

A DEMOGRAPHIC ASPECT OF THE “CIRCASSIAN ISSUE”: HISTORICAL DYNAMICS AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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Abstract: The article considers the socio-demographic results of the Caucasian War and muhajirun emigration that gave rise to the accusation of the Russian Empire of the Circassian Genocide. The authors prove that not the Caucasian war, but the emigration of Circassians due to the war (muhajirun emigration) played the main role in the sharp reduction in the number of Circassians in the 19th century. This expatriation was largely due to the choice of the Circassian population, who failed to correctly assess the systemic prospects of two future scenarios – muhajirun emigration and life in exile and staying in the historic homeland as the loyal nationals of the Russian state. The memorative policy of modern radical Circassian activists is largely determined by their intention to reinterpret the events of the Caucasian War and shift the responsibility for muhajirun emigration of Circassians on the government of the Russian Empire.

Keywords: Circassian issue, genocide, politics of memory, the Caucasian war, reproduction of population, demographic losses, muhajirun emigration, conflict.

INTRODUCTION

As noted by contemporary historians, in the second half of the twentieth century the historical memory became an object of scientific reflection, “when scientists began to understand its relation to the history of collective mentality”. The works of Halbwachs and Foucault played a major role in the development of this direction (Halbwachs, 2005; Foucault, 2002). At the present time, in a situation of the systemic political crisis of a certain state, a historical memory mechanism is actively used by government institutions and political actors for the construction of the identity, social mobilization and independence from other states or nations. The appeal to the authority of the historical science is often used to manipulate the public consciousness that perceives the point of view of a certain historian as an expression of truth and the result of collective discussion (Bourdieu, 2005). A pragmatic approach to the use of historical knowledge is currently defined as the memorative policy.

In the North Caucasus region, the “Circassian issue” is one of the pressing issues, which is placed in the historical and political discourse. The constant

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reference to this issue is initiated by representatives of the fringe group of the ethno-activists, who interpret the events of the Caucasian War of the 19th century as the Circassian genocide. This discourse updates the analysis of the demographic aspect of the Caucasian War.

A Circassian issue is a symbolic notation of a broad range of issues relevant to the Adyghe (Adygei, Kabardian and Circassian) ethnic activists, as well as more or less major groups of a number of national communities of the North-West Caucasus (NWC).

The “Circassian issue” can be conditionally divided into two problematic set of issues. The first set of issues is “general Circassian”, that includes various aspects of activities of the Circassian ethno-activists (and supporting political actors, who differ by genesis), demanding Russia to recognize the Circassian genocide during the Caucasian War; the issues related to the resettlement and naturalization of foreign Circassians in the Russian Federation (descendants of Muhajirs of the 19th century); as well as the problem of creating a united “Adyghe” republic as part of the Russian Federation that would unite Adygeya, Kabardino-Balkaria, part of the territory of Karachay-Cherkessia, certain areas of Krasnodar and Stavropol regions.

The second set of issues is associated with the internal republican issues, defined by the complex ethno-political dynamics of “two-part” Turco-Circassian national autonomies (Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia), the socio-economic contradictions between their titular nations; the conflicts generated by the limited system potential of the Adygeis incapable to achieve full social and demographic dominance in Adygea (Sushchiy, 2012).

As for the two sets of issues mentioned, the general Circassian set is currently of obvious geopolitical importance; it has received a rather wide international response and concentrates the main conflict potential dangerous to the Russian Federation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article is based on the analysis of monographic studies, conference materials and scientific journals devoted to the Circassian issue and representing different points of view on the key moments of the history of the accession of the NWC to the Russian Federation, social and demographic consequences of the Caucasian war, the causes and extent of muhajirun emigration. The principles of historicism and objectivity, a system analysis method that combines the historical, socio-demographic, ethno-political, geo-political perspectives of studying this issue have been used as the main ones in methodological terms. This integrated approach allows to explain historically the variable dynamics of the Circassian issue, transformation of its substantive agenda and sharp actualization of the Circassian issue in the post-Soviet period, more than a century later after the completion of the historical period, to the events of which the ethno-activists refer.

Main part

Formulation of the Circassian issue in its modern content diversity falls on the years of the start of the post-Soviet period and is related to a major ethno-cultural rise of this time (Patrakova, & Chernous, 2011). Since then, the "Circassian issue" in a great number of its historical aspects appears at the center of scientific and political debates. The views of certain researchers in a pointed journalistic form serve as an ideological justification for the programs of action of the republican political movements, based on the energy of "lower-class" mass nationalism (Kasumov, 1989; Kasumov, & Kasumov, 1992).

It should be emphasized that an issue of recognition of the Circassian genocide by Russia in the period of the Caucasian War, during which, according to some historians, the number of Circassians was reduced 20 times (Tsvetkov, 2010), is a central one in the general Circassian set of issues. Some ethno-activists go even further. Thus, according to Kazanokov, demographic losses were 50-fold (the population reduced from 4 million to 80 thousand people) (Kazanokov, 1998).

A serious controversial and socially detonating potential of the idea of Circassian genocide was correctly noted by many external centers of power, which since the early 1990s provided various kinds of support to the national activists. Regardless of own beliefs of ethno-activists, they were used by foreign politicians for bringing "low" pressure on Russia. At the same time, an anti-Russian interpretation of historical events served as an effective tool. The problem of the Circassian genocide in the 19th century went beyond a purely academic discussion. And this analysis perspective soon became dominant (Ryabtsev, 2012). The formulation of the problem of changing the administrative-territorial organization of the life of contemporary Circassian societies of the North-West Caucasus (NWC) also contributed to this tendency. The Circassian national "revival" of the late twentieth century gave rise to a centripetal ethno-political movement, the main objective which was the administrative unification of all Circassian autonomies.

But starting from the very beginning of this movement, a utopian nature of practical implementation of such project has been revealed, primarily due to the need to resolve territorial disputes with other ethnic communities. The two-part titular structure of the Circassian regions (Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia) excluded the possibility of the compromise administrative reorganization, as was evidenced by the previous experience of the twenties of the twentieth century (Matishov *et al.*, 2012).

The ethno-linguistic map of this region in the mid-twenties shows that it is practically impossible to implement the project of creating a unified Circassian region – the Kabardian area is cut off from the "Abazino-Circassian" area with a wide strip of the Karachay settlement system (Tsutsiev, 2006). The areas of the close-together habitation of Adyghe-Circassians, having further become a part of Adyghea, are geographically limited areas within the dense area of the East Slavic settlement.

Thus, the Circassians lost an opportunity to create a common autonomy during the Caucasian War and further mass migration of the highlanders to Ottoman Porte; already at that time, a unified system of their settlement split into enclaves. Understanding of this makes the Circassian activists again and again appeal to the history of the 19th century, to the issue of the Caucasian War and muhajirun emigration, as well as reinterpret historical events, emphasizing the demographic consequences of the Caucasian War for the Circassians. Therefore, the historical reconstruction of demographic processes requires conducting a special analysis. Even the most balanced assessment of the Circassian population dynamics in the first-second third of the 19th century is an inevitable statement of their multiple quantitative reduction. However, beyond this very general conclusion, the most serious disagreements occur among researchers of this broad theme. An issue of the ratio of the contribution of the Caucasian War and muhajirun emigration to the process of a radical ethnic-demographic transformation of the NWC remains acutely controversial.

Demographic realities of the Caucasian war and the dynamics of the Circassian population in the 19th century.

The demography of the Circassians in the second half of 18th-19th centuries is an area of scientific knowledge, allowing to make only rough estimates. Highlanders did not collect statistics of their population; any attempts of the Russian authorities to conduct a census have always frustrated. Tornau, one of the first researchers of this theme, states: “All estimates, which meant the Caucasian population, were rough and approximate. According to the highlanders, counting people was not only completely useless, but even sinful; that is why they resisted a census anywhere they could or told lies, if they could not resist” (Sheudzhen *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, the available estimates of the size of the Circassian population prior to the Caucasian War vary in a very wide quantitative range – according to Zubov, the Circassians amounted to about 250 thousand people (Budai, 2010), while Rushdie estimated about 6 million people (Zafesov, 2012). This almost 25-time difference should warn serious researchers against any “radical” conclusions.

Taking into account that an actual figure is within the designated range, its quantitative gradation by a number of “estimators” is of interest. The analysis of 33 demographic estimates of the Adyghe-Circassians population in more recent studies shows that seven of them fixed the population in the range of 200-307 thousand people; other seven estimates – in the range of 350-505 million people; six estimates – in the range of 600-900 thousand people; three estimates – 1-1.1 million people, four estimates – 1.5-2 million people; and two estimates indicate the following ranges: 2.3-3 million; 3.5-4 million; 4.8-6.0 million people. If both the lowest estimates and unlikely figures are ignored, a significantly wide range of 0.6-1.1 million people remains, which, obviously, should be taken into account.

The intensity of the hostilities on the NWC was not a constant value. The armed resistance of highlanders continued for decades. Detailed periodization of the entire Caucasian war from this perspective is an independent and rather time-consuming task. But, in a first approximation, based on the scale of human losses, two main periods can be distinguished in the history of the "Western" (Adygei-Cherkess) frontline: the first third of the 19th century (1801-1833) and the subsequent decades of the Caucasian war (prior to 1859).

During the first period, the activity of the armed hostilities remained mainly low, which resulted in limited losses of the Circassian population. In August, 1825 the Circassians reported to the Anapa Pasha a figure of 25.2 thousand compatriots killed by the Russians for 25 years of war in Kuban and Terek (Sheudzhen *et al.*, 2004). In other words, the annual loss of the Circassian communities was within a thousand people. At the same time, a traditional type of the demographic reproduction associated with early marriage and the engagement in the reproductive activity by almost the whole female population, allowed to maintain a simple reproduction of the population. Taking into account that fertility in traditional societies not limited by planning is about 5-5.5% (50-55 ppm) (Kabuzan, 1996), the annual increase in the Circassian population could amount to almost 30-55 thousand people at that time.

It is even conceivable that the quantitative dynamics of the most regional communities of the NWC highlanders in the first quarter (one-third) of the 19th century did not almost differ from its normal dynamic circuit typical of all previous periods. Upon conditions of the dense multi-ethnic habitation and the need to firmly defend the interests of their community, the life of highlanders has almost always been associated with certain "battle" losses, high mortality of the population because of the tribal clashes, epidemics and crop failures. Widely practiced slave trade was also the reason of the demographic losses (representatives of other Circassian tribes captured during skirmishes and raids were sold to the Ottoman Empire).

The population loss becomes more noticeable with the intensification of the armed hostilities in the second period of the Caucasian war; both sides suffered from losses. Some kind of a watershed falls on 1833-1834. Upon the calculations of Bizhev, in 1830 the total loss of the royal army in the Circassian "flank" amounted to 120 people, while in 1834 – already 789 people (Sheudzhen *et al.*, 2004). The average annual losses of the Russian army in the NWC in 1830-1833 accounted for 320 people and in the 1834-1840 they increased up to 984 people (i.e. more than three times). There is no doubt that the losses of the Circassian side had to grow up by several times. Upon the calculations of Dubrovin, the total loss of the Circassian population (killed in the fighting and during punitive expeditions of the royal troops) amounted to 211.5 thousand people in 1835-1858 (Sheudzhen *et al.*, 2004). If we take into account these figures, the average loss of the Circassian communities in this period was in the range of 8.5-9.0 thousand people, a much more substantial figure than in the first quarter of the century.

Such scale was to have a major impact on the quantitative dynamics of the Circassian communities, often resulting in the narrowed demographic reproduction. However, it must be considered that the most of the deceased, even at a young age (i.e. people who could not attain the age of 30-35 years) could leave their offspring. The developed nepotism and tribal mutual assistance allowed the families left without a breadwinner to raise children. That is why a population shortfall due to the major battle casualties could soon be pieced out by the next generation of young highlanders. Even significantly decreased in size, many mountain communities in the subsequent years could, if not completely, but at least partially, compensate for a decline with a new rapid demographic growth.

According to our calculations, the indicated birth rate (50-55 ppm per year) allowed a natural increase in the periods of temporary “peacemaking” to reach annual 2.5-3%. In other words, several years of a relatively peaceful life were enough to increase the demographic potential of some mountain communities by 15-20%. A gender-age structure of the Adygeyan Hadzhimukovskoye village should be noted as an example. In the 1880s, there were 1,253 children aged under 10 years old (36.5%) of 3,431 inhabitants of this village (Budai, 2010). For comparison, today in the largest North Caucasian peoples (Chechens, Ingush, Avar, Dargin) this children age generation comprises no more than 19-22% of the total population. The gender composition of the village is also indicative – men accounted for 53% of the population (1,813 people) of the Hadzhimukovskoye village. The quantitative dominance of the male population was typical for the vast majority of other Circassian villages of that time (for example, the dominance of the male population was fixed in 27 of 32 mountain villages located in the Ekaterinodar Area and, in general, men accounted for 52% of the village residents) (The List of Villages of the Ekaterinodar Area with the Indication of the Number of Residents in Each of Them as of January 1, 1891 and the Number of Residents Who Expressed Their Desire to Resettle into Turkey in April 1889, n.d.). In other words, no gender imbalance due to the Caucasian War and the high mortality of men could be fixed. Either these losses were initially small, or 25 years were enough not only to compensate for them, but also to obtain significant surplus male population.

Taking into account all the limitations of the historical and demographic reconstruction in this North Caucasus region, the available data make it possible to conclude with certainty that there was no “radical” reduction in the number of Circassians in the first half of the 19th century. And by the final part of the Caucasian War, the demographic potential was almost the same as of the beginning of the war. Certainly, this does not exclude the possibility of considerable losses of the Circassian population (up to 15-25% of the pre-war population size). But even such losses maintained a quantitative format of the Circassian community, which does not allow to talk about the ethnic genocide that took place during the war.

Thus, in the early 1860s the number of Circassians in the NWC could be around 0.6-1.1 million people. And, as previously, their population size could be comparable with the total population of all other North Caucasian communities (according to Kabuzan, the total population of Caucasians – “non-Circassians” amounted to about 750 thousand people in 1858) (Kabuzan, 1996). After less than a decade, only a few tens of thousands of the Circassian population left in the Caucasus. Thus, we can talk about a demographic catastrophe associated with large-scale emigration, turning out to be the most tragic page in the history of the Circassian community.

The available estimates of the scale of the muhajirun emigration also vary in almost a mathematical order – a range from 400 thousand to 3.1 million people. The order proportionality of the pre-war Circassian population and the scale of muhajirun emigration is another indirect evidence that the main demographic losses of the Circassians in the 19th century were connected with their emigration, not with the Caucasian war.

Circassian genocide: pro & contra

According to the UN General Assembly Convention, adopted upon the Resolution No. 60 of December 9, 1948, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, religious or other historically established cultural-ethnic group as such (Convention on Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 1946).

Genocide policy is aimed at denial to accept the right to exist of any ethnic group. In other words, genocide cannot be “endured”, it is impossible to adapt to it. If a community preserves its right to life and the conditions of existence are agreed (for example, a place of community living, a settlement form, kinds of activities, etc.), this is an infringement of the rights of this community, but not its fundamental destruction. The Empire sought political loyalty of the highlanders and was interested in the reduction of the “restless” mountain population, but not in their destruction. This can be evidenced by the involvement of highlanders onto the side of the Empire during the war, their provision with military training, serving as officers (Tsvetkov, 2011). Stimulation of emigration at its early stages was due to the fact that after half a century of hostilities a significant part of Russian administrators engaged in various aspects of the NWC integration in the Empire, no longer believed in the ability of highlanders to become its loyal citizens. In such situation, their departure seemed the best solution, both for the immigrants and for the state they left.

It is revealing that at this stage the highlanders had a choice: either to accept the conditions offered to them (including moving into new areas of residence) or to go to Turkey; for this purpose, they were even given some relocation allowance. There was a dilemma of choosing between two risky and uncertain strategies.

The activities of numerous Turkish emissaries, engaged in “advertising” to the highlanders the life in their new homeland, played a significant role in this fateful choice. It is significant that vast majority of Muhajirs came from the NWC, which was located in the area of maximum influence of the Ottoman Porte. At a comparable population, 87-88% of all immigrants came from the Adygei-Cherkess subregion (including 6% of the Kuban Nogais), while the Chechens, Ossetians and other representatives of the central and eastern Caucasus communities accounted only for 12-13% (Sheudzhe *et al.*, 2004).

The position of the Circassian secular nobility and clergy, a significant part of whom at that time wanted to depart for several reasons, played a major role. As a result, the most significant part of the Circassian communities chose emigration. Each stage of emigration was attended by large-scale human losses – the way to the Black Sea ports, waiting for transport, moving to Turkey, settling in various provinces of the Porte.

The imperial power faced with the mass exodus of the indigenous population, introduced a restriction of emigration since 1865 and then prohibited it in 1867. The number of remaining Circassians in the last decades of the imperial period significantly increased (for the period of 1897-1926, their number in the South of Russia rose from 43 thousand up to 64.2 thousand people). It is indicative that the tragic pages of the Circassian history of the first half – the middle of the 19th century were not defined as genocide in the Russian historiography.

This definition was introduced for scientific use by republican researchers only at the turn of the 1990s. An established public organization “Circassian International Association” (ICA) introduced this concept in the political discourse. Initially, this occurs at the regional level: genocide in the early 1990s was recognized by the authorities of Kabardino-Balkaria and Adygeya. In 1994, the ICA becomes a member of the international organization UNPO (Unrepresented Peoples Organization) operating under the auspices of the UNO and bringing together more than 50 peoples that do not have their own state. Since 1997, an issue of the Circassian genocide started to be discussed at the international political level by various UNO commissions and committees.

RESULTS

It should be emphasized that the actions accompanied by mass deaths of civilians of the colonized peoples in the 19th century are widely represented in the practice of almost all western countries engaged in the expansion of their territory. However, in none of these cases a fact of genocide has been recognized by the world community and not even been brought up for discussion by the authoritative international political structures and institutions. Therefore, bringing up the Circassian problem for discussion at the international level can be explained by geopolitical interests

of the powerful political players. However, the radicalism of the position of ethno-activists is not supported in the republics. Opinion polls show that a resource of the active public support of the activist movement is rather limited both in the Russian republics and in foreign diasporas. Unlike the radicals, the main part of the Circassian activists is focused on the dialogue with the authorities and obtaining their preferences.

CONCLUSIONS

The available data of modern science, despite the fragmentation and some inconsistency, allow to make a conclusion that the overall demographic potential of Circassian communities of the NWC was maintained throughout the Caucasian War. Such factors as a traditional type of population reproduction, early marriage and possession of many children allowed Circassians to adapt to the wartime conditions and restore the population size, despite the excessive mortality. The most of demographic losses and the subsequent radical transformation of the national structure of the NWC population were associated with a significant share of emigration of the Adyghe-Circassians to Turkey. Moreover, such emigration was largely due to the free choice of the Circassians, who could not properly evaluate the historical perspectives of two future scenarios – muhajirun emigration (exile) and stay in their historical homeland as the loyal cast of the Russian state.

However, the lack of accurate data on the dynamics of the Circassian population in the NWC in the second half of 18th-19th centuries forms the basis for the ideological speculation on the demographical issues during the Caucasian War, which are far from the academic discourse. A geopolitical dimension of this topic ensures its active use for the practical ethno-political and geo-political purposes by different actors using the Circassian issue as an instrument of pressure on Russia.

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