People in Exile: The Oral History of Meskhetian Turks (*Akhyskha Turkleri*)

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Abstract

This paper examines the plight of the Meskhetian Turks (*Akhyskha Turkleri*) originally from Georgia, who subsequently relocated to Central Asia by order of Stalin, later migrated to Russia just prior to the break-up of the USSR, and in the post-Soviet era, a sizeable population immigrated to the United States. After researching the subject and conducting interviews with a number of Meskhetian Turks residing in the US coming from various professional and socio-economic backgrounds, my findings suggest that the most prominent feature of these people is their multiple, non-voluntary relocations and experience of discrimination by host populations everywhere. Indeed, like most other minorities persecuted by majority rule worldwide, the hardships of the Meskhetian Turks are derived from social and political conditions not of their making—it is as though they have been the pawns in a world shaped largely by local and international political agendas. This paper examines the origins of Meskhetian Turks; their various deportations; the hardships that they and their predecessors endured under Stalin’s administration and the Ferghana Pogrom of 1989; their successive persecution in Krasnodar, Russia; and their current life in the United States.

Introduction

The Meskhetian Turks are Turkish in origin and have been given a Meskhetian prefix due to the region they originate from, Meskhetia, which is an area in southern Georgia that shares a border with Turkey. They were forcibly deported to Central Asia in 1944 by order of Joseph Stalin and resettled in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. In May 1989, a pogrom against Meskhetian Turks occurred in Uzbekistan’s territorial share of the Ferghana Valley—a resource-rich and densely populated area in Central Asia shared between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The reasons behind this push are still unknown, but likely related to local inter-ethnic animosities and competition over natural resources, which generated a massive evacuation of Meskhetian Turks from Uzbekistan. The majority of Meskhetian Turks were then resettled in the Krasnodar region of Southern Russia, on a territory adjoining the Kuban River. Some managed to settle in Azerbaijan, and a few in Turkey. Ethnic tensions, followed by conflicts, violence, and even the murder of many Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar led to the creation of the Involuntary Resettlement Refugee Program of the United States Government in 2004, where the USA accepted applications from over 10,000 Meskhetian Turks under the said refugee resettlement scheme. Many of the Meskhetian Turks in the US have settled in and around the city of Philadelphia, while others have come to St Louis, Missouri, and a few households have even settled in Salt Lake City, Utah.
This paper presents the recollections of the dislocations and hardships as reported to me via interviews with selected members of the Meskhetian Turks who have settled in St Louis. My acquaintance with these ethnic Meskhetian Turks occurred at the International Institute of Metropolitan Saint Louis, a refugee resettlement agency, where I was a case worker for refugees. Several members of this community graciously offered me their time, and in many instances I had the opportunity to speak with them in depth. As far as can be determined, they were candid in recounting their life experiences and reflecting on the several periods of their resettlement. The interviews were mainly conducted in Russian, but also in Turkish. I offered my interviewees to choose the setting for the interview, and sometimes they invited other relatives to join in the conversation; in some cases I met with my interviewee alone.

In this paper, I will outline the major developments in their history and quote from some of their statements in order to record what these events meant to them. The interviewees whose statements are presented in this paper include:

- Alim (51), who is married and has four children. He originally was manager of a group of government grocery stores in Uzbekistan, prior to relocating to Krasnodar, Russia, where he became a farmer.
- Raziya (39), was also a farmer in Russia. In Uzbekistan she worked as an accountant. She currently works at a factory in St Louis. Raziya's husband, Ilyas (41), claims that due to the requirement of having to serve in the Soviet Army he had to forfeit his chance to attend an institution of higher learning. Raziya and Ilyas have two children.
- Leila (45), who worked as an education specialist in Uzbekistan. In Russia, she mainly assisted her husband in selling vegetables in the market. She has one daughter.
- Hamida (42), who worked in the market selling fruits and vegetables in Krasnodar while her husband Beinali (47) and their two sons, aged 19 and 21, worked on an agricultural plot of land that the family had rented from the local Russian population.

**Origins of the Meskhetian Turks**

Meskhetian Turks come from Meskheti-Dzhavakheti, a south-western region of Georgia. Despite the fact that they are labelled as Meskhetians, most prefer to be called Akhiskha Turks, from Akhaltsikhsk, a main town in Meskheti-Dzhavakheti, south-western Georgia. Some regard the Meskhetian Turks as “renounced Georgians” (that is, they are said to have originally been ethnic Georgians of the Christian faith who had converted to Islam); others consider them as primordial Ottoman Turks, having links to the original Turkic tribes that populated Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and Europe. Indeed, Georgian historical documents claim that Meskhetian Turks, who speak the Kars dialect of Turkish and belong to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, are Georgians whose ancestors converted to Islam in the period between the sixteenth century and 1829, a time when the region of Meskheti-Dzhavakheti was under the sway of the Ottoman Empire. Russian sources claim that the Meskhetian Turks originated from Gunno-Bolgarian and other Turkic tribes that appeared in the Caucasus in the second century BC. Meskhetian Turks living in St Louis tend to agree with the second version, adding that they are direct descendants of Ottoman Turks.
It is not clear whether the Meskhetian Turks were once Christians and ethnic Georgians or whether they were ethnic Turks who converted to Islam. What is clear is that in the contemporary history of the twentieth century, the lives of Meskhetians have been marked by brutal divide-and-rule policies of the Soviet Union and the inter-ethnic strife of the post-Communist successor states. The nationalities policy of the USSR entailed a certain contradiction: on one hand, it had a strong and sincere commitment to forming a multicultural state, without any hostility to ethnic and national identities, which was probably one of the reasons for its relatively peaceful existence as a multicultural state for over 70 years; but on the other, the USSR carried a punitive character towards “suspicious ethnicities”—that is, ethnic groups believed to have close ties with Soviet enemies or those who were otherwise considered, for a variety of reasons, as potential threats to the state. Terri Martin, in analyzing the Soviet domestic nationalities policy, notes two Bolshevik concepts, which he calls “Soviet Xenophobia” and the “Piedemont Principle”. By the former, he means the “exaggerated Soviet fear of foreign influence and foreign contamination”. An interesting side of the Soviet xenophobia was that it was ideological, not ethnic, for it was stimulated by an ideological suspicion of foreign governments, not the hatred of non-Russians. The Soviet government was thus especially xenophobic or suspicious toward a variety of ethnicities situated on its borders. On the other hand, the Soviet government “aimed to emphasize and promote the ethnic diversity” and even cultural pride and a form of nationalism of its various border regions rather than “restricting national self-expression in the border regions”. This somewhat contrary policy was a form of realism in protecting the massive socialist entity from capitalist influence, but was also aimed at promoting the Soviet image abroad under what Martin calls the “Piedmont Principle”. (Martin named Piedmont Principle after the 19th century process of consolidation of the Italian state around the northern province of Piedmont.) By having generous policies towards the nationalities living on its borders, the Soviet leadership hoped to attract populations related to its own minority ethnicities, which lived across the border from the Soviet Union. Thus, “while Soviet Xenophobia encouraged ethnic suspicions, the Piedmont Principle dictated an instantaneous promotion of national institutions”. These policies in contrary ways both affected the Meskhetian Turks, whose homeland was situated in a border area but whose loyalties, in the eyes of Moscow, were never certain to the Soviet Union or, as a result of their experiences with displacements, to their host populations.

From Georgia to Central Asia

During World War II, the Soviet policy makers initiated the deportation of eight entire nationalities, including the Meskhetian Turks (the others were Volga Germans, Karachai, Kalmyks, Chechen, Ingush, Balkars, and Crimean Tatars). In November 1944, the Meskhetian Turks, along with some other smaller ethnic groups of Southern Georgia, were suddenly deported to Central Asia. According to Dmitriy Nikitin, the number of deportees, including Meskhetian Turks, Khemshils, and Kurds, was 95,000, although Western historical accounts indicate even higher figures for deportees, of between 150,000 and 200,000. On the morning of 15 November, the NKVD (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affaires) surrounded the villages of the condemned people and transported them to the train station where they were herded in unheated and unhygienic freight train cars. Alim, a recent arrival to St Louis, recalls of that period:

Before the 1944 deportation, our people lived and worked peacefully in South Georgia, on the border with Turkey. We faced a huge misfortune on November
14, 1944. While our fathers and brothers were struggling in a war defending their Motherland, their wives, children and grandparents were herded into cold freight carts and forcefully relocated to what was to them unknown lands. Since that time, we have been granted an undeserved stereotype of an “enemy” population.

Fifteen thousand people—or nearly one in six of those deported—from among the Meskhetian Turks and other peoples amongst them are said to have died en-route to Central Asia due to harsh conditions. They were often forced to keep the decaying bodies of their relatives and comrades on the train until given the opportunity to throw the bodies out or if lucky bury them along the long journey, which lasted for almost two months. Many men who fought in the Soviet Red Army against Nazi Germany had to search for their families after the war.

Concrete reasons for the deportation orders have remained unclear. The deportees were not provided with any explanation whatsoever, either written or oral, and their deportation was never mentioned in the official Soviet documents of that period. There was some speculation for the reasons behind this deportation: there is some evidence, for example, that at that time Stalin had designs to invade Turkey and thereby wished to clear the Transcaucasia of “suspicious” ethnic elements who might hinder his war plans. Due to their cultural, religious, linguistic, and territorial proximity to Turkey, and their sizeable numbers, Meskhetian Turks were the first on the list of suspected ethnic groups. There might even have been some historical basis to Stalin’s fears: Nikolai Bugai, a Soviet historian who studied the deportations of Soviet people, claims that in 1918, during the Turkish offensive on Georgia through Meskhetia, the Muslim population of this region had sided with the Turks, and thus could not be trusted. Lavrenty Beria, the feared chairman of NKVD, had advocated the removal of “suspicious” Muslim populations from Georgian territory, and after receiving the official approval of Stalin, Beria scheduled the deportations to begin on November 15, 1944.

Those of the deportees who survived the gruelling journey were soon resettled in small groups in the territories of Kazakhstan (29,497 persons), Kirghizia (9,911), and above all Uzbekistan (42,618), where they were known as “special settlers”. Initially the Soviet regime assigned most of the settled Meskhetian Turks to agricultural work. They lived in isolated settlements, lacking heat, forced to endure overcrowded and unhygienic conditions. Among other things, many lives were lost as a result of typhus epidemics. Between the beginning of 1945 and the end of 1950, the NKVD and MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) recorded 19,047 deaths (20% of the deportees) among the Turks, Kurds and Khemshils in social settlements. They were not allowed to change their residence and had to appear once a month for registration at the official institutions. Their children could not attend school because they had to work, owing to economic need or state requirements. It appears that the Stalin regime, already known to inflict human suffering to and even extermination of its opponents, had no concern over the high mortality rates among the deportees of “suspected” ethnic groups.

After Stalin’s death, the Meskhetian Turks remained confined to special settlements in Central Asia for several more years. The first step in the dismantling of the special settlements took place on 5 July 1954 when the Council of Ministers of the USSR released all children under 16, including Turks, Kurds, and Khemshils, from special settlement duties and forced residence. However, they did not grant a petition for the Meskhetian Turks to return to their original homeland in southern Georgia. The majority of Meskhetian Turks thus remained in Central Asia until the late 1980s and early 1990s.
Ferghana Pogrom and Exile from Central Asia

The period of 1989 and 1990 was associated with multiple violent ethnic conflicts that broke out in various parts of USSR. In May–June of 1989 one such ethnic conflict occurred between the two ethnic Turkic peoples of Meskhetians and Uzbeks in the Ferghana Valley, culminating in the deaths of at least 100 people, the separation of family members, and in the massive resettlement of Meskhetian Turks. The clashes and the resettlements destroyed most of what the Meskhetian Turk diaspora had managed to build in Uzbekistan. Conflicts and massive violence took place in other parts of Uzbekistan as well.

Raziya, who resided with her family in Alimkent (Tashkent region), recalls the events that took place in her town:

There was a huge panic in the streets. Turks were running away. I was in the eighth month of pregnancy. My husband’s father was in his deathbed. We decided not to tell him anything. My husband was running between two fires. On the one hand he had a sick father to take care of [and who could not easily relocate], on the other he had to think of my safety. He made a decision to send me to Kazakhstan with his sister while he remained in Alimkent with his father. We went to Kazakhstan on a bus. There were more people in the bus than seats, so, people took turns sitting. We arrived at Berken and the locals were very kind to us. Much thanks is due to the Kazakh government for accepting us at that critical time and supporting their local [Meskhetian] Turkish people. We lived in the local Turks’ houses for about a week until news arrived from Alimkent that the situation had calmed down in Uzbekistan. I soon found out that my father-in-law had died. He did so without knowing what had happened.

Despite the calm, a resolution on 13 July 1989, of the Union of Ministers of the USSR, ordered the evacuation of Meskhetian Turks residing in Ferghana Valley to Russia. Seventeen thousand Meskhetian Turks were forced to migrate to Nechernozem’e (“the non-black earth territories”). Most moved to Russia, some to Azerbaijan, and a small number to Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The administration of the then Soviet Republic of Georgia, the land where the Meskhetians were originally from, refused to accept them, however. Later, another 70,000 Meskhetian Turks residing in other parts of Uzbekistan were also forced to leave. Leila was living with her family in Samarqand when they were forced to leave. This is her account of her experience during that period:

I was born in Tumenarik, Kazakhstan. I married at the age of 23 and moved with my husband to Uzbekistan. In Samarqand, I started working as an instructor at a local kindergarten. After a while, I decided to continue my education and went to the Pedagogical Institute, where I studied part time. After graduating from the institute, I was promoted to be the position of ‘methodologist’ [education specialist], a position which required me to inspect kindergartens and check the work of the teachers.

In 1984, I gave a birth to a handsome baby boy. He had golden curly hair and everybody said that he looked more Russian than Turk! My second child was born in 1988. We had a very good life during this period. People respected me and valued my work. Every three years I was sent to the capital city for training to improve my qualifications. Furthermore, because I spoke very good
Russian, I was often sent to different parts of the country to participate at conferences and meetings.

Then in 1989, on June 3rd, there was a huge conflict in Ferghana Valley [between the local Uzbek and Meskhetian Turkish populations]. That's when our lives changed completely. The whole country felt unsafe for us. We couldn't sleep at night. There were people who would walk around the town holding loud speakers and yelling: “Turks, go away! If you won't leave, we will kill you. You will face the destiny of those in Ferghana”. The local authorities conducted a meeting where they asked us to leave for good. They said they don't want any bloodshed in their town. So, just in one day over 90% of the [Meskhetian] Turks left [Samarqand and its surroundings].

We took a bus to Turkmenistan. There we crossed the Caspian Sea on a ship and came to Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan we were placed on an airplane that took us to Minvodi (southern part of Russia) and from there we went to Nalchik in Kabardino Balkaria (southern part of Russia), where we spent nearly six months. The local population was very friendly at first, but after more and more of our ethnic cohorts started to arrive, our presence began to cause irritation among the locals and we started hearing people say that they don't want us living there. We thus had to leave that town as well. That's how we came to Krasnodar region.

The reason behind the original clashes between the Uzbek and Meskhetian Turks still remains unclear. The official press merely indicated that they were a result of the ethnic tension between Uzbeks and Meskhetian Turks. However, it is not clear as to why tensions would rise among the two, given the fact that the Meskhetian Turks were, among all the resettled nations in Uzbekistan, the closest to the Uzbek population in faith, culture, and language. Tofik Kudrayev, a Meskhetian who was born in Georgia and was deported to Kazakhstan in 1944, has published a book titled The Memory of the Nation, in which he claims that one of the reasons behind the attack on the Meskhetian Turks in Ferghana was that the majority of Meskhetian Turks possessed larger sections of land than the local Uzbek population—to thus feelings of resentment by local Uzbeks (the majority) over a relatively wealthier minority group at a time of political and economic crises in a densely populated region of the Soviet Union may have been a major reason behind the attacks. According to Kudrayev, two-thirds of Uzbekistan's inhabitants have been living in rural areas, thus, the question of fair land ownership had been, and remains today, central to the economic and political stability of Uzbekistan. Khazanov also claims that there was evidence to suspect that disturbances in the Ferghana Valley were not completely spontaneous, that they were thoroughly organized and planned in advance. Some claim that the anti-Meskhetian riots occurred as a result of a form of instigation that included directed mob participation in pogroms. In fact, the attacks against the Meskhetian Turks happened to begin just as Islam Karimov was taking power in Uzbekistan; according to Mark Beissinger, Karimov's regime, “through a skillful campaign of consistent repression, cooptation, and divide-and-conquer tactics”, was working to diffuse all potential sources of disorder. Also, it is worth noting that about this time Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was introducing economic and political liberalization policies, which may have contributed to an atmosphere of economic uncertainty and thus animosity towards an ethnic minority (the Meskhetian Turks) perceived to be rich by the local
poor (from the ethnic Uzbek). The anti-Meskhetian Turk outbursts thus lifted the lid on simmering nationalist sentiment among Uzbeks, owing to the economic instability in the country, and the increase of poverty, especially in the rural areas.\textsuperscript{28} Also, overcrowded conditions in the Fergana Valley, combined with widespread poverty, may well have fuelled interethnic hostility by themselves. The questions remain: could all these factors have been reasons for these attacks? And, who exactly, if anyone at all, was behind these attacks? Raziya’s husband Ilyas, has his own opinion on this:

You see the politics of Moscow was to master the earth of Chernozem [Blackearth—southern Russia’s black, rich soil]. Our people mostly dealt with agriculture. Those in Sirdarya mostly dealt with cotton. At the beginning of 1980s our people were invited to go to Krasnodar to plant tobacco. Approximately 2000 people agreed to go.

There were also rumours indicating that a few days before this pogrom occurred, the emissaries of Uzbekistan’s popular movement “Birlik” called the people of Fergana Valley to deal a severe blow on the Meskhetian Turks.\textsuperscript{29} Ilyas was aware of these rumours:

I heard people saying that the leaders of “Birlik” approached us [Meskhetian Turks] and the Korean people and asked them to collaborate with them in their struggle for independence. Our leaders rejected their offer because they did not want to have any troubles with the central government, since we are a peaceful people. But as an act of revenge “Birlik” leaders disposed [sic.] the local Uzbeks against us.

**Persecution in Krasnodar**

Because of the favourable climatic conditions, many Meskhetian Turks moved to the Krasnodar region, where 250 Meskhetian families were already residing, most having become tobacco farmers in the mid-1970s when they had accepted an invitation from the local government to fill a workforce shortage in the tobacco plantations.\textsuperscript{30} However, the local authorities in Krasnodar refused to accept Meskhetians as legal residents, depriving them and their children of their citizenship rights. Ilyas shared his experience by stating:

Soon after our arrival, we managed to buy a house in Krasnodar. The Greeks and Tatars were leaving at that time and sold their houses to us for cheap.\textsuperscript{31} We had some money because the Uzbek government bought our houses. The conditions in Krasnodar were terrible. There was no gas. We had to start our lives from the very beginning. The first two years we were allowed to drive our cars with Uzbek plates. Then after the collapse of the Soviet Union they gave us special car plates, which started with the letters KKZ. This was a good way for militia to recognize Turks and ask them for money. Then they changed the plates to a yellow color, which helped them identify us from a distance. After 1996 they stopped issuing plates for Turks. Every 45 days we had to pay 288 roubles . . . [just so that] so we could live there!

Moreover, ethnic discrimination in the Krasnodar region became a fundamental part of its local politics. A Russian political scientist, Vladimir Ilyushenko, explained the situation thus:

Pogroms, acts of vandalism, slaughter and murder on the basis of national origins does not surprise anybody anymore—they have become a normal way
of our lives, our everyday companions. The number of such crimes constantly increases, yet the authorities refuse to regard it as a serious issue, explaining it differently [in the form of] illegal migration, inobservance of passport regime and [among other things] registration regulations ... As a result, not only xenophobia, but also Nazism becomes a marginal phenomenon in our lives ...  

Leila described her own experience in Krasnodar. It is worth noting that Leila was often taken to be Russian, so that although she herself also suffered discrimination and hardship, she was sometimes able to observe from afar the scorn and mistreatment that her Meskhetian Turkish friends and relatives experienced on the streets. She recounts:

Krasnodar took away my two children. My son died on the second day of our arrival. He was eight years old. He was crossing the street when a drunk driver hit him. There was no limit to my grief. When my youngest daughter turned two-and-a-half, I took her to the local hospital to have her inoculated. Having a fever was a natural reaction for children after inoculation shots. But my daughter had an exceptionally high fever of up to 40 degrees. We took her to the hospital but the doctor there assured us that it was a natural reaction. After some time the fever decreased and my daughter was back to normal condition. However, in 2 months she was feeling very weak. She hardly spoke, walked very little and had almost no strength to play.

I couldn’t trust the doctors in Krasnodar anymore so we took my little girl to Tashkent [Uzbekistan]. We spent two months in the hospital. But her condition worsened day after day. The doctors said that the inoculation somehow damaged her central nervous system and that in a short period of time she will be completely paralyzed. We returned to Krasnodar with no hope for my daughter’s recovery. I tried to gather all of my strength and went around the local hospitals pleading for any kind of help. Neither the government, nor the hospitals were willing to help us. We needed money to keep on buying medicine.

After realizing that these agencies won’t be of any help, I decided to apply for assistance to the Krasnodar Department of Social Needs of the Population. A woman greeted me there with a warm smile. She listened to my story and assured me that she will do her best to help me. Then I made a confession. I told her that I was not Russian, that I was Turkish. Her face turned angry. She said that I have to get out of her room immediately. “We don’t help Turkish people”, she said, “Get out of my office and of my country; there is no place for Turks here.” I was crying and saying that my child was born here and Russian doctors ruined her. But she just pushed me out and slammed the door in front of my nose.

My daughter was paralyzed for ten years. She had no life in her. It was miserable for me to see her in such condition. But every day I managed to smile and joke in front of her. She loved it when I cooked pelmeni for her. I would chew the food before giving it to her. One day I cooked her pelmeni and brought a plate of it into her room. She looked at me and smiled. I gave her some tea and felt that she had difficulty swallowing it. She started choking. Her father came into the
room. He lifted her and put her head on his shoulder. She died within a minute in his hands. That’s how I lost my two children.

From the point of view of the Krasnodar regional authorities, Meskhetian Turks were “unsanctionally migrated citizens, who personally chose regions of Russia for residing” 34. This official position gave the Meskhetians no right to have a permanent residence in the region. Moreover, a refusal to provide a legal status to Meskhetians is known to also have been meant to stimulate their departure from the region and to prevent the arrival of new migrants. 35

Another obstacle facing the Meskhetians was that during the period 1990–1992 the Russian administration issued coupons to all workers, but paid the Meskhetians cash instead. Such staples as sugar, flour, butter, and soap, normally quite expensive, were sold with special coupons. This is Hamida’s experience during this time:

The government never gave us coupons. My daughter was 9 months old. There was an old Russian lady living next to us. She felt really sorry for my daughter, so, every time she received coupons she would give them to me.

The legal position of Meskhetian Turks in Russia was adjusted as early as 1991 by the Russian Federation Law “On Citizenship” (Article 13.1). Since they permanently resided in the Russian Federation when that law came into force, the law granted them citizenship and this was confirmed by the Russian Supreme Court. In 26 regions of Russia, where Meskhetian Turks still reside, the law is respected, with nearly all Meskhetians having received passports as Russian citizens. However, the Meskhetian Turks living in Krasnodar have not been treated as equals under the law, because the leadership of Krasnodar Territory appears not to respect the law and to disregard it instead. Among other things, the attitude of the Governor of the Krasnodar Territory, Alexander Tkachyov, has played a vital role in the formation of aggressive and what can only be categorized as local racist attitudes towards the Meskhetians. 37 Tkachyov not only approved but also inspired the anti-Meskhetian campaigns in the media and anti-Meskhetian actions of Cossack extremist organizations. He has explained his position by stating that the life-style of Meskhetian Turks does not match that of the local population of Krasnodar and that the region is “strangling” due to the inflow of immigrants. 38

Hamida says:

Our children studied in Turkish classes. Russian kids studied before lunch and Turkish kids after lunch. After hearing about our possible emigration to the US, my daughter’s teacher had told my daughter in class: ‘I don’t understand why America would want these sheep. You are all sheep, why would they need you?’

We endured other insults from the local population. A common one went something like: ‘Hey you black-asses, get out of our land. Kozan is for the Cossack.’

In 2002, authorities in the Krasnodar administration took measures corresponding with the expiration of the temporary registration held by most Krasnodar Meskhetians that reportedly cancelled leases on land or denied lease renewals for the 2002 agricultural season. In an apparent attempt to pressure the Meskhetians to leave, the regional legislature enacted a series of laws that banned residence registration for “stateless persons”, suggested more extensive passport and residence checks, and required strict administrative control over the issue of papers certifying land possession. The situation of Meskhetians in Krasnodar thus became desperate to the point where women organized a protest against the government.
Raziya, one of the women actively promoting the rights of Meskhetian Turks, had this to say:

Our patience was exhausted. Women gathered at our leader’s house and pleaded with him to take action. We even decided to go on a hunger strike, which started on August 21 and lasted for 21 days. The local officials sent out some people to find out if the strike was fake or real. An ambulance came to check our health and took three of us to the hospital. Our hunger strike coincided with two events: Firstly, a neighboring town was flooded during that period and so, they would mock our condition and demands by reporting on TV that even though people are dying from floods and their houses are being destroyed, the Meskhetians are going on hunger strike. Secondly, August 21 was the first day of the Battle of Stalingrad of World War II. [The Battle of Stalingrad is considered to be the bloodiest battle recorded in human history. It began in August 1942 and ended on February 2, 1943.] The local officials thus even linked us to Hitler for our actions. But we didn’t give up.

One day a bus full of Cossacks approached the building where we had our strike. They set up a grill and started cooking kebab with pork. Then they poured home-made vodka into glasses and took kebab sticks in their hands and started waving them in front of the nose of hungry people. It was humiliating. They yelled: “Hey Turks, take it easy, learn how to have a good time from us. Let’s make peace.” They then laughed and drank vodka and ate the kebabs right in front of us.

The representative of Novorossiysk human rights organization “School of Peace”, Vadim Karastelyov, had been assisting the Meskhetians in their hunger strike. The agency was then accused by the main department of justice of the Krasnodar territory of having only one founding member and was liquidated in 2003 by the court. According to Caucasian Knot, government claims against the “School of Peace” are connected with their active position on the advocacy of Meskhetian Turks’ rights.39

Resettlement in the United States

As the situation of the Meskhetian Turks in the Krasnodar region was unbearable, elements within the US government stretched a helping hand and approved a resettlement program for those Meskhetians who had been living in the Krasnodar region for at least 15 years. According to Novorossiysk City Committee on Human Rights, as of summer 2005, over 7,000 people had submitted their applications for participation in the resettlement program carried out by the US State Department. Only those Meskhetians subjected to discrimination from the Krasnodar regional authorities were eligible to participate in this program.

While his extended family was not sure if another resettlement was good for them, Alim, the father of four children, was among the first to apply for this program. His extended family is now living in St Louis. He recalled:

On March 1st [2004] I submitted my documents and on February 4th [2005] we departed from Krasnodar to St Louis. I feel like I am at home here in St Louis. We are the people with no homeland. Our parents claim Georgia to be our homeland because they were born there. But nobody wants us there.
Uzbekistan kicked us out and Russia hates us. I truly hope that my children will be happy here. Do you know what homeland is for me? A homeland for me is a place where my children are happy. I hope that America is our last destination.

Conclusion

The dislocations and persecutions of the Meskhetian Turks appear to have taken place owing to no fault of theirs. They were first moved because their position in their homeland was considered a threat to Soviet planners. Their disparate experiences in Central Asia seemed also to have been shaped by policies of the regimes in power. And the pogrom against them in Uzbekistan just prior to the dismantling of the USSR may have been instigated for political reasons emanating from changes in policy, in administrative personnel, and even due to competition over natural resources at a time of economic crisis. They evince in stark form the extent to which the perceptions and concerns of those in power, however accurate or inaccurate they may be, directly affect the affairs of ordinary people. As such, the Meskhetian Turks, largely a stateless people, have been through a lot of misery and humiliation. Today, however, many among them are given a chance to start a new life in which they and their future generations are assured basic human rights, such as freedom from persecution and fear. For the first time since their deportation in 1944, many of the Meskhetians are being offered a chance to, in a way, share a motherland. Only time will tell if this latest dwelling will be the last stop for this suffering nation.

NOTES

1. This paper in its original version was presented at the “Central Eurasian Studies Society Sixth Annual Conference”, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 29 September–2 October 2005.
3. To protect their privacy, the names of the interviewees have been changed.
7. Ibid., p. 829.
8. Ibid., p. 831.
9. Ibid., p. 832.
11. Anatolii Khazanov, After the USSR, op. cit.
12. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Interview with Beinali, St Louis, MO, 21 May 2005.
20. Interview with Beinali, op. cit.
25. Ibid.
31. Beginning in 1989, ethnic Greeks and Crimean Tatars began returning to the Crimea and Greece.
32. Dmitriy Nikitin, “Turki Meskhetinci: vopros zakrit?” op. cit.
33. *Pelmeni* is a national Eastern European (mainly Russian) dish, usually made with minced meat filling, wrapped in thin dough.
34. Dmitriy Nikitin, “Turki Meskhetinci”, op. cit.
35. Ibid.
37. It is worth noting that Alexander Tkachyov Krasnodar, a regional governor, was named ‘Person of the Year’ in 2003 for his personal contribution in developing Russia’s political system and for his efficiency in the administration.
38. Dmitriy Nikitin, “Turki Meskhetinci”, op. cit.