which already has engendered U. S. military bases to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Has necessity tipped the balance?

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This is a strange book indeed. Its sub-title announces that it is intended as a “Handbook,” a category that has no clear definition. The book falls under the “Scholarly and Reference Division” of St. Martin’s Press. Yet it reads as much as a highgrade tourist guide as it does as a scholarly work. There is a little for all readers of all interests: some history (oftentimes more than merely descriptive), much on popular culture, smatterings of literature and the arts, and lots of promotion on behalf of the Circassians and their fate over the centuries.

Originally located in northwest Caucasia, the Circassians lay astride a crossroads of empires: Persian, Roman, Byzantine, Turkish, Russian and, lastly, Soviet. Some rulers were benign, others less so. The result has been a considerable outmigration to Turkey and beyond, a theme whose dynamics are referred to but not explored. The interested reader can refer to the bibliography where there is a wealth of materials in English, French and Russian; the serious scholarly reader, however, is not served well by a total absence of works in key non-European languages, Turkish and Circassian! This brings one back to the identity of the book: scholarly reference or detailed guide?

Factually, the book contains a wealth of information that is almost encyclopedic, leading one to wonder whether the format of an encyclopedia might not have been a more satisfactory solution to the intentions of the author. Instead, he has selected fourteen rubrics: two chapters on history, the rest on literature, folklore, and so on. The lack of integration makes for somewhat tedious reading; no less so the stilted English: odd vocabulary and phraseology. (Where was the style editor?)

Nevertheless, this is a timely book. Since Gorbachev, world attention has been focused on Caucasia, north and south. The on-going crisis in Chechnya in the north and the festering war over Nagorno-Karabakh; the secession threats facing Georgia (Abkhazia, South Ossetia); the plight of the Georgian Mshetian Muslims; the Azerbaijani Lezgins’ desire to affiliate with Dagestan, and so on. All these have fueled instability in a strategic region. Caucasia is to Russia what the Balkans are to Europe. And one of the players in the restless Caucasian region are the Circassians. In conjunction with their kin abroad, they are becoming increasingly politicized, fervent activists in a part of the world, between the Black and Caspian Seas that has become a potential choke point in the international-sponsored oil and gas pipelines network.

In this context, a handbook on the Circassians is welcome and can be of some use for all its faults, none of them serious enough to disqualify it from being a source of useful information until a better volume is published.

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BOOKS RECEIVED/LIVRES REÇUS


Beissinger, Mark R. Nationalist Movements and the Collapse of the Soviet State. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xvi, 502 pp. $80.00 (cloth); $30.00 (paper).


