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Narrating about the Death of the Nation: The Last of the Departed by Bagrat Shinkuba

Abstract

The following essay examines how literary narration can transmit the historical memories and aesthetic emotions related to the tragic exile experience of the Ubykh people. When Russia subjugated the northwest Caucasus (present-day Sochi, Russia) in the 1860s, the Ubykh were expelled by Russian troops and had to flee to Turkey. The survivors were scattered around Turkey and assimilated into Turkish culture. *The Last of the Departed* (1974), a historical novel by Bagrat Shinkuba, an Abkhazian writer, narrating about one of the most tragic events in the history of exiles – the death of the Ubykh people and their language – shows that historical fiction may be an instrument contributing to the memorialization of ethnic identity. It also exposes the ideological accents and focusing of the displayed events.

Keywords: the Ubykhs, Caucasian War, *Muhajirism*, assimilation, narration, Shinkuba

According to Anatoliy Genko, an outstanding linguist, ethnographer, historian, one of the leading experts on the languages and cultures of the peoples of the Caucasus, the first mention of the Ubykhs comes from the 6th century AD. The death of the Ubykh people and their language began in the late 1860s, after Russia, in 1860–1864, had conquered the northwest Caucasus (present-day Sochi, Krasnodar Krai, Russia). The Ubykh were expelled by Russian troops and had to flee to Turkey, leaving their Shache/Soatshe, the capital of Circassia, the valley Soatshe and the river of the same name, their mountains,



houses, horses, cattle and pets in the villages between the rivers Shache and Khosta, and, no doubt, with heavy loss of life, they reached the Ottoman Empire. Those who survived were scattered all over Turkey and assimilated into the local culture. The Ubykh language was quickly replaced by Turkish. The Ubykhs with their ancient history and culture ceased to exist.

Gradually, over time, in the Russian information literature, Sochi becomes cut off from the Ubykhs¹. They kind of dissolved in space and time. At the end of 1970s one could read about the economic and cultural achievements of Krasnodar Krai but in the Soviet reference books there was not any mention of the Ubykhs. Even in the volumes of БСЭ (*Great Soviet Encyclopedia, GSE*), one of the largest and most respected universal encyclopaedias, the history of the Sochi region begins with the erection of the Russian defensive fortification Navaginskoye.² Admittedly, there is in *GSE* a short entry on the Ubykhs (but they are absent in the entry 'Sochi') who "lived before the 1860s on the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus (approximately 25,000)" and "in 1864 moved to Turkey where they gradually assimilated",³ but first you had to know the word connected with Sochi to look it up.⁴ Moreover, in Soviet times, the rare remaining Ubykhs were actively discouraged from identifying as such. So, for a long time there was silent about the Ubykhs, who gave names to the mountains, rivers and villages between Sochi and Shakhe. The vast majority of both locals and visitors to this region knew nothing about the ethnic cleansing of the Circassians. Bagrat Shinkuba's novel *Последний из ушедших (The Last of the Departed, 1974)* helped and still helps to find out about the Ubykhs' existence and their tragic fate.

Bagrat Uasył-ıpa Shinkuba (born 1917, Chlow, Abkhazia, died 2004, Sokhumi, Abkhazia), was an Abkhazian writer, historian, linguist and politician. Shinkuba was also

¹ As noticed by Viacheslav Chirikba, "The Ubykhs' self-designation is „Tpakhy". Abkhazians are called by them "Azgha" and the Abkhaz language "Azgha-bza" and Abkhazia "Azgha-shwabla." Viacheslav Chirikba, 'The Ubykh People Were in Practice Consumed in the Flames of the Fight for Freedom'. Conversation of Ina Khadzhimba with Doctor of Philological Sciences, Linguist and Caucasologist, Viacheslav Chirikba, *Circassian World*, Viewed 21 May 2021, <<https://www.circassianworld.com/interview/1657-viacheslav-chirikba-the-ubykh-people-were-in-practice-consumed-in-the-flames-of-the-fight-for-freedom>>.

² Aleksandr Prokhorov (ed.), *Bol'shaya sovetskaya entsiklopedia*, Vol. 24, Moskva 1976, pp. 258–259. Unfortunately, nothing has changed in this case in post-Soviet Russia – the same information is given by the Soviet geographic encyclopaedias: Vladimir Kotlyakov (ed.), *Geograficheskiy entsiklopedicheskiy slovar'*, Moskva 2003, p. 704. Against their background, the encyclopaedic dictionary edited by Lappo looks more advantageous, which – based on D. Kochenovskiy's (1913) and Y. Voronov's (1979) specialist research – at least mentions the Ubykh origin of the city's name (Sshatche or Soatshe). Georgiy Lappo (ed.), *Goroda Rossii*, Moskva 1994, p. 434.

³ Prokhorov, *Bol'shaya*, Vol. 26, Moskva 1977, p. 438. All translations of cited material from Russian are mine.

⁴ Interestingly, in the very first, magazine edition of Vladimir Dal's (1801–1872) *The Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language* (Russian: *Tolkoviy slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo jazyka*) there was an extensive definition of the word 'Ubykh'. It disappeared in all subsequent editions, beginning from the first book edition (1863–1866). See Vladimir Dal', *Tolkoviy*, T. 4. R-Ya, Sankt-Peterburg. Likewise, we will not find this entry in the *Encyclopaedia of the Peoples of Russia*, except in the margins of information about the Adyhe, Shapsugs and other Circassians: Valerii Tishkov (ed.), *Narody Rossii*, Moskva 1994, pp. 55, 77, 413.

an outstanding Abkhazian philologist. A member of the Abkhazian Institute for Language, Literature, and History, he was involved in translating literary works into Abkhaz and in documenting the Abkhaz oral tradition. He developed individual issues of the Abkhaz language, wrote down and studied folk art, wrote textbooks on the Abkhaz language for primary schools, and compiled programs on native literature. He worked in the field of Abkhazian history and ethnography as well.⁵ Shinkuba is best known for his poetry, and he was one among a few Abkhaz poets who created their native poetry. The first Abkhaz literary (non- folklore) poem was written and published by Dmitry Gulia in 1912. Later, it was Shinkuba who “played a big role in the development of Abkhaz poetry and became a true transformer of its poetic technique”.⁶ He was the national poet of Abkhazia. His prose work includes one novella, the autobiographical novel *Hewn Rock* (1986) and the historical novel *The Last of the Departed* (1974), which was translated into Russian (1979), English (1986), and – as noticed by Viacheslav Biguaa, an Abkhazian literary critic, into Arabic, Turkish, German, Estonian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Kazakh, Kabardian, Georgian, and Armenian,⁷ which brought him international recognition.

In *The Last of the Departed* Shinkuba used a frame narrative structure, well known in world literature: the novel is set around a discovered manuscript, and uses it as a narrative frame. The author of the manuscript, Sharakh Kvadzba, like the author of the novel, was an Abkhazian linguist with extensive historical knowledge of his nation and the Caucasus region. It was no coincidence that the author gave him such name – as “the Abkhaz folklore proves, the names A(rdzynda) and Kvadzba belong to the most ancient Abkhazian families”.⁸ As noticed by narrator, in Turkey, Kvadzba was looking for the people “who still spoke Ubykh, which was especially important since there was no written Ubykh language”.⁹ Shinkuba endowed the author of manuscript with a rare linguistic gift – he was an “extremely talented linguist, and that is probably why he was sent to Turkey and the Middle East for research work, a rare opportunity in those [Stalin’s] days” (p. 3). To make him more believable, the author made him a disciple of a real historical person, professor Marr (Nikolay Yakovlevich Marr, 1865–1934), a well-known Georgian linguist, archaeologist, and ethnographer specializing in the languages of the Caucasus), under whose scientific supervision he “specialized in the north-western group of the Caucasian languages, including the Ubykh language which is important in establishing the historical relationships between other Caucasian languages” (p. 3).

For the same purpose, for the greater credibility of the narrated events, in the middle of the manuscript some “real documents” were added: “two typewritten pages dated August 1940 – Kvadzba’s pre-war resume – and a handwritten outline of the report

⁵ Prokhorov, *Bol’shaya*, Vol. 29, Moskva 1978, p. 407; Vladimir L. Tsvinaria, *Tvorchestvo B.V. Shinkuba (Lirika. Epos. Poetika)*, Tbilisi 1970, p. 5, etc.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 5.

⁷ Viacheslav Biguaa, *Abkhazskiy istoricheskiy roman. Istoriya. Tipologiya. Poetika*, Moskva 2003, p. 255.

⁸ David Ardzynda, *Iz istorii familii Ardzynda-Adzynda-Kvadzba*, Sukhum 2016, p. 8.

⁹ Bagrat Shinkuba, *The Last of the Departed*, Moscow 1986, p. 3. The pages of all the next citations from this edition are in brackets, right after the quote.

that he apparently made to his institute about the trip. There was also a receipt in the manuscript made out to Kvadzba for a brass horn and a Caucasian dagger that he had brought back with him from abroad for the Abkhasian State Museum” (p. 4). In the foreword, the editor of this manuscript notes that the text was written shortly after Kvadzba came back from Turkey, at his mother’s home, in Abkhazia, right before the outbreak of WWII, for which he was called up and from which he never returned. The editor states that he has seen with his own eyes the Ubykh horn (which was described in the novel), “a truly rare artefact” (p. 4) in the Abkhazian museum.

Kvadzba’s manuscript gives us a vivid picture of the history of the Ubykh people. According to its form, it is a record of Kvadzba’s conversation with Zaurkan Zolak, a 100-year-old man, who tells the story of his life and the expulsion of the Ubykhs from their homeland to the Ottoman Empire, where they were dying of thirst, starvation, disease, and war, and of how those who managed to survive lost their identity.

Therefore, we have three narrators: Narrator 1 – the editor of the manuscript; narrator 2 – the author of the manuscript (Sharakh Kvadzba, a linguist); narrator 3 – the hero and the main narrator (Zaurkan Zolak, Ubykh). Each of them gives way to the others in turn. The linguist from Soviet Abkhazia becomes a listener, withdraws into the shadows, only occasionally, with his digressions, he interrupting to confront Zaurkan’s story with his own historical knowledge. The storyteller, centenarian Zaurkan Zolak, “a man who not only had rare vitality, but an excellent memory” (p. 4), becomes the main figure. A straight-out narrative of a life story begins. An honest, almost month-long oral story about the history of life – his own life and the life of his nation.

As noticed by the main narrator, Zaurkan Zolak was born in 1840 to his Abkhaz mother and Ubykh father in Ubykhia. He had lived near the mouth of the River Sochi in an area that was considered the heart of Ubykh territory. His grandfather was a shepherd, who “tended the cattle of a nobleman to earn a living for his family” (p. 16) but his father became a peasant. Zaurkan recalls: “He grew millet and corn and worked so hard from morning until evening that I remember him lying down when I would wake up in the middle of the night, but I don’t remember him sitting up in the middle of the day” (p. 16). Such a transition from nomadic cattle breeding to sedentary agriculture, which was facilitated by the availability of fertile land and favourable climatic conditions is noted by historians.¹⁰ The Vardan district was especially famous for its fruits and berries. Agriculture was developed in the Sochi valleys, on the left banks of the Kuban. The predominant crops for the Zolaks were winter wheat, corn, barley and millet. They worked hard and managed somehow. They had several beehives, “sold some corn and nearly all (...) honey and bees-wax in return for salt, soap and most importantly, gunpowder” (p. 16). When the crops were bad, Zaurkan with his father went up the River Sochi to chop box wood and sell it to Turkish merchants. Hunting was also of great importance in

¹⁰ Shapi Kaziyeu, Igor’ Karpieyev, *Povsednevnaya zhizn’ gortsev Severnogo Kavkaza v XIX veke*, Moskva 2003, p. 174.

the life of these highlanders.¹¹ From an early age the boys were trained to use weapons. The Ubykhs were warriors, which they needed to be. Their land “was never peaceful” (p. 18). As Zaurkan notes, they “couldn’t imagine life without plunder and raids, without selling slaves overseas to merchants in Turkey, hostility between families, between the Ubykhs and neighbouring tribes, or without abducting women and feuds” (p. 18). Ubykhia was situated on the important north-south and east-west crossroads, and the Ubykh “had always been able to defend themselves from anyone who infringed on their freedom whether they were neighbours, or came from afar – Greeks or Romans, Arabs or Turks” (p. 18). There were legends of great wars, which were passed down from generation to generation, and a dagger was holy for men. They were considered the most warlike tribe in the North-West Caucasus. War for them was morally permissible, and even obligatory. Their ethics of war predicted heroism, courage, self-giving – including the ultimate sacrifice – in the service of the nation and... ordinary spoils of war for loved ones. A Russian expert on the history of the Caucasus draws attention to boldness as their most valuable asset, as well as to high organization and military discipline:

The glory and military reputation of the Ubykhs was maintained thanks to their best military organization. (...) Before undertaking an expedition (...) the Ubykhs chose a leader in a large party. The latter could only be a person known for his bravery, who had already been in several campaigns in the rank of a simple warrior, then leading small parties (...) showed courage and management. The leader had to be of strong build, able to endure cold and hunger, to serve as an example for everyone else.¹²

Zaurkan, a fictional person, in his turn, states: “no one could recall a time when Ubykh men were not trained as warriors. We simply could not imagine any other way, or that anyone capable of holding a weapon could refuse to. And if such a culprit did appear among us, he was stripped of his name and exiled” (p. 18).

The Ubykhs lived between the Abkhazians and the Circassians (Adyghe – Georgiy Dzidzaria, the Abkhas researcher, uses these names – Circassians and Adyghe – synonymously).¹³ As noticed by M. Kaziyev and I. Karpieyev, “By the middle of the 18th century, the ethnic composition of the region had stabilized. In the North-West Caucasus (...), the largest Adyghe peoples lived – the Natukhais, Shapsugs, Abadzekhs; on the Black Sea coast – Ubykhs and Abkhazians”.¹⁴ Very often these nations were related, they knew each other’s languages, more or less similar in their naming. Adolf Berge (Berzhe), a Russian orientalist, historian, archaeologist, as well as an official of the Russian Empire in the Caucasus, stated, “still the ancients called the Caucasus

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 211.

¹² Nikolay Dubrovin, *Istoriya voyny i vladychestva russkikh na Kavkaze*, Vol. 1, 1, p. 254.

¹³ Georgiy Dzidzaria, *Makhadzhirstvo i problemy istorii Abkhazii v XIX v.*, Sukhum 1982, p. 3.

¹⁴ Kaziyev, Kapeev, *Povsednevnyaya zhizn'*, p. 10.

a mountain of tongues”.¹⁵ In fact, he was the first to classify and describe the multi-ethnic inhabitants of the Caucasus, of course, from his imperial, colonizer’s point of view. In his descriptions the most important facts were whether they were humble, agreeable to Russia, resisting or paying taxes. Berge, distinguishing three subcategories of the Ubykhs – “actual Ubykhs” (“собственно Убыхи”, living within 20 *verst* [A Russian measure of length, about 1.1 km – O.W.] from the seashore, between the upper reaches of Khosta and Shache rivers), Sashe (Саше/Sashsio - living between the River Khosta and the Shache/Sochi valley), and Vardane (from the Sochi valley and the Siuepse with its tributaries) – draws attention to their libertarian character, democracy, lack of power and rebelliousness toward the occupiers. He gives the most severe characteristics to the “actual Ubychs” (Zaurkan’s countrymen).

In the land of the Ubykhs, all gatherings against us are plotted: there, however, the restless people from tribes submissive to us find support and refuge. (...) This tribe has no control and, feeding the ingrained hatred to us, it tries to maintain hostility towards the Russians in other highlanders, for that purpose they go several times a year in large gatherings to punish those *auls* [villages] which had relations with us. In this, they are particularly supported by the inaccessibility of the country they occupy.¹⁶

These repulsive, extremely negative features of the Ubykh people noted by the Russian official and historian, were for the Ubykhs themselves of the greatest value. Zaurkan time and again emphasizes the love of his compatriots for their mountains, forests and rivers, for their unique language and homeland, their readiness to fight to the last drop of blood for it, their courageous, passionate, unbending nature. In his story he defines the Ubykh’s identity in the clusters of very close, related neighbouring peoples. Nonetheless, he has a very clear sense of belonging to the common Abkhaz-Adyghean ethno-cultural world. Zaurkan primarily associates his identity with his language.

It’s a mistake to think (...) that we can forget a language learned from infancy. No, we can’t, just like I cannot forget my mother – although I know several languages and know how necessary they are. I learned three languages when I was still young. Facing the sea, the Adighes lived to the right of the Ubykhs and the Abkhasians to the left. I know not only Abkhasian, but Adighe, too; of course, not as well, but I know it. We were all close neighbours, so we had to know each other’s languages. Ubykh is my native language. It was spoken all around me from childhood – at home, around the house, and everywhere I went. How could I forget it? I learned

¹⁵ Adolf Berzhe, *Kavkaz v arkhologicheskoy otnoshenii [chitano v den otkrytiya Obshchestva Lyubiteley Kavkazskoy Arkheologii 9 dekabrya 1873 goda]*, Tiflis 1874, p. 8.

¹⁶ Adolf Berzhe, *Kratkiy obzor gorskikh plemen na Kavkaze*, Nal’chik 1992, pp. 23; 27–28.

Abkhasian from my mother. Grandmother knew Adighe very well, and when I was a child she told me fairy tales, tongue-twisters and riddles in Adighe. Everything that I knew in childhood is carved in my memory like the inscription on a tombstone. The years pass, but neither rain, nor snow, nor wind, nor sand storm can erase the epitaph (pp. 13–14).

For Zaurkan, his native language was a source of pride, a guarantee of ethnic cohesion and durability. One of many, but unique. For his listener, linguist Sharakh Kvadzba, it was the subject of his inquisitive research. Many linguists, anthropologists and historians emphasized the uniqueness, peculiarity of the Ubykh language. Even in the 1870's Piotr Uslar (Baron Peter von Uslar, 1816–1875), a Russian general and one of the most prolific researchers of Caucasian languages in the 19th century, who recorded many of the Caucasian languages from different language groups and described their phonetic and grammatical properties, noticed, “the Ubykh lexicon contained many words of the Adyghe and Abkhazian, only slightly altered” but the grammar is completely different. He also paid attention to a very special sound ‘ë’ (Fr. *eu*) at the beginning of a word and the abundance of double consonants.¹⁷ In 1862, Uslar published the first grammar textbook of the Abkhaz language, and the first Abkhaz (Cyrillic) alphabet was attached to this book. The fictitious Zaurkan mentioned that Ahmed, son of Barakai, his most educated countryman, very positively evaluated such educational activity by one Russian general who had “even ma(de) up letters for the Caucasians and want(ed) to publish a beginning reader” (p. 41), obviously, having in mind Uslar. It has to be stated that despite active linguistic achievements his imperial ideology towards the highlanders triumphed: “At present, the Ubykhs constitute the tribe most hostile to us in the whole western Caucasus”.¹⁸ Over a hundred years later, the word would see Hans Vogt’s *Ubykh Language Dictionary*,¹⁹ the world’s linguists would talk about the uniqueness of Zaurkan’s native tongue, considering the Ubykh language as the language with the most consonant phonemes.²⁰ Since there are only two phonemic vowels, there is a great deal of allophony in Ubykh. According to Kaziyev and Karpieyev.

Few managed to speak the languages of the [Caucasian] Highlanders with perfect pronunciation. Guttural sounds prevail in a number of languages;

¹⁷ Piotr K. Uslar, *Etnografiya Kavkaza. Yazykoznanije. Abkhazskiy yazyk*, Tiflis 1887, pp. 1–82; 84.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 75–76.

¹⁹ Hans Vogt, *Dictionnaire de la langue oubykh*, Oslo 1963, p. 265.

²⁰ It has 81 consonants but only two phonemic vowels (a derived long /a:/, not phonemic, and short /a/ and /i/ a neutral vowel). For comparison: in Turkish there are 21 consonants, in French and English 20. In Ubykh there are consonants that are not found in other languages of the world (e.g. pharyngalised consonants). A number of linguists from the West and the East have dealt with and continue to study this language: from Georges Dumezil and Georges Charachidzé who recorded its last fluent speaker Tevfik Esenç (1917–1992) to Viacheslav Chirikba. See V. Chirikba, *Common West Caucasian. The Reconstruction of its Phonological System and Parts of its Lexicon and Morphology*, Leiden 1996, especially the subchapter on the reconstruction of CwC consonants in Ubykh, pp. 223–237.

others resemble the scream of an eagle. Possibly, the highlands, rarefied air, and other natural features contributed to the fact that the language took the form most optimal for each climatic zone, of which there are many in the Caucasus – from subtropics to eternal glaciers.²¹

The Ubykh language was the most unique for its phonetics. It died out on 7 October 1992, along with the death of Tefvik Esenç. In the novel, the centenarian, Zaurkan Zolak is the last fluent speaker and the last of the Ubykhs (it is very likely that it was Tefvik Esenç who served as the prototype of the protagonist of the novel). The linguist Kvadzba, a fictional character, carefully listens to the guttural low-pitched sounds of Zaurkan's speech, notes their tone, often he wonders about the etymology and morphology of Ubykh words, juxtaposing them with Abkhazian. Zaurkan, who loved his unique language most of all, was aware of the inevitable process of assimilation. Many years before his death, with great sadness he learned that some of his countrymen had given up speaking Ubykh in Turkey because they were mocked for their language and they had already assimilated. His cousin explained this situation as follows,

I understand everything you're saying and I even think in Ubykh, but it's easier to speak in Turkish. And my wives talk and fight in that language. I can't just talk to myself like some kind of an imbecile.

Sometimes when Husein Effendi wants a good laugh he asks me to speak Ubykh. All I have to do is start talking and he doubles up with laughter: "It's like bird talk," he says. «Come on, keep chittering»" (p. 148).

Apart from their common language, the Ubykhs were united by faith. They had their own religion. The religious ideas of the Ubykhs were based on polytheism with its pagan beliefs, which include the cult of animals, trees, celestial bodies and natural phenomena. "The cult of sacred trees and groves has been known among the Black Sea tribes since ancient times".²² In almost every valley of the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus, there were sacred trees and groves, where the cult of various local deities went on. The mild Christianization of the Ubykh and their neighbours did little to change their pagan cult, as evidenced by the large number of sacred groves and the almost complete absence of Christian churches, they continued to live as before with their old beliefs, often, with a cross, the very symbol of Christianity. Adopting later Islam very superficially, performing prayers and visiting mosques, the highlanders – in parallel – continued to make sacrifices to their native pagan saints. Even at the end of the protracted Caucasian war, when Islam was spread in this region as a religion-symbol of opposition to the ideology imposed on Caucasians by Christian Tsarist Russia, their worship was closely intertwined with

²¹ Kaziyev, Kapeev, *Povsednevnaya*, p. 9.

²² Vladimir Voroshilov, *Istoriya Ubykhov. Ocherki po istorii i etnografii Bol'shogo Sochi s drevneyshikh vremen do serediny XIX veka*, Maykop 2006, p. 58.

folk culture, pagan beliefs, and formed a special spiritual and cultural symbiosis. And yet, the *murids*,²³ a special population of Islam which came during the Caucasian war under the leadership of Imam Shamil (1834–1859) did not deprive the Ubykh religion off the layers of previous and neighbouring beliefs. Vladimir Voroshilov claims that:

The sacred groves did not have any special structures for prayers. All ceremonies were performed under the shade of centuries-old trees. (...) On the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus, within the limits of modern Greater Sochi, according to various historical sources, a large number of sacred trees and groves are known, some of them preserved in the first half of this [20th] century.²⁴

He also states, that it was here that, during the landing of Raevsky's troops in 1839, Russian troops discovered a large grave monument, and at the mouth of the Shakhe the sacred grove of Tagapkh, protecting which the Ubykhs and Shapsugs put up desperate resistance. Before the battle, they all vowed to die, rather than to allow the desecration of the shrine.²⁵ The centuries-old oaks in Zaurkan's home are very similar to the groves described by historians.²⁶

In the second chapter of the novel, titled *When we were at home... Zaurkan* with great reverence refers to their traditional worship of Bytkha (*by-txa* – 'great-god')²⁷.

Probably when you went to the land of the Ubykhs you could (...) see our holy place, the refuge of our almighty Bytkha. Some people called it a shrine, others – an icon. A green meadow lay under a tall hill, and on the hill there were seven huge oak trees protecting our holy place with their foliage. Their branches brushed against one another, their leaves

²³ *Muridism* was a political and religious movement in the Caucasus in the 1820–1850s. *Muridism* as an Islamic movement and doctrine became the ideological foundation of the national liberation movement of the highlanders of the North Caucasus in their struggle against tsarism. It called for a "holy war" against the infidels, *gazavat*. See in more detail Agafangel Krymskiy, 'Miuridizm ("poslushnichestvo")', in: *Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar'*, Vol. 20, Sankt-Peterburg 1897, pp. 373–374; John Frederick Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, London–New York 1908, pp. 230–241; Tadeusz Bodio, 'Wprowadzenie: Z badań nad religiami, polityką, elitami i bezpieczeństwem na Kaukazie Północnym', in: *Kaukaz Północny: religie, polityka, elity i bezpieczeństwo*, ed. Tadeusz Bodio, Warszawa 2017, p. 62.

²⁴ Voroshilov, *Istoriya Ubykhov*, pp. 58–59.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 59.

²⁶ Bronievsky at the beginning of the 19th century described the cult of sacred trees (oaks) among the Sochi Abaza: Semen Bronievskiy, *Noveyshiye geograficheskiye i istoricheskiye izvestiya o Kavkaze*, Moskva 1823, p. 322–323. Cited by Voroshilov, *Istoriya Ubykhov*, p. 58.

²⁷ Biguaa affirms the real existence of the pagan sanctuary of Bytkha near Sochi and the author's visit to this place, and he gives interesting data about the place based on both ethnographic and historical material (Biguaa, *Abkhazskiy istoricheskiy roman*, pp. 322–329). The Russian encyclopaedic dictionary notes "Sochi micro district Bytkha", the Bytkha river and Bytkha ridge – "on the slopes of the foothills, south of the Bytkha ridge in the valley of the river of the same name there is Matsesta" (Lappo, *Goroda Rossii*, p. 436).

whispered to each other. When you stood there couldn't you hear how they were talking in our language? Couldn't you see the numerous scars in the trunks left by the hot candles attached to them each spring by the worshipers of Bytkha? (p. 15)

He is sure that, walking through the country of the Ubykh, Sharakh could not help but notice their sacred place, called by them a "shrine" or an "icon"²⁸. He remembered that in the year they moved to Turkey something terrible happened to their shrine. In the middle of winter on a frosty night when against a clear sky thunder broke from the holy site and they saw something that never before had any Ubykh seen: the shrine left its sanctuary, not to return to it, in the middle of the winter, only in the summer. "Everyone took it as a bad omen" (p. 15). Under the seven age-old oaks, near the holy place of Bytkha (the fictional narrator, researcher-linguist Kvadzba, carries out quite a scrupulous etymological analysis of the word *bytkha*, pp. 106–107) Haji Kerantukh, the leader of the Ubykhs (historical figure), was meeting with the most influential Ubykhs before their decisive meeting with the Russian Tsar's envoy, General (p. 20), when the Russians wanted to sign a peace treaty with the Ubykhs (shortly before manifesto of Tsar Alexander II declared hostilities at an end on May 21 old calendar), 1864). At a meeting with the Russians, they heard the Tsar's ultimate conditions.

The Ubykhs must decide whether they wish to move to the Kuban Region, where they will have perpetual ownership of the land and will retain their own system of government and courts, or emigrate to Turkey (p. 23).

When Hamutbey Chachba and his companions, in order to persuade the Ubykhs to surrender, came to the place with seven oaks and the Ubykh sanctuary where the national shrine of Bytkha was kept, they were greeted by crying women in black; in their protest they held a crying ritual with the staging of his death for the Ubykhs (pp. 29–30). Hence, it may be stated that the pagan sanctuary of Bytkha was an integral part of the life of the Ubykhs. In the most decisive moment of their choice (when they had to choose between Russia and Turkey) they did not go to the mosque but went to the large meadow with the seven oaks and the shrine of their Bytkha. On the day of their exile they gathered in this meadow, they performed the rite of slaughtering several white goats prepared for sacrifice, and a blind Soulakh, "the guardian of Bytkha, strung up on a sharp edged stick a liver and heart freshly boiled and still piping hot, and began praying" (p. 44). The others moved in around him and began praying, too. Soulakh's voice broke, and tears

²⁸ The English translation of Shinkuba's work uses 'shrine' for the odd bird-like icons that were sacred to the Ubykh. 'Shrine' usually denotes a fixed religious site of some sort, perhaps with a small shelter. 'Icon' would be a better phrase for these figurines. 'Sanctuary' usually denotes a holy place, a temple or mosque. Also Bytkha would be Ubykh /bi-/ (pharyngealized /b/) 'great' and /txa/ 'god', the last borrowed from Circassian /tha/ 'god', originally 'tree'. This detailed information was provided to me by a linguist, expert in Caucasian languages, for which I am very grateful.

streamed down his cheeks. “«Don’t let us perish, oh, Bytkha», he exclaimed in tears and they repeated several times after him in unison: «Amen! Amen!»” (p. 44). In Zaurkan’s memory the sculpture’s appearance and its significance for the countrymen were forever preserved.

The shrine was carved of stone and looked much like an eagle. Its eyes were made of gold plates and its beak, wings and claws of silver. After praying, we set the shrine back in its place, into its underground habitat. That was the Big Bytkha, or as Soulakh called it, the elder Bytkha. But with it in the habitat was another one, the younger Bytkha, also made of stone with gold and silver, but the size of a dove (p. 44).

The elders and Soulakh took the younger shrine to Turkey and until the end, several older Ubykhs worshiped Bytkha in exile.

The main narrator, Zaurkan, presented in detail (and very similar to historical sources²⁹) the heroic struggle of the Ubykhs against the Russian army, here and there in his stories are historical figures – the Caucasian, Russian, Turkish, Polish³⁰. In the first part of his story (the Ubykh people at their home), Zaurkan – more or less – talks (he himself tells or recounts the stories of others) about them: for example, Haji Berzek Adagva’s son, Haji Berzek Kerantukh, Hamutbei Chachba (Shervashidze), Suleiman Effendi (Mustafinov), Omer Pasha, Emin Pasha (Mohammed Amin), Gechba Rashid, Mekhnedbey (Bandja), General Gaiman, Teofil Lapinski etc. He told about their role in the Caucasian conflict, about acute strife among Ubykh leaders who had to make a hard choice for themselves and for their people (the role of the historical person in the history of a nation) when the nation turned out to be between a hammer and an anvil. The old narrator reveals that the Ubykhs’ choice was influenced by Islamic mullahs, betrayal of their own princes, former matrimonial and commercial arrangements with Turks, huge hatred of the Russian

²⁹ See for example the following: “The new military offensive that ensued would mark the final chapter in the Caucasus wars of the nineteenth century and the beginning of a long history of Circassian exile. From the earliest days of Russian movement into the Caucasus, the rearrangement of populations was an essential part of the empire’s political and military strategy. The burning of crops and destruction of villages, on their own, were imperfect methods of ensuring obedience. Crops could be replanted and houses rebuilt. (...) In time Russian commanders came to understand that the complete dislocation of populations could ensure that communities conquered during one season did not become rebels during the next. (...) In a policy memorandum of 1857 Dmitrii Miliutin, chief of staff to Bariatinskii, summarized the new thinking on dealing with the northwestern highlanders. The idea, Miliutin claimed, was not to clear the highlands and coastal areas of Circassians so that these regions could be settled by productive farmers, as had happened in other parts of the empire’s periphery. Rather, eliminating the Circassians was to be an end in itself – to cleanse the land of hostile elements”. Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*, Oxford 2008, p. 94. In the novel, also, as in historical sources, the sovereign prince of Abkhazia Hamutbei Chachba is shown as a person who, to save the blood of the Ubykhs (and for his own interests) does not yield to the persuasion of the Turks, Mohammed-Amin, Haji Kerantukh, Teofil Lapinsky and others to oppose Russia, when it made no sense (pp. 19, 24–25).

³⁰ Biguaa has dedicated a whole section of his monumental work, cited above, to the correlation of historical reality and artistic fiction in Shinkuba’s novel.

invaders and naive faith of some people in the fatherly care of the Turkish sultan who was – in fact – in conspiracy with the Russian tsar. And so, following Zaurkan's narration, the last Ubykh council, "the governing body of the Ubykhs" (p. 37), which consisted of thirteen people plus two others who were representatives of the Abkhasian Sadz and Akhchipsou was held in the house of chestnut wood. It was the very beginning of spring. "The council met in the village of Mitkhas where Haji Kerantukh lived along with all the other Berzeks from his kinship group. In the summer the council met in the shade of several oaks that formed a semi-circle, and in the winter it gathered in a house of chestnut wood built collectively" (p. 37). It was in that house and in his presence that, under the influence of Haji Kerantukh and the ethno-psychic condition of the Ubykhs (their national character, collective memory, traumatic experiences of the Russian invasion, religious feelings, ect.), the decision was made to move to Turkey, a decision, in Zaurkan's words, that in the end resulted in his being the last person "who can speak (...) in the Ubykh language" (p. 37).³¹ In retaliation, on April 15, General Gaiman's detachment returned to the Ubykh post and then, having crossed into the Sochi basin, moved to its mouth. On the way, Voroshilov claims, "the troops burned down all the *auls* they met, including the large *aul* of Khadzhi-Berzek Kerantukh, which was located on the site of the modern village of Plastunki".³²

From time to time Sharakh, a linguist, historian and ethnographer, "controls" and verifies the historical memory of the old Zaurkan (his own memory and collective memory of the Ubykhs which he presents), confronting the figuratively and emotionally narrated events (very often in legendary, romantic or folkloric style) and the characters participating in them with his own source knowledge (i.e. with the view of the author Shinkuba himself, who, before writing the novel, as noticed by Biguaa, had thoroughly researched the archives and consulted the Caucasian expert Georgiy A. Dzidzaria).³³

³¹ Voroshilov gives another version of the place: "According to the stories of the highlanders who remained on the Black Sea coast, under this ancient tree ["kunatsky"] the Sochi Ubykhs, led by Haji Berzek Kerantukh, at the end of March 1864, came to the last national assembly, where they made the tragic decision for the Ubykh people to leave the Caucasus and move to Turkey" (Voroshilov, *Istoriya Ubykhov*, pp. 69–60). Here he refers to Vereshchagin's travel notes which described a sacred tree, called by Russian settlers „kunatsky" and preserved in the valley of the River Sochi, above the Plastun Gate, until the beginning of the 20th century. This tree, representing a genus of silver poplar, known as white-leaved, stood in a vast meadow, on the left bank of the River Sochi, 11 km from its mouth.

³² Ibidem, p. 144.

³³ It has to be pointed out that Biguaa gives a critical overview of the huge cockpit of historical sources studied by Shinkuba: "The basis for the formation of G. Dzidzaria's point of view was documentary materials from the Central State Historical Archives of Georgia (TsGIAG) and the Central State (now Russian State) Military Historical Archives (TsGVIA / RGVIA /), works, articles and notes by A.V. Fadeev, T. Lapinsky, F.F. Tornau, N.A. Smirnov, M.N. Pokrovsky, H.M. Ibragimbeyli, N. Karlhof, E. Felitsyna, S. Esadze, A. Lilov, S. Dukhovskiy, A.P. Berger, Y. Abramova et al., Publications in the 12-volume edition *Acts collected by the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission*, etc. Unfortunately, neither for G. Dzidzaria nor B. Shinkuba were available (except some) foreign archives, studies of foreign scientists, for example, from England, Germany, France, Turkey and Poland, who were to one degree or another involved in the Caucasian events and geopolitics in the Black Sea countries" (Biguaa, *Abkhazskiy istoricheskiy roman*, pp. 287, 290).

In the second part of the novel (the Ubykhs on their exile in Turkey) the great historical figures go to the margins, as if dissolving into the great national grief with which the Ubykhs went to their end. Haji Berzek Kerantukh, three sultans of the Ottoman Empire, the Russian consul Moshnin from Trebizond and ambassador Ignatiev from Istanbul, etc., appear occasionally, mainly so that Zolak and his compatriots would understand the causes of this great tragedy and get to know its real perpetrators.

The Ubykh people were among the other Caucasian tribes sentenced to population transfer and this mass resettlement of the Muslim population of the North Caucasus into the Ottoman Empire was named *Muhajirism*. The meaning of this peculiar form of resettlement was the exodus of Muslims from the Caucasus. *Muhajirism* was especially widespread in the last years of the Caucasian War (1817–1864) and immediately after its end. Estimation of the total number of immigrants today is the subject of debate among researchers – the exact number of displaced persons was not recorded and is unknown, in addition, there were also those who were displaced on their own; a very small part, however, managed to return.³⁴ It is even more difficult to determine the number of Ubykh *muhajirs*. Voroshilov, based on the data from the report of the commission on the case of the resettlement of highlanders to Turkey dated February 18, 1865, states:

As a result, already three weeks after the official submission at the end of April 1864, practically no Ubykhs remained on the vast territory of the southern slope of the Western Caucasus in the Shakhe-Khost interfluve. The exact number of the Ubykh population who moved to Turkey is unknown, but consideration and comparison of various sources suggests that at the time of the eviction of the Ubykhs, at least 45 thousand people lived on the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus, but hardly more than 50 thousand.³⁵

Charles King gives similar evidence of the complete ethnic cleansing of the Ubykh region:

As Russian forces moved farther and farther into the northwest Caucasus uplands, lists of groups targeted for expulsion were drawn up and orders given to move them out of their villages and down to the coast (...).

³⁴ *Muhajirism* in the North Caucasus was studied in detail by Dzidzaria (Georgiy Dzidzaria, *Mukhadzhirstvo i problemy istorii Abkhazii v XIX v.*, Sukhum 1982, pp. 97–246). In spite of strong ideological accents which were obligatory in Soviet science, his study maintains historical value. Dzirdzaria gave 700.000–900.000 muhajirs (p. 212). See also Khamitbiy Laipanov, 'K istorii pereseleniya gortsev Severnogo Kavkaza v Turtsiyu', in: *Trudy KCHNI*, Vyp. V, Stavropol' 1966, pp. 111–131; Jeronim Perović, *From Conquest to Deportation: the North Caucasus under Russian Rule*, New York 2018, especially the chapter 'Musa Kundukhov and the Tragedy of Mass Emigration', pp. 53–74. The author mainly focuses on the Chechen people.

³⁵ Voroshilov, *Istoriya Ubykhov*, p. 152. According to Kaziyev and Karpieyev, it reaches 74.567 (Kaziyev, Karpieyev, *Povsednievnaya zhizn'*, p. 18).

Russian diplomats repeatedly assured their European colleagues that the expulsions were not meant to be bloody, and that removing the highlanders was the only way to extinguish banditry and organized rebellion. (...) By the middle of the 1860s, the traditional lands of the Abazakh, Shapsug, Ubykh, and other Circassian tribal groups had been abandoned. As a local saying had it, even a woman could now travel easily between the harbour cities of Sujuk Kale and Anapa since she could be assured of never meeting a single person on the way. (...) "In the mountains of the Kuban district one can now find bears and wolves", wrote one observer, "but no highlanders".³⁶

In this way the Ubykh people were scattered in the countries of the Middle East (Ottoman Empire) but most of them were expelled to Turkey. The Ubykhs settled in Turkey within the Asia Minor Peninsula, forming a settlement near Bursa, in the Izmit region, in the Samsun region, in the Adana region, on the Usun Highlands and in a number of other points of Anatolia. The fictitious Zolak, after a terrible voyage and long wandering – from Trebizond, Samsun, Osmankoy to Cairo – found himself in the outskirts of Adapazari, and finally, in a remote, uncrowded, abandoned rocky village.

The description of the voyage resembles the descriptions of the Irish who ran away from starvation to America on the coffin ships in 1847–1852. Zaurkan remembers, "Because of the continuous pitching, lack of water and an accumulation of excrement, typhoid fever broke out. People died like flies" (p. 57); "The people, crazed from thirst, began drinking sea water. The first to die were the children" (p. 57). Finally, the voyage was over and all those who came out alive stepped on the shore of a foreign land but no one was there to meet them. In Zaurkan's memory a picture has survived: "the Ubykhs sat down in groups all along the beach. [they] looked like flocks of birds that had lost their way in a storm and, finally exhausted, landed in an unknown place" (p. 56). From this moment they "began the road to extinction" (p. 56).

They openly began to express their dissatisfaction with the Turkish authorities, who treated them like prisoners of war, and to seek through the Russian embassy in Constantinople and local consuls to return to their homeland (Zaurkan presents this situation in detail with historical characters, e.g. Moshnin, a Russian consul in Trebizond). But the tsarist government and the military authorities in the Caucasus resolutely rejected petitions from large groups of highlanders to return home (then already Russia) and, using military means, together with the Turkish border troops, prevented them from crossing the border. Zaurkan's brother was one of those who failed in an attempt to cross the border. In order not to starve to death, they were forced to steal and rob. Zaurkan did not hide his nation's degrading deeds and actions, he confided it to his listener with pain in his heart.

³⁶ King, *The Ghost of Freedom*, pp. 95–97.

Hunger can make you chew a rock. All the food the Ubykhs had taken with them from home had disappeared in the first few days as if swept away by the waves. While we still had some money we bought bread in the neighbourhood bakeries. When our pockets were empty, we began selling the few family treasures we had (p. 58).

A hungry crowd of people is like an overflowing river; there's no way to control it. Before we knew it we became thieves. We were in tatters, but we kept our weapons in silver sheaths. Led by hunger, the young went around in bands stealing cattle and sharing the fresh meat with their fellow-tribesmen. They raided towns, robbed dry goods and shoe stores. (...) We became known as ruffians (p. 59).

The sultan's retaliation was devastating – they were dispersed over the infertile, waterless, uninhabited flat plains of a foreign country, where they were sentenced to death, suffering and, at best, assimilation. This was the end of the nation. "Emigres, pitiful creatures desperate for food, were up and down the Asia Minor Black Sea coast in every city and every village from Trabzon to Istanbul. They had once dreamed of heaven on earth. When they realized what a fatal mistake they had made, it was already too late" (p. 65). Just one century later a people with a rich and courageous past had disappeared from the face of the earth. The old Zaurkan is aware of his people's mistakes and the end of the Ubykhs existence. His conclusion has historiosophical sense: it is very easy to destroy a nation, much more difficult to regain it.

Bagrat Shinkuba gave a true historical vision of these tragic events – according to the historiography of his time. Conveying the entire tragedy of the people, he created a tragic psychological tale which sticks close to historical reality, despite some artificial ideological accents that were essential for passing through Soviet censorship. This moving, very poetic and legendary folklore narrative about the expulsion of the Ubykhs from their homeland to the Ottoman Empire and the death of the nation sounds like a majestic hymn for them and has epic features. It may be called the epic of the dying nation, alluding to the scale of the subject-matter and the hero who was in conflict with the historical destiny of his people. *The Last of the Departed* also resembles the song-ballad of the old blind Soulakh with his immutable *apkhiartsa*, with great love and respect mentioned by Zaurkan. In part it resembles Ubykh women's crying ritual (the folklore genre of crying) with elements of staging, a theatrical performance that was described by the narrator. Even so, this emotional, figurative, poetic, metaphorical tale (oral speech) is systematically interrupted by the sober voice of Zaurkan himself and by the voice of the scientist, Sharakh (written story), controlling Zaurkan's speech.

The emigration of the Ubykh people was a matter of necessity, a forced resettlement, which destroyed them physically, mentally and morally. Bagrat Shinkuba – with the help of his narrators – managed to record the life and death of the brave Ubykh people in the memory of the contemporary nations. *The Last of the Departed* serves as a historiosophical conclusion and at the same time as a warning for future small and large nations. Moreover,

his novel accelerated the symbolic rebirth of the Ubykh language that is taking place today. Viacheslav Chirikba, a linguist, explains the difficulties of the process of rebirth for the Ubykh language:

For the revival of the Basque language and of Welsh, all the conditions exist, and there are quite sizeable speech-communities in the Basque Country and in Wales. With the help of special programmes, which are generously funded, they are successfully reviving their languages. But amongst the Ubykhs there are only a few enthusiasts who can learn only words, or individual phrases, or small texts. They were a wonderful, beautiful and proud Caucasian people, with a very interesting and, in many respects, unique language. This people lived on the coast, and communed during their history with the Byzantines, the Genoese, the Turks, as well as the Abkhazians, and they took a lot from them. This people was very militant but at the same time fully developed culturally.³⁷

The names and concepts of those who, in unfavourable ideological conditions, continued to write about the Ubykhs, also come back from oblivion. The fate of Professor Genko was as tragic as the fate of the nation he studied. Innocently convicted, he died in prison in the prime of life, after which the name of the scholar was forgotten for many years. Today, the works and history of the largest researcher take on a new life.³⁸

The novel about the death of the Ubykh people has been translated into twelve languages. If it had reached a much larger group of readers (and had a better English translation, a direct translation from the Abkhaz original), it is possible that the Ubykh's past would have been present in the grand opening and closing ceremonies of the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014, which coincided with the 150th anniversary of the brutal pacification and expulsion of the Ubykhs by Russian troops in 1864, a massacre that Russia denies. At least in the eyes of the world audience, historical fiction has its own power.

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³⁷ Chirikba, 'The Ubykh People Were in Practice Consumed'.

³⁸ *Commemorative event dedicated to the 125th anniversary of Anatoly Genko was held in St. Petersburg. World Abaza Congress. News 19/05/2022 23:05 3219*, Viewed 24 October 2022, <<https://abaza.org/en/commemorative-event-dedicated-to-the-125th-anniversary-of-anatoly-genko-was-held-in-st-petersburg>>.

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