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Meskhetian Turks

**An Introduction to their History, Culture
and Resettlement Experiences**

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*Krasnodar region
in southern Russia*



*Countries with
Meskhetian Turk
population*

Introduction

Meskhethian Turks are a group of Turkish-speaking people originally from Meskhethia (now known as Samtskhe-Javakheti), a part of southern Georgia that borders with Turkey. Today, as a result of deportations and discrimination, Meskhethian Turks are widely dispersed throughout the former Soviet Union. Treatment of the Meskhethian Turks from the Krasnodar region of southern Russia has been especially harsh, and since 2004, approximately 9,000 Meskhethian Turks from the Krasnodar region have been accepted for resettlement in the United States. Over the next 2 years, another 3,000 are expected to arrive.

Starting life over in an unfamiliar country and culture is never easy, and Meskhethian Turk arrivals have encountered their share of challenges in their new communities. Nevertheless, there is reason to be optimistic about this group's prospects in the United States. From a long history of displacement and struggle, Meskhethian Turks have developed survival skills that are serving them well in their new communities. As a Philadelphia service provider noted about Meskhethian Turks, "They are used to dealing with hardship and are very disciplined. These qualities will help them succeed here."

This profile looks at the history, culture, and early U.S. resettlement experiences of the Meskhethian Turks, with a particular focus on those from the Krasnodar region. The profile is intended primarily for U.S. resettlement staff who assist the refugees in their new communities. But others may find it useful, too. Teachers may use it to educate themselves and their students about a resilient people with a rich and little-understood culture. Local government agencies—the courts, the police, and the housing and health departments—may use it to help their staff better understand, and thus better serve, the new arrivals.

Ultimately the best source of information about Meskhethian Turks is Meskhethian Turk people themselves, and readers who find this profile interesting should consider taking the next step—getting to know those whose history, culture, and resettlement are described on these pages. Those who do will discover a welcoming people eager to share their lives and stories.

Meskhethian Turks have developed survival skills that are serving them well in their new communities.

People

Population

It is difficult to state the exact population of Meskhethian Turks because Soviet authorities at different stages did not consider them in a separate census category. According to the 1989 Soviet census, 207,502 "Turks" were living in the Soviet Union at that time. This figure, however, does not reflect the real population of Meskhethian Turks, because Soviet authorities recorded many of them as belonging to other nationalities such as Azeri, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek. Today, it is estimated that somewhere between 350,000 and 400,000 Meskhethian Turks live in nine different countries: Azerbaijan, Georgia,

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and now the United States.

Origins and Terms

The ethnic origins of Meskhetian Turks are the subject of a politically charged debate. The basic issue revolves around this question: Are Meskhetian Turks in fact ethnic Turks, or are they ethnic Georgians who at some stage in history converted to Islam?

Connected to this debate is the equally charged issue of terms for the group. Today, three different terms for Meskhetian Turks compete for use: *Meskhetians* (or *Meskhi* in the Georgian language), *Ahiska Turks*, and *Meskhetian Turks*, each carrying its own implications about the group's ethnic identity and historical origins. (For a further discussion of the relationship between these terms and competing views about Meskhetian Turks' historical origins, see "History," p. 3.)

The term *Meskhetian* is commonly used by those who view the population as ethnic Georgians who converted to Islam and learned to speak Turkish during the period when the region of Meskhetia was under Ottoman rule. This term is used by some Meskhetian Turk leaders and also officials of the Georgian government to emphasize an underlying Georgian identity. Other Meskhetian Turks distance themselves from this term as they see it as a denial of their Turkish identity.

The second term widely used among many Meskhetian Turks is *Ahiska Turks*. The term refers to Akhaltsikhe, the largest city in the Meskhetian Turks' native region of southern Georgia. As with the word *Meskhetian*, there are political reasons behind the use of this term. Certain Meskhetian Turk leaders prefer the term *Ahiska Turks* because it allows them to emphasize the Turkish element of their identity and de-emphasize the Georgian elements.

The third term, and the one most widely used today by officials, scholars, and the media, is *Meskhetian Turks*. The term first emerged in the late 1960s, but only came into wide use by Soviet officials, the media, and researchers after Meskhetian Turks were forced to flee violent pogroms in 1989 from Uzbekistan and international attention first came to the group. (For a discussion of the 1989 events, see "History," p. 8.) A 1998 meeting on Meskhetian Turks in the Hague, attended by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), among other international organizations, also adopted the term, despite resistance from the Georgian delegation.

It should be noted that in the past, other terms, such as *Meskhetian Muslims*, *Georgian Muslims*, and *Soviet Turks*, have been used by officials, leaders, and scholars. It is also important to recognize that some Meskhetian Turks, especially those in the United States, prefer simply to be called *Turks* and reject all other terms.

Because of its widespread use today, *Meskhetian Turks* is the term we have chosen to use in this publication. Our use of the term, however, should not be

The ethnic origins of Meskhetian Turks are the subject of a politically charged debate.

interpreted as support for a particular position in a debate that remains highly charged.

Land

The ancestral homeland of Meskhetian Turks is the area of southern Georgia known as Meskhetia, located to the east of the province of Adjara and next to the Turkish border. Now officially the region of Samegrelo-Zemaldzhaneti in Georgia, Meskhetia is made up of five districts (*rayons*) where Meskhetian Turks lived: Adigen, Aspindza, Akhaltsikhe, Bogdanovka, and Akhalkalaki. The area covers approximately 3,728 square miles and rests mostly in the valley of the Mtkvari River. Meskhetia is surrounded by mountain ranges whose average heights are 1,000 to 1,400 meters above sea level in the west (where most Meskhetian Turks lived), and 1,500 to 2,000 in the east (inhabited mostly by ethnic Armenians). The climate is dry and relatively cold, although warmer weather dominates the western half of the region where lush forest appears. Meskhetia's main agricultural crops are corn, wheat, barley, potatoes, and apples. The region's inhabitants have also long been known for the breeding of livestock.

Meskhetian Turks have a long history of suffering.

History

Meskhetian Turks have a long history of suffering. Victims of mass deportation from Georgia, pogroms in Uzbekistan, and human rights abuses in Russia, Meskhetian Turks are being resettled in the United States after 6 decades of exile from their homeland. While this section serves as a brief introduction to the history of Meskhetian Turks who live throughout the former Soviet Union, its focus is on the Meskhetian Turks who are being resettled in the United States from the Krasnodar region of Russia.

Changing Borders, Changing Empires, Changing Names

Disputed by different empires throughout the centuries, located on trade and migration routes, and subjected to a variety of cultures, Meskhetia has the typical characteristics of an imperial borderland. The transnational character of the region mirrors the history of its people. Scholars disagree as to whether the Meskhetian Turks are ethnic Turks or rather ethnic Georgians who at some point in the past became Muslim by force or choice. Official Georgian Soviet and post-Soviet accounts claim that Meskhetian Turks are descendants of an ancient Georgian tribe, *Meskhs*, who converted to Islam due to Ottoman rule in southwest Georgia from the 16th through the 19th century. The counter argument, put forth by many Meskhetian Turk leaders, holds that the ancestors of Meskhetian Turks were people from Turkic tribes that settled in the region beginning in the 5th century. Over time, and particularly under Ottoman rule,

the argument goes, the local tribes were consolidated into a new Meskhetian Turk ethnicity.

As is the case of many other ethnic groups, the question of the Meskhetian Turks' historical origins is closely linked to debates about ethnic identity, and any account of their early history must include a variety of historical narratives. For the Georgian sources, the beginning of the Turkish presence in Meskhetia begins with the Ottoman invasion of 1578. According to this view, the local population that lived in the region was the Georgian tribe known as the *Meskh*s. The Meskhs occupy a hallowed place in the Georgian national pantheon, as defenders of the Georgian nation against Turkic invaders.

Scholars of the Georgian camp explain the presence of Muslim Turkish-speaking people in Georgia by pointing to the Meskhs' conversion to Islam and their gradual Turkicization under Ottoman rule. This view stresses the "Georgianness" of the Meskhetian Turks and describes their Turkish language and culture as alien, forced, and superficial. According to one leading scholar, Alexander Osipov, the Georgian view deserves more questioning and analysis. Even so, it has dominated Soviet and Western scholarly interpretations.

Countering the Georgian argument, the Turkish view argues that the Turkic presence in southern Georgia stretched back well into the pre-Ottoman period. Various Turkic groups were present in southern Georgia or nearby long before Ottoman conquest. In the 11th to 12th centuries, Turkic tribes that had come earlier from Kazakhstan and Central Asia regularly attacked Georgia. The Georgian King David IV called on their main rival, the Kipchak Turkic tribes, to settle along the border and defend his territory in eastern and southeastern Georgia, including Meskhetia, in the 12th century. According to this version, then, the peoples in the Meskhetia were Turkic very early on and some historians explain the presence today of Georgian Christian elements in Meskhetian culture by the conversion of certain Meskhetian nobles to Christianity.

Somewhere between these two views lies the reality of the Meskhetian Turks' origins. As the scholar Alexander Osipov has noted, the formation of the Meskhetian community "was a result of both Muslim inflow (migration of Turks, Turkmen, Karapapakhs, Kurds, Lezgins) and the assimilation of Georgians to Islam." Economic realities clearly played a role. Under Ottoman law, only Muslims could own land. Thus, some Turks and Georgians had an incentive to convert to Islam in order to preserve their property rights and social privileges. However, the Ottoman policy of assimilation was probably not systematic enough to acculturate the Georgian elements entirely, and many Georgian Orthodox Christians migrated to the region in this period.

The question of the Meskhetian Turks' historical origins is closely linked to debates about ethnic identity.

Tsarist Rule and the Early Soviet Period

The Russian conquest of the Caucasus probably had as much influence over the population of Meskhetia as did Ottoman rule. In 1801, the Russian Empire annexed Eastern Georgia and, moving westward, incorporated Meskhetia

30 years later, after the 1828-1829 war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. The Tsar's army won the southern two-thirds of Meskhetia, the Kars and Ardahan districts, from Ottoman Turkey in 1878, but they eventually were returned to the Turkish leader Atatürk after World War I.

Under Ottoman rule, periodic conflict caused a steady decline in urban life. As a result, very few Muslims remained in the region's towns, and most turned to the cultivation of crops and livestock breeding. Since that period and up until the present, most Meskhetian Turks have lived mostly in rural areas and engaged in agriculture.

By the end of World War I, the Ottoman Empire was about to be divided among the victorious powers, while the Russian empire was engulfed in revolution. In May 1918, Georgia proclaimed its independence and sent its troops to gain control over the southern border territories, including Meskhetia. In response, and encouraged by the advance of Ottoman troops, groups of Muslims in Meskhetia proclaimed a semiautonomous federation and moved for reunification with a decrepit Ottoman Empire. Later that year, Ottoman troops occupied the region, and strife between Muslim and Christian communities broke out. We lack good data from this period, but Georgian accounts describe the Muslim treatment of Georgian Catholics and Armenians as brutal, while Muslim accounts cite similar atrocities committed by the Christian population. In any event, Muslim behavior during this period would become in later years one of the main official justifications for keeping Meskhetian Turks from returning to Georgia in the post-Stalin and post-Soviet periods.

In 1921, Soviet forces gained control over Georgia. Lenin and Atatürk signed the 1921 Kars peace treaty that ultimately divided the region of Meskhetia in two. According to the treaty, Turkey received back portions of the former territory of the Ottoman Empire, while the Soviet Union took possession of the upper third of Meskhetia, which had been a part of the Russian Empire since 1829.

For the next two decades, Soviet policy toward Meskhetian Turks endorsed alternating views of their ethnic identity, laying the groundwork for the debates over identity that continue to the present day. At first, Soviet authorities adopted the idea that the Muslim population of Meskhetia was ethnically Georgian but still allowed the teaching of Turkish language at local schools. Then, from 1926 to 1935, in a change of policy, officials referred to many Meskhetian Muslims as *Turks* or *Tyurki* ("Turkic people"). This effort to reclassify the ethnicity and nationality of the Meskhetian Turks was part of a larger goal of Soviet nationalities policy vis-à-vis ethnic minorities. The Soviet government sought to consolidate various Turkic ethnic groups of the Caucasus region into one so-called nation. In the 1920s, this nation-building process labeled the Meskhetian Turks as Turkic people.

Policy shifted again after 1935, when Meskhetian Turks were called *Azeris*, the predominant ethnicity of Azerbaijan. As a result, Soviet authorities introduced the Azerbaijani Turkish language into Meskhetian schools and began recording

Up until the present, most Meskhetian Turks have lived mostly in rural areas.

Meskhethian Turks as *Azeri* in their internal passports. Thus, in the 1939 census, a significant percentage of persons who had been referred to in previous censuses as *Turks* were now called *Azeris*. Today, Meskhethian Turks who still hold old Soviet passports (such as those living in the Krasnodar region who were denied Russian passports) are *Azeri* ethnicity according to their passports. As a result, during the U.S. resettlement process, it was common to find families in Krasnodar in which some members were labeled *Turks* and others were *Azeris*.

This changing policy of classification may have also had to do with the group's own unsteady conception of themselves as a unified people. As Ann Sheehy and Bohdan Nahajlo note in their book about the Soviet treatment of minorities, "In general, the Meskhethians' self-identification in the concrete moment depended on with whom the person was talking. . . ." From 1938 until World War II, Soviet and local authorities shifted back to referring to Meskhethian Turks as *Georgians*. None of these ethnic categories, however, was to save the Meskhethian Turks from the calamity of deportation.

Many thousands of Meskhethian Turks perished during the initial deportation to Central Asia.

Deportation: "Enemies of the People"

By 1944, Stalin's fear of a Soviet Union divided into different nationalities led to a policy of deportations of entire peoples he considered to be even potentially disloyal. In late 1944, Stalin's right-hand man, Lavrenti Beria, passed an executive resolution declaring the Meskhethian Turks and other smaller groups in the area "untrustworthy populations" that should be immediately deported from the Georgian Soviet republic to Central Asia. Between November 15 and 17, 1944, Soviet troops forcibly removed approximately 100,000 Muslims from the Meskhethian region, confiscating their belongings and placing them in cattle cars destined for the Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

Locked inside freight cars for one month, many did not survive the journey. In a 2001 interview with the author of this section of the profile, one Meskhethian Turk community leader remembered the events: "At 4 a.m., four soldiers came into our house and said we had one hour to pack. We were not told where we would be sent. About 120 families were loaded into one freight car. We traveled 18 days and nights to Central Asia. Many died of typhoid. At each stop they would unload the dead." Many thousands of Meskhethian Turks perished during the initial deportation to Central Asia, while more died from cold or hunger in their first years of displacement. Within 4 years after the deportation, the Meskhethian Turks had lost between 15% to 20% of their total population.

The specific reasons behind Stalin's deportation of Meskhethian Turks remain unexplained. The official Soviet justification followed the pretexts given for the deportation of Chechens, Crimean Tatars, Ingush, and other peoples—that they had collaborated with Hitler, even though the German army had never been closer than 100 miles away from Meskhethia. The most commonly held view among historians is that Stalin and Beria viewed Meskhethian Turks as potential subversive elements in the region, given the proximity of the Turkish border.

Some have also argued that Meskhetian Turks would have been a potential fifth column in Stalin's alleged plans to invade Turkey.

The deportees who survived were sent to 18 districts all over Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, where they were forced to live under "special settlement regimes" until 1956. Deprived of nearly all civic and political rights, most Meskhetian Turks worked as agricultural laborers. They had to register several times a month with the state police and were not entitled to travel anywhere outside of their settlement without the permission of the local commandant. Some of the local population were hostile to the newcomers, whom the NKVD (the forerunner of the KGB) had labeled "enemies of the people." For the first 12 years of their exile, Meskhetian Turk settlers suffered lives of extreme deprivation, discrimination, and constant supervision.

Deportation helped the Meskhetian Turks develop an identity as a separate people.

Perpetual Exile

In 1956, 3 years after Stalin's death, the new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, lifted many of the restrictions that had been imposed on Meskhetian Turks. He also allowed the other deported peoples, such as the Chechens and the Ingush, to return to their territories in the Caucasus. Meskhetian Turks, however, were neither rehabilitated nor allowed to return to their native land in Southern Georgia. In the Cold War era, the region of Meskhetia, known as Samtskhe-Javakheti, had become geopolitically important as it was adjacent to the border zone between the Soviet Union and NATO, and it became closed to the possibility of repatriation. Soviet Georgian authorities also opposed a repatriation of Meskhetian Turks, believing that their return would provoke antagonism between them and the Christian Armenians and Georgians living in Samtskhe-Javakheti. Some also attribute the Soviet refusal to allow Meskhetian Turks to return to Meskhetia to the privileged position held by Georgian officials in the Soviet government.

Unable to return to Meskhetia, most Meskhetian Turks continued to live in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and—until 1989—Uzbekistan. The extremely harsh regime under which they lived from 1944 to 1956, as well as the branding of them as "enemies of the people," encouraged them to band together for physical and cultural survival. Thus, the experience of deportation helped the Meskhetian Turks develop an identity as a separate and distinct people. In addition, their practice of not marrying outside their ethnic group contributed to the group's strong sense of identity. In Central Asia and other regions, Meskhetian Turks tended to live close to one another in rural or suburban settlements of anywhere from several dozen to a hundred or so households. As a rule, extended families remained close together and lived alongside those who had originated from the same villages in Meskhetia.

During de-Stalinization, *détente*, *perestroika*, and the final collapse of the Soviet Union, the identity of this transnational people developed three main patterns of ethnic and cultural self-identity. Some considered Georgia as their homeland and saw themselves as ethnically Georgian; others saw themselves as Turks and

preferred to emigrate to Turkey; and a third group (the largest of the three) claimed a specific Meskhetian identity, culturally Turkish, but attached to the land in Georgia.

Over the years, several Meskhetian Turk organizations, aligned with one or more of these viewpoints, emerged to fight for the right of their return to the homeland. They include, among others, *Vatan* ("Fatherland"), the International Foundation of Ahiska Turks, *Khsna* ("Salvation"), and the Union of Georgian Repatriates. The pro-Turkish line was the most popular among the Meskhetian Turks in the late 1960s, early 1970s, and late 1980s, whereas the pro-Georgian one had the most supporters in the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. Whereas *Vatan* stands for a Turkish identity for Meskhetian Turks, *Khsna* and the Union of Georgian Repatriates support the view of the Georgian authorities that the Meskhetian Turks were converted to Islam under Ottoman rule and hence became Muslim Georgians. On the international scene, *Vatan* has gained the most attention.

"We left in such a hurry that we had no time to collect any possessions."

The 1989 Fergana Massacre and the Flight from Uzbekistan

In June 1989, nationalist tensions were on the rise in Uzbekistan, and a pogrom broke out in the Uzbek section of the Fergana Valley, resulting in the deaths of approximately 100 Meskhetian Turks. While the underlying causes of the pogrom are still unclear, the economic and political liberalization policies of the *perestroika* period, combined with rising nationalism, poverty, and overcrowded conditions in the Fergana Valley, apparently contributed to interethnic tensions. As a result of these tensions, the Soviet army evacuated 17,000 Meskhetian Turks to Russia. After the government-sponsored evacuation, another 70,000 Meskhetian Turks living in other parts of Uzbekistan fled on their own to Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union.

Events quickly spiraled out of control. As one Meskhetian Turk witness told the Open Society Institute, a New York-based human rights organization, in a 1998 interview:

Uzbek crowds appeared on the streets and they were throwing stones and threatening people. . . . We became very afraid when we heard that in other places they [Uzbeks] were burning houses and killing people, so we fled. . . . We left in such a hurry that we had no time to collect any possessions. We didn't even take our documents. . . . It was devastating to leave. With hard work people had built a nice life and we had to leave with nothing.

Most of the displaced Meskhetian Turks settled in Azerbaijan while others settled in Ukraine as well as the republics adjacent to Uzbekistan: Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Many others found their ways to different parts of central and southern Russia, in particular to the Krasnodar region.

A Life of Hardship in Krasnodar: 1989-2004

Exiled first from Georgia and then Uzbekistan, Meskhetian Turks of Krasnodar began a new chapter of their history. In contrast to other regions of Russia where Meskhetian Turks lived after fleeing Uzbekistan in 1989, Krasnodar authorities refused to recognize the approximately 13,000 Meskhetian Turks who arrived in the region as Soviet and (after 1991) Russian citizens. It is a bitter irony that the Meskhetian Turks' new place of asylum became a hotbed of ethnic discrimination that would put them at risk of yet another deportation.

While it was common for migrants and ethnic minorities to face certain levels of discrimination in post-Soviet society, Krasnodar Krai presented a case of what has been called "soft ethnic cleansing." Regional politicians used xenophobia against non-Slavic people to keep the Meskhetian Turks, along with some other smaller ethnic minorities, a perpetually stateless people. Contravening the Russian Constitution and the federal laws on citizenship, the regional government denied Meskhetian Turks the right to register their residences in the territory, effectively making them stateless and resulting in the absence of basic civil and human rights, including the right to employment, social and medical benefits, property ownership, higher education, and legal marriage. Trapped in a legal limbo for 15 years, Meskhetian Turks were demonized by regional laws and the state-controlled local media as "illegal migrants" who posed a threat to the region. The Kremlin and federal authorities helped perpetuate the abusive practices put into place by the local Krasnodar government.

Methods of Discrimination

The Krasnodar authorities rendered Meskhetian Turks stateless by using the notorious *propiska*, a residence permit and vestige of the Soviet system that is used to both regulate a person's permanent residence and to monitor movement throughout the country. Without a *propiska*, the Meskhetian Turks could not own property, work legally, obtain a passport or other personal documents of identification, attend public institutions of higher education, register marriages and the births of their children, and gain access to social security pensions or healthcare benefits. According to Krasnodar-based human rights groups, since 1991 large numbers of Meskhetian Turkish children born in the Krasnodar region have been denied birth certificates, and, as a result, legal identity. The position of the Krasnodar administration that Meskhetian Turks are illegal also inspired some school officials to create segregated classrooms for Meskhetian Turk children in various villages, ostensibly due to their "unwillingness" to learn correct Russian.

Despite the unconstitutionality of the *propiska* as a means to curtail migration, the Southern region's authorities exploited the Meskhetian Turks, requiring them to re-register as "guests" in the region every 45 days. Law enforcement authorities have carried out raids to sweep up those with improper registration documents. Among the most severe violations of the Meskhetian Turks' human rights has been the inability to earn a livelihood. Without a *propiska*, they have been pro-

Krasnodar Krai presented a case of "soft ethnic cleansing."

hibited from renting plots of agricultural land or trading in the marketplace. The prohibition seemed to fit into the local government's overall strategy to "starve minorities out of the region" by depriving them of any source of income.

Krasnodar's political leadership, beginning with those appointed by President Yeltsin in 1991 to 1992, exploited xenophobic sentiments and established legal mechanisms of quasi-apartheid for what was termed "illegal migrants." Meskhetian Turks, as a visible group, were primary targets for this xenophobia. Beginning in 1992, the regional authorities adopted strict legislation severely limiting the migrants' ability to obtain a propiska. In addition, they adopted specific pieces of legislation singling out the Meskhetian Turks as an unwanted ethnic group. The neo-communist governors Kondratenko and Tkachev, who won election in 1996 and 2000 on openly nationalist platforms, only intensified the discriminatory practices against the Meskhetian Turks and brought the full power of the state to bear against them. For example, in March 2002, a local anti-immigration ordinance took effect, permitting huge fines on those who hired or rented agricultural land to Meskhetian Turks, immediate deportation of illegal migrants, and the creation of deportation centers throughout the territory. "Our goal is to make clear to all illegal immigrants that Russia is not a revolving door," Krasnodar Governor Alexander Tkachev was quoted as saying at a local migration conference. He also pointedly suggested that authorities should crack down on all people in Krasnodar with non-Slavic last names.

Why Krasnodar?

Meskhetian Turks living in other parts of Russia also encountered various degrees of official harassment and hostility from local populations, but their general conditions were better than those of Meskhetian Turks in the Krasnodar region. Most, for example, were able to receive Russian citizenship under the 1991 Law on Citizenship. This discrepancy has led many to ask why the persecution in Krasnodar became so pronounced. While the answer to that question is not clear, it may lie in the way nationalist leaders in Krasnodar were able to mobilize local racism and xenophobia among extremist groups and the media.

During *perestroika* and throughout the 1990s, Krasnodar witnessed a revival of Cossack nationalism in which reactionary scholars and members of the media formulated a racist ideology directed at non-Slavic peoples. Ideologues of this movement propagated pseudoscientific theories proving the "incompatibility of Slavic and Turkish populations," predicting the outbreak of ethnic conflict if the Meskhetian Turks and other minorities were allowed to upset the region's fragile ethnic and demographic balance. The local state-controlled media reinforced xenophobia by consistently whipping up hysteria against Meskhetian Turks and other ethnic minorities.

Vigilante Justice

The policy of discrimination against Meskhetian Turks was not limited to discriminatory laws and xenophobic language. Meskhetian Turks also became victims

Meskhetian Turks were prohibited from renting farm land and trading in the market place.

of intimidation and violent attacks by Cossack paramilitary organizations, which have enjoyed the official support of the local authorities and operate as a kind of shadow law enforcement. Descendants of the fierce fighters who once guarded the imperial borders of tsarist Russia, Krasnodar's neo-Cossacks see themselves as protectors of the ethnic purity of the territory given to them more than 200 years ago by Catherine the Great. Over the past 15 years, Cossack units have conducted thousands of violent nighttime raids and "passport checks" on Meskhetian Turks designed to intimidate them and force them to leave the territory. One such incident, reported by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty on May 11, 2001, occurred when busloads of Cossack paramilitaries arrived in the Krymsk district of the region dressed in camouflage and carrying batons and gas pistols. After rounding up dozens of Meskhetian men for so-called passport checks at a police station, they brutally beat them.

In a 1998 interview with the Open Society Institute, a Meskhetian Turk leader now living in the United States described the persecution the group endured on a daily basis.

You wake up in the morning and you are immediately afraid. You not only fear going out into the street, but also worry about being visited by the police, or Cossack groups, who do nothing but demand bribes and harass you. . . . You try to leave home as infrequently as possible. When you must go out to shop, or for some other task, you always worry about being stopped. . . . The authorities do not accept our Soviet-era documents. . . . They say that we must have Russian documents. When we try to explain the reasons that we don't have proper documents, they do not care. Their reply is, "Either go away, or die."

The desperation of the Meskhetian Turks reached a peak in June 2002 when the regional authorities placed a ban preventing Meskhetian Turks from leasing and cultivating land. Left with virtually no income, approximately 40 Meskhetian Turks staged a 10-day hunger strike and only suspended the strike amid pledges that President Vladimir Putin would appoint a commission to investigate the continuing human rights violations in Krasnodar.

The Search for Durable Solutions

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the crisis of Meskhetian Turks steadily gained international attention. Several international organizations, including the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Federal Union of European Nationalities (FUEN), have taken up the Meskhetian Turk issue. Until recently, however, attention has focused mainly on the issue of repatriation to Georgia rather than the human rights abuses experienced by those living in Russia's Krasnodar region.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the plight of the Meskhetian Turks gained international attention.

In 1996, the OSCE, UNHCR, and IOM, with support from the Open Society Institute, organized a regional migration conference to address the problems of refugees and displaced persons in the post-Soviet states and formally recognized the right of Meskhetian Turks voluntarily to return to their homeland in Georgia. While the conference resulted in few concrete results, it succeeded in raising international awareness of the problems facing Meskhetian Turks. In 1998 and 1999, the OSCE organized meetings in the Hague and Vienna between the representatives of the affected post-Soviet governments, international organizations, and the Meskhetian Turks themselves, to explore and find solutions to the crisis.

Georgia's entry into the Council of Europe in 1999 also offered an opportunity for finding a durable solution to the issue of repatriation. Since Georgia gained independence in 1991, the government has consistently claimed it is not legally obligated to accept the Meskhetian Turks into its territory because the Russian Federation became the legal successor state to the Soviet Union and is thus solely responsible for the crimes of Stalin's regime. However, upon joining the Council of Europe in April 1999, Georgia agreed to develop laws that would allow for the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks within 2 years, initiate a repatriation program within 3 years, and complete the program within 12 years. Despite these worthy goals, Georgian authorities say it is impossible to accept the Meskhetian Turks while the country still struggles to cope with refugees produced by two other regional interethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and they cite fears that the group's return could spark clashes with the ethnic Armenians living close to their historical villages. In fact, most Georgian politicians openly oppose the return of the Meskhetian Turks.

While in the last several years Georgia has made some progress toward the goal of repatriation, little progress on the issue of basic human rights and citizenship for the Meskhetian Turks living in Krasnodar has been achieved. In 2004, reacting to years without a durable solution for the Meskhetian Turks, and to discrimination in the Krasnodar region on the rise, the U.S. government joined the international effort to address the ongoing crisis and proposed the option of U.S. resettlement for the long-suffering Meskhetian Turks of Krasnodar.

Most Georgian authorities oppose the return of the Meskhetian Turks.

Meskhetian Turk Communities around the World

Today, roughly 350,000 to 400,000 Meskhetian Turks live in nine different countries: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and the United States. The following provides a brief overview of the nine communities.

Azerbaijan

Currently 90,000 to 110,000 Meskhetian Turks live in Azerbaijan. It has been an important place of refuge for Meskhetian Turks during and after the Soviet regime, and there have been different waves of migration to the region. About 25,000 to 30,000 migrated to Azerbaijan between the late 1950s and 1970s, while others migrated either after the 1989 Fergana incidents or following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They are settled mostly in rural areas and in the cities of Khachmaz, Saatli, and Sabirabad. Living conditions for the group in Azerbaijan vary from region to region. As a rule, urban dwellers tend to be better off than those in agricultural areas.

Georgia

Approximately 600 to 1,000 Meskhetian Turks live in Georgia today, mostly in Akhaltsikhe, Imaneti, and Nasakirali. A few also live in the capital, Tbilisi. Since Soviet authorities eased restrictions on the group's movement in 1956, groups of Meskhetian Turks have tried to return to their homes, but few have been allowed to repatriate. Starting in the late 1970s, the Georgian government developed projects aimed at repatriating Meskhetians. However, little action has been taken since then. As this publication goes to the printers, the Georgian government has resettled six Meskhetian Turk families from Azerbaijan since adopting an official policy of favoring repatriation. While there are still many Meskhetian Turks who wish to repatriate, the U.S. resettlement program has had the effect of reducing their numbers.

Kazakhstan

About 150,000 Meskhetian Turks live in Kazakhstan. They are settled mostly in the southern regions of Kazakhstan—in Almaty, Chimkent, Kyzylorda, and Zhambyl. Since their arrival in Kazakhstan in 1944, they have lived mostly in closely knit, rural communities. Although affected by the economic difficulties, Meskhetian Turks are largely integrated into the society. As a result of the growing investment of Turkish entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan, Meskhetian Turks have served as a bridge between Turkish and local businesses.

Kyrgyzstan

An estimated 50,000 Meskhetian Turks live in Kyrgyzstan. Settled mostly in the rural areas of the northern part of the country, they face a situation that is quite similar to that of Meskhetian Turks in Kazakhstan. As in Kazakhstan, they are integrated into the society, but interaction with other nationalities is restricted mostly to public and professional life. They have been affected by the country's economic difficulties and the growing nationalist tendencies that emerged after independence. They have close relations with Turkish entrepreneurs.

Russian Federation

An estimated 70,000 to 90,000 Meskhetian Turks live in the Russian Federation, settled mostly in regions such as Krasnodar, Rostov, Stavropol, and Voronezh. First resettling in central Russia after the Fergana events, over time many moved south toward the regions bordering Georgia. Some Meskhetian Turks in Russia, especially those in Krasnodar, face hostility from the local population. The Krasnodar Meskhetian Turks have suffered significant human rights violations, including the deprivation of their citizenship. When the U.S. resettlement program for Meskhetian Turks began in 2004, approximately 15,000 to 19,000 Meskhetian Turks were living in the Krasnodar region.

Turkey

Approximately 40,000 Meskhetian Turks migrated to Turkey following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A special 1992 Turkish law authorizes their migration to Turkey, and as of August 2004, more than 32,000 migrants have been granted residence and work permits by the government. Approximately half of these have received Turkish citizenship. The population is concentrated in big cities such as Antalya, Bursa, and Istanbul. Those in Bursa and Istanbul are working in industry, whereas those in Antalya work in tourism.

Ukraine

Approximately 10,000 Meskhetian Turks live in Ukraine. They are concentrated mostly in Crimea, Donetsk, Kherson, and Mykolaiv. A few live in Kiev. Most settled in Ukraine following the Fergana events. In 1991, they were granted Ukrainian citizenship.

Uzbekistan

Approximately 15,000 Meskhetian Turks live in Uzbekistan, settled mostly in cities, such as Bukhara, Navoi, and Samarkand. Small numbers live in Jizzakh, Sirdarya, and Tashkent. Uzbekistan was where most Meskhetian Turks were sent in the 1944 deportation, and before the 1989 Fergana events, the Meskhetian Turk population there exceeded 100,000. Following Fergana, around 90,000 left Uzbekistan. Of these, 17,000 were sent to Russia by the Soviet government, and the others left the country on their own within a year, migrating to Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.

The United States

As of mid-2006, the Meskhetian Turk community in the United States is in a state of growth with individuals arriving daily from the Krasnodar region. According to the Refugee Processing Center, which keeps track of refugee admissions for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) at the U.S. Department of State, as of mid-June 2006, approximately 9,000 Meskhetian Turks from the Krasnodar region were resettled in the United States. Meskhetian Turks live in communities in 33 states and the District of Columbia. The states with the largest Meskhetian Turk communities are Pennsylvania (785 individuals), Washington (590), Illinois (508), and Kentucky (499). PRM anticipates an additional 3,000 refugees will arrive by the end of fiscal year 2007. (For further discussion of the Meskhetian Turk community in the United States, see "Resettlement in the United States," pp. 26-34.)

Culture

All cultures are dynamic, adapting to changing circumstances in order to survive and thrive. This is particularly true of Meskhetian Turk culture, which has evolved from years of contact, sometimes friendly and sometimes adversarial, with a variety of other peoples and cultures. The following section describes a culture that forms a unique blend of customs and practices from different sources.

Religion and Festivities

Meskhetian Turks are Sunni Muslims. Due to the Soviet Union's official policy of discouraging religion and promoting atheism, the majority of Meskhetian Turks, like Bosnian Muslims, are not strictly observant Muslims. They practice circumcision, and some fast during Ramazan. Meskhetian Turks, as other Muslims, refrain from eating pork. In practice, women tend to be more religiously observant than men, although this may vary from community to community.

Meskhetian Turk *mullahs*, or religious leaders, generally attend marriage ceremonies (*toy*), ceremonies for the deceased, and circumcisions. They also organize large religious celebrations twice a year that coincide with the Meskhetian Turks' two most important holidays: *Ramazan Bayram* and *Kurban Bayram*. Both are general Muslim holidays celebrated by Muslims around the world. They are celebrated according to the lunar calendar so the actual dates shift.

Ramazan Bayram follows the month of Ramazan, falling on the first day of the tenth month in the Islamic lunar calendar. A fast (*oruç*) starts one month before the holiday. During the fast, those who choose to fast (*niyetli*) refrain from eating or drinking from dawn until dusk. Ramazan is also a time of celebration, and after sunset the feasting begins with a ceremonial light meal called *iftar*.

After dinner, people recite prayers (*namaz*) and remember the deceased relatives of the host. Before the prayer, the believers must thoroughly cleanse their bodies (a ritual known as *abdes*). Those who fast eat their breakfast meal before sunrise. The day of Ramazan Bayram ends the month-long fast. After morning prayers, it is customary for Meskhetian Turks to visit the cemetery and the households where there have been recent deaths to pray for the deceased.

Throughout the day, each Meskhetian home sets a table with traditional foods, such as pilav, fruits, and sweets, which they serve and replenish all day long. After the celebration dinner, people pray again and visit elderly relatives.

Kurban Bayram is a second important holiday for the Meskhetian Turks and takes place on the 10th day of the month of *Dhul Hijja* of the Islamic lunar calendar. It occurs approximately 70 days after the end of the month of Ramazan. On this day, Meskhetian Turks who can afford to do so sacrifice domestic animals, usually sheep, as a symbol of İbrahim's sacrifice. The meat is distributed among neighbors, relatives, and friends so that everyone can enjoy a feast.

*Meskhetian Turks
are Sunni Muslims.*

As for other Muslims, the story behind Kurban Bayram derives from the belief that God revealed himself in a dream to İbrahim (Prophet Abraham) to sacrifice his son İsmail. İbrahim and İsmail set off to Mina for the sacrifice. As they went, the devil attempted to persuade İbrahim to disobey God and not sacrifice his son. Before İbrahim could complete the sacrifice, God intervened and gave him a sheep to sacrifice instead.

In addition to these two religious festivals, Meskhetian Turks, like other peoples of the former Soviet Union, celebrate New Year's Eve and New Year's Day on December 31 and January 1. Meskhetian Turks have also borrowed some of the secular rituals attached to the holiday from the Russians. For example, they decorate a New Year's fir tree (in the Soviet Union, the use of a Christmas tree was attached to the secular holiday of New Year's Eve) and feast on traditional and nontraditional dishes.

Meskhetian Turk scholars who adhere to the Georgian version of their ethnic origins see traces of Christianity in their present culture. Whether these traditions derive from the Meskhetians themselves or from other surrounding Georgian Orthodox Christians living in the Meskhetian region is unclear. However, in Meskhetia, there are remnants of several ancient Orthodox churches in various villages where the Meskhetian Turks lived before the deportation. Ancient monasteries in the villages of Zarzma and Andriantsminda can also be found. Some Meskhetian Turk villages took on the name of Christian saints such as Andriantsminda (Saint Andrey), Georgitsminda (Saint Georgi), Eliatsminda (Saint Ilya), and Mikeltsminda (Saint Michael). At the same time, there is no reliable evidence that the ancestors of modern Meskhetian Turks were members of the congregations of these ancient monasteries.

Kinship plays a key role in the lives of Meskhetian Turks.

Social Organization

Nearly all Meskhetian Turks, whether born in Georgia or the descendants of people born there, know the name of the village in Georgia from which their grandparents originally came. Each village group has a specific name, formed from the name of the village in Georgia, with the suffix *-li* (meaning "from") added to the name. Thus, *Honali* is the name of those from Hona, and *Gildali* is the name of those from Gilda.

Some Meskhetian Turks believe that people should marry within the village group, or at least within one that is nearby. There is a proverb supporting this tradition: "She who has been kissed, you will not marry; if brought from afar, she is no good."

Kinship

In addition to village groups, Meskhetian Turks divide themselves into large groups of relatives (*kovum* or *kohum*). Most Meskhetian village groups included several different sets of *kovum*, each with its own separate name. Some of these were based on nicknames indicating physical features, occupational skills, or

ethnic background. Examples are *Işık* ("light"), *Kömürcügil* ("coal people"), and *Arap* ("Arabic"). Other names derive from traditional Muslim names.

Kinship plays a key role in the lives of Meskhetian Turks, and as a result there are numerous words for describing family relations. Many terms do not translate into English because they denote a level of specificity not found in their English equivalents. For example, Meskhetian Turks have special words for an uncle who is the brother of the father and for an uncle who is the brother of the mother.

Meskhetian Turks have an unusually detailed knowledge of their genealogy. Many Meskhetian Turks can trace their origins four to five generations back, and some even seven generations back. Usually this knowledge is passed on orally, and in order to make memorization easier, some Meskhetian Turks will give their children names that rhyme—for example, *Ilimzhon* and *Salimzhon*, or *Sarvar*, *Dzhafar*, *Nufar*, *Zufar*, and *Anvar*. Some people, however, put together genealogy lists in writing. A list compiled by a Meskhetian Turk from the Chechla village in the Krasnodar area, for example, included information about 166 relatives (87 names) belonging to 61 nuclear families. The author of that list could remember his ancestors for seven generations without a single gap.

Many marriages are arranged.

Marriage and Family Life

The importance of family ties is one of the main characteristics of the Meskhetian Turk community. Following the 1944 deportation, family and village ties were strengthened even more in Central Asia as a reaction to the discriminatory policies of the Soviet regime. The extended network was a crucial survival tool for overcoming the many difficulties they faced as a deported people.

The role of the family is essential in marriage, friendship, burial, and mutual help, and the elderly play a significant role in the preservation of the traditions. Unlike many traditional cultures from the Caucasus, in which the relatives of the husband form the primary family network, the Meskhetian Turks include and respect relatives of the wife's side equally. Thus, the Meskhetian Turk community creates an all-embracing network of personal and kin ties, which has allowed them to sustain their culture despite repeated experiences of displacement. Because of their very close relations with the larger kin, geographical proximity is essential.

In general, Meskhetian Turk families are extended families that unite two to three generations. A couple generally has at least two or three children, and household size varies between six to eight members. According to Meskhetian Turk traditions, the parents live with their youngest son.

Many marriages are arranged. Meskhetian Turks generally avoid marriages in which the bride and groom's families are related. Nonetheless, marriages between first cousins do occur. Traditionally Meskhetian Turks in Central Asia have not welcomed mixed marriages, even with other Muslims outside the

community, because they are considered a threat to the preservation of their own culture and the future of the community.

Life Cycle

For Meskhetian Turks, the most important publicly observed life events are circumcisions, weddings, and funerals. These events reflect Muslim, Caucasian, and Russian traditions and practices, as well as those specific to Meskhetian Turks.

Circumcisions

Traditionally performed by a mullah, circumcisions today are more often performed surgically. They are followed by a big celebration (*sünnet toy*), involving family, friends, relatives, and neighbors. The family of the *kirve* (similar to a god-father) provides gifts for the boy and his family. The *kirve* does not have to be a relative but rather should be someone whom the family greatly respects. After this event, the family of the *kirve* and the boy's family will always be connected.

Weddings

The wedding (*toy*) is preceded by a formal proposal. At that time, the groom's family gives the bride gold jewelry. The formal proposal is followed in 2 to 4 weeks by an engagement party (*nişan*), where everyone is served a sweet drink (*şerbet*) to confirm the agreement. The two parties exchange gifts for all family members, and for the bride and groom in particular. The engagement period typically can last from one month to sometimes even a year or longer.

The actual wedding lasts one full day or more seldom two days, as was more common in the past. It begins with a procession that proceeds from the groom's house to the bride's house. The procession consists of the groom's immediate family, the mullah, the groom's best man (*sağdıç*), and a woman called the *yenge*, among others. The procession returns to the groom's house with the bride, who is dressed in a white dress and a colorful cap (*katha*) and has a kerchief covering her face. The procession also includes a woman from the bride's family (*gelin yengesi*) and other relatives. The bride is welcomed into the groom's house with music. After the mullah reads the prayers, the groom and his friends (one of whom must be a married man) climb onto the roof and shower the bride and other members of the procession with coins and sweets. It is believed that unmarried girls who catch the candy will soon get married themselves.

Before entering the household of her future husband, the bride breaks one or sometimes two plates and smears honey on the threshold of the door. This ritual is intended to bring happiness to the couple. The bride then sits in a corner of the room, with a baby in her lap to ensure that she will have children in the future. Everyone, both men and women, congratulate her, as she silently bows her head. While this is happening, the groom symbolically pays the bride's family for her possessions. His relatives also place money in the bride's shoe to ensure the family's well being.

The wedding is preceded by a formal proposal.

The bride then leaves to change into a special wedding dress, which the groom's family has bought for her. She returns in her new dress, her face still covered by a kerchief, and sits down on a chair that is on top of a rug. The groom's friend (*sağdıç*) symbolically cuts off her tongue, and the bride cannot speak or raise her voice until her father brings her gold (usually in the form of earrings). The groom's friend then pierces some balloons that hang over the bride's head with a knife. Only after that does the bride take off her kerchief and show her face.

The wedding feast then begins, in the biggest area of the house (often the courtyard), or—as happens frequently nowadays—in a rented space or a restaurant. There are usually hundreds of guests, with separate tables for men and women. The newlyweds, sometimes accompanied by the best man and maid of honor, sit together at a separate table, decorated with sweets, fruits, and gifts. The groom and his friend are allowed to eat but the bride is not. The guests give money as gifts, and when receiving the gifts, the bride and the groom must rise.

During the feast, the dancing begins. Families enter the center of the room and dance. For the next to the last dance, everyone dances in a circle, with men and women forming separate circles. The bride and groom dance the last dance, a waltz, ending the wedding.

Funerals

Funerals are an extremely important rite for Meskhetian Turks. Both family and friends attend, and guests can often number in the hundreds. In the former Soviet Union, this means that many relatives come from several different countries to pay their respects. Men gather in the courtyard of the house of the deceased, while from inside the house the voices of women mourning the deceased can be heard. Service providers can expect that funerals in the United States will likely play a similarly crucial role in Meskhetian Turk cultural life.

The body of the deceased, which remains at home no more than one day, is washed by women if the deceased is a woman and by men if the deceased is a man. The washing sometimes is performed in a special tent. Men read a prayer (*cenaze namazı*) while the body is wrapped in a white shroud and green fabric. A mullah summons a relative who is supposed to settle any outstanding debts of the deceased.

After the prayers, the men carry the body on a stretcher to the funeral car. Some distance before the graveyard, the men will carry the funeral stretcher the rest of the way. This custom is called *sabab*, and it is believed that Allah blesses those who carry the stretcher.

Only men are present at the graveyard. The grave is dug according to Muslim tradition. It faces toward Mecca and includes a niche in one of its walls where the deceased is placed in a fetal position. The green fabric is removed, and the body is buried wrapped only in a white shroud. After the funeral, prayers are

At funerals, guests can number in the hundreds.

read, and coins (*fitka*) wrapped in paper are distributed to 61 persons who are present at the funeral. The amount of money is equivalent to the price of a kilogram of bread at the time of the last Ramazan Bayramı.

Upon returning from the graveyard, the men take part in a funeral meal (*heyrat*) at the deceased's house. Funeral meals are also held on the 7th and 40th days after the death, and quite often also on the 9th and 52nd days. During the 40-day period, a special prayer is read. For the 40th day funeral meal, which takes place at the deceased's courtyard, *helva* (a flour and butter dish that is fried and eaten with syrup) is prepared in a big pot. Those present are supposed to stir the helva.

Leadership

In Tsarist Russia, Meskhetian Turks had their own social class structure. At the top were the members of the nobility (*beyler*) and the wealthy people (*ağalar*). The transformation of society during the Soviet period for the most part led to the elimination of this structure, and today the power of the *beyler* and the *ağalar* has greatly diminished.

While the old social system no longer exists, Meskhetian Turks nonetheless have their own leaders and people of power and prominence. The following briefly describes the types of leaders and important people found in Meskhetian Turk communities today:

- *A highly respected male elder* - The elder's power is traditional, directed toward defending the moral norms of the community, and could extend to a block, a street, or a whole village.
- *A senior man in the extended family* - This man not only has traditional power but also real economic power. Unlike the elder's authority, his leadership does not extend beyond the clan or extended family. In some settlements in Russia, Meskhetian Turks managed to form a leadership group, called the Councils of Seniors, made up of such people.
- *An elderly woman in the extended family or nuclear family* - This woman's power extends only to very specialized areas of family life, such as match-making strategies and the proper behavior of junior members of a family.
- *A woman who possesses supernatural gifts as a sorcerer, a psychic, or a healer* - This woman's powers could extend beyond the Meskhetian Turk community into other communities. She is often also a reader of the Q'uran and consulted on spiritual matters. At times, she may even compete with mullahs in interpreting religious issues.
- *A man who presides over social gatherings such as a feast* - Known as the *tamada*, the man is always invited to large celebrations accompanying wed-

In Meskhetian Turk culture, the mullah's power is largely ceremonial.

dings and circumcisions. An experienced *tamada* may be a guarantee that the event will proceed without confrontations and arguments.

- *Mullah, or male religious leader* - The mullah's power, which generally does not extend beyond circumcision and funeral ceremonies, is largely ceremonial. Mullahs do not receive a formal religious education. Their main teachers are elder mullahs; some study the Q'uran themselves.
- *People who hold important positions in the outside world* - Representing a relatively small segment of the population, these are professional people, such as teachers, doctors, and scholars, who hold positions of authority outside the Meskhetian Turk community. While their authority is exercised outside the Meskhetian Turk community, it also strengthens their status and influence inside it.
- *Leaders of formal organizations such as Vatan* - These are formal leaders representing the interests and welfare of the community at meetings with officials in Russia, human rights activists, and others concerned with the issues of Meskhetian Turks. While the authority of these organizations extends beyond the boundaries of the community, many Meskhetian Turks view their influence as very limited. It is important to note, however, that while Meskhetian organizations have never been united among themselves, they have done a great deal to put the issue of Meskhetian Turks' human rights on the international agenda.

The cuisine includes South Caucasian and Central Asian dishes.

Food

The cuisine of Meskhetian Turks includes South Caucasian as well as Central Asian dishes. It also includes numerous elements specific to the urban life of the former Soviet Union. On a daily basis, people eat potatoes, rice, vegetables, meat, eggs, cheese, sour cream, and honey. Breakfast usually includes homemade bread with butter, homemade cheese, and scrambled or boiled eggs. It may also include homemade sour cream (*kaymak*). Lunch and dinner might include rice with meat (*pilav*), cabbage or beet soup, stewed potatoes with meat (*çorba*), stuffed cabbage or stuffed vine leaves (*dolma*), and different kinds of round cakes with meat or cheese.

At wedding feasts, both traditional and modern foods are served. These include a Russian beet salad known as *vinegret* and delicacies such as *pakhlava* (a traditional sweet), traditional flat bread, jellied meat, cookies, *khinkali* (Georgian dumplings), *çorba* (soup made of whole potatoes and lamb), and *pilav*. Sometimes vodka is also served.

Both men and women help prepare the wedding feast. On the Friday before the wedding, women set the table and prepare salads, dumplings, and sweets. Each woman cooks only what she does best. On Saturday, the day of the wedding, men take over. They cook the main wedding dish, *pilav* in big pots on an open fire, and they also serve guests and clean the tables.

The funeral meal is more austere, and alcohol is not served. Çorba, cheese, bread, tomatoes, mineral water and sodas, and tea are served. Everything is brought over by relatives and neighbors.

Dress

Dislocation and modernization have led to the disappearance of traditional Meskhetian Turk dress, arts, and crafts. In the 1980s, only a few elderly women still owned the traditional shawl, silver belts, and *katha*, the headdress worn by married women that looks like a low cut-off cone and is made of cardboard covered by red velvet and decorated with strings of coins. One occasionally encounters elderly women dressed in the traditional Uzbek style, with wide, colorful silk pants and shawls.

All other people dress in modern clothes, with some restrictions: Some married women wear head scarves, and elderly religious men wear Muslim caps (*kudi*). Younger women living in urban areas dress in a more modern fashion.

Today most people dress in modern clothes.

Housing

In Krasnodar, Meskhetian Turks live in homes that they either built with their own hands or purchased from Russians and Crimean Tatars. Traditional Meskhetian Turk features are preserved only inside the house, where there is a two-part division: The men's section is in the back and includes rooms for guests to assemble, while the women's section includes the children's bedrooms. In the dining area, instead of a dinner table there is a *sekü*, an elevated part of the floor where people eat crouching around a small, low table (*sofra*) or tablecloth (*dastarhan*).

Traditionally, in wealthier homes married couples often had separate rooms for the husband and wife. However, space constraints changed this practice in many households after the events of 1989. In the United States, as with many refugees, many members of Meskhetian Turk families share small-sized apartments.

Folklore

Although Meskhetian Turk folklore has not been studied systematically nor recorded, the culture is rich in proverbs, puzzles, fairy tales, folk songs (*ashugs*), wedding songs, ritual incantations, and prayers. Meskhetian wedding music is very similar to that of the other peoples of the South Caucasus (Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Georgians) and Central Asia. Traditional musical instruments played at weddings are the clarinet, oboe (*zurna*), tambourine, and a string instrument called the *saz*. Nowadays, however, a band at a wedding is more likely to play electric guitars, drums, and keyboards.

A well-known poet-musician beloved by Meskhetian Turks is *Samanji-ashug* (whose name means "the Milky Way"). One of his famous songs names the different Meskhetian Turk village groups, giving each one a human description

(e.g., cunning, crafty, industrious, hot tempered, and so on). After the Fergana Valley events, he ended up in Smolensk, then moved to Crimea, where he died. His saz and notebook with songs remain with relatives living in Nizhnebakansii village in the Krasnodar region.

Language and Education

Language

Meskhethian Turks speak an Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish, which hails from the regions of Kars, Ardahan, and Artvin. Their language also resembles in significant respects Azerbaijani. While the Meskhethian Turk dialect uses mostly Turkish words for everyday life and for agriculture and animal husbandry, many other words have been borrowed from the languages that Meskhethian Turks have been in contact with during Russian and Soviet rule. Among other languages, these include Georgian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Russian, and Uzbek. From Georgian, for example, Meskhethian Turkish has borrowed such words as */kurka/* (fruit), */satxi/* (cheese from sheep's milk), */kaka/* (eye ball), and */kort/* (hill). Meskhethian Turks who have lived in Kazakhstan and in Uzbekistan have borrowed Kazakh and Uzbek words, especially those referring to foods. Examples include */kashmash/* (noodles), */toxic/* (intestines), and */ximiz/* (a drink made from mare's milk).

Russian, too, has found its way into Meskhethian Turkish, as one reporter observed in a 1998 *Moscow Times* article:

At home, Meskhethian Turks speak a strange mix of 19th century Turkish and modern Russian, the language of a long and unhappy history. For old concepts, such as *bread* and *life*, they use Turkish words, but new things like *airplanes* and *refrigerators* are exclusively Russian.

Until 1926, Meskhethian Turkish, as all Turkic languages, was written using the Arabic script. Then in late 1920s it was replaced by the Latin alphabet. By the late 1930s, Turkic languages throughout the Soviet Union were switched to the Cyrillic alphabet. Some older Meskhethian Turks have maintained the use of the Arabic script, while others use the Latin alphabet. But most adhere to the use of the Cyrillic script.

In the past, Meskhethian Turks have passed their variety of Turkish from one generation to the next, having little contact with standard Turkish, but in recent years there has been more contact between the Meskhethian Turk dialect and Turkish as spoken in Turkey. In the post-Soviet period, the Turkish government sponsored programs for the instruction of the Turkish language in some of the urban centers where Meskhethian Turks lived in Central Asia and has facilitated the training of Meskhethian Turks in Central Asia to become professional Turkish language teachers. In recent years, Meskhethian Turks have traveled more often

In recent years there has been more contact between the Meskhethian Turk dialect and Turkish as spoken in Turkey.

to Turkey for commerce and education, bringing back books and music recordings in Turkish. A good number of Meskhetian Turks across the former Soviet Union acquired Turkish satellite television channels. It is expected that with increasing contact with Turkish as used in Turkey, and the Turkish community in the United States, the Meskhetian Turk dialect will become closer to the standard dialect in Turkey.

Most Meskhetian Turks being resettled in the United States are multilingual, speaking their dialect of Turkish, Russian, and the language of the country in which they lived before moving to Krasnodar, such as Kazakh, Kyrgyz, or Uzbek. In Krasnodar, Russian has become the primary language that Meskhetian Turks use for communicating with the surrounding population. The elderly in Krasnodar speak the Meskhetian Turk dialect of Turkish among themselves, while younger couples living in urban settings may speak in Russian among themselves and to their children when they want to speak quickly, or when they are engaged in deep discussions. Although there has been widespread language loss among children born and raised in urban areas, most Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar live in closely knit rural communities where everyone, regardless of age, speaks the Meskhetian Turk dialect as a community language.

Their mother tongue carries great importance as a vehicle of culture for Meskhetian Turks, and they maintain that they are loyal to it. They boast that they—unlike, for example, the Kazakhs—have kept their language. They judge an individual's loyalty to the culture by his or her knowledge of the mother tongue. As a reaction to both discrimination and the need to adapt to the larger culture, Meskhetian Turks have used their language as a way to identify themselves and as a tool against assimilation. The need to preserve the mother tongue and Turkishness is stressed by almost all Meskhetian Turks and is mentioned as the most important group value and the symbol of its ethnic identity.

Despite the language loyalty that all Meskhetian Turks profess, there is reason to be concerned about the future of the language. The generation that experienced the 1944 deportation has been the strongest advocates for the preservation of the language and traditional culture. With the passing of this generation, it is unclear who will take over as guardians of the language and the culture it conveys.

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Education

Meskhetian Turks are generally well educated. Soviet education was a centralized state-run system that provided access to schooling for all Soviet citizens. Until the late 1930s, while living in their home villages in Georgia, Meskhetian Turks learned their mother tongue, an Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish, in local schools. Later, the Soviet government reclassified the nationality of many Meskhetian Turks as Azeri and replaced their dialect of Turkish as the medium of instruction with both Azerbaijani and Georgian. After their deportation from Georgia to Central Asia, Meskhetian Turk children studied in the language of the surrounding Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Uzbek communities where they had been resettled.

Soviet policy forced Meskhetian Turks as well as other minorities to learn Russian, sometimes at the expense of the mother tongue. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the languages of the independent republics became the languages of public life and education. As the result of rising nationalism, local languages became more important, and Meskhetian Turks came to realize that to guarantee the future of their children, they would need to send them to schools where instruction was in the local language. While the quality of education in these schools has deteriorated because of economic difficulties and widespread corruption, most Meskhetian young people are eager students, with a keen interest in learning English, which they see as necessary in order to communicate with other peoples of the world.

Meskhetian Turks made good use of the Soviet education system but encountered problems when it came to enrollment in universities, where there were discriminatory quotas and barriers for youth who did not belong to the titular nationality of each individual Soviet republic. Meskhetian Turks were absolutely barred from entering institutions of higher education during their confinement to the “special settlements” immediately after deportation in 1944 until the easing of restrictions by the Soviet government in 1956. Despite discrimination, the number of Meskhetian Turks who gained vocational and higher education rapidly grew between the 1960s and 1980s. As a result, many Meskhetian Turks are university graduates and have worked as doctors, engineers, and teachers. The rest are mostly secondary school graduates, although it is possible to find primary school graduates among the elderly whose education was interrupted by the closing of Turkish-medium schools in the 1930s, World War II, and the 1944 deportation.

In Krasnodar, Meskhetian Turks have faced extraordinary obstacles in education. Many Meskhetian Turk children in Krasnodar have either attended segregated schools or otherwise faced discrimination in the educational sphere. In March 2003, the Concluding Observation of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination specifically condemned the Russian Federation for allowing Krasnodar officials to segregate Meskhetian Turk children into separate and inferior classrooms in the villages where they reside. Several NGO activists from the region have also brought complaints of educational discrimination against Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar before the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. As one mother noted shortly before her departure for the United States:

Our children lost interest in studying when they were told that they do not need to study. Why would they, they are told, if they would only be working in the fields? I cannot wait until we come to the States so that they can finally reach their fullest potential.

In addition, many Meskhetian Turks who came to Krasnodar as young adults were barred from attending institutions of higher education due to their lack of registration. By contrast, older Meskhetian Turks, roughly between the ages of 35 and 55, tend to have higher educational degrees as they came of age in Uzbekistan

In Krasnodar, Meskhetian Turks have faced extraordinary obstacles in education.

during the Soviet period when they were able to receive an education. Up until the Fergana massacre of 1989, many had continued their education by obtaining diplomas from professional and technical institutes and universities.

Resettlement in the United States*

Meskhethian Turks are being resettled widely across the United States, with preference being given to cities where local communities and resettlement agencies have the capacity and resources to accept new refugee arrivals. As of mid-June 2006, approximately 9,000 Meskhethian Turks have been resettled in 33 states and the District of Columbia, with Pennsylvania (785 individuals) and Georgia (623) host to the largest numbers. Other sizable populations are found in Washington (590), Illinois (508), Kentucky (499), Arizona (497), Idaho (471), Texas (417), Virginia (417), New York (394), and Colorado (365).

While it is too early in the resettlement program to make clear and definitive statements about Meskhethian Turk resettlement, there is reason to be optimistic about this group's prospects in the United States. From a history of repeated displacement and struggle, Meskhethian Turks have developed survival skills that are serving them well in the United States. A service provider who is a case manager at Jewish Children and Family Services in Philadelphia had this to say about Meskhethian Turks' history of overcoming obstacles:

When I began working with the Meskhethian Turks, I was reminded of the Jews who immigrated to the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. These were individuals who, like the Meskhethians of Krasnodar, knew that there was no country for them to return to if things became difficult. Therefore, they strove even harder than all the others. In addition, like the Jews who maintained their faith underground in the Soviet period, the Meskhethian Turks have had to maintain a double life, with many identities. This trait has helped them to master several languages and is making learning English easy for them. They are used to dealing with hardship and are very disciplined. These qualities will help them succeed here.

Yet starting life over in a new and unfamiliar country and culture is never easy, and Meskhethian Turks have encountered their share of difficulties in their adjustment to the United States. In this section, we take a look at the early resettlement experiences of Meskhethian Turks, noting areas of need and challenge as well as strength and resources.

Meskhethian Turks are being resettled widely across the United States.

*The material in this section is based on information provided by U.S. resettlement agencies and on a study by Steven Swerdlow and Elisaveta Koriouchkina, *Meskhethian Turks in the United States*. The statements by refugees are from the study.

Housing

Although Meskhetian Turks generally lived in houses in the Krasnodar Krai, most are familiar with apartments. In general, American housing appears to pose no particular problem, although one resettlement agency reports the case of a large extended family preferring to crowd into a single house in order to save rent money, instead of occupying two separate dwellings as was recommended by staff. Most families want to live near each other.

Modern appliances such as microwaves, blenders, mixers, and electric stoves are not foreign to Meskhetian Turks, although they may not have had extensive experience using them. Most seem anxious to acquire appliances, a resettlement agency reports, and on occasion have requested them by drawing pictures. Most children seem familiar with computers and have used the Internet. Cellular phones are not new to Meskhetian Turks.

Meskhetian Turks seem to be comfortable with the idea of a lease agreement. One resettlement agency reports that recent arrivals have had “some trouble” understanding that a tenant is required to pay for the apartment every month on an exact date, without exception: In Russia, if a tenant did not have rent money, the landlord would usually allow payment later.

Modern appliances are not foreign to Meskhetian Turks.

Transportation

Many Meskhetian Turks have owned cars in the past—in fact, in Russia many men worked as taxi drivers—and most men know how to drive, although few will be familiar with U.S. driving practices. While eager to drive as soon as possible, Meskhetian Turks appear to understand and accept the need to first obtain a driver’s license and insurance. Nor has public transportation posed problems for new arrivals: Where buses and other forms of transportation are available, refugees appear comfortable using them.

Banking and Finances

Bank failures and an unstable Russian economy after the breakup of the Soviet Union have led many in Russia, including Meskhetian Turks, to doubt the security of financial institutions. Moreover, Meskhetian Turks’ lack of legal status has limited their ability to use the formal banking sector. As a result, they tended to carry out economic transactions in cash in Russia, and modern banking practices will be new to some. Meskhetian Turks have also learned to rely extensively on family and social networks to save money and pool economic resources. It is likely that Meskhetian Turks who have relatives in other parts of Russia and the former Soviet Union will send back remittances of financial support.

The concept of purchasing items on credit, while not new to Meskhetian Turks, is not a common practice with them.

Employment

Meskhethian Turks are known for their work ethic. With no legal rights and few social protections, Meskhethian Turks in Russia learned to depend on their own labor for their needs. Denied registration by the Krasnodar authorities, Meskhethian Turks cannot legally obtain employment, and most have had to depend on petty commerce and agricultural labor, doing work that others have not wanted to do, such as harvesting by hand. Meskhethian Turks have generally not been allowed to rent plots of agricultural land or trade in the marketplace.

Meskhethian Turks have brought their strong work ethic to the United States, resettlement staff say. Many appear willing to accept work simply to start earning money. In fact, a primary motivation for Meskhethian Turks is the chance to work freely and openly, since the right to work legally has been denied to them in Russia.

Meskhethian Turks in the United States feel a profound sense of freedom at no longer having to worry about documentation, a constant source of problems for them in Russia. Many express amazement at how easy it is to get a job in the United States. As one woman, a former geography teacher now working in a food processing plant in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, put it,

Honestly, we were afraid that there will be hours of questioning and waiting, but they invited us into the office immediately and told us to fill out job applications. We filled them out. The man in charge asked for our social security numbers, made photocopies, and then said, "You're hired." They knew nothing about us. How can they hire us like that? The man said, "You can start tomorrow."

Meskhethian Turks also value the opportunity to go to work every day and be paid regularly, contrasting employment stability in the United States with the unpredictable pattern of seasonal work in Krasnodar. A Meskhethian Turk woman explained it this way:

Well, I did not like the way it was in Krasnodar. You work like crazy during the summer and into the fall trying to make as much money as you can so that it can last you until the next spring. In the spring, you have almost nothing left and yet you need money for the seeds, the field, fertilizers, and workers. Also, throughout the winter months all you have left to do is sit at home and be bored. It is different in the U.S.—you go to work every day, you come home, and you know that the next day will be like that as well. You receive money twice a month and you can plan what to do with this money and how to spend it.

Meskhethian Turks are generally eager to work, but like other refugees they initially may not want to take the first available job, preferring instead to wait for a better paying opportunity. In the end, however, most have cooperated with

Meskhethian Turks have brought their strong work ethic to the United States.

job placements efforts with the understanding that an entry-level job is the first step toward gaining better employment. Once placed in jobs, Meskhetian Turks have proven to be exceptional workers, resettlement staff say.

Women in the Workplace

As is common in other traditional cultures, Meskhetian Turk women are typically in charge of the home and responsible for household work. They generally do not work outside the home, except to help out in family agriculture or to sell things in the bazaar. Traditional gender roles are changing in the United States, however, with women working outside the home, while still being expected to manage the home.

While some women appear happy to work outside the home, others seem initially reluctant to work, apparently expecting that their husbands will earn enough money to support the family. However, once financial realities are explained and the refugees understand the need for more than one income in a family, women generally go to work and perform well, resettlement staff note.

Because women employed outside the home are generally still expected to manage the house and take care of the children, some women, while interested in working, do not want jobs that consume too much of their time or energy. Moreover, a woman working outside of the home can cause “significant stress” between the husband and wife, reports a resettlement agency, noting the case of an unemployed husband physically taking out his frustrations on his employed wife. To minimize this kind of stress, the resettlement agency tries to first place the husband in a job.

Employment Obstacles and Challenges

For Meskhetian Turks, the two biggest obstacles to employment are their lack of English and the lack of other workers in the workforce who speak their language, resettlement staff say. As one agency staff member explains, “While we have placed non-English-speaking clients in companies, our clients usually have the benefit of a prior refugee placement at the site who speaks their language (i.e., Arabic, Somali, Spanish). However, it has not been possible to locate employment where there is a Russian speaker.”

Lack of transportation is another common obstacle to employment. In Russia, public transportation is generally much more accessible, even in villages, than it is in the sprawling urban areas of the United States where Meskhetian Turks have been resettled. As a result, many Meskhetian Turks consider acquiring a car crucial to their employment success. One refugee woman working at a pharmaceutical packaging plant on the outskirts of Philadelphia explained her dilemma:

The managers liked me right off the bat and proposed that I work a double shift on Sundays. Of course, I want to work a double shift, but on Sundays it takes me three hours just to get there. I have to

Traditional gender roles are changing in the United States.

transfer buses twice, so it is just really impossible without a car of our own.

A challenge that Meskhetian Turks share with other refugee newcomers is the gap between expectations and reality. Some Meskhetian Turks expect to take up their old occupation of farming. Others have had to accept the disappointing reality that they will be employed, at least initially, in low-skilled, minimum wage jobs that do not correspond to their levels of education. In San Diego, for example, where many Meskhetian Turks have degrees from institutes of higher education in Uzbekistan, most men have accepted initial jobs as construction workers, while women are working as caretakers for the elderly or maintenance workers in hotels or restaurants. As refugees with little economic and social capital, Meskhetian Turks are working long hours and sometimes two jobs to support their families.

Using Social Network to Find Jobs

In searching for jobs, Meskhetian Turks not only use the resources of resettlement agencies but also rely on their extended social networks in the Meskhetian Turk, Caucasian, and Russian communities. More than a few Meskhetian Turks have found work in businesses run by individuals from the former Soviet Union. For example, two lifelong neighbors and friends, now living in San Diego, were able to get jobs at a repair shop owned by an immigrant from Ukraine. One of the men, Aybek, recounted:

Our boss came from Ukraine a long time ago. But he still likes it when people speak in Russian. And he likes to help out those people. So, we got a job at his shop. There are about ten Russian-speaking employees there, and our relations are really good. Our boss does not rush us—he comes and makes sure that we are doing everything properly and taking our time to learn things properly. There are people in his shop who have been working there for 10 or 15 years. They have all worked there for so long because the atmosphere there is so good.

Aybek's commentary provides an insight into the phenomenon of ethnic enterprises, which have traditionally served as a springboard into the world of work for refugee and immigrant newcomers. The lack of language and cultural barriers at work and the support of colleagues who share similar experiences attract newcomers to these types of jobs. Note, however, that in this particular case the notion of an ethnic business has been expanded to include Soviet businesses. Aybek and his employer both belong to a country—the Soviet Union—that no longer exists but that still serves as a surrogate for ethnic and cultural identity.

Physical and Mental Health

Health care is an issue of concern for Meskhetian Turks in the United States. While modern medicine is available in Russia, Meskhetian Turks there have gen-

For the Meskhetian Turks, the biggest obstacles to employment are a lack of English and a lack of other workers who speak their language.

erally been denied access to the free medical care the government provides to its citizens. As a result, Meskhetian Turks in Russia have had to pay for medical treatment, and many have been unable to afford the costs. Travel restrictions constitute another obstacle to health care for the Meskhetian Turks, who often live in rural areas where good medical care is not available.

Because they have often not been able to access good health care in Russia, many Meskhetian Turks arrive in the United States with health issues that need to be addressed. Dental problems, from cavities to root disease, are particularly common.

There is also reason to be concerned about mental health issues with this population. Evidence suggests that both men and women suffer from ailments associated with high levels of stress, as a result of the tremendously difficult circumstances they faced in Krasnodar.

While Meskhetian Turks compare health care in the United States favorably to health care in Russia, some refugees, particularly those more than 50 years old, believe that Russian medicine is more effective than U.S. medicine and ask friends and relatives to bring them refills from Russia. It is unclear whether they simply feel more comfortable with familiar Russian brands, or if the Russian brands are in fact more potent.

Access to treatment in the United States can be a challenge for Meskhetian Turks. One problem lies in the scarcity of Russian-speaking health professionals in many of the U.S. communities where Meskhetian Turks have been resettled. With some difficulty, resettlement agencies have attempted to provide Russian-speaking interpreters who can accompany refugees on doctor visits.

While most Meskhetian Turks seem to be adjusting well to the U.S. health care system, resettlement agencies note several U.S. health care practices that differ from practices in Russia and that therefore can pose challenges for new arrivals:

- Seeing a generalist before seeking treatment from a specialist
- Visiting a doctor for regular check-ups and not only when there is a problem
- Making medical appointments in advance
- Keeping a family file of medical documents in a safe place where they will not get lost.

Health care is an issue of concern.

Education

The high value that Meskhetian Turks place on education can be seen in the aspirations they have for their children in the United States. While Meskhetian Turks are happy that their children no longer face discrimination at school, some express frustration that U.S. schools are not as rigorous and demanding as they are in Russia. Some parents have been known to ask their children's teachers to provide more homework.

Another worry among some Meskhetian Turk parents is that their children are progressing more slowly in learning English because they are enrolled in schools with high numbers of non-English-speaking students. This concern has been particularly acute in San Diego, where Meskhetian Turks have been resettled in Spanish-speaking areas of a city just 5 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border. One mother wondered, "How will my child learn English well if all he hears is Spanish day in, day out?"

It is also important to note the special educational difficulties that young Meskhetian Turk adults, ages 17 to 19, face. Many are caught between the conflicting desires to continue their education and to begin earning money for their families.

Despite these challenges, most Meskhetian Turk families appear enthusiastic about the educational opportunities that are available to their children in the United States. For the most part, children appear to have integrated into the school system, making new friends and involving themselves in school activities. One mother expressed how most parents feel when she said, "There is nothing for us in Russia. As Turks, our children would always be second-class citizens. Our children here will have to struggle to get ahead in school, but after several years I know they will be successful."

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Learning English

Most Meskhetian Turks arrive in the United States with little or no English. Nevertheless, Meskhetian Turks generally show a keen interest in learning the language. Many have continued with their English as a second language (ESL) classes, even 6 months after resettlement. For some, continuing with English has been difficult because of work responsibilities, but many adults, especially women, continue to study the language. For some families, the wife appears to be the designated English language learner. This strategy is apparently based on the belief that every family needs one good English speaker and that the wife is in a better position to learn the language than the husband, who needs to put his time and energy into earning money.

Family and Community

Meskhetian Turks bring with them a strong sense of family and community. Both are sources of support and comfort in a new and unfamiliar environment.

Family

Family plays a dominant role in the lives of Meskhetian Turks, both in Russia and the United States. Among Meskhetian Turks, family extends beyond the nuclear family to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and others. In Meskhetian Turk families, there is a clear and definite hierarchy. Elders are esteemed and important decision makers in the family.

A Determination to Succeed

Alibek and Samet illustrate how Meskhetian Turk children are taking full advantage of educational opportunities available to them in their new home. Back in Krasnodar, the two brothers completed their high school studies. "The kids could not wait until we went to the States because they wanted to continue on to university," Zarema, their mother, said. But on their arrival, they quickly realized that without proper knowledge of English they would not be able to achieve their dreams of a university education. With the sponsorship of the Turkish community in Philadelphia, they were sent to a college preparatory academy in Connecticut, where classes are conducted in English and partially in Turkish. In a short period, Samet and Alibek managed to catch up with their classmates.

Aybek, their father, spoke proudly of his sons' determination in school. "They study 12 hours a day. Whenever we call them, they are always at a library, studying." Alibek, the older of the two, has already taken the standardized test (SAT) for college admission and is setting his sights on attending a prestigious university such as the University of Pennsylvania. Samet hopes to one day become a pilot, while Alibek thinks he might become an economist. Aybek and Zarema hope their daughter, Aynura, who now attends a public school in northeast Philadelphia, will follow her brothers' example.

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Resettled Meskhetian Turks have shown a strong desire to live near other family members, wishing to reside not just within the same town but within close proximity to each other. Some resettlement agencies comment that Meskhetian Turk women in particular use each other for support, following a hierarchy based on age.

One family custom, however, appears to be a source of conflict: Traditionally among the Meskhetian Turks, parents live in the youngest son's house. This arrangement has not always worked well in the United States, where apartment living generally provides less privacy than what people experienced in Russia. The lack of privacy can lead to family tensions.

Community

Meskhetian Turks are very community oriented. Their strong sense of community can extend beyond their own community to include those of Caucasian, Russian, and Turkish newcomers. Meskhetian Turks have proven adept at forging social connections with these other communities to learn about employment, housing, and work opportunities and medical and public assistance benefits.

Meskhetian Turks' history of persecution in Russia has not prevented them from establishing close relationship with Russian refugees. Most Meskhetian Turks note that their problems in the Krasnodar Krai stem from the government's treatment of them as a people, yet individual relations with Russians and other ethnicities have for the most part been tolerable. Moreover, in the United States, Russians

who are not from the rural regions of Krasnodar generally have little knowledge of Meskhetian Turks and harbor no prior ill feeling toward the group. In Philadelphia, Meskhetian Turks have found assistance from Russian refugees in the community. Some Meskhetian Turks work in a Russian market in Philadelphia and have been commended by their supervisors for their good work.

Since Meskhetian Turks first began resettling in the Philadelphia region in the summer of 2004, there have been efforts at community self-help and development. Through support from the U.S. government, a program that puts on regular activities for Meskhetian Turks is helping to bridge the Meskhetian Turk community with the wider community. The post-Soviet and Turkish communities across the United States have worked with resettlement agencies to help Meskhetian Turk newcomers.

Leadership

Meskhetian Turks have brought their traditional leaders and forms of leadership with them to their new communities in the United States. In their efforts to exercise authority in a new and unfamiliar environment, however, Meskhetian Turk leaders face several challenges. The community's most visible personalities became leaders during their years of activism in the Krasnodar area, or even earlier. Now they have been placed in a different arena and will remain leaders only if they are able to adapt to the new demands of a new environment. As the project of returning to Georgia yields to the goal of integration into U.S. society, leaders who came of age during the struggle for repatriation and human rights in Krasnodar will have to reconceptualize the core mission of their organizations. Only time will tell as to whether the leaders of the past will be able to do so. Other challenges include developing the ability to use modern technology, such as the Internet, to communicate with a widely dispersed community and acquiring fundraising skills, business savvy, and at least modest English. At the same time that they face these challenges, they will encounter a new generation of U.S.-educated younger leaders.

In the initial period of resettlement, the primary goal of Meskhetian Turk organizations is to help new arrivals adjust to life in a new society. Some Meskhetian Turk leaders also envision their organizations as the primary agent behind the preservation of the group's culture and identity. These organizations offer courses in Turkish language and Meskhetian dance and provide a space for important cultural events such as weddings, Ramazan, and the yearly remembrance of the 1944 deportation. Some leaders hope to raise funds to send community elders to Georgia for short visits to view the homeland they left behind.

Support for the traditional leadership varies from community to community. While some communities support the traditional leadership, others have expressed frustration with the top-down hierarchy characteristic of the old leadership. Whatever form Meskhetian Turk leadership in the United States takes, it will no doubt play an important role in shaping the future of the U.S. Meskhetian Turk community.

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