethians: Muslim Georgians or Meskhetian Turks? A Community without a Homeland

Stephen F. Jones

Historical Background

Meskhethians are an ethnically heterogeneous group of peoples, including Islamicized Georgians, Meskhi Turks, Kurds, Turkmen, Khemshins and Karapapakhs. This group of peoples adopted the name Meskhetian after they were expelled in 1944 to Central Asia and Kazakhstan on Stalin's orders. The term comes from the region in southern Georgia where they lived before their expulsion. After expulsion from their homeland and more recently from their place of exile in Central Asia, the Meskhethians are in serious danger of losing their identity completely.

Meskhethi is a mountainous region located on the Georgian-Turkish border, which originally extended almost as far south as Erzerum in present-day Turkey, but is now confined to Georgia's southern regions.¹ The original settlers were the Meskhi, a Georgian tribe that became Christian in the fourth century along with other Georgian groups. Until the sixteenth century, the region, known as Samcxé-Saatabago, was culturally and politically part of Georgia. Occupied from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries by the Ottoman empire, most of the inhabitants, including the Armenian Khemshin, adopted Islam. In 1829, the northern part of the region (now in southern Georgia) became part of the Russian empire. By the time of the Russian revolution, the area was occupied by Gregorian and Muslim Armenians, Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Georgians (the latter known as "the Franks"), Georgian Muslims (Sunni), Kurds and Karapapakhs. In the 1920s, Soviet authorities established Turkish language

schools for the inhabitants, and in the 1926 census, the majority Muslim population, though ethnically originally Georgian, was classified as (Azerbaijani) Turkish. Later they were reclassified as Azerbaijani, but in 1944, on the eve of their deportation, classified as Turks from Turkey.²

The Deportation

In 1926, "Turks" in Meskhethi numbered 137,921; in 1944, the number deported, which included other Muslim groups such as the Kurds and Khemshins settled in the region, was approximately 110,000. The inhabitants of over 220 villages were rounded up in one night and packed into cattle trucks for the long journey into exile in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. Over 50,000 perished from hunger and cold on the way or shortly after arrival. They were dispersed in collectives and state farms according to labour needs, which led to the breakup of many families and village communities. Until 1956, they were under "special settlement control," which entailed registering at the special commandant's office twice a month. The Meskhethians were never officially accused of collaboration like the other exiled North Caucasian peoples who were deported at the same time, but they suffered the same restrictions on their civil rights.³

There are various hypotheses as to why the Muslim Meskhethians were deported. The commonly accepted view is that they were removed in preparation for Soviet plans to annex parts of north-eastern Turkey.⁴ One author suggests that the deportation was directly linked to historical Armenian claims for Turkish territory, and that the Soviet intention was to incorporate the region into a Greater Soviet Armenia.⁵ The Soviet government claimed East Anatolian provinces on behalf of both Armenians and

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Georgians from 1945-53. A third hypothesis not considered before touches on the role of Lavrentii Beria, who was in charge of the deportation. In the 1930s, he launched a Georgianization campaign against Ossetians and Abkhazians living in Georgia. The "ethnic cleansing" of Meskheti, which was followed by the resettlement of native Georgians in the region, may have simply been the most violent part of Beria's campaign to "Georgianize" Georgia. It is interesting to note that large areas of territory that formerly belonged to the exiled North Caucasians were annexed to Georgia in 1944-45.

Meskhetian Identity

The common fate of these peoples in exile led to a Meskhetian consciousness closely identified with a feeling of *turkluk* or "Turkness," although many still classify themselves as Georgian Muslims rather than Meskhetian Turks. An angry letter from a Muslim Meskhetian addressed to the Georgian government in 1991 suggested that the term "Meskhi Turks" was a false one invented by the Tsarist authorities to denationalize the Georgians.⁶ After 1956 when the Meskhetians were granted passports, most were entered as Azerbaijanis or Turks. The 1989 census counted 216,000 "Turks" in the U.S.S.R., most of whom are Meskhetians. Approximately 70,000 are classified as "Azerbaijanis" and live in Azerbaijan. The Meskhetians themselves claim a total of 350,000. The vast majority are employed in rural occupations. After their expulsion from the Fergana valley in Uzbekistan in 1989, most Meskhetians were relocated to Azerbaijan (40,000), Belgorod, Kursk, Smolensk, Krasnodar, Stavropol and North Caucasian regions. In all, there are currently 74,000 registered Meskhetian refugees.

Meskhetians classified as "Turks" speak Turkish as their first language (84.7 percent in 1979). Forty-six percent claim a good knowledge of Russian. The Meskhetians never acquired territorial autonomy, but from the early 1920s until 1935-36, instruction in local schools was in Turkish. Thereafter, it was in Azerbaijani. Initially, Meskhetians were

permitted to use the Arab alphabet. From 1930, it was switched to the Latin form and in 1935 to Cyrillic. While in exile, they had to learn whatever local language was used for instruction. They were poorly integrated in Central Asia. Most Meskhetians are Sunni Muslims, although small numbers of Meskhetians who were not deported in 1944 remain Christians. Since the Meskhetians' expulsion, the region has remained ethnically and religiously mixed, with large numbers of Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Georgians living there.

Although the vast majority of Meskhetians are Muslim and speak Turkish, there is still confusion about their identity. Since the nineteenth century, there was a close association between religion and nationality, and by the turn of the century, most Meskhetian Muslims considered themselves more Turkish than Georgian, despite their Georgian names.

The majority of Meskhetians today, most of whom were born outside Meskheti's borders, call themselves "Meskhi Turks." But a significant minority, in its campaign to return to Georgia, continues to identify itself as Georgian Muslim. Meskhetian solidarity has been undermined by a recurring conflict between those who take a pro-Turkish orientation as against those who maintain their "Georgianness."

The Campaign to Return

In 1956 the Meskhetians' punitive "special settler" status was lifted, but unlike the Greeks who were expelled from Georgia in 1948, they were not permitted to return to Georgia. Between 1945-68 the Soviet authorities continued their public silence on the Meskhetians. It was not until a decree of the Presidium of the U.S.S.R. Supreme Soviet in 1968 that the Soviet authorities publically acknowledged that the Meskhetians had been deported and gave them the theoretical right to live where they wanted. But at the same time, the decree implied that the Meskhetians had now "taken root" in Central Asia, so there was no need for them to move.⁷

Attempts to take advantage of the right to return Meskhetians were con-

stantly thwarted. Between 1961-69, there were six attempts by Meskhetian groups to move back to southern Georgia, but on each occasion they were forcibly expelled. To this day, despite an unrelenting campaign to secure their return, very few Meskhetians have been permitted to do so.

Like the Crimean Tatars with whom they were in contact, the Meskhetians organized their campaign well. Initially it took the form of petitions and meetings with Soviet officials (144 in forty-five years). They organized "meetings of the people" on a regular basis. In April 1968, for instance, 6,000 delegates gathered near Tashkent for the twenty-second gathering.

After the disappointment of the May 1968 decree on rehabilitation, the Turkish Association for the National Rights of the Turkish People in Exile, which was formed by the Meskhetians in 1964, began to coordinate a more aggressive campaign, including demonstrations, appeals to international organizations such as the United Nations and Amnesty International, renunciation of their Soviet citizenship, and attempts to resettle spontaneously in Georgia. At the end of the 1960s, the Soviet authorities began to arrest Meskhetian leaders, such as Enver Odabashev (Khozrevanidze), a founder of the Turkish Association for the National Rights of the Turkish People in Exile, and threatened their meetings with Soviet troops. In 1970, after the movement's Sixth People's Assembly, the Meskhetian leadership petitioned the Turkish embassy to allow those Meskhetians who wished to settle in Turkey to do so. The Assembly also released a statement in which they argued their right for a separate national Meskhetian-Turkish Autonomous Republic or Region.

In the mid-1970s, the Meskhetians linked up with Georgian human rights' activists, Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava, and with Helsinki monitors in Russia who began to campaign for their return. Such pressure may have led to the resettlement of approximately 100 Meskhetian families to Georgia during the 1970s, though none were allowed to settle in Meskheti.

After the Fergana events, Georgian attitudes towards the Meskhetians changed. Both the Georgian government and former dissidents raised a barrage of arguments as to why the Meskhetians should not be allowed to return: there was no land available, it would mean uprooting Georgian settlers in the region, the economy was too weak to support them, they had lost their "Georgianness" and their presence would only increase interethnic tensions in the republic. A new Georgian nationalism directed at non-Georgians left the Meskhetians little hope for return after 1989.⁸

The Current Situation

For two weeks in June 1989, Uzbeks in the major cities of the Fergana valley, who complained of reverse discrimination and who were resentful of local minority "privileges" led vicious attacks on Meskhetian communities. Over 100 Meskhetians were killed in the riots, had their property plundered, and thousands fled for their lives. The violence spread to Tashkent.

Many Meskhetians assert that the pogrom was organized by local authorities who were pressured into finding scapegoats for the region's high unemployment and "acute social problems" associated with rapid population growth.⁹ As a result, the Supreme Soviet set up a Commission on the Problems of the Meskhetian Turks, which later that year recommended that Meskhetians be allowed to gradually return to Georgia. The Meskhetians, led by Yusuf Sarvarov, chairman of the Interim Steering Committee of the Turkish Association for the National Rights of the Turkish People in Exile, organized an All-Union conference in Moscow in May 1990. The seventy-eight delegates created an All Union Meskhetian Society that reiterated the call for a return to their historic homeland. Leading Georgian activists announced that only those with a Georgian name, "orientation" and those who could speak Georgian would be allowed to return.¹⁰

Frustrated by the Georgians' refusal to accept them, in August 1990 approximately 800 Meskhetians gathered on Georgia's northern border and an-

nounced their intention to stage a "peace" march to Meskheta through Georgian territory. After negotiations with Georgians, the Meskhetian demonstrators backed down because they feared a violent reaction. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, whose party was voted into power with an overwhelming majority in October 1990, declared in December that Meskhetians were "foreigners" and their arrival could only cause "civil war and heavy bloodshed." The only Georgian party that cautiously supported the Meskhetians' return was the small and uninfluential Ilia C'avc'avadze Society. The Coordinating Committee for the Association of Repatriated Meskhetians, formed in Georgia in 1989, was intimidated into silence during the Gamsakhurdia period. The Meskhetians' pro-Turkish orientation increased and many began to petition the Turkish embassy in Moscow for emigration.

Since the removal of Gamsakhurdia in January 1992 and the arrival of Eduard Shevardnadze to head the new Georgian government, the Meskhetian situation has slightly improved. In April 1992, after negotiations with Georgia, Turkey agreed to resettle 50,000 Meskhetians. The Georgian State Council set up the Commission on the Regulation of the Problem of the Meskhetians, and in May 1992 it called on the Russian government to protect Meskhetian refugees on its territory from threatened attacks by Kuban Cossacks. That same month, Shevardnadze declared that Georgia was prepared to resettle Meskhetians in the republic over a period of fifteen years, although he mentioned no numbers.¹¹

Despite these encouraging signs, it is unlikely the Meskhetians will remain a single community. The dispersion of refugees is a real threat to their survival as a separate people. Apart from the approximately 74,000 refugees in the central regions of Russia, those remaining in Azerbaijan and Central Asia continue to be subject to assimilation pressures. The Georgian economy, despite Shevardnadze's statements, is not capable of taking on the extra burden of thousands of new settlers. However, the Meskhetians' survival to date suggests a tenacity that

may also pull them through this latest national crisis. ■

Notes

1. The current Georgian districts that made up part of historical Meskheta are Adigeni, Aspindza, Axalkalaki, Axalcixi and Nino Vc'minda (formerly Bogdanovka), all located on Georgia's southern border.
2. See S. Enders Wimbush and Ronald Wixman, "The Meskhetian Turks: A New Voice in Soviet Central Asia," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 17, no. 2-3 (1975): 320-40. This is by far the most detailed and best source on the Meskhetians, although it is dated.
3. For sources and figures on the deportation, see Ann Sheehy and Bohdan Nahaylo, "The Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans and Meskhetians: Soviet Treatment of Some National Minorities," second rev. ed., *Minority Rights Group Report* (London, 1980); *Materialy Samizdata* AC nos. 6568 and 6569, no. 3/91; Khalil Gopalishvili-Kochibroladze *Meskhetskaiia Tra-edii (kratkii obzor)* (Nal'chik, 1983). (Unpublished manuscript in the author's possession.)
4. See Elizabeth Fuller, "Georgian Muslims Deported by Stalin Permitted to Return," *Radio Liberty Research Bulletin*, RL 32/86 (January 14, 1986).
5. This is the hypothesis of S. Enders Wimbush and Ronald Wixman, "The Meskhetian Turks."
6. See Iasin Pashali Ogly Khasanov, "K pravitel'stvu Gruzinskoi Respubliki, k uchenym, intelligentsii i molodezhi, k synov'iam i docheram, k materiam, ko vsemu gruzinskomu narodu" (April 13, 1991). (Unpublished manuscript in the author's possession.)
7. Wixman and Wimbush, "The Meskhetian Turks," 331.
8. For a discussion of the worsening nationality situation in Georgia since 1985, with some reference to the Meskhetians, see Stephen F. Jones, "Revolutions in Revolutions within Revolution: Minorities in the Georgian Republic," *The Politics of Nationality and the Erosion of the USSR*, edited by Zvi Gitelman (New York: St. Martin's Press 1992).
9. For a report on the events in Fergana, see Annette Bohr, "Violence Erupts in Uzbekistan," and Yaqub Turan and Timur Kocaoglu, "Appeal to the People of Fergana," *Report on the USSR* 1, no. 24 (June 16, 1989): 23-27.
10. "Obrashchenie k Gruzinskomu narodu" *Molodezh' Gruzii* (March 16, 1990).
11. *Foreign Broadcast Information Service-Soviet Union (FBIS-SOV)* 92-083, April 29, 1992, 68-69; 92-088, May 6, 1992, 65; 92-090, May 8, 1992, 67; 92-099, May 21, 1992, 99.