



Religious and National Identity of the Meskhetian Turks in the Conditions of Changing Statehood

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Abstract

Meskhetian Turks are a Turkish-speaking ethnic group, which lived in Georgia until 1944. The origins of this ethnic group is a matter of academic dispute. Since their beginnings, they have been under the influence of many cultures due to their location on the borders of the Christian and the Muslim worlds. In 1944, they were forced to leave Georgia and were displaced and dispersed throughout the territory of the Soviet Union, mainly to Central Asia. There are currently around 350–600 thousand Meskhetian Turks scattered all over the world. They are the only ethnic group which did not gain permission from the Soviet authorities to return to their homeland of Georgia. The deportation is the most tragic event in the history and collective memory of Meskhetian Turks which has directly affected their traditions, their religiousness, and their religious and national identity. The aim of this paper is to analyse how these events and the present situation have influenced and reshaped religious and national identity of Meskhetian Turks as well as their traditions in the Soviet and post-Soviet period.

Keywords: religious identity, national identity, Meskhetian Turks, Islam, Muslims of Georgia, deportation, Turkey, homeland

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość religijna, tożsamość narodowa, Turcy meschetyńscy, islam, gruzińscy muzułmanie, deportacja, Turcja, ojczyzna

Introduction

The Meskhetian Turks originally resided in Georgia and from their earliest years, they were under the influence of many cultures due to their location on the borders of the Christian and the Muslim worlds, contested by the Ottoman Empire in the

sixteenth century, and by the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. Actually, it is their geopolitical location that has caused a number of serious events that have led to their tragic past which is still affecting and shaping their religiousness, identity and traditions.

The aim of this paper is to analyse how the tragic past of the Meskhetian Turks, particularly their deportation, has influenced and reshaped their religious and national identity as well as their traditions in the Soviet and post-Soviet period.

The first part of this article briefly describes the history of Meskhetian Turks that has largely shaped the current fate of this ethnic group and their religiousness and traditions. The second part is an account of conditions that the Meskhetian Turks are facing in their countries of residence and how it shapes their national identity, which is based on the example of Turkey.

Who are Meskhetian Turks?

Meskhetian Turks are a Turkish-speaking ethnic group, which until 1944 lived in a part of Georgia called Meskheta or Samtskhe, which is located in the territory of the present-day southern Georgia region Samtskhe-Javakheti, which borders Turkey.¹

The origins of this ethnic group is a matter of academic dispute. However, there are two main concepts regarding their origins. On the one hand, scholars claim that they are an ancient Georgian Meskheta or Meskhs tribe that was under the Ottoman Empire's influence from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century thus converted to Islam. On the other hand, some scholars argue that they are an ethnic Turkic group which settled there in the Middle Ages or even in the fifth century.²

Scholars debate about whether they are ethnic Georgians or ethnic Turks. Certainly, the location of their homeland does not make it easy to answer this question since they were located at the borderland, on the trade routes which enabled them to remain in constant cultural exchange with and under the influence of both the Christian and the Muslim world.

There is no single homogenous name regarding this Muslim ethnic group, there are three terms that are used to refer to Meskhetian Turks. The first is Meskhetians, which is mainly used by Georgians and spreads the belief that they are ethnically Georgians who underwent Islamisation during the rule of the Ottoman Empire. The second term is preferred and is commonly used by the members of this ethnic group – Ahıska Turks (tur. Ahıska Türkleri). The third term is Meskhetian Turks. This term is the most commonly used officially and it was disseminated by the Soviets.³

¹ A. Aydıngün et al., *Meskhetian Turks: An Introduction to Their History, Culture and Resettlement Experiences*, "Culture Profile" 2006, no. 20, p. 1.

² *Ibidem*, p. 3; V. Modebadze, *Historical Background of Meskhetian Turks' Problem and Major Obstacles to the Repatriation Process*, "IBSU Scientific Journal" 2009, no. 3 (1), p. 114; T. Trier et al., *Meskhetian: Homeward Bound...*, Tbilisi 2011, pp. 7–8.

³ A. Aydıngün et al., *op. cit.*, p. 2; A. Akkaya, *Ahıska/Meskhetian Turks' Diaspora, Sense of Belonging, and Identity*, "Turkish Review" 2013, no. 3 (3), p. 254.

Ayşe Aydıngün⁴ claims that the name they are being referred to also expresses the views of the speaker regarding their identity. Therefore, the Georgian government uses the term ‘Meskhetians’, meanwhile the term ‘Ahıska Turks’ is used in order to put emphasis on their Turkish identity and is commonly used by this ethnic group themselves. Furthermore, Aydıngün⁵ argues that the term ‘Meskhetians’ is regarded by the Ahıska Turks as a denial of their Turkish identity. Whereas, at the end of the nineteen-sixties, the term ‘Meskhetian Turks’ appeared and was spread by the Soviets. The latter term has been popularised on the international level and is commonly used by officials, scholars and the media. The names that have been used to refer to them in the past are: ‘Turks of Akhaltsikhe’, ‘Meskhetians’, ‘Javakhetian Turks’, ‘Khemshins’ or ‘Khemshils’, ‘Caucasian Turks’, ‘Meskhetian Muslims’, ‘Georgian Muslims’ or even ‘Soviet Turks.’⁶ The Soviet authorities in the beginning of their rule used to call them simply Turks; however, in 1935 they changed their policy towards ‘Ahıska Turks’ and began to classify them as Azeris. At this point, the identity of Ahıska Turks was not strongly developed; therefore, such a policy had an impact on their identity and what is more, it caused inaccurate evaluation of the actual number of their population.⁷

In Turkish, they are called *Ahıska Türkleri* meaning ‘Ahıska Turks’, which is associated with the place of their origin, the city of Akhaltsikhe, thus I use both terms ‘Meskhetian Turks’ and ‘Ahıska Turks’ interchangeably with no emphasis on the ongoing political discourse regarding their origins. As previously mentioned, Muslim Meskhetian Turks call themselves ‘Ahıska Turks’.

In the years from 1578 to 1829, the region inhabited by the Meskhetian Turks remained under the control of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, Ahıska Turks remained under their rule for 250 years. Therefore, the Ottomans had a large impact on their culture, traditions and language. It is worth noting that the Meskhetian Turks are Sunni Muslims. The language they speak is an Eastern Anatolian dialect of Turkish⁸ (associated with regions of the Turkish cities of Kars, Artvin and Ardahan).

The period of the Ottoman rule is believed to be a difficult period in the history of Christian Georgia, mainly due to financial and economic pressure. Christian Georgians had to pay a form of poll tax called *jizya*, which was imposed on non-Muslim inhabitants of the empire. Whereas Muslim believers were paying less taxes. As a result, in order to avoid paying high taxes, many inhabitants of that particular region of Georgia converted to Islam.⁹

⁴ A. Aydıngün *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁶ V.A. Tishkov, *Narody i religii mira. Entsiklopediya*, Moskva 1998, p. 551.

⁷ T. Trier *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11.

⁸ A. Aydıngün *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁹ G.M. Derluguian, *The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajaria Before and Since and the Soviet Collapse*, “Global, Area, and International Archive” 1998, p. 276.

The Russian Empire's conquest of Georgia – the end of Muslim rule

In 1829, the treaty of Adrianople between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire was signed. This year was important not only for Muslim Ahıska Turks but also for the remaining Christian inhabitants of Georgia. The treaty finished 250 years of the Muslim rule and introduced the rule of Christians. The Russian expansion into the territories largely inhabited by Muslim communities required the reorganisation of public administration. The percentage of the Muslim population in the declining period of the Russian Empire was 20%.¹⁰

It is worth noting that the Russian Empire did not try to convert Muslims of the southern part of Georgia to Christianity. The Empire did not give lots of importance to the re-Christianisation of the above-mentioned region. It is important to add that the policy of the Russian Empire concerning Muslims in Caucasus was inconsistent, it changed over the course of time. Nevertheless, Muslims in the Russian Empire were a minority; therefore, they had fewer rights than Christians, and legally operating religious communities were under the strict control of the imperial authorities.¹¹ This also resulted in the reorganisation of the foregoing structure of religious communities. At the same time, the authorities encouraged Armenians to settle down in that region, and it caused a massive influx of Christians. Therefore, as a consequence of the colonial policy of Imperial Russia that was imposed on Muslims in Georgia, many decided to move to the Ottoman Empire.¹²

Policies of the Russian Empire towards Muslims in Georgia

At the very beginning of their rule in Caucasia, the Russian officials tried not to exert too much pressure on the Muslims in Caucasia in order to gain the support of the Muslim population and not to lose socio-political stability in that region. Moreover, at that time they also did not have enough knowledge concerning the Muslim administration that would enable the Russian administration to become involved with religious Muslim affairs.¹³ Therefore, Muslims living in Georgia were allowed to continue practicing their faith. What is more, Muslim religious functionaries were often used in spreading the policy of the Empire. Muslim religious organisations in the Russian Empire were under the control of the Ministry of Internal Affairs – the

¹⁰ S. Mkrtychyan, *Georgia*, [in:] *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, J.S. Nielsen et al. (eds.), vol. 5, Leiden 2012, p. 263.

¹¹ J. Potulski, *Islam i ZSRR. Polityka bolszewików wobec muzułmanów w okresie kształtowania się państwa radzieckiego*, „Cywilizacja i Polityka” 2017, no. 15, p. 235.

¹² A. Hajiev, *Akhalsikhskiye Turki. Istoriya, etnografiya, folklore*, “IRS Nasliediye, Etnos” 2007, no. 2 (26), p. 8.

¹³ A. Ganich, *Transcaucasia's Muslim Religious Boards in the Russian Empire During the 19th Century and Beginning of the 20th*, “Russian Perspectives on Islam”, https://islamperspectives.org/rpi/ganich_intro [accessed: 12.04.2022].

Department of Spiritual Affairs of Foreign Religions. The department was responsible for various Muslim matters such as:

The organization of the administration of Muslim spiritual affairs; the formation of Muslim parishes; the construction and opening of mosques; the Muslim press; the work of Muslim educational institutions; the property of Muslim clergy; the military obligation of Muslims.¹⁴

In 1872, the Transcaucasian Muslim Spiritual Board (i.e. Muftiate) was established in Tiflis (Tbilisi).¹⁵ One of its duties was to monitor connections and relations of the Muslim population of the Russian Empire with the Ottoman Empire and to report suspicious religious officials. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was the Ministry of War that was also responsible for checking Muslim connections with foreign religious institutions.

The Transcaucasian Muslim Board was also responsible for keeping population registers. Therefore, the local mosque religious functionaries were obliged to record births, deaths, marriages and divorces. Afterwards, the main administration of the Caucasus was receiving the annual reports which included the total size of the Muslim population, the number of mosques and local communities (called ‘parishes’) and all issues and affairs related to the Muslim population, including its religious officials. It is worth noting that in accordance with the Russian Empire’s policy towards its Muslim inhabitants, there was no distinction between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims.¹⁶

Despite the above points, it does not mean that the Russian Empire did not try to convert conquered people to Christianity. It did make such attempts and often actions against the Muslim population of the Russian Empire were very violent. In the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire took actions aimed at transformation into a modern national state based on a uniform legal, administrative and economic system, and a uniform common culture implemented by Russification.¹⁷ Such a policy largely affected Muslim communities, especially those of Turkic origins. Therefore, such actions resulted in the appearance of the Jadidism movement aimed at modern reforms based on the European model.¹⁸ The movement spread the call for the reform of the Muslim society and the idea of Pan-Turkism in opposition to Pan-Slavism introduced by the Russian authorities.¹⁹ One of the ideas of Jadidism was Muslim religious autonomy. In fact, the Russian Empire had little knowledge on how to address their religious policy towards the Muslim population and few attempts to change the regulations were made, thus their attitude towards the Muslims has varied over the years.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ G.M. Yemelianova, *Islamic Leadership: the Russian and Soviet Legacy*, [in:] *Islamic Leadership in the European Lands of the Former Ottoman and Russian Empires. Legacy, Challenges and Change*, E. Račius, A. Zhelyazkova (eds.), Leiden 2018, p. 231.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ J. Potulski, *op. cit.*, pp. 235–236.

¹⁸ The Jadidism (from Arabic *jadid* – ‘new’) was a Russian Muslims’ modernism movement inspired by Ismail Gasprinski at the end of the nineteenth century; Ismail Gasprinski was a prominent Crimean Tatar modernist and reformer. See: I. Baldauf, *Jadidism in Central Asia Within Reformism and Modernism in the Muslim World*, “Die Welt des Islams” 2001, New Series, no. 41 (1), pp. 72–73.

¹⁹ J. Potulski, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

The relations of the Muslim Ahıska Turks and Christian Georgians

It is worth adding that during this period, Muslim Meskhetian Turks and Christian Georgians lived together peacefully. The First World War and the February Revolution of 1917 had a huge impact on Muslims in the Russian Empire, since those events caused socio-political changes that enabled them to have political and religious claims.

However, the relations between Muslim Ahıska Turks and Christians in Georgia deteriorated when an independent Georgian state was established from 1918 until 1921. During this period, the first symptoms of hatred against the Muslim population inhabiting Georgia began to appear. This period, although brief, was remembered as the moment in which the conflict between the Muslim and Christian populations of Georgia accumulated. The region inhabited by the Muslim Ahıska Turks was a borderland with the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, the Christian population of Georgia feared that Ahıska Turks could cooperate with the Ottomans.²⁰ After all, they shared a significant common feature in the context of their identity with the Ottomans, namely they shared the same faith. During this period, Meskhetian Turks identified themselves primarily with Islam, not with a specific nation and were thus loyal to the Ottoman Empire. Their loyalty could not be exchanged for anything as they were not even interested in free land given by the Georgian social democrats, and as contemporary Georgian prime minister Noe Zhordania said about Muslims in Georgia:

Even in theory our laws on land stand no chance in this realm of Islam. Antagonizing local begs and agas would do a thousand times more harm [to democratic Georgia] than leaving the peasants without land. Mohammed perhaps proved to be a better socialist in giving the land right to God.²¹

The aforementioned fear of Christian Georgians has resulted in the suspicion, mistrust and unfriendliness of Christian Georgians towards Muslims. It was during this period when adverseness began, sometimes even the hostile attitude of the Georgian population towards the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks that is discussed today. It is worth noting that 83% of Georgians are Orthodox Christians.²²

The Soviets and their policies towards the Muslim population

The independence of Georgia was interrupted by the Russian Bolsheviks and the proclamation of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in February 1921. The situation for Muslims in Georgia during the Soviet regime undoubtedly deteriorated in

²⁰ T. Trier *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²¹ G.M. Derluguian, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

²² According to national census conducted in 2014, Geostat, 2014, *General Population Census*, http://census.ge/files/results/Census_release_ENG.pdf [accessed: 24.04.2022].

comparison to the period of the Russian Empire, since the Soviets were less tolerant and introduced a number of policies directly affecting the religious life of Muslims in Georgia.²³

In general, the Soviet authorities tried to limit the role of religion in society by implementing atheisation, but it is worth noting that it was not directed only against Islam but against religion in general. The relations of Soviet authorities with the Muslim community were more complex and varied throughout the different periods of their rule. However, all things considered, in comparison with the Russian Empire the Soviet authorities were not tolerant towards Muslims in Georgia²⁴. However, the first years of the Soviet rule were not oppressive against Islam, in fact, the Soviet authorities realised that they needed to cooperate with Muslims in order to win against the current order, but at the same time, they did not want to grant Muslims autonomy.²⁵

The Soviets' policy towards the Meskhetian Turks was volatile. At first, the Soviets stated that Ahıska Turks were of Georgian origin, but at the same time, they did not deny their 'Turkishness' – for instance, it was not forbidden to teach Turkish at schools. In terms of religion, in the nineteen-twenties, the authorities implemented a policy of "an apolitical Soviet Islam".²⁶ The policy was based on a brutal policy of atheisation aimed, inter alia, at Muslim spiritual organisations, as a result of which, mosques were closed down and were sometimes destroyed, and mullahs were arrested. Some mosques were turned into storage houses.²⁷ Furthermore, it was forbidden to perform Muslim religious rituals.²⁸

The Soviet political position finally stabilised in 1926–1935 and the power was taken over by Joseph Stalin. The new Soviet leader introduced changes in the Soviet policy towards different ethnic, religious and national groups, which were formerly introduced by Bolsheviks.²⁹ Therefore, many of those ethnic groups began to be regarded as hostile and as a threat which should be eliminated. Moreover, during that period, some groups were also reclassified; this is why the Soviet authorities, when referring to the Meskhetian Turks, began to call them simply Turks. The aim of such a policy was the unification and consolidation of the various Turkish nations inhabiting the Caucasus into a single Turkish nation.

As mentioned earlier, another change in the Soviet policy regarding various ethnic groups took place in 1935, namely Ahıska Turks began to be regarded as Azeris, and not as Turks as they were previously. This is why many Ahıska Turks have their identity written as Azeri in their passports. At that time, Meskhetian Muslims were

²³ S. Mkrtychyan, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ J. Potulski, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

²⁶ G.M. Yemelianova, *Muslims of Central Asia*, Edinburgh 2019, pp. 57, 58.

²⁷ R. Baramidze, *Political Process, Social Activity and Individual Strategies in Georgia: Institutional Transformations, Struggle for Identity and Georgian Muslims in the Media*, "Central Asia Program Papers" 2016, no. 160, p. 11.

²⁸ R. Baramidze, *Islam i ego osobennosti v Adzharii*, Tbilisi 2005, p. 3, <https://ge.boell.org/2005/01/16/islam-i-ego-osobennosti-v-adzharii> [accessed: 5.04.2022].

²⁹ G.M. Yemelianova, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

also forced to learn the Azeri language instead of Turkish.³⁰ The Soviet period is characterised by identity changes that Meskhetian Muslims went through. Until then, they identified themselves as followers of Islam and under the influence of the Soviet policies, they began to identify themselves ethnically.

During WW II and the threat posed by the Nazis, the Soviet authorities changed their approach towards Muslims. This approach was less anti-religious, and thus introduced the reorganisation and reactivation of the previous religious structure that was previously changed by the Bolsheviks.

The aim of this was to attract Muslims and to gain their support in the fight against the Nazis; the so-called Great Patriotic War.³¹

The following years of Soviet rule went down as the most tragic in the history of the Meskhetian Turks because in 1944, Stalin made a decision on the displacement and dispersion of Muslims from the region throughout the entire territory of the Soviet Union, mainly to Central Asia. Ahıska Turks were one of many Muslim nations against whom the Soviet authorities implemented deportation.³²

The deportation

In 1944, Stalin stated that the Meskhetian Turks are “Enemies of the Soviet People” and made a decision to displace and disperse Meskhetian Turks throughout the territory of the Soviet Union; therefore, on 14th November 1944, they were deported mainly to Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.³³ The Soviet authorities never gave a certain reason for the deportation of Ahıska Turks. They were not accused of collaboration with the Germans; however, many sources argue that the deportation of this particular group may be regarded as preventive action. The Soviets feared they could turn to Turkey for help and become a so-called “fifth column” and jeopardise plans to invade Turkey since Ahıska Turks were both in close relations with Turkey and were closely located geographically.³⁴

The Meskhetian Turks were not the only nationality deported by the Soviets, Stalin also ordered the deportation of Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, Chechens, Ingush, Karachai, Kalmyks and Balkars. The nationalities except for Crimean Tatars and Volga Germans were allowed to return to their homeland in 1957 and Crimean Tatars got their permission to do so in 1989; Germans were not allowed to resettle in the region despite being rehabilitated in 1965.

It is important to add, that Ahıska Turks are the only ethnic group which did not gain right from the Soviet authorities to return to their homeland in Georgia. Meanwhile, Armenians (it should be noted here that Armenians are Christians and are in

³⁰ A. Aydıngün *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³¹ G.M. Yemelianova, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–65.

³² T. Trier *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

³³ S. Kurt, *Ahıska'nın Türkiye İçin Jeopolitik Önemi*, “Karadeniz Araştırmaları Merkezi” 2018, no. XV (58), p. 199.

³⁴ G.M. Derluguian, *op. cit.*, p. 278; A. Aydıngün *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

conflict with Turkey after the Armenian genocide conducted in the Ottoman Empire) residing in Georgia were encouraged to move in to the territories primarily inhabited by Meskhetian Turks.³⁵ The Soviet authorities had never given a specific reason for taking such measures. They were not accused of cooperation with Germans as Crimean Tatars were. However, many sources believe that deportation of that particular group may be regarded as a precaution – the Soviets were afraid that Meskhetian Turks could constitute “the fifth column” of Turkey.³⁶

The estimated number of deported people varies between 115,000 and 138,000, according to different sources. As a result of deportation, around 3,000 people died due to hunger, cold and illness. After arriving in Central Asia, Meskhetian Turks once again had to deal with hunger and illnesses which also caused the death of those who survived the travel itself. As a result of deportation, within a few years, the population of Ahıska Turks decreased from 15% to 20%.³⁷

After the deportation, Meskhetian Turks had to face many difficulties, inter alia, challenging living conditions, unfriendliness of the local community, and the harsh climate of Central Asia. They found themselves in a foreign land where they did not know either the local language or the local culture. Furthermore, they were placed in rural areas of the Soviet Central Asian republics in special settlements and were deprived of basic civil and social rights, such as freedom, since they were not allowed to leave their place of residence without a special permit.³⁸

The restrictions imposed on Ahıska Turks by the Soviet authorities were lifted in 1956. It enabled them to move and settle down throughout the territory of the Soviet Union; however, they still had no right to return to Georgia.³⁹ The Muslim Ahıska Turks were not allowed to leave the place of their residence without the consent of the local authorities under the threat of being sent to a gulag for fifteen to twenty years. After the restrictions were lifted, many left for Azerbaijan hoping that being so close to Georgia they would be able to return to their homeland.⁴⁰ Most probably, Muslim Ahıska Turks were not allowed to return to their place of origin due to its strategic location being close to Turkey, which was then regarded as hostile by the Soviets since Turkey was a NATO member.⁴¹ At that time, Ahıska Turks were considered to be the Soviet Muslims within the framework of Russian Islam, which also imposed on them restrictions regarding contact with Muslims outside of the USSR. Furthermore, the Soviet authorities imposed intense Sovietisation on Ahıska Muslims, primarily based on atheisation, and were included in the developed Soviet educational, social, political and information system.⁴²

³⁵ T. Trier *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

³⁶ G.M. Derluguian, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

³⁷ A. Aydingün *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³⁸ A. Hajiev, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³⁹ Z. Karaman, D. Mursül, *Meskhetian (Ahıska) Turks in Turkey and Their Perception of Spatial Belonging*, “Open Journal of Social Sciences” 2018, vol. 6 (12).

⁴⁰ E. Cikadze, *Uzbekistan v poiskakh bezopasnogo doma*, [in:] *Turki-meskhetintsy: Integratsiya. Repatriatsiya. Emigratsiya*, T.T. Trier, A. Hanzhin (eds.), Sankt-Petersburg 2007, pp. 90–128.

⁴¹ T. Trier *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁴² G.M. Yemelianova, *op. cit.*, pp. 63, 66.

At the end of the nineteen-eighties in Uzbekistan, an increasing number of ethnic conflicts were appearing. They were directed against Christian Russians and Muslim Tatars and also against other ethnic minorities residing in Uzbekistan. The conflict between the Meskhetian Turks and the indigenous Uzbeks escalated in 1989 and turned into a bloody riot (the so-called massacre in the Fergana Valley). It is worth noting that both Ahıska Turks and Uzbeks are Sunni Muslims and the conflict broke out despite the same confession. Most likely, the conflict had an economic basis since the economic situation of Ahıska Turks residing in Uzbekistan slowly began to be better than the local population. On the other hand, some scholars argue that it could have been the Kremlin that wanted to apply pressure on Georgia as a result of its aspirations for independence.⁴³

As a result of the Fergana Valley massacre, the Soviet army relocated around 17,000 Muslim Meskhetian Turks to Russia (mainly to Krasnodar Krai), Azerbaijan or Ukraine. Furthermore, around 70,000 voluntarily decided to leave Uzbekistan.⁴⁴ Conflict in the Fergana Valley was another traumatic event in the history of Muslim Meskhetian Turks when once again, they were forced to resettle and leave their houses. Once again, they were left with nothing and were forced to start from the beginning.

Scattered around the world

At present, around 350,000–600,000 Muslim Meskhetian Turks are scattered around the world, residing in nine countries:⁴⁵ Azerbaijan (90,000–110,000), Turkey (38,000–76,000), Kazakhstan (150,000–180,000), Ukraine (8,000⁴⁶), Uzbekistan (15,000–38,000), Kyrgyzstan (50,000), Russia (70,000–95,000), United States (5,000–16,000) and Georgia (600–1,500).⁴⁷

It has been seventy-eight years since their deportation and still, they remain in different countries and have so far faced several resettlements. Firstly, they were deported from Georgia, then from Uzbekistan, and due to discrimination issues, many emigrated from Krasnodar in Russia to the USA and around 2,000 have been forced to leave their homes in Ukraine after the war in Donbas began,⁴⁸ when as a consequence, they found their shelter in Turkey. The Meskhetian Turks are shattered around the world in countries in which Islam is not the main religion everywhere.

⁴³ A. Hajiev, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ A. Aydıngün *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁴⁵ S. Ersöz, *Ahıska Türkleri ve dilleri*, [in:] *Son Sesler Kaybolmadan, Tehlikedeki Türk Dilleri II A: Örnek Çalışmalar*, vol. 2, S. Eker, Ü. Çelik Şavk (eds.), Ankara 2016, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Applies to data taken in 2014.

⁴⁷ A. Aydıngün *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 13; B. Ekinci, *Ahıska Türklerinin 70 yıllık sürgünü*. The given numbers are estimates due to the fact that different ethnic organisations present various numbers of a given population.

⁴⁸ The number of Ahıska Turks who fled Ukraine after the Russian aggression on the 24th of February 2022 is unknown yet.

Status of the Meskhetian Turks in Georgia

The revival of Islam in Georgia was intense at the end of the nineteen-eighties and after the post-Soviet era. During this period, it was possible to renew ties with other Muslim organisations abroad, particularly with Turkish and Iranian organisations. According to the census conducted in 2002, the population of Muslims in Georgia at that time was 9.9%.⁴⁹ Since 2004, the attitude of the Georgian government towards Muslims in the country has been based on dialogue and co-existence.⁵⁰

Until 1989, around sixty Muslim families of Ahıska Turks (300 people) decided to return to Georgia. At the end of the nineteen-nineties, the number of Ahıska Turks' families residing in Georgia was 643; however, they were not allowed to settle in the place of their origin, instead, they were relocated to other parts of Georgia.⁵¹ In 2005, the Georgian parliament ratified The Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Protection of Minority Rights. In the meantime, due to its aspirations to join the Council of Europe, Georgia prepared the repatriation process. Therefore, the Georgian parliament adopted the law on repatriation in 2007 and has agreed to develop a repatriation law by 2011. Nevertheless, Meskhetian Turks were not granted permission to resettle in the territory of their origins, Samtskhe-Javakheti region, they are only allowed to settle in other parts of Georgia⁵². However, due to numerous internal problems, Georgia was still unable to meet its repatriation obligations. The Repatriation Law was strongly criticised for its restrictions and lack of assistance to the Meskhetian Turks.⁵³ Nevertheless, a few hundred decided to return.

As the country is dealing with many internal issues – political issues, refugees from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, unemployment, poverty and economic issues – it does not seem attractive to Ahıska Turks⁵⁴. Moreover, the local Georgian population inhabiting the region is reluctant to accept the Muslim community of Ahıska Turks. The Georgian authorities also fear that changes in the ethno-demographic composition of the region may result in an ethnic conflict which could escalate between Christian and Muslim populations in the region, especially with Armenians.⁵⁵ Many Ahıska Turks are also apprehensive with regard to their possible return to the homeland of their ancestors.

There are many other obstacles that the Meskhetians would face in Georgia. First of all, their possessions were taken after the deportation, so in fact, there is no place where they could possibly return to, and furthermore, their houses were given to Christian Georgians or Armenians. The second obstacle is the language – the

⁴⁹ S. Mkrtchyan, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

⁵⁰ R. Baramidze, *Political Process...*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁵¹ S. Ersöz, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁵² O. Pentikäinen, T. Trier, *Between Integration and Resettlement: The Meskhetian Turks*, "ECMI Working Paper" 2004, no. 21, p. 53.

⁵³ T. Trier *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 30–31, 117, 118.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 47; V. Modebadze, *Historical Background of Meskhetian Turks' Problem and Major Obstacles to the Repatriation Process*, "IBSU Scientific Journal" 2009, no. 3 (1), pp. 124–125.

Meskhethians do not speak Georgian (before the deportation, most of them could speak Georgian, though). Therefore, it would create issues with education and employment.⁵⁶ The Meskhethian Turks themselves also indicate their ‘otherness’ from Georgians.⁵⁷ Therefore, assimilation would be a very long process. This is why many chose to stay or move to Azerbaijan or Turkey, as these states seem more attractive to them than Central Asian countries. Furthermore, both countries are inhabited mostly by the Muslim population. The Meskhethians Turks originally spoke an East Anatolian dialect of Turkish, thus Turkish and Azeri are less difficult for them to learn than Georgian. Furthermore, their mass movement to Turkey, or especially to Azerbaijan, was their tactic to deal with the circumstances as it allowed them to be closer to Georgia, which also gave them hope for an easier return to their homeland.

Meanwhile, the Turkish and the Georgian governments after 2012 began their intense bilateral cooperation in terms of the religious care of the Muslim population living in Georgia.⁵⁸ Thus, the Turkish government provides religious education for Georgian Muslims both in Turkey and in Georgia. This activity includes publishing educational materials, funding religious functionaries and the preservation of mosques in Georgia.⁵⁹

Identity of Ahıska Turks

The deportation of Ahıska Turks is the most tragic event in their history and it has had an impact on their present life, identity, culture and religiousness. An important role in shaping the identity of Ahıska Turks is played the fact that they were treated as “enemies of the nation”. This social exclusion in fact united them and tightened their relationships among themselves. At the same time, it caused the social and cultural life of Ahıska Turks to become limited to the inside of this group. Due to their traumatic experiences, a separate Meskhethian Turk identity has developed. Moreover, they managed to sustain this identity thanks to the attachment to their traditions, for example, the endogamy of marriage only within members of their own community that is practiced to the present day.⁶⁰ Religion is another significant element of their identity. Nevertheless, the religiosity of Meskhethian Turks was largely affected by the atheisation policy of the Soviets and by restrictions and repressions.⁶¹

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

⁵⁷ A. Akkaya, *Ahıska/Meskhethian Turks' Diaspora, Sense of Belonging, and Identity*, “Turkish Review” 2013, vol. 3 (3), p. 255.

⁵⁸ Bilateral cooperation also includes restoration of Turkish cultural heritage in Georgia and Georgian cultural heritage in Turkey.

⁵⁹ R. Baramidze, *Political Process...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1–2.

⁶⁰ L. Janiashvili, *Socio-Cultural Institutions and Integration Prospects within the Community of Deportees from South Georgia in 1944*, [in:] *The Changing Ethnic Environment in Georgia. Conference volume*, Tbilisi 2012, p. 189.

⁶¹ R. Baramidze, *Ethnic Georgian Muslims: A Comparison of Highland and Lowland Villages*, “Caucasus Analytical Digest” 2010, no. 20, p. 15.

In the countries where Meskhetian Turks found themselves through all those years, they lived in diasporas taking care of their culture, language and tradition.⁶² However, the language of the Meskhetian Turks who happened to end up in, for instance, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan has largely been replaced by the Russian language. During the Author's meetings with Ahıska Turks' families from Kazakhstan,⁶³ it could be observed that the Russian language was predominant.

Meanwhile, the youngest generation undoubtedly prefers to communicate with each other in Russian than in the language of their ancestors. According to what the author has observed, even though they knew Turkish, they mostly still preferred to communicate with each other in Russian, and at home, they mostly watch Russian TV channels where sometimes Turkish channels also appear.

Nevertheless, the Meskhetian Turks try to cultivate their traditions. Family and marriage are the most important part of social organisation of the Meskhetian Turks. They are a patriarchal community with a strictly structured family system. Men in the families of the Meskhetian Turks are privileged and superior to women. Respect for the elders is also an important element of the tradition; if there is some family meeting among the elders then women should not wear trousers, the best solution would be long skirts, they also should not sit with their legs crossed. The role of the head of the family is taken by the eldest man in the family and what is important is that women are not allowed to make decisions on their own, without consulting it with the head of the family.⁶⁴ Women also are expected to obey their husbands.

A married woman should wear a headband to indicate that she is no longer single. Family celebrations, for instance weddings, are held according to the tradition which also shares features of Caucasus culture. The traditions of the Muslim Meskhetian Turks are a mixture of traditions related to Islam (for instance, marriage occurs in accordance with Shari'a law) and local Caucasian or Central Asian customs, for example, kidnapping brides or marrying cousins. It is worth mentioning here that the tradition of marrying cousins is contrary to Islam, and results from a tradition rooted in the customs of Central Asian nomads. "Cousin marriages" are quite popular among Meskhetian Turks.⁶⁵

The other tradition which is familiar in the Caucasus region is "a rule of gender separation" which is still practiced among the Ahıska Turk community.⁶⁶ Meskhetian women are expected to act in a shy manner; therefore, a bride during the wedding celebration, for instance, should not smile, she should express sadness due to leaving her family and should look down throughout the whole ceremony. Moreover, she is expected not to talk to her father-in-law for some time. The situation of the eldest women in the family is totally different; elderly women play also an important role in

⁶² A. Aydingün *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁶³ Observations made during Author's meetings with Ahıska Turks families, which took place in Istanbul in 2013.

⁶⁴ L. Janiashvili, *Socio-Cultural Institutions and Integration Prospects within the Community of Deportees from South Georgia in 1944*, [in:] *The Changing Ethnic Environment...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 191–192.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 193.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

the family. They take part in the decision-making process and are dividing housework among the female members of the family.

Raising a son is generally a father's responsibility, who teaches his son religious customs and other traditions of the Meskhetian Turks when he reaches the age of twelve, whereas girls are taught religious customs when they reach the age of nine. Moreover, girls are also taught how to do the housework and boys in rural areas how to cultivate land and farming.

One can observe limited conservatism in religiosity. In this regard, there is a visible influence of the Soviet/Russian culture. During the celebrations, alcohol might also be served, drinking alcohol can be interrupted for namaz (prayer) which means that prayer is taking place while unsober; consumption of alcohol continues afterwards.

An important part of the tradition directly connected with deportation is the oral transmission of their tragic history, which is mainly the domain of elderly members of the family or community.

Despite living in different environments, the Meskhetian Turks managed to sustain and preserve their own traditions and customs that were different from the cultures of the local population where they reside; however, to a certain degree, it also contains features of the local culture. Nevertheless, it is religion and Turkish ethnic origin that the Meskhetian Turks perceive as an element consisting in their identity.⁶⁷

Has Turkey finally become the homeland?

The Meskhetian Turks⁶⁸ often emphasise their Turkish origin and the fact that they are descendants of the Ottoman Empire. In this regard, the Turkish government always seemed welcoming towards the Ahıska Turks and on 2nd July 1992, the Turkish government passed a law that allowed the resettlement of 500 Meskhetian Turk families to the country from Russia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, relying on their Turkish ethnic origin.⁶⁹ However, the number of accepted Ahıska Turks was changing each year.⁷⁰ Prior to 1997, Turkey accepted 12,000 Meskhetian Turks, who received the status of "national refugees", which enabled them access to education, work and healthcare, it also allowed them to receive Turkish citizenship. The approximate number of Ahıska Turks currently living in Turkey varies from 35,000⁷¹ to 100,000.⁷²

⁶⁷ A. Akkaya, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

⁶⁸ There is also a group of Meskhetian Turks which underline their Georgian rather than Turkish origin.

⁶⁹ A. Yılmaz, R. Mustafa, 1992, *Sonrası Türkiye'ye Göçen Ahıska Türklerinin Göç, İskan ve Uyum Sorunlarına İlişkin Bir Araştırma, Bursa Örneği*, "Studies of the Ottoman Domain" 2014, vol. 4 (6), p. 6; Z. Karaman, D. Mursül, *Meskhetian (Ahıska) Turks in Turkey and Their Perception of Spatial Belonging*, "Open Journal of Social Sciences" 2018, vol. 6 (12), p. 91.

⁷⁰ A. Yılmaz, R. Mustafa, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁷¹ Z. Karaman, D. Mursül, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

⁷² A. Yıldız, *Bakan Çavuşoğlu: Türkiye'de yaşayan yaklaşık 100 bin Ahıska Türkü'ne vatandaşlık verildi*, Anadolu Ajansı, 10.12.2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/bakan-cavusoglu-turkiyede-yasayan-yaklasik-100-bin-ahıska-turkune-vatandaslik-verildi/2444241#> [accessed: 31.12.2022].

The reason why the Turkish state quite easily accepted the Meskhetian Turks may also be found in the fact that while establishing the republic in order to create unity among the diverse population of the Ottoman Empire, a Turkic foundation myth was formed. The Ottoman Empire was characterised by cultural heterogeneity, thus the myth of their origins was created in order to establish the Turkish ethnic identity. It emphasised the Central Asian origins as a basis for their existence, thus Turkey always played the role of a big brother among all Turkic nations.⁷³

What is more, in Turkish language there is no even term for “Turkic” as distinct from “Turkish”; therefore, Ahıska Turks were welcomed by the Turkish government as Turks, not as some foreign element.⁷⁴ Moreover, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Turkish government provided Turkish language courses for Meskhetian Turks residing in the major cities of Central Asian countries.⁷⁵

The Meskhetian Turks and Turkish people share common features in terms of culture and religious practice; therefore, as a whole, integration and coexistence have been relatively successful. Nevertheless, many have returned to their previous country of residence for various reasons, including difficulties adapting to the relatively modern lifestyle in Turkey and difficulties in finding employment. Ahıska Turk communities arriving from the former Soviet republics in general are more traditional in comparison with Turkish society. Therefore, they often regard Turkey as “morally corrupt”, where traditional values are increasingly less important.⁷⁶ By contrast, many Ahıska Turks, especially those coming from rural areas, appreciate the fact that the country offers considerable stability. Furthermore, many of them have given up further demands for resettlement to Georgia after arriving in Turkey, since it is considered a homeland by them.⁷⁷ Therefore, for one group, Georgia remains only a homeland of their ancestors, meanwhile, the others are longing to return to the lost motherland in Meskheti.⁷⁸

Although the Turkish Government adopted a law enabling Meskhetian Turks to settle in Turkey and is granting them citizenship, they still face many problems. The major problems that most Meskhetian Turk communities are facing in Turkey are economic in nature, especially the prevailing economic conditions in the country caused by the high level of inflation. Moreover, employment is not easy to find due to the fact that the older generations hold Soviet diplomas that are not recognised in Turkey.⁷⁹ Purchasing a property or land is also in many cases beyond the financial abilities of Ahıska Turk families.

⁷³ Z. Karaman, D. Mursül, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 90, 93.

⁷⁵ T. Trier *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁷⁶ O. Pentikäinen, T. Trier, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

⁷⁸ Z. Karaman, D. Mursül, *op. cit.*, pp. 92, 94.

⁷⁹ O. Pentikäinen, T. Trier, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

It is important to add that although most of members identify themselves as Ahıska Turks, they also often identify with Turkey because they consider it to be the country that is most culturally and linguistically close to them.⁸⁰

It is worth noting that the Meskhetians are hardly known in Turkey, many Turks have never heard of Ahıska Turks.⁸¹ The author faced situations where Turkish people were confused and asked, “What Turks? Alaska?”. Many Ahıska Turks that the author spoke with were disappointed that Turkish people have no idea who they are and where they came from.

The Turkish government makes efforts to assist Ahıska Turks in assimilation in Turkey. Nevertheless, for many, it does not come easy. The author encountered situations when Meskhetian Turks families could not adapt and decided to return to Kazakhstan. Even though when they adapt, they do not forget their origins, the organisations of Ahıska Turks are very active in sustaining their identity and culture, promoting their culture among the Turkish population and offering aid to other Ahıska Turks. Therefore, Ahıska Turks undoubtedly remain grouped together.

There are various organisations of Meskhetian Turks operating in many Turkish cities. One of them is DATÜB (tur. Dünya Ahıska Türkleri Birliđi) World Union of Ahıska Turks which has branches in all countries where the Meskhetian Turks reside right now and is the largest organisation associating them.⁸² Moreover, in many Turkish cities,⁸³ there are associations of Ahıska Turks (tur. Ahıska Türkleri Eđitim Kùltür ve Sosyal ve Dayanıřma Derneđi) which associate Ahıska Turks in Turkey and also promote Ahıska Turks’ culture, tradition and history by publishing the quarterly culture magazine Bizim Ahıska.⁸⁴ Now, all of those organisations take care of the cultivation of their tradition, remembrance of their tragic past and turning the attention on the international arena to their difficult situation.

Conclusions

Meskhetian Turks are a Turkish-speaking ethnic group, which until 1944 lived in the part of Georgia called Meskheta or Samtskhe, which is located in the territory of the present-day southern Georgia region Samtskhe-Javakheti, bordering Turkey. In 1944, Stalin took the decision to displace and disperse the Meskhetians throughout the territory of the Soviet Union, mainly to Central Asia. In 1989, there was a pogrom of the Meskhetian Turks in Uzbekistan, when a bloody riot between the Meskhetian Turks and the Uzbeks broke out (the so-called massacre in the Fergana Valley).

The Soviet rule, their policies and then the deportation played an important role in reshaping the identity of the Meskhetian Turks. Previously they would identify

⁸⁰ Z. Karaman, D. Mursùl, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, p. 96.

⁸² DATÜB, <https://www.datub.eu/> [accessed: 26.04.2022].

⁸³ Ankara, Antalya, Bursa, Denizli, Istanbul, Iđdır.

⁸⁴ Meaning *Our Ahıska*.

themselves with Islam, in the given circumstances the ethnic identity of the Meskhetian Turk appeared.

There are currently around 350–600 thousand Meskhetian Turks scattered all over the world. They are the only ethnic group which did not gain the right from the Soviet authorities to return to their homeland in Georgia. It has been seventy-eight years since their deportation and they still remain deployed in different countries and have faced few resettlements. Firstly, they were deported from Georgia, then many were deported from Uzbekistan. Due to discrimination issues, many emigrated from Krasnodar, Russia to the USA and around 2,000 have been forced to leave their homes in Ukraine after the war in Donbas began in 2014, when they found their shelter in Turkey. In the meantime, due to its aspirations to join the Council of Europe, Georgia prepared the repatriation process. However, the Repatriation Law was strongly criticised for its restrictions and lack of assistance to the Meskhetian Turks.

The deportation is the most tragic event in the history and collective memory of Ahiska Turks and has directly affected their traditions, religiousness, and religious and national identity. Moreover, this tragic event has shaped their identity, sense of belonging and religious sphere and continues to shape them to the present day.

The Meskhetian Turks have been living in exile for seventy-eight years in different countries and are still searching for their homeland (tur. *vatan*). Increasingly often, the Georgian homeland is not a real desire but a feeling of nostalgia. The Meskhetian Turks are drifting between the two homelands, it is not entirely Turkey, although often they refer to it as the return to a homeland (countries they inhabit currently are not regarded as a homeland either), nor is it entirely Georgia, with which they often feel connected only historically as the land of their ancestors.

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