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**OSSETES IN OTTOMAN ANATOLIA:
RESETTLEMENT AND CONSTRUCTION OF A DIASPORIC HOMELAND
(THE SECOND HALF OF THE XIX–THE BEGINNING OF THE XX C.)**

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**ОСЕТИНЫ В ОСМАНСКОЙ АНАТОЛИИ:
ПОСЕЛЕНИЕ И КОНСТРУИРОВАНИЕ ДИАСПОРНОЙ РОДИНЫ
(ВТОРАЯ ПОЛОВИНА XIX–НАЧАЛО XX В.)**

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Abstract. The article examines the processes of immigration (muhajirism) of Ossetes to the Ottoman Empire in the mid-XIX century and their subsequent internal migrations in Eastern and Central Anatolia. It evaluates the specifics of economic, social, and ethno-political adaptation and integration of the migrants and the construction of their own socio-cultural diasporic space in their new homeland. Particular attention is paid to the characteristics of the relationships of Ossetes with the indigenous population of the regions of settlement and with other North Caucasian muhajirs.

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются процессы иммиграции (мухаджирства) осетин в Османскую империю в середине XIX в. и их последующих внутренних миграций в Восточной и Центральной Анатолии. Оценивается специфика экономической, социальной и этнополитической адаптации и интеграции переселенцев и конструирования ими собственного социокультурного диаспорного пространства на новой родине. Особое внимание уделяется характеристике взаимоотношений осетин с коренным населением регионов поселения и с другими мухаджирами-северокавказцами.

Keywords: ossetes, Ottoman Empire, Anatolia, migration, colonization, adaptation.

Ключевые слова: осетины, Османская империя, Анатолия, миграция, колонизация, адаптация.

The migration of the Ossetes to the Ottoman Middle East took place as part of a much larger phenomenon, namely the mass exodus/expulsion of the Caucasus mountain peoples to the Ottoman Empire in the final phase of the Russo-Caucasian War, the so-called muhajir movement (Russ. mukhadzhirstvo, Turk. muhaceret from Arabic hejere ‘to emigrate’). The resettlement of Ossetes, generally occurring in common with the other North-Central Caucasian peoples (the eastern Adiges (Kabardians), Chechens, and Ingushis), started immediately after the defeat of Imam Shamil’s resistance movement in 1859 and continued in small waves up to 1862. A small number of Ossetes also moved to Anatolia in 1865, after which time there was only sporadic migration [1, 2].

Unlike the Northwest Caucasus and specifically Circassia and Abkhazia, in Ossetia the relocation was not a result of an official policy aimed at expelling the indigenous population. Although in the historical memory of more recent diaspora generations, reasons such as the ‘desire to preserve the Muslim faith’ and ‘unwillingness to live under the Russian rule’ habitually appear as

the dominant motives of their ancestors' decision to leave the Caucasus [3; 4], the actual causes of the displacement were more complex. The muhajir movement emerged in Ossetia rather as a reaction on the part of some segments of local traditional society to the strengthening of the military-colonial regime and the imposition, within the framework of Russian agrarian reforms, of an imperial version of social modernization. It is no coincidence that the main advocates and organizers of the resettlement were members of the Islamized feudal-patriarchal elite faced with a real prospect of losing their lands, privileges, and control over dependent classes [5]. Their agitation was heeded by a part of the Muslim Ossete peasants alarmed by exaggerated rumors of enforced Christianization, conscription to the Russian army, and Cossack colonization in Ossetia [5; 6]. However, since Islam was not dominant among the peasantry, the total number of migrants proved comparatively low, with no more than 5,000 persons [1] or approximately 5% of the Ossete population of the time, which contrasted sharply with Circassian and Abkhazian lands devastated by forced migration to the Ottoman Empire.

The social composition of the Ossete muhajirs also showed a specific social and class character. A disproportionately large percentage of them, perhaps up to a quarter, belonged to the hereditary nobility, including several dozen Russian army officers who had resigned in order to relocate to Turkey, as well as some former fellow soldiers of Imam Shamil [7]. The bulk of migrating free peasants were apparently dominated by the wealthier and active elements, anxious about the infringement of their positions by the Tsarist administration [6]. A small minority of the emigrants was made up of serfs and slaves who had forcibly or voluntarily followed their masters. It should be noted that not the least of the incentives for relocation seems to be the Muslim mountaineers' greatly idealized representation of the Ottoman Empire ('the country of Istanbul') as a powerful and prosperous state under the just and merciful Sultan-Caliph ready to bestow benefits on his co-religionists, a view reflected, inter alia, in the contemporary folk songs [5]. With those naive expectations were linked, on the other hand, the hopes of the Ottoman victory in the next war against Russia and subsequent return of the muhajirs to their liberated homes [3; 6].

As distinct from the disastrous Circassian and Abkhazian deportations, the Ossete migrations were carried out for the most part not by sea but overland in a fairly orderly manner, allowing them to minimize human losses and with relative safety to transport the livestock and other property to Ottoman territory, where the immigrants were provided with certain material assistance by the Porte. According to the oral tradition, the leaders of Ossete muhajirs were favorably received in Istanbul by the Sultan's officials, who invited them to choose the place of settlement by themselves. After crossing much of Anatolia, they finally chose the locality of Sarıkamış in the sanjak (district) of Kars, which appeared attractive to them due to the similarity of its wooded mountain landscape with the Caucasus, geographic isolation and sparse population, as well as its proximity to the Russian border [3].

The last consideration was of particular importance, since a significant number of the migrants, disenchanted with the socio-economic and environmental realities discovered in the Ottoman domains, had intended to return home, and only the closure of the border by the Russians in 1861 (after some 90 Ossete families had crossed it in the opposite direction) forced the discontented to abandon the idea of return migration [5]. Thus, by the 1860s nearly all Ossete muhajirs had settled in the area, creating about 30 separate villages. In subsequent years in Sarıkamış, which was reorganized into a separate kaza (township) after this influx of population, several colonies of other migrants from the Caucasus (Kabardians, Chechens, and Dagestanis) emerged [4].

According to British intelligence officer Fred Burnaby, who visited Sarıkamış in 1876, the area was populated by 1,005 North Caucasian ('Circassian') families [8], that is, up to 6,000-7,000

people, the bulk of them obviously Ossete. This dense settlement cluster was, however, essentially destroyed after less than two decades as a result of the annexation of the Kars region by Russia following the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878. After this, the overwhelming majority of Sarıkamış Ossetes preferred to migrate to the Ottoman interior, dividing in the course of this movement into several factions.

As a consequence of the move of one such group from Kars southwards, a significant Ossete community emerged in the early 1880s in the central part of the East Anatolian Plateau. In the sanjaks of Muş, Bitlis, and Siirt, at least ten Ossete villages were established but in a more dispersed fashion than formerly in Sarıkamış. According to the evidence of Russian intelligence officer Aleksey Kolyubakin, no less than 1,500 Ossetes were residing within the sanjak of Muş alone by the late 1880s [9]. As before, Ossete villages here neighbored Dagestani, Chechen, and Adige settlements [10; 11].

Another group migrated westward from the Kars region to Central Anatolia, settling there in a still more dispersed way, although against the background of a quite numerous array of the older Adige and Abkhaz-Abazin colonies. From the 1880s, about a dozen settlements of Ossetes were established in the sanjaks of Sivas, Tokat, Yozgat, Kayseri, Niğde, and Maraş, some jointly with other Caucasian peoples [10; 11].

Finally, in the same period, a small party of Ossetes reached Ottoman Syria, founding no less than two villages in the vicinity of Quneitra [12].

As for the Ossetes who remained in the Kars region, a certain number of them moved back to Ossetia during the period of Russian rule while maintaining their Ottoman citizenship. Yet, after the restoration of Kars to Turkey in 1921, nearly all of them or their descendants, fearing Bolshevik repression, once again resettled in their old villages in Sarıkamış [7; 13]. Later on, the Turkish government also relocated some Ossete families from Muş and Bitlis to the area [3]. These reverse migrations partly reinvigorated the Sarıkamış community, although the number of Ossete settlements there never exceeded five thereafter.

The abovementioned description of a more than 60-year period of migrations and wanderings of the Ossete muhajirs resulted in the formation of their final settlement in the Ottoman countryside and coincided with the process of their adaptation to the new circumstances.

As in the Caucasus, the economy of Anatolian Ossete communities was based largely on farming. Yet, the significantly lower soil fertility and relative scarcity of water in most of the settlement areas, especially in the eastern parts of the country, restricted opportunities for effective agriculture. Thus, in Sarıkamış only wheat, barley, potatoes, and some vegetables were grown, yielding a harvest barely sufficient for the settlers' own needs. Somewhat preferable were the natural conditions of the Muş valley, but there too the colonists, lacking the specific agricultural skills of the local Armenian, Kurdish, and Turkish peasants, were distinctly inferior to them in agrarian production. Such a situation urged the settlers to consider alternative forms of economic livelihood. For instance, an important source of income for the Sarıkamış Ossetes from the early weeks of their settlement was the harvesting of timber for sale in Kars and Erzurum, which maintained its significance until the local forests had been nearly completely exhausted by the beginning of the XX century [3].

n Muş and Bitlis, rather profitable, if risky, tobacco smuggling went on [9]. Animal-drawn cartage of people and goods also gained some ground among Ossetes. In many instances settlers were able to purchase with funds they had brought from the homeland, in addition to the land provided to them by the government, vast tracts of arable fields that were subsequently rented to members of the local population. Thus, the majority of residents of the 'aristocratic' Ossete village

of Hulik in the Bitlis sanjak never actually directly worked the soil but hired landless Kurdish and Turkmen peasants for the purpose [4].

The major source of wealth of the muhajirs was founded, nonetheless, on livestock breeding, facilitated by their traditional skills of mountain and sub-mountain pastoralism and the abundance of quality pastures in Eastern and Central Anatolia. In terms of cattle numbers per person, the settlers competed with nomadic Kurds, while in horse breeding they surpassed all neighboring native groups. Horses and livestock were also the primary exports of the Ossete colonies. During the first decades of their settlement, the Ossetes, in close cooperation with other North Caucasians, managed to establish several routes of cattle and horse trade between Kars-Sivas and Damascus, with some of the animals being brought from the Russian Caucasus [3; 9].

In the Ottoman era, this greatly contributed to the growth of a prosperous class among Ossetes. At the same time, a small but significant percentage of the settlers appear to have been involved in cattle and horse stealing, also organized along ethnic lines [14].

Soon after settlement, the Ossetes began to demonstrate their aspiration to enter the military and, less frequently, civilian state service, to which they were generally encouraged by the authorities. Most immigrant commissioned officers were immediately enrolled in the Ottoman army, preserving the ranks they held in Russia, while the most renowned of them, Musa Paşa (Kundukhov), was given the rank of mirliva (brigadier general) [6].

Further, dozens of young people from the noble classes were accepted by prestigious military and administrative schools in Istanbul. Simultaneously, quite a number of Ossetes of different social backgrounds saw service in military garrisons, the gendarmerie, and in government bodies in their local areas. Thus, as early as 1860, five hundred newly arrived Caucasian muhajirs were recruited to guard frontier posts along the Russian border in the Kars sanjak, while during the war of 1877-1878, the Ossetes of Sarikamış, the epicenter of hostilities, fought against the Russians within the 'Circassian' and 'Dagestani' irregular cavalry units under the command of Musa Paşa and Gazi Muhammed Paşa, the son of Imam Shamil [5; 15].

On the other hand, as late as 1904, the government formed a special mobile gendarme force from Circassian (predominantly Ossete) immigrants residing in the Bulanık kaza of the Muş sanjak of the vilayet (province) of Bitlis 'as a check on the turbulence of the Kurds' [16].

The relationships between Ossetes and indigenous communities varied significantly across Anatolia. The most conflict-free nature they had in the provinces of Central Anatolia, where the immigrants were settled in areas with the relatively high level of socio-economic and cultural development and a rather homogeneous Turkish Muslim sedentary population. In the Kars region, on the contrary, Ossetes were directly adjacent to newly settled or semi-nomadic Muslim groups who were themselves recent migrants from the Russian Transcaucasus (Karapapaks and other Turkmens) or the interior of Anatolia (Kurds, some Turks). Yet, the fact that these groups had no traditional or legal rights to lands allotted to the North Caucasians essentially minimized reciprocal friction. Although on their arrival in the district, Ossetes in several cases had to resort to a display of armed force to bolster their right to the allocated lands [3], before long their relations with the Muslim neighbors, partly through official mediation, assumed a generally peaceful character. However, during the Russian rule in Kars, recurring small-scale conflict broke out between Ossetes, who were rather pro-Ottoman in attitude, and local Armenians and Greeks who usually enjoyed Russian protection [3].

The Ossetes' situation was far more complicated on the East Anatolian Plateau, where the central authority was extremely weak and the centuries-old system of oppression and exploitation (in the form of feudal-patriarchal 'patronage') of some groups by others was still prevalent. At the top of this hierarchical system, which has been described by the numerous contemporary observers,

were situated nomadic Kurdish tribes, followed by sedentary and non-tribal Kurds and other Muslim communities, while Armenians and other Christians occupied the lowest position [9].

The chiefs of Kurdish nomadic tribes, who controlled most of the region's countryside, initially regarded the immigrants as a natural object for asserting their 'sovereign' claims, especially as the settlers frequently were installed in villages, only recently abandoned by Armenians previously subject to Kurdish feudal lords. Nonetheless, due to the effective mutual resistance organized by the Caucasians, their better military qualifications and equipment, as well as occasional support from the provincial administrations, the newcomers soon managed to gain a foothold in the local hierarchy at a senior level, which provided full autonomy in their internal affairs and respect for their personal freedom and dignity [9], albeit sometimes combined with a nominal 'vassalage' to the most powerful tribes [4].

However, there is considerable evidence that the immigrants pursued a quite independent local policy even if it ran counter to the interests of their formal 'overlords.' A dispute occurring in 1893 between the Ossetes settled in the Simo village of Muş and the Kurdish Sipkan tribe provides one example of the type of relations that existed among North Caucasian settlers and the local communities. The dispute arose when the Ossetes accepted an offer by Armenians living in the neighboring village of Lapbudak to act as a paid escort to an Armenian convoy intent on migrating to Russia, despite the presence of Kurds along the route. When the latter raided the convoy with the intention of looting, the Ossetes fulfilled their promise, stopping the assault by killing a number of attackers and escorting the convoy safely to the Russian border. The Sipkans later carried out a revenge attack against the village of Simo, in which more than twenty people, mostly Kurdish tribesmen, were killed in a conflict that lasted several days [17]. While it is true that the Ossetes were paid for these efforts, the opportunity for them to expand their rather limited living space into the lands newly abandoned by the Armenians was likely to have provided greater motivation than any monetary compensation, a fact confirmed when Lapbudak village was settled by Ossetes.

As a rule, Ossete colonies presented rather isolated and, to a certain degree, exclusive communities, usually demonstrating a relatively low level of interaction with the world outside, mainly as a result of the substantial differences in the cultural composition of the settlers and indigenous populations. The immigrants often considered unacceptable and reprehensible the standards of hygiene, healthcare, nutrition, and housing that prevailed among the rural population, especially in eastern areas of Anatolia, as well as the existing rules of social, domestic, and interpersonal etiquette, which contradicted the patriarchal morals of Caucasian mountaineers largely based on a martial code of honor. Particularly noted grounds for censure included, for example, the natives' submissiveness, obsequiousness, lack of respect for the elders and women, 'rude manners,' and so on. These attitudes, along with a firm sense of their own superiority, largely contributed to the establishment of a somewhat supercilious view of the local populace among Ossetes, further reinforced by the provincial administrations' clearly preferential treatment of the immigrants as a 'stabilizing and civilizing' factor vis-à-vis the natives [4]. For their part, the Ossetes' adaptation strategies from the beginning presupposed maximum close contact and cooperation with the local civil, military, and religious officials. Generally, the neighboring groups also recognized the higher social and cultural status of the Caucasian settlers, regarding them with a marked deference mixed at times with misgiving [4].

In essence, the Ossete colonies formed islets, where the settlers, in a nearly complete separation from their cultural 'metropolis' (that is, Ossetia or, more broadly, the Caucasus), sought to construct a diasporic model of the world abandoned in the homeland. From the outset, villages were planned in accordance with the traditional principles of clan- and caste-based settlement, while domestic architecture and organization of the living and farming space reproduced the Caucasian

patterns as far as the environmental conditions permitted. The weakening of the power of the nobility, already underway in Russia, continued at a rapid pace after the migration through the special efforts of the Porte to destroy the feudal structure of the Caucasian groups by enabling, for example, their privileged members to settle separately from their subjects in the capital and other major cities. Therefore, the internal life of the communities was regulated chiefly by more democratic institutions, namely the elected councils of elders, that also acted as mediatory courts to deal with internal conflicts on the basis of customary law [3]. The muhajirs were particularly scrupulous in observing traditional norms and etiquette of behavioral and ceremonial culture that performed the function of consolidating communities and maintaining their collective identity. Ossetic remained the major or sole language of communication within the settlements. An obvious marker of identity was also the regular practice, both within and beyond their settlements, of wearing the Caucasian mountaineer costume (with the indispensable long dagger), all of its elements, including the cloth, being manufactured manually by the village women [9].

However, the religious sphere underwent a striking transformation, being placed under special supervision of the Ottoman authorities, who ensured the construction of mosques in the immigrant villages and the appointment of imams, usually not from among the settlers themselves. Under the influence of the intense confessional 'enlightenment,' non-Islamic elements were completely expelled from the public and spiritual life of Anatolian Ossetes. This included the early elimination of ritual feasts associated with the use of traditional beer and grain spirits, the residual reverence of Christian and pre-Christian saints, and some other features of the syncretic religious culture of their declaredly Muslim compatriots in the Caucasus. At the same time, despite their effective Islamization, manifestations of bigotry and sectarianism, or such outward signs of religious piety as veiling of women and other forms of gender segregation, never took any noticeable hold among the settlers, at times giving rise to the perception of them as 'doubtful Muslims' by their local coreligionists. Moreover, in certain conservative areas, for example, in the vicinity of the Yozgat district, characteristic features of Ossete social culture, such as collective dancing of men and women on ceremonial occasions, were also the object of condemnation on the part of outsiders. Generally, the impact of Islamic tenets on the Ossete traditional institutions appears to have been more profound in the predominantly orthodox Sunni Turkish regions of Central Anatolia compared to the confessionally and ethnically heterogeneous eastern provinces where the official religious ideology was relatively weak.

Cultural factors accounted for the quite rigid observance by Anatolian Ossetes of intra-ethnic endogamy as well. Moreover, because of the small number of groups, the normally strict bans on marriages between members of clans of different traditional status (that is, noble, free, and unfree), as well as between members of related clans, were gradually lifted in order to expand the range of potential conjugal partners [3]. On the other hand, even between geographically remote Ossete communities, there was some degree of intermarriage, which, along with the cooperation in the livestock trade, constituted an important means and, at the same time, a purpose for maintaining relationships among them.

Of a completely special nature were the Ossetes' relationships with the other North Caucasian groups, with whom they shared similar social, cultural, and ethical norms and attitudes and a common historic experience. The Caucasian immigrants of different ethnic affiliation were considered by Ossetes as acceptable and, when compared with the indigenous population, preferable as business or marital partners. In some cases, strong allied relations emerged between adjacent Ossete and non-Ossete muhajir settlements, as, for example, between the Ossete village of Poyrazlı and the Abazin village of Osmaniye in Yozgat [4].

In the Muş-Bitlis region, an informal confederacy bringing together over twenty Chechen, Dagestani, Ossete, and Adige villages under a common leader was recorded by the end of the XIX century [18].

There is no doubt that even at the initial stage of Ossete immigration, there took shape an overarching North-Caucasian supra-ethnic identity, partly stimulated by the undifferentiated Ottoman perception of all Caucasian mountaineers as a single people, namely Circassians. This manifested itself in the spread of the custom among Anatolian Ossetes, while speaking in Turkish, of referring to themselves as Circassians (Çerkez), to their native tongue as Circassian (Çerkezce), and to their country of origin and outcome as the Caucasus (Kafkas) rather than Ossetia. As a more narrow self-identification in Turkish, Ossetes shortly after the resettlement embraced their customary name in Adigean Kuşha, along with the aural form of their Russian ethnonym Asetin, also imported from the Caucasus by the polyglot muhajir masses, even if in Ossetic they were consistent in using their abovementioned original ethnonyms. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for Ossetes in Anatolia to be proficient in one or more Caucasian languages, as well as for their neighboring Caucasians to speak Ossetic. Cases of cultural and linguistic assimilation of minor Ossete communities by more numerous groups of the Circassians proper, that is, Adiges, are known also: thus, the Ossetes of the villages of Fındık and Batmantaş in Maraş and Tokat sanjaks, respectively, took up the Kabardian dialect of the Adige language at a fairly early stage while continuing to preserve an awareness of their Ossete descent.

In conclusion, we can say that migrations from Ossetia to the Ottoman Empire occurred chiefly between 1859 and 1865, in line with the broader process of relocation of the North Caucasus mountaineers following the final subjugation of the region by Russia. Gradually several clusters of Ossete colonies took shape on Ottoman soil located mainly in eastern and central Anatolia and Syria. In all these areas, Ossetes neighbored and closely cooperated with fellow North Caucasian immigrant peoples and thus formed an integral part of the Middle Eastern Circassian supra-ethnic entity. By contrast, they were generally involved in a relatively limited social and cultural interaction with the indigenous population, maintaining 'working' contacts principally with local administrations. For this reason, in the Ottoman period, Anatolian Ossetes formed a rather exclusive community, persistently tending to reproduce in diaspora a micro-model of the customary traditional milieu of their homeland.

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