



Ahiska Turks in Washington D.C. (Cem.Ahiska/Wikimedia)

# The Ahiska Turks: Prisoners of the Soviet and Russian Empires

By Richard Arnold

Some 6.5 million Ukrainians have been displaced by Russia's full-scale invasion of their country, a number which seems staggering until set against the 114 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees worldwide in 2023.<sup>1</sup> Such numbers can seem overwhelming, but each group of exiles has its own story to tell.

There are challenges facing certain ethnic minorities in Russia, forcing them to seek refuge abroad. One such unfortunate group, the Ahiska (or Meskhetian)

Turks, claimed political asylum in the United States in large numbers between 2004 and 2006. Today, those who made it are working to bring more of their community over. Their plight has only

## Tortured Past

Russian and Soviet history is replete with examples of ethnic and religious repression. Yet even among such misery, the Ahiska story stands out. The group lived in present-day Georgia during the Ottoman Empire. Centuries later, the end of the Russian Civil War saw their ancestral lands incorporated into the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Unlike many other ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union, the Ahiska Turk identity was not

them in various parts of the Soviet Union, including Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan. This second forced resettlement involved dispersal and a persistent Georgian refusal to facilitate their return.

Following the pogroms mentioned above, some Turks did return to Georgia, but the authorities, led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, forced a lot of them out. Those who did remain were forced to adopt Georgian family names and profess Georgian ancestry. Even resettled, Ahiska were still far from safe. Fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s led to another deportation for Ahiska placed there.<sup>8</sup> Others went to Southern Russia, where they lived in the regions of Belgorod, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kalmykia, Krasnodar, Rostov, and Stavropol.<sup>9</sup> While many continued to face outright discrimination in the provision of public goods, discrimination continued its starkest form in Krasnodar Krai.<sup>10</sup>

## The Post-Soviet Period

During the 1990s, the regional authorities in Krasnodar refused to recognize the presence of the Ahiska Turks or to give them a propiska, the residency permit by which the Soviet Union controlled where individuals and ethnic groups could settle and live. While the Russian supreme court declared the propiska system illegal in 1992, according to human rights scholar Steve Swerdlow, regional authorities continued to use it “in open defiance of federal law.”<sup>11</sup> Without propiskas, the Ahiska could not receive Russian passports, and consequently many continued to use their Soviet passports well into the 1990s and early 2000s. Worse, Cossack paramilitary forces recruited by the local authorities as a volunteer militia to enforce regional nationalism periodically attacked the Ahiska. Cossacks attacked on at least 21 separate

documented occasions between 1991 and 2006, although the true number is assuredly higher.<sup>12</sup>

The two governors of the Krasnodar region, Nikolai Kondratenko (1995–2001) and Aleksandr Tkachyov (2001–2015), mistreated the Ahiska in similar ways, though the latter was arguably the more zealous. The regional government’s monopoly on the media, even in the 1990s and 2000s, enabled elites to disseminate wild accusations bordering on blood libel. For example, accusations ranged from the economic (stealing Russian jobs, evading taxes) to the criminal (raping Russian boys, dealing in drugs) and the political (spying for the United States).<sup>13</sup> Whatever the rationale, the end result was the same: the othering and defamation of the Ahiska population.

Finally, between 2004 and 2006 the Ahiska gained some sort of legal protection. Under the auspices of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the US Department of State, US authorities gave asylum to roughly half the Ahiska (10,000 to 15,000) in Krasnodar. Initially, this meant resettlement to Washington DC, Lancaster, PA, and Phoenix, AZ. Over time, however, the largest concentration of Ahiska in the United States emerged around Dayton, OH, where the Ahiska have their own community center. Fortunate Ahiska individuals now lead new lives in the United States, escaping over 75 years of repressive state policy and periodic pogroms.

Logical alternatives to US asylum proved, and continue to prove, unwilling to provide this troubled group a home. Authorities in their original homeland, former Ottoman lands now governed by the Republic of Georgia, do not want them back—at least, not as Ahiska Turks. In 2003, the Georgian government officially acknowledged its obligation

to take Ahiska refugees, but since then it has done little to accommodate them. The Georgian government already confronts ethnic problems and is unwilling to add another. According to scholar Aysegul Aydingun, it fears that the Ahiska Turks could develop into a fifth column and bring about “the next Nagorno-Karabakh.”<sup>14</sup> The Georgian implied solution—that the Ahiska surrender their Turkish identity in favor of a Georgian one—is not acceptable to the Ahiska. Next door, the Turkish government’s policy is to encourage Turks outside of Turkey to remain where they are, even if they have co-ethnic sympathies with the Ahiska.<sup>15</sup>

After 2006, some 75,000 Ahiska individuals remained inside Russia (28,500 in Rostov, 7,500 in Stavropol, 5,425 in Krasnodar, 4,000 in Voronezh, and in other Russian regions).<sup>16</sup> Ethnic discrimination on both the societal and state level continues against them. In most cases, this has meant difficulty in obtaining public goods like education and medical care, for which they have had to pay increased bribes. But it has also meant the 2012 murder of a 19-year old Ahiska Turk in Rostov Oblast and the disruption of an Ahiska wedding in Kabardino-Balkaria in 2013. Abuses previously concentrated in Krasnodar Krai have spread to other regions like Stavropol and Rostov.<sup>17</sup>

## Dangerous Present

The Russian government’s mistreatment of the Ahiska reached new heights during the prosecution of its war in Ukraine. This has taken two principal forms- dragooning Ahiska men into the military and ravaging their lands.

First, Russian authorities disproportionately target young Ahiska men for mobilization into the army. Practically every male under the age of 50 of Ahiska

heritage is a target of the recruiting squads on the streets in Rostov and served with a draft notice. Most of the Ahiska males of fighting age that I

Meanwhile, those Ahiska who were relocated to Ukraine after 1989 are stranded in the very lands now being invaded. A Change.org petition from February 2022 identifies 1,500 Ahiska families living in the Kherson region, 280 in Mykolaiv, 250 in the Odessa region, 150 in the Kharkiv region, and 50, respectively, in Donetsk and Sumy.<sup>19</sup> The petition claims to represent 11,000 people in total. There is little data on the Ukrainian government's treatment of the Ahiska prior to the full-scale invasion, which makes me think that discrimination was either less than in Russia or non-existent.

The fact that the Ahiska lived in places either partly or wholly occupied by Russia now means there is no safe space in Ukraine to which they can return. Russia is drafting the Ahiska at high rates, so Ahiska serving in the Ukrainian armed forces may have to shoot at kin mobilized in Russia—although this situation is not unique to the Ahiska.

## **Ominous Future**

The Ahiska face threats in Russia away from the war as well. Radical Islamists from the group ISIS-K

## Conclusion

The Ahiska Turks are just one minority in modern and multi-confessional Russia, and certainly not the largest. However, their tortured past, their dangerous present, and their ominous future makes them one of the most persecuted minorities. They endured deportation in 1944, pogroms in Uzbekistan in 1989, and Cossack attacks in Krasnodar in the 1990s and throughout the Caucasus today. Americans can be proud that approximately 10,000 Ahiska political asylum seekers arrived in the United States in the last 20 years ago.

Once again, the need is great for the Ahiska to get behind in Russia, where they confront a hostile government ready to send them to the front lines of suspicious neighbors who believe they have become potential terrorists. Mediazona estimates that 120,000 Russian troops have already died in the war in Ukraine exceeds 500,000.<sup>23</sup> Avoiding conscription is sufficient ground for seeking asylum when a war has been condemned by the international community, as this war has. The Ahiska also have credible fear of attacks from elements of Russian extremists. Part of the Russian society is not protesting the war.



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