Tapa Tchermoeff and Khavarsultan Begum Ibragimbekova

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This article is a short biographical sketch of a Chechen politician, one of the leaders of the Mountainous Republic of the North Caucasus, the prime minister Abdulmajid Tchermoeff and his wife, Khavarsultan Begum Ibragimbekova, believed to be a descendant of the Khans of Karabakh. The Bolsheviks' victory in the civil war in Russia forced the Tchermoeff family into emigration in Europe. We were able to find interesting facts about them in archives in France and our research into this topic continues.

Abdulmajid "Tapa" Tchermoeff was from one of the very few Chechen families granted the right of hereditary nobility by the Russian Empire and recorded in the noble family register of the Stavropol Governorate, all thanks to Tapa's father, Ortsou Tchermoeff. A general, Ortsou Tchermoeff wanted a military career for his son, too, and after completing school in Vladikavkaz Tapa was enrolled in the Imperial Nikolaevskaya Cavalry School (1901). After graduation, he was assigned to serve in the personal convoy of His Imperial Majesty Nicholas II but, dissatisfied with his career, he obtained a discharge from that elite unit and devoted himself to business.

Even though it was becoming a center of the oil industry in the southern part of the empire, Grozny at that time (in 1901 the ban had been lifted on ethnic Chechen settlement within city limits on the left bank of the Sunzha River) was still a second-rate provincial town and couldn't compare with Vladikavkaz. The city itself was a dismal sight to see. Filth and disorder, on the backdrop of smoke and fire from the oil fields, didn't make Grozny a particularly attractive place to

live. Tapa only made brief trips there, mostly to visit his numerous family members and to deal with issues related to his oil investments. He understood that the oil business was growing in strategic importance with each passing year, and betting on it had been a correct and farsighted decision on his part.

Tapa chose to make his home in Vladikavkaz, the capital of Terek Oblast at the time. On the one hand this allowed him to maintain a certain independence from his elder family members, but on the other his older brother Abdulmuslim had already been living there for years. Tapa's home would later be the site of the first meetings of the Central Committee of the Union of Mountain Peoples of the North Caucasus, which listed its official address in its letterhead as: Vladikavkaz, Osetinskaya St., the Tchermoeff home. During the Russian Civil War, under the military dictatorship of Anton Denikin, the house served as the headquarters of the White Guards. In May 1925, Norwegian explorer, oceanographer, and Nobel Prize winner Fridtjof Nansen stayed in the house after a renovation in the first years of Soviet rule.

A major event in Tapa Tchermoeff's life was his wedding on August 9, 1906, to Khavarsultan Begum from the famous Azerbaijani Ibragimbekov family. The Ibragimbekovs were allegedly descendants of the Khans of Karabakh. However, during the time in question Kahavrsultan's father settled in Terek Oblast of the Russian Empire and rented a postal station on the Georgian Military Road. He lived in a house that he owned in Vladikavkaz.

Tapa and Khavarsultan met in Vladikavkaz at one of the balls held there every week on various pretenses. These parties offered some escape for the young people who, in accordance with tradition, could only marry with the permission of their parents or guardians. Enchanted by Khavarsultan, Tapa soon asked her father for her hand in marriage.

Khavar – as her name was shortened by her husband's family and friends – was well-liked, and quickly found her place in the Tchermoeffs' large family. As her parents' youngest child, she was somewhat spoiled, and having lost her parents at a young age she was very attached to her two sisters – Khurshid Begum[i] and Makhrukh Begum[ii]. Their bond would not be broken even by the revolution or by her relocation with her husband to Paris. Both Khurshid Begum and Makhrukh Begum later joined her there, and supported her when her marriage fell apart.

In 1914-1916 in World War I, Tapa served as an officer (captain and regimental adjutant) in the Chechen Cavalry Regiment of the Caucasian Native Cavalry Division (known as the "Savage Division"), for which he was awarded the Order of St. George IV class, among other distinctions. With the approval of her husband Khavarsultan Begum volunteered as a nurse. For dedication in her work with the Red Cross as part of Mobile Unit 22 with the Caucasian Savage Division she received in 1915 a silver medal "For Diligence" on a ribbon of the Order of St. Anne.

When the events of 1917 occurred, Tapa was in Vladikavkaz recovering from wounds received at the front. In March of that year, he was elected a member from Chechnya of the Provisional Central Committee of the Union of Mountain Peoples, whose work he also financed. It should be noted that the Azerbaijani oil magnates Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev, Murtuza Mukhtarov, and Mirza Asadullayev also supported the Union financially. In the next few years Tapa would hold a number of important positions and be entrusted with several important missions. Beginning in May 1917, he served as chairman of the Central Committee, and in July, during the anti-Ingush riots, he was the head of the Provisional Military Committee of Terek Oblast. After the official establishment of the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus in May 1918, Tapa served as the Prime Minister. He would go on to sign a treaty with the Ottoman Empire, and following the war he was sent to participate in

the Paris Peace Conference, where the republic's fate was to be decided.

In Paris Tapa was more than just an ally of the Azerbaijani delegation to the peace conference, headed by Alimardan bey Topchubashov. He was someone who could be trusted and called on for help. Topchubashov himself was a sort of *aqsaqal* ("white beard" or community elder) for the mountain peoples of the North Caucasus. Later, they would often come to him for advice or to ask him to resolve various issues and disputes between members of the North Caucasus diaspora. This demonstrated not merely an affinity between the Azerbaijani and North Caucasus diasporas, but their unity at this difficult time, when they were just beginning to settle in France, a country that was so foreign to them. Even at the plenary sessions of the "quartet" (the committee of the delegations of the four Caucasian republics – the North Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia) it was always clear that any position taken by the Azerbaijani delegation would receive the full support of the North Caucasus delegation and vice versa. Tapa also paid from his personal funds the first tranche of scholarships for Azerbaijani students at European universities.

In emigration, Tapa and Khavar had a better chance than anyone else among the North Caucasus mountain peoples to receive French citizenship, but they never requested it. They remained until their deaths citizens of Persia (Iran). Their principled support of the idea of the Mountain Peoples' Republic took precedence over any advantages they might have had if they had received French citizenship. They also refused Russian citizenship and never became members of the Russian diaspora.

In her marriage with Tapa, Khavar gave birth to one daughter, Zara (Sultanat), who died at an early age, causing a rift in her relationship with her husband. Since 1924 they lived separately. Starting that year, Tapa began living with his lover, Natasha Brailowsky (née Kanelsky), with whom he had a

daughter named Marianna. Tapa and Khavar officially divorced on March 14, 1929, which was witnessed by the private attorney of the Consul-General of the Russian Empire Leontiy Kandaurov. Khavar never married again. None of Tapa's relatives broke off relations with her after the divorce. She continued to be a welcome guest for her husband's family, who put all the blame for the divorce on him. Despite the divorce, she continued to use the name Tchermoeff.

As the now ex-wife of a man who was once rich and famous, Khavar strove to be independent of him and resolve her financial issues on her own, such as when she attempted to recuperate money that she had given away earlier. For example, in 1929 a conflict broke out between Khavar and her fellow Azerbaijani emigré madame Umm-el-Banine Assadoulaeff[iii], as reported on December 10, 1929 in the Parisian newspaper *L'action française*. In 1922, without receiving any receipt let alone a notarized document, Khavar lent Assadoulaeff the large sum of 50,000 francs. Assadoulaeff herself was from mentioned elsewhere in this text family, once well-known in Baku and Vladikavkaz and even wealthier than the Tchermoeffs, and according to Khavar, she saw no need to record the loan in writing. But according to the terms of her divorce, Tapa had no obligations towards her, and within a year Khavar was forced to turn to her old debtors and try to recuperate the money she had given them. Of course, as she suggests, she immediately remembered the not insignificant sum which she had once lent Assadoulaeff without getting a receipt. Assadoulaeff, however, refused even to discuss the money's return since, as she claimed, it had never been stipulated that she should return it. Tchermoeff sued Assadoulaeff and the case seemed so incomprehensible to the French that all of Paris's daily papers reported on it. The judge couldn't believe that someone could lend such a large sum without any promissory note or witnesses, and Tchermoeff's suit was dismissed. Probably, herself is immigrant in France Banine Assadoulaeff simply couldn't afford to pay back such a large

sum borrowed seven years earlier.

Meanwhile, Khavar tried to stay up to date on the affairs of the North Caucasus community in Paris. She continued to attend events organized by the mountain peoples' organizations, including charity events.

Life in the capital was expensive, and from the beginning of the 1930s Khavar rented a small private cottage in a secluded area 40 km outside of Paris. The address – 3 Rue Eugène Delaplanche, Combs-la-Ville, Île-de-France – is indicated in a note from Lausanne informing her of Tapa's death. Despite their divorce, Khavar was among the people whom Tapa requested to be informed in the event of his death.

Abdulmajid "Tapa" Tchermoeff died in August 1937 in Lausanne, Switzerland, and is buried in the Muslim cemetery in the Parisian suburb of Bobigny (France). Tapa may have left his first wife less than his second, but she received more than any other member of his large family – 20% of everything he owned at the time of his death. During his life, he hadn't included Khavar among those who received percentages from the profits of his stocks. However, they were shares of oil fields which were now under Bolshevik control.

When the Germans invaded France in 1940, Khavar fled the country and resettled in Lausanne, where she remained until her death. She continued to support North Caucasus publications in Europe insofar as she was able, sending money which was always accepted with gratitude by Caucasian editors in Europe.

Khavar died at 65 in Lausanne on October 14, 1953. In accordance with her wishes, her body was transported to Paris and buried in the Muslim cemetery in Bobigny in the grave of her older sister Makhrukh Begum Zolgadar (née Ibragimbekova).

Her grave is to the left of Tapa's grave. To her right are the graves of Nadir and Mirza Assadoulaeff, in the same row is the

grave of Anushirvan Zolgadorov, and in the same area is the grave of Akbar Agha Sheykhulislamov, a minister of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic and a member of Azerbaijani Delegation to the Paris Peace Conference.

Notes

[i] Khurshid Begum was born in 1881 in Vladikavkaz. She died in France and is buried in the Muslim cemetery in the Parisian suburb of Bobigny. She was married to Farrukh bey Vezirov, with whom she had a son named Alimurad bey.

[ii] Makhrukh Begum was born in 1884 in Vladikavkaz and died in France in 1949. She is buried in the Muslim cemetery in Bobigny. She was married to Allahyarbek Zolgadarov, with whom she had two sons – Rashid bey and Aliyar bey – and a daughter, Surayya Khanum.

[iii] Writer Umm-el-Banine was the daughter of Mirza Asadullayeff who was a son of Azerbaijani oil magnate Shamsi Asadullayeff. Mirza Asadullayeff served as a minister in the Government of Azerbaijani Democratic Republic (1918-1920)