

# Language Policy and Education in Circassia

[From A. Jaimoukha, *The Circassians: A Handbook*, London: RoutledgeCurzon (Taylor & Francis); New York: Palgrave and Routledge, 2001, pp 251-61.  
Additional information is added to take account of more recent developments]

Language is the means by which the history and culture of a people, and hence a principal part of its identity, is comprehended and depicted. Culture is transmitted and the essential national characteristics are perpetuated through language. In essence, it is the repository of the spirit of a nation, and losing it is like wrenching the soul out of a people. Ezra Pound expressed the value of language, any language, succinctly: 'The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is capable of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension.' It is in the interest of humanity that all languages of the world are preserved.

Circassian Language and culture have been under great pressure for almost two centuries. Adiga psyche in the Caucasus has been affected by seventy-five years of communist ideology that relegated native culture to a secondary status and elevated Russian language and culture, in a Soviet guise, to pre-eminence. Although things improved somewhat after 1991, no serious work has been undertaken to upgrade the status of the local vernaculars.

## Education in the early years

In 1851, the first Circassian language school was opened in Nalchik. A Circassian alphabet was devised based on Arabic script, but literacy remained low. Circassian was taught in some confessional and secondary schools in Stavropol, Nalchik, Ekaterinodar, Batalpashinsk, and other places. Wimar Bersey, who taught at Stavropol, published in 1855 *The Book of the Study of Circassian language and literature*. Lopatinsky taught Circassian at the Nalchik High School towards the end of the 19th century.

## **The tsarist period & the Mountain Republic**

The main thrust of the language policy between 1864-1917 was to undermine local languages by excluding them from education and literary usage, with the Russification of the various ethnic groups as the ultimate goal. Russian was the only official language in Circassia and the sole medium of instruction in secular schools. Arabic was used in the few religious schools. Only a minority of Circassians was bilingual in Russian.

In the short life of the independent North Caucasian Mountain Republic, primary education was conducted in Circassian.

## **Soviet period**

At the beginning of Soviet rule, a language policy was devised to facilitate sovietization of the different peoples and nations encompassed by the vast empire. National languages were to be developed to be used in education and other spheres. In 1921, Russification was abandoned and instead national languages and cultures were promoted. The right of the Circassians to develop their language was recognized as a prelude to elevating its status to state language, alongside Russian. However, Russian was envisaged to become the lingua franca of all peoples that made up the Soviet Union, national languages only being used in the nominal republics and regions. This policy could only be effected through tight central control.

There was a flowering of local languages in the relatively liberal 1920s. In 1922, an educational conference was held in Kislovodsk, in which many significant proposals were made. Two written Circassian languages based on Latin alphabet were devised, one for Kabardian in 1923, and another for Adigean in 1927. Latin script rather than Cyrillic was chosen to mitigate anti-Russian reaction, as adopting Cyrillic would have been conceived as an attempt at Russification. Circassian began to be used in education.

Some linguists worked hard to promote the status of Circassian and to iron out any anomalies in its two alphabets. Conferences were held for this purpose. In 1930, the New Alphabet Committee of the Nationalities Soviets made an attempt to unify not only Circassian alphabets, but also those of other North Caucasian

languages. However, this valiant endeavour was overtaken by new plans for conversion to Cyrillic alphabet already being drawn in the Kremlin.

The controversy regarding the use of two different orthographies for Circassian is still alive today. Critics have been maintaining that that policy was a scion of the old 'divide and rule' dictum. There are some phonetic and, to a lesser extent, lexical variations, but the grammars are essentially the same. Therefore, these differences could have been ironed out at the outset, minimizing differences and laying down the way for further convergence, and perhaps eventual unification, instead of becoming pervasive and institutionalized. On the other hand, it may be argued that, though the two languages are very close, they could never be made one. The best solution would be to develop both languages separately and to familiarize the children of each group with the language of the other.

The motto of the early Soviet years was language modernization. National schools were established offering a curriculum with national content and instruction in Circassian. New professional and technical words were coined based mainly on roots found within Circassian itself, although a smaller number of terms was borrowed from Russian.

By the 1931-1932 scholastic year, most Circassian schools had textbooks in the native language using the new version of the Latin alphabet. This second alphabet change was supposedly intended to simplify the spelling systems in order to make the languages easier to learn. However, the immediate effect of this policy was to make the literate Circassians instantly illiterate. In fact, this happened three times within less than fifteen years following each switch in script.

In July 1932, the Kabardino-Balkarian Pedagogical Institute was founded. It was the forerunner of the [Kabardino-Balkarian State University](#), which was inaugurated in 1957. The University offered degree courses in Kabardian language and literature. Some published papers and theses took up cultural themes.

Circassian had barely completed the switch to Latin when the pressure to change to Cyrillic began in the mid-1930s, marking a new phase in language policy. New words and terms were to be borrowed from Russian, as opposed to being derived from national language. Some educators opposed this move and other detrimental edicts that were undermining Circassian language and culture. These were

denounced as ‘enemies of the people.’ The Director of Education and of the State Publishing House of Kabardino-Balkaria, I. Af’ewine, was accused of carrying out counter-revolutionary activities, namely resisting teaching Russian language and literature in schools. Workers in the Cherkess Institute for Cultural Construction were accused of errors in translations from Russian into Circassian. Many of these hapless people were arrested and either executed or sent to concentration camps, thus depriving the nation of a generation of pedagogues.

With the local education authorities hammered into shape, the new policies were executed. In 1937, a switch was made to Cyrillic alphabet for both Adigean and Kabardian. As time went by, Circassian became laden with loan-words. One marked consequence, apparent by the late 1960s, was further divergence of the standard languages used in the Caucasus from those dialects used in the diaspora.

In 1938, Russian language instruction became compulsory in all non-Russian schools, beginning at age seven. Concurrently the number of hours of Russian language instruction increased and teachers of Russian were given a 15% pay rise. The size of Russian classes was reduced to fifteen students and Russian textbooks for scientific and technical subjects appeared.

In 1940, Circassian schools were supplied with textbooks in the native language written in Cyrillic alphabet. The government claimed that the peoples themselves demanded such a switch to facilitate learning both native language and Russian. No one dared to challenge this rationale—people had become wise after the event. In the same year, a new directive called ‘The Common Rule’ was issued requiring that all Russian-derived words in Circassian be spelled according to the rules of Russian.

The principle of proportional representation in education meant that depending on the size of the group, and the degree of development of the language, language use could vary by degree, from a couple of years of schooling to full university education. Circassian was placed in the middle of the range, where it was used as the language of instruction in school but not in higher education.

In the competition between Circassian and Russian, parental preference played some role in determining the status of the local vernacular. If Russian was chosen, the native tongue suffered. In addition, many schools were bilingual, both languages being used in parallel for the same students. Providing two options

meant developing textbooks, training teachers, establishing teacher training colleges, setting up printing presses and so on. This was one of the successes of the Soviet education system.

By the mid-1950s, there had been a gradual reduction of the number of hours devoted to teaching Circassian. In addition, textbooks were poorly designed, being blind-copies of Russian models. This was a result of lack of methodology. Teachers were also poorly trained, the majority doubling as instructors of other subjects. In Cherkess schools, there were no native language instructors with higher education for the fifth through seventh grades. This sorry condition was the result of, ‘the frivolous attitude of the local regime towards these [native] languages’ (R. Karcha, 1958, p113).

During the 1956/57 scholastic year, there were 249 schools in Kabarda. The numbers of students receiving instruction in Circassian were as follows: in Kabardian ASSR 14,300, out of a total student population of 60,900, giving 24%; in Adigey AO 4,400, out of 39,500, giving 11%; in Cherkess AO 1,600, out of 17,400, giving 9% (R. Karcha, 1958, p114). These low percentages were indicative of the lessening of the importance of instruction in the native language and the predominance of Russian. Also of interest is the number of books published in Circassian (R. Karcha, 1958, p115):

	No. of titles (& copies) in 1940	No. of titles (& copies) in 1950	No. of titles (& copies) in 1956
Kabarda	41 (172,000)	44 (183,000)	67 (165,000)
Adigea	67 (122,000)	57 (163,000)	44 (54,000)
Cherkess AO	-	5 (6,000)	13 (14,000)

In 1956, a book, *Methods of Teaching Circassian in Elementary Classes*, was published by Nicolai Bagh in Nalchik. Bagh had long observed the teaching of Circassian in schools, and came to the conclusion that language education system was in need of a major shake-up. He put together a collection of short rhyming

poems (one for each of the letters of the alphabet) of high quality that helped the children learn the alphabet. The one for 'A' ran as follows:

<b>А</b> жэм жьакIэр егъэсыс,	<i>Azhem zchach'er yeghesis,</i>	Billy-goat shakes his goatee,
<b>А</b> р хуащIыну хуейщ нэмыс,	<i>Ar xwasch'inu xweysch nemis,</i>	As is dictated by habit,
<b>А</b> уэ мэлхэм гу зылъатэр	<i>Awe melxem gw zilhater</i>	But the sheep consider
<b>А</b> жэм и бжьэр зэрыджатэрщ.	<i>Azhem yi bzcher zerijatersch.</i>	Billy's horn a rapier.

In the 1958-59 educational 'reforms,' the requirements that non-Russian children study Russian, and Russian children study local languages were scrapped. Parents were given the freedom to choose language of instruction for their children. Circassians, along with other non-Russian peoples, saw this as detrimental to the status of their language. Non-Russian children with no Russian education soon found themselves with no prospects, as higher education was only available in Russian. It was difficult to provide instruction in all subjects in both Adigean and Kabardian. Russians chose not to teach their children Circassian as local children were by necessity familiar with Russian.

## **Brezhnev's education policy**

In the late 1970s, a systematic process of Russification was started which put tremendous pressure on the local vernaculars. During Brezhnev's period of tenure, a law was passed in 1978 which made Russian the sole language of instruction at schools and the native languages came to be studied as foreign languages. Kabardian and Adigean were adversely affected. In 1984, Russian was declared as the only official language in Adigea, which meant further downgrading of the status of Circassian.

## **Glasnost**

By the mid-1980s, Circassian language instruction was at a low point, almost moribund. Although the majority of pupils in Circassian national schools were non-Russians, Russian was the main language of instruction, with Circassian

taught just like any other subject. As late into glasnost as the 1989-90 school year, the Circassians had no instruction available in their native language beyond the second grade. Glasnost allowed greater freedom of discussion of language policy in the Circassian republics. The education system was in the process of decentralizing, as local authorities were claiming more control. New ministries of education began to emerge in the autonomous republics and regions. In 1990, the faculty of Kabardian and Balkar philology was set up in the Kabardino-Balkarian State University. [The Institute of Philology of the University](#) offers specialties in Kabardian language and literature in the [Department of Kabardian Language and Literature](#). The Department was established in 1932. The first Head of Department was T'ut'e M. Boriqwey (1932-1937). The Department prepares philologists and teachers and offers a bachelor degree in Kabardian philology. Postgraduate degrees are also offered in the Department, including Master of the Kabardian-Cherkess Literature and Master of Kabardian-Cherkess Language. The Department is headed by Kh. T. Taov (Taw). The staff of the Department is made up of 18 personnel, including five professors and doctors. Scholarly output of the staff include monographs, articles, and collections of scholarly works. The Department also prepares textbooks and school supplies for the teaching of Circassian in republican schools.

## **Bilingualism, trilingualism**

In the 1926 census, the total number of Circassians was 205 thousands, of which 98% were native speakers. Thereafter, the percentage decreased to the mid-1960s and hovered there until the late 1970s, when it decreased further more, due to the further demoting of the status of Circassian. Between 1989 and 1994, the proportion of Kabardians and Cherkess who considered the language of their nationality their native tongue kept increasing, in reflection of the rise in nationalist sentiments. On the other hand, the percentage of Circassians bilingual in Russian increased steadily starting from the mid-1920s. By the early 1970s, 71.4% of Kabardians spoke Russian fluently (W. Zhemix'we, 1973, p58). In the mid-1980s practically all were bilingual. In 1973 the number of schools in Kabardino-Balkaria increased to 300, with a further 10 technical institutes.

Before the Soviet era, the Abazas were bilingual in their language and Kabardian. They were slowly being assimilated by the Circassians, being smaller in number. In the Soviet years, the Abaza language was formalized and standardized, and the

process of assimilation was reversed. This beneficence was motivated more by a desire to emphasize Abaza separateness rather than for concern for the fate of the language. Thus, the Abazas inadvertently benefited from Russia's pet Machiavellian dictum of 'divide and rule'—some good did come out of the Soviets' language policy after all. Nevertheless, trilingualism is prevalent among the Abazas today.

## **Soviet legacy**

The Soviet language policy in the Circassian republics has resulted in functional bilingualism, especially among the young, and some degree of Russification. Authorities never made systematic attempts to perpetuate native language instruction for Circassians even through the middle school level. By the late 1980s, Circassian was only taught in the first few grades. School is a major means of instilling national culture, and as such education in the native language is extremely important in perpetuating it. Thus hindering this education can only be interpreted as a deliberate attempt at undermining local culture and promoting a Russian substitute. Nevertheless, literacy was very high by the end of the Soviet period.

By the beginning of the 1990s Russian had become the dominant language in Adigea, even within the family, the last refuge of the native tongue. This perceived threat of linguistic extinction, and the demise of the Soviet System combined to make the Circassians more vocal in their demands for more autonomy.

## **Post-Soviet developments**

Kabardian in Kabardino-Balkaria and Adigean in Adigea, together with Russian, have been designated as official languages. The Adigeans lobbied hard to pass a law stipulating that presidential candidates be proficient in Circassian. Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been some increased interest in the native language in Adigea, where Circassian programmes are regularly broadcast, and newspapers in the local vernacular are now a common staple in the republic. In 1993, the Pedagogical Institute in Adigea was upgraded into the Adigean State University. Other sweeping educational reforms and restructuring were



implemented. In the early 1990s, the Institute of National Problems in Education was established to increase national content in the school curriculum and implement new policy measures. There has been some success in the production of relevant school text-books for all grades.

The Shapsugh language had not been taught at schools in the period between abrogation of status in the 1940s and the early 1990s. However, after a vigorous campaign fuelled by decades of injustice, a number of concessions were obtained from the regional centre at Krasnodar. Adigean is now taught at village schools, being very close to Shapsugh. In general, the hardy Shapsugh have preserved their language and culture.

According to the 1992 Law on Education of the Russian Federation 'citizens of the Russian Federation have the right to receive primary education in their native language. They also have the right to select the language of instruction.' The Constitution of the Russian Federation of 1992 guarantees cultural self-determination and the right of local organizations to set up educational institutions to promote native language and culture.

There are many difficulties facing the governmental and private educational bodies. There is a chronic shortage of textbooks in Circassian in all subjects. In the republican universities, all subjects are taught in Russian with Circassian language and literature offered as degree courses. This has been creating problems in finding qualified teachers to teach science and social subjects to school students.

Circassians in the diaspora, having been divorced from their original culture for more than a century, have undergone tremendous linguistic and cultural assimilation in their adoptive societies. They look upon the Caucasus for cultural guidance and sustenance. Although some assistance has been forthcoming, it is certainly not enough to reverse or even to stop assimilation.

The high rate of increase of Circassian population in the three republics and favourable demographic trends will perhaps support switch back to native language preponderance. [There had been a very high increase in Circassian population in the Caucasus up to 1970, and thereafter (see 'Demographic and Census Data of 1970', in *Soviet Sociology*, vol. 10, no. 4, spring 1972, pp 331-74). This phenomenon is a syndrome associated with people threatened with

extinction. Some, unconsciously, make a collective decision to enhance their numbers to perpetuate their nationhood. Others may decide to throw in the towel; the reaction of the Ubykh in face of Russian genocide. There is a prevalent myth among some diaspora Circassians that their fellow Adiga in the Caucasus are a bit lazy on the progeniture side, which could not be farther from the truth. The Kabardian population in the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic posted an increase of almost a third (from slightly less than 400,000 to more than 500,000) between the years 1989 and 2002. If such rates of population increase are maintained, the Circassians in the Caucasus shall pass the one million mark within a couple of years].

## **To Latinize or not to Latinize?**

There has been some work done by Western scholars to devise Latin representations for Northwest Caucasian alphabets. Monika Höhlig devised an orthography for Abzakh based on the Turkish alphabet (1983). Professor George Hewitt adapted one for Abkhaz (1995).

There is an ongoing debate as to the merits and demerits of Latinizing Circassian alphabets. Those who advocate change point to the great advantage reaped by using same letters as the Western European languages. The survival of Circassian is dependent on reducing the pre-eminence of Russian to a secondary or even tertiary language. If this obtains, then it would be superfluous to keep Cyrillic. The antis argue that there is a 60-year history of education and writing in Cyrillic and that most of the culture and lore has been preserved in works using this script. It is estimated that there are more than 5,000 books in Circassian written in Cyrillic.

A compromise solution would be to design a Latin script that combines functionality with simplicity. If possible only letters used in English would be included, with no additional symbols and definitely no accents. The advantage of such a system is that the usual keyboard would be used to write the language with no additional software to be incorporated. Furthermore, if the new and current scripts were made to have an almost one to one correspondence, then it would be possible to devise a software package to ‘translate’ the one into the other. In fact, such a facility has been devised by M. Shafei, a neuro-cognitive specialist who has designed [a software package to convert Circassian Cyrillic into Latin](#) in

accordance with the [scheme proposed](#) by Amjad Jaimoukha [*The Circassians: A Handbook* (pp 320-4)], which would make it possible to turn documents and literary classics into Latin script, if ever a decision was made to discard insular Cyrillic. Thus, all the depository of literature would be easily converted to the new script and be available for use. One would envisage a transitory period in which both scripts would be in use until Cyrillic is eventually phased out when the new system gains complete acceptance.

A proposal for such a system is presented in [Latinized Kabardian Alphabet](#). Like all new systems, it suffers from a few kinks, which can be ironed out as consensus is arrived at. The new orthographical system assumes English rules of capitalization. [There is a table of the eight Kabardian alphabets, with a phonemic transcription, used from the 18th century to the present in the Appendix of A. Kuipers, 1960, pp 116-17. It is reproduced in A. Jaimoukha, 2001, p253]. However, change must come from within the Caucasus, in which almost all works in Circassian are published. Csaban's example shows that even the best alphabet is useless unless it is adopted in the native land of the language.

## **Language, culture & the Internet**

The Internet has made access to the outside world and information at the tips of one's fingers, so to speak. In our world today the lingua franca par excellence is English. Russian has become a provincial language. There must be a fundamental shift in language policy such that English becomes the second language of learning, with the native tongues made as the only official languages in a gradual process in which Russian is phased out.

The Internet offers the Circassians the perfect means to convey their languages and culture to the world. Their history and culture have been shrouded in romanticism and misinformation for a very long time. What better way to reach the elite of the world than to use the fastest, most efficient and cheapest media technology invented by humanity – electronic communication.

What is of equal importance for the North Caucasian republics is to service their huge diasporas in Turkey, the Middle East, Europe and the United States. These descendants of Circassian immigrants have been cut off from their mother cultures for decades and their thirst for them is almost unquenchable. A few

generations have grown up almost ignorant of their mother tongues. Their search for identity is made the more difficult by the lack of sources of information. Although the cultural outputs of many of the North Caucasian peoples are substantive, they all could be reasonably contained on a large Internet site, or perhaps several interconnected sites. In addition, the world would be kept posted on the latest economic, social and political developments in the North Caucasian republics from the perspective of the indigenous peoples themselves, not from the self-imposed caretakers.

The present sites that deal with the North Caucasus suffer from many drawbacks. For example, the site of the Kabardino-Balkarian State University in Nalchik offers the readers the information mainly in Russian and there is a half-hearted attempt at presenting some of it in English. This quite beats the purpose of the exercise, because the readers of the site are to be found outside the Russian Federation, and, in general, these are not conversant with Russian. In addition, it would seem that the e-mail service is not operational so that on-line inquiries cannot be processed. Most probably, in this case, the requisite infrastructure has not yet been laid for easy communication. However, no excuses for backwardness are credible now that cheap computer communication technology has pervaded the whole globe.

Other sites emphasize a limited range of issues that concern a particular area in the North Caucasus. Politics predominates in sites dealing with Chechnya and Abkhazia, for obvious reasons. There are many great personal sites, but none has the resources to provide comprehensive covering of linguistic and cultural issues. The North Caucasus, the principal depository of linguistic and cultural resources, must possess the capability to maintain electronic communication with the outside world. The Iron Curtain has come down, but it seems that the cumulative effects of more than seventy years of inefficiency and stagnation have taken a very heavy toll on the psyches and technical aptitude of the North Caucasians. Now that the burden has been lightened, the peoples of the area must try very hard to catch up with the rest of the civilized world.

An ideal site requires substantive financial resources and organizational skills. A big institution or a republic is needed to back such an enterprise or to sponsor it. The initial investment and running costs are however very small prices to pay in order to attain linguistic and cultural revival. [Eight years after writing this

account in the year 2000, the cyber presence of Circassian language and culture has not improved much, as the following article graphically illustrates]

The following account is added for the sake of comparison:

### **The situation of Circassian among the Circassians of Israel**

[A. Jaimoukha, 2001, p115]

It was only in 1958 that Israeli Adiga first learnt that their mother tongue was a literary language, through Soviet propaganda broadcasts. Contacts with the Caucasus were set up and educational and other material was requested and duly received from Adigea. These were used to launch a literacy campaign in Circassian. Demands for inclusion of the native language in the curricula of the local village schools were granted in 1971. Four years later, it was made a compulsory subject in the sixth to eighth grades. The syllabus was initially based on received literature, which was permeated with communist ideology. The first local primer, more in tune with local needs, was published by the Ministry of Education in 1982.

John Catford, an Adiga language specialist from Michigan University, was brought over to instruct and train language teachers. It was a preposterous and droll case of an expert teaching students fluent in their language its basic grammar. After break-up of Soviet Union, Ruslan Tov, a language instructor from Adigea spent a few years in Kfar Kama teaching and upgrading school syllabuses. He finished his term in autumn 1999. [Information in paragraph was sent to the author by Dr Isabelle Kreindler, former Academic Head of CALL Center, Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Haifa. Dr Kreindler co-authored informative papers on languages of instruction of Israeli Circassian students; paragons for researchers on Circassian to emulate in other countries]

The Circassian community in Israel is considered the most successful in the diaspora in preserving its national identity and language. Circassian is by far the language of the home, the school and the street. No less than four languages are taught in the two village schools: Circassian as the mother tongue; Hebrew as the

language of State; English as the language of wider communication; Arabic as the language of religion and State (I. Kreindler et al, 1995).

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covering 485 respondents, including 323 pupils from the age of 10 up to 16, and 162 parents. The Circassian language status and maintenance are analysed as a continuum of language functions and domains in a society. Classification is based on the traditional distribution of language policy dimensions, where language status, corpus and acquisition aspects, as well as UNESCO's nine language vitality factors and linguistic rights are considered. Different factors influencing language maintenance are useful for characterising a language's overall sociolinguistic situation. So far there has been neither expert evaluation of the Circassian language situation based on international legal documents, nor has there been research which would provide basis for requesting governmental support and plan further steps for language revitalisation.]

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