

The Meskhetian Turks

Background

The Meskhetian Turks originate from Meskhetia, located in the southwest of Georgia, a region that borders Adjara to the west and Turkey to the south (see map). In November 1944, upon the orders of Josef Stalin, upwards of 100,000 Meskhetians were deported to the Ferghana Valley in Uzbekistan. Unlike other ethnicities deported by Stalin, the Meskhetians were never accused of a specific treachery, nor were they “rehabilitated” once Stalin died.

In the summer of 1989, ethnic violence between Meskhetians and Uzbeks in the Ferghana Valley culminated in a pogrom killing at least 100 people. The Soviet Army assisted in removing the Meskhetian Turks from the Ferghana Valley to western Russia. Over the next year, most of the Meskhetians left were relocated out of Uzbekistan, though some stayed behind, mainly those who had assimilated into the Central Asian republics (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) through marriage.

The Soviet relocation of the Meskhetians to Russia was swift. The Meskhetians were not able to sell their property and prepare, and consequently, some left without their proper documents or following the established procedures for departing an area set up in the Soviet Union. This lack of documents and departure proceedings would come to haunt the Meskhetian Turks in the Krasnodar Krai.

The Krasnodar Krai

According to the 1991 citizenship law, Meskhetian Turks should be granted citizenship based on the criteria of primary residence in the Russian Federation and not revoking the right to citizenship. In other areas of Russia, Meskhetian Turks gained citizenship and legal status, but not so in the Krasnodar Krai – the Meskhetian Turks are still denied their rights in the Krai.

The Krasnodar Krai is approximately the size of Pennsylvania and contains very fertile land for agriculture. There are between 15,000 and 18,000 Meskhetian Turks residing in the Krasnodar Krai in compact rural villages between the Krai capital, Krasnodar, and the Black Sea, the western-most boundary of the Krai. The Meskhetian Turks are predominantly involved in agriculture and small economic commerce in the villages in which they live.

The biggest impediment for the Meskhetian Turks is the hostile administrative authorities and the paramilitary Cossacks that harass and bother the Meskhetians. The Cossacks are fiercely national Russians who have traditionally seen themselves as playing a pacifying role in the northern Caucasus for Russian authorities. With the downfall of the Soviet Union, the Cossacks in the Krasnodar Krai have been able to reconstitute themselves as a paramilitary force and view the Krai as their land¹ and do not accept Meskhetians as residents, referring to them as guests. The hostility towards the Meskhetians is greatest of all the Caucasian nationalities (i.e., those from the Caucasus, not Caucasian as used in the U.S.), though generally all persons who are non-white suffer from the xenophobia present in the Krai. Complicit in the administration’s hostility is the broadcast of the administration’s point-of-view through controlled media to the residents of the Krai; there is a lack of interaction between ethnic Russians and the Meskhetian Turks which allows for the internalization of the stereotypes perpetuated by the media in the Krai.

Because the Meskhetian Turks lack citizenship and residence status, they are unable to fully access social services in Russia or work in formal economic sectors. There have been reports of discrimination in medical services at hospitals in the Krasnodar Krai for Meskhetians and their ability to access schooling is limited compared to Russians. Their children have been allowed to go to school but have

¹ In fact, Catherine the Great presented the city of Krasnodar to the Cossacks as a gift for their loyal service to the Tsars. In Soviet times, Krasnodar was known as Ekaterinodar, or, “Gift from Catherine.”

been segregated in some cases and are not encouraged to finish the last two years of schooling in Russia. Meskhetians have also been evicted from their houses because of a lack of formal ownership or documents, and employers face pressure from Cossacks and authorities for employing Meskhetians in labor. In addition, there have been spats of violence against Meskhetians in the Krasnodar Krai.

Questions & Answers

What is the language/religious/cultural background of the Meskhetian Turks?

The Meskhetian Turks are Turkish in origin, gaining the Meskhetian prefix due to the region they come from, Meskhetia. Their religion is Islam, though their practice of faith has been modified over the years. They adhere to dietary regulations of Islam and will not eat pork, will not drink alcohol, and will pray before meals. They would appreciate being resettled near a mosque, though their attendance at mosque is irregular. Religious ceremonies like marriages, births, and deaths are important. Their language is Turkish, though influenced by Uzbek and Russian. Their Russian is excellent and is the lingua franca on the Russian side of the resettlement process. They are close-knit and emphasize an extended family as opposed to a nuclear family. The most recent generation will consist of two parents and two or three children, though the parents may come from seven to eight children families. The Meskhetian Turks consider the extended family as their family.

How can Meskhetian Turks in other regions of Russia live peacefully and with rights?

The wholesale denial of legal status is unique to the Krasnodar Krai. Meskhetian Turks in other regions of Russia have been granted citizenship or legal status by those regional authorities and enjoy the rights of other Russian citizens. Also, in the Krasnodar Krai, all ethnicities from the southern Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) and non-ethnic Russians from Russia (Chechens, Ossetians, Tatars, etc.) suffer discrimination in the region, but the Meskhetians bear the brunt of the abuse. This xenophobia is not as pronounced in other areas of Russia where Meskhetians reside.

How come the Meskhetians in the Krasnodar Krai do not go to another region of Russia?

The Meskhetians in the Krasnodar Krai have come to the region from other areas. The Krasnodar Krai was not one of the areas they were relocated to after the events in Uzbekistan. They have a stated preference for warm weather and balked at the idea of living in the Siberian cold.

Why is resettlement in the U.S. the best option for the Meskhetian Turks?

Other options for a durable solution have been exhausted with the Meskhetian Turks. Their stated preferences is for legal status within the Russian Federation, though that is not possible given the administration's tendencies in the Krasnodar Krai. Georgia agreed as a condition of admission to the Council of Europe to accept the return of the Meskhetian Turks, yet they have not fulfilled their pledge, or when Meskhetians are accepted for return, impose conditions upon the Meskhetians that they "Georgianize" if they want to return. Turkey likewise will not accept the Meskhetian Turks. In the 1990s, Turkey put together a scheme whereby less than one hundred families (numbering in the low hundreds of people) would be resettled. From those few families, relatives came to Turkey as tourists (on USSR passports requiring no visas) and subsequently were forced to leave by Turkish authorities. Misunderstanding about their status as tourists, and not resettled persons, lingers with the Meskhetian Turks and the Turkish authorities, ending the possibility of resettlement in Turkey. After sixty years of displacement, the chance for U.S. resettlement will bring some finality to the Meskhetian Turks journey.

What is the education level and profession of the Meskhetian Turks?

* In Russian schools, grades one through nine make up primary education, while grades ten and eleven finish high school and allow children to move into colleges and universities.

Average education is eight to ten years of general schooling, though some people are better educated. Many are employed in agriculture, though they also express a desire to work as laborers (mechanics, drivers, maids). When in Uzbekistan, some fulfilled positions in medical and dental clinics as well, though they were not able to continue in those positions in the Krasnodar Krai. Meskhetian Turks work very hard and are enviously noted for their work by others in the Krai.

What is the Meskhetian Turk lifestyle in the Krasnodar Krai?

The Meskhetian Turks live in rural areas, in compact villages consisting of 10,000 to 60,000 people. They live in large extended families and are very close to one another. There are persistent rumors that all the Meskhetians are wealthy and that they engage in illegal behavior via the drug trade or mafia activity. For the most part, their hard work has allowed them a small measure of success, but they are not tremendously wealthy or well-off compared to those around them. For example, some have built greenhouses at their homes which allow them to produce fruits and vegetables year round to supplement their food production. Their houses and property though are subject to raids and inspections by Cossacks and they occasionally have to pay a "fine" for their so-called illegal residences.

Are the Meskhetian Turks "modernized" to the amenities of today?

Meskhetian men are able to drive and some do own cars. As with most people in the Krasnodar Krai, those with enough money have purchased cell phones and the children will know (to varying degrees) how to use a computer and the internet. Meskhetian women are in charge of cooking and would be familiar with stoves and ovens, but not a microwave or other high-end appliances (blenders, mixers, etc.). The Meskhetians are exposed to conveniences, though they do not dominate their lives.

What are special cultural practices of the Meskhetian Turks?

Meskhetian girls tend to marry young, in their teens, usually to boys whom they know. Both sets of parents would approve of the marriage. Also, females will generally not work outside of the house unless the husband's income is insufficient. Since the Meskhetians see the family as an extended unit, they cluster together with other family members.

What is the role of women in the family and community?

Women generally do not work outside of the home, and girls receive less education than boys. Meskhetian Turk society is male-dominated.

How will Meskhetians deal with Russians and other post-Soviet nationalities upon resettlement to the U.S.?

The problems the Meskhetian Turks have in the Krasnodar Krai originate from the authorities in the Krai, not necessarily the Russian people. Actions and words by the authorities manifest themselves into violence by Russians, but the Meskhetians have said they do not have a problem with Russians (or other nationalities) per se.

Are there any special considerations for thought when placing them in the U.S.?

They have a strong desire to be placed in warm climates. They did not stay in the colder areas of Russia when relocated from Uzbekistan, preferring to go to the warmer south. Also, the extended family is important and they would like to be placed near family members. IOM has told them that it will not be possible to resettle all of the Meskhetians in one location, but that they could be cross-referenced to be resettled in groups of fifty. The fifty families will NOT arrive at the same time, but gradually so as not to overwhelm the resettlement agency.

What are complicating factors for the Meskhetian Turk resettlement?

Because some of the Meskhetians in the Krasnodar Krai do have legal status, they will not qualify for the resettlement, and there is a question of how that will affect those who qualify for resettlement. Because not all family members may qualify, those that do qualify may elect not to go to the U.S. because it would break up the family. Therefore, of the 15,000 to 18,000 Meskhetians in the area, about 10,000 are estimated to be eligible for resettlement and maybe 5,000 will actually depart Russia, though that number may range from 3,000 to 10,000.

References

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Contact Information

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