

Ottoman Policies on Circassian Refugees in the Danube Vilayet in the 1860s and 1870s

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Abstract

This article examines problems related to the large-scale immigration of Circassians into the Danube Vilayet of the Ottoman Empire in the 1860s and 1870s. It looks at the overall process of immigration of Circassian refugees and the actions taken by the Ottoman authorities in order to settle them and help them adapt to the social and economic life of the region. It further analyses the results of the Ottoman policies in relation to the “Circassian issue” that strongly influenced the overall socio-political developments of this sizable Bulgarian region.

Keywords: Circassians, Ottoman Empire, Danube Vilayet, Bulgarian lands, refugee crisis.

Osmanlı Devleti’nin 1860 ve 1870’li yıllarda Tuna Vilayeti’nde bulunan Çerkes Göçmenlerine Yönelik Uygulamaları

Özet

Bu makalede, çok sayıda Çerkesin 1860-70’li yıllarda Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nun Danube Vilayeti’ne göç etmesiyle ortaya çıkan sorunlar incelenecektir. Çerkes mültecilerin bu bölgeye geliş sürecine genel bir çerçeveden bakıldıktan sonra Osmanlı yönetiminin bu mültecilerin bölgenin sosyal ve ekonomik yaşamına adapte olmaları için aldıkları önlemler irdelenecek, ve makale Bulgaristan’ın bu büyük bölgesindeki sosyo-politik gelişmeleri derinden etkileyen ‘Çerkes Sorunu’na dair Osmanlı idarecilerinin uygulamalarının sonuçlarının değerlendirilmesiyle sona erecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çerkesler, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Danube Vilayeti, Bulgaristan, mülteci krizi.

The mass migration of Circassian refugees into the Ottoman Empire began after the Crimean War of 1853–1856 and accelerated dramatically in the 1860s following the final conquest of the Caucasus by the Russian Army. These waves of migration included, according to different estimates, from a few hundred thousand people to over a million refugees (muhajirs) that were settled in the Ottoman territories in the Balkans, Anatolia and the Arab provinces.¹ Nevertheless, despite the importance of this phenomenon, it has never been highlighted in Bulgarian historiography, and for many years it has only been mentioned in various regional studies (Damyanov, 1967; Penkov, 1967; Grancharov, 1982; Zayakov, 1986; etc.) and in some nationwide studies in Bulgarian history (Istoriya na Balgaria 1987, 78–80). The short-lived Circassian immigration into the Bulgarian lands has only recently begun attracting the attention of Bulgarian researchers (Balkanski, 2011; Muchinov, 2012; Muchinov, 2013; Dobreva, 2013). The problems related to the Circassian immigration into the Danube Vilayet in 1860s and 1870s are the focus of this article because it is exactly in this large administrative unit (which included the Bulgarian lands between the Danube River and the Stara Planina Mountain, together with Sofia and Niš Sanjaks) that of the Circassian refugees, who had arrived in the European territories of the Ottoman Empire, a large part settled.

In this article, I will analyse the measures the Ottoman authorities undertook when settling the refugees and what assistance was offered to the newcomers to help them adapt to the social and

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¹ There is still a discussion among historians about the number of Circassians and other Muslim peoples that were routed out from the Caucasus into the Ottoman lands after the Crimean War. Russian sources point to 300.000 to 500.000 people, while the majority of the Ottoman sources and contemporary Turkish researchers use the figure of 1.000.000 people or more. For the Russian sources, see Berje, 1882; Volkova, 1974: 219–224; Narochitskiy (ed.), 1988: 210–212; Belozerov, 2005: 35–40. For the Turkish and foreign authors on the issue, see: Pinson, 1972: 75; Karpat, 1985: 66–69; Meyer, 2007: 15–32; Rosser-Owen, 2007: 14–27; McCarthy, 2010: 51–53; Besleney, 2014.

economic realities of the region that were introduced to. In doing research for this article, I have extensively used Ottoman Turkish, Bulgarian, Russian, Western European, and other sources on the topic. One highly valuable source of information has been the bilingual newspaper *Dunav* (Tuna), which, published in the town of Ruschuk (Ruse), was the official newspaper of the administration of Danube Vilayet. The data published in the official newspaper of the Vilayet is juxtaposed to the materials of the Bulgarian Revival literature and regular press, to the memories of the Bulgarian Revival figures, to the information provided by foreign diplomats, travellers and researchers.

Danube Vilayet was one of the main locations of settlement in the Balkan territories of the Ottoman Empire for the Circassian refugees arriving from the Caucasus. While it is probable that a small number migrated to this region in the years before the Crimean War (Muchinov, 2012: 126), the bulk of the Circassian emigration occurred after the end of the Crimean War, with a sharp acceleration after the final conquest of the North West Caucasus by the Russian Army in 1859–1864. In terms of Circassians' arrival in Bulgarian lands under Ottoman rule, the time frame was between 1862 and 1867, with its peak in 1864. In the summer of 1864 around 35 000 Circassian families were settled in the territory of the future Danube Vilayet. They represented over 80 % of the refugee families from the Caucasus that had moved until that time in the Ottoman Balkans. Later on, some of them moved into neighbouring districts – mostly into Kosovo (Mihov, 1968: 51). In the spring of 1867, the Circassian refugees in Danube Vilayet numbered about 150 000 people (*Dunav*, year III, No. 172, 7 May 1867). From May to September of 1867, 8.000 Abkhazians from Abkhazia also arrived in the Vilayet (*Dunav*, year III, No. 172, 7 May 1867; No. 178, 28 May 1867; No. 200, 13 August 1867; No. 204, 27 August 1867; No. 207, 6 September 1867; No. 215, 4 October 1867)².

² Apart from the Caucasian refugees, around 150.000 Tatar refugees from the Russian-controlled territories in Crimea and Kuban were settled in Danube Vilayet after the Crimean War (mostly in 1860–1861) (Mihaylova-Mravkarova, 1999: 447). Therefore the total number of refugees in the

The arrival of such large a number of refugees forced the local Ottoman administration to take urgent measures that would improve the dire conditions that the immigrants found themselves in. At first these measures were taken under the leadership of Nusret Pasha, a participant in the Ottoman “Refugee Commission (Muhacirin Komisyonu)”, who had an active role in settling the Tatar refugees from Crimea and Kuban in the Danube Bulgaria in 1860–1861. He was entrusted by the Sublime Porte with the task of settling the Circassian immigrants in this region. Nusret Pasha organized the movement of the Circassian refugees still remaining in the Black Sea ports of Varna and Constanța to the interior of the Bulgarian lands. Despite all the efforts, such a large scale and hasty population movement impacted very badly the health of the immigrants, many of whom never reached the places where they were supposed to settle, and perished (Savetnik, year II, No. 17, 25 July 1864; No. 23, 5 September 1864; No. 34, 21 November 1864; Turtsia, year I, No. 2, 1 August 1864; No. 18, 21 November 1864; Pinson 1972, 74–78). Dangerous outbreaks of tension between the refugees and local population occurred, after authorities had placed certain responsibilities for the transport and settlement-related issues and obtaining livelihood for the Circassian refugees on local residents - especially the Christian inhabitants.

The problems with transporting and settling the refugees cost Nusret Pasha his post. After the establishment of the Danube vilayet in October 1864, Midhat Pasha, who was appointed as the governor, replaced Nusret Pasha with Ahmed Şakir Effendi, who was the head of the newly-formed Refugee Commission of the vilayet (Pinson 1972, 77). Midhat Pasha, who would remain the governor till the early 1868, was personally involved with efforts to solve most pressing issues,³ and initiated a vilayet-wide programme on the matter. This programme projected actions in several directions: 1)

vilayet reached more than 300.000 people in 1867. See also: Koyuncu, 2014: 684–688.

³ For information on the personality, policies and turbulent life of the popular Ottoman reformer Midhat Pasha, see: Fadeeva, 1977; Bakardzhieva, 2009. About his work as a Governor of the Danube Vilayet, see also: Pletnyov, 1994.

settling the refugees and ensuring their livelihood; 2) taking measures to improve the state of health of the immigrants; and 3) initiating efforts for their integration into the Ottoman religious and educational system.

While Circassian refugees settled in the entire territory of the vilayet, except for the mountainous regions of Tarnovo Sanjak, they were more concentrated in Vidin, Niš, and Sofia sanjaks on the border with Serbia, as well as in Lom, Nikopol, Svishtov, and Dobruja -locations situated along the right bank of the Danube River. Their concentration in these regions had an undeniable political and strategic context – Circassians were expected to help strengthen the Ottoman authority in conflict-ridden border regions and form a hard-to-overcome barrier between the Bulgarian population and the neighbouring Christian states. Furthermore, the Ottoman authorities was also trying to increase the population of the border regions following the emigration of a portion of the local Bulgarians to Serbia or Russia (Damyanov 1967, 64–66, 359–361; Pinson 1972, 82; Miyatev 1976, 84; Grancharov 1982, 60–66; Zayakov 1986, 111–124; Kanitz 1995, Vol. I, 84–139; Vol. II, 40–315; Kiel 2005, 436–437; Ignatiev 2008, 93; Muchinov 2013, 174–177). Initially, Circassians settled in newly-built monoethnic villages, some of which had from 70–80 to 100–150 houses (Dunav, year I, No. 21, 21 July 1865; No. 29, 15 September 1865), probably to prevent, to an extent, direct contact with local population. However, the difficulty of establishing government control over these compact settlements, forced Ottoman authorities to make a policy change after which they begin sending immigrants in small groups to existing settlements. This is how some small groups of Circassians, numbering between ten to thirty households, ended up in existing villages of the northern part of the Ruschuk sanjak (Kanitz 1995, Vol. III, 317–346). The aim of exercising efficient control over them, may also explain why large number of Circassians were settled in a many towns in Danube Vilayet, too, where separate neighbourhoods were built for them. As a consequence of this policy, Circassians were settled near the holy grave of Shaykh Bali Effendi in what is today known as the neighbourhood Knyazhevo in the capital of Bulgaria, Sofia (Dunav, year II, No. 106, 7 September 1866; Jireček 1974, 128).

To offer Circassian immigrants the opportunity to acquire livelihood, actions were taken on land allotment for agricultural activities. With the legislation in 1857 of the “Refugee Code (Muhacirin Kanunnamesi),” the Ottoman Government promised free agricultural lands to all immigrants in the Empire (Shaw and Shaw, 1977: 115; Karpat 1985, 61–62; Dumont 1999, 501). Within the following few years, however, this issue caused serious complications because of the unexpectedly high number of immigrants arriving from the Russian territories in Crimea, Kuban and the Caucasus, and of the shortage of land for the newcomers. This required a reallocation of lands in a number of regions within the Bulgarian-inhabited territories – an issue that, quite expectedly, provoked considerable tension between the immigrants and the local population. In 1865 authorities in Danube Vilayet sent special administrators to map out and allocate land in contentious areas of the vilayet and mostly in Dobruja. They continued to work on the issue in the following year, too. (*Dunav*, year I, No. 38, 17 November 1865; year II, No. 56, 13 March 1866). A number of committees of local notables and clergymen were formed to assist the administrators (Panchev 1914, 438; Vazvazova-Karateodorova and Dragolova 1988, 39). As a result of the measures taken, a large section of refugees were allocated land, which was an important precondition for ensuring their means of livelihood. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in some cases the plots allocated were insufficient in size to ensure the livelihood of their families (Dobрева, 2013), resulting in some menfolk join the Ottoman army and police forces.

Another serious problem for the authorities in Danube Vilayet turned out to be the unwillingness of Circassian refugees, who had come from the mountainous region of the Northwest Caucasus, to settle permanently in the flatlands of the vilayet where they could support themselves by agricultural work. In a number of sources from that period, it is mentioned that unlike the Tatar immigrants, who had arrived earlier and supported themselves by cultivating the allocated agricultural lands, Circassians made their living mainly by committing robberies, and that they were especially ‘distinguished’ in stealing cattle (*Vremya*, year II, No. 12, 29 October 1866; Dimitrov

1896, 249; Slavov 2008, 117–118). The authorities were forced to take measures against these illegal acts. There were even recorded cases of armed clashes between Circassians and the Ottoman authorities (Dunav, year I, No. 33, 13 October 1865). Such conflicts arose also because the authorities wanted to put a stop to the wilful movements of the Circassians from places, which they had settled in, to other regions of the vilayet or the neighbouring districts (Dunav, year I, No. 25, 18 August 1865; No. 31, 29 September 1865; year III, No. 172, 7 May 1867). Although, the authorities did not manage to solve the aforementioned problems permanently, the measures taken during the governorship of Midhat Pasha to reduce the crime rate among the Caucasian refugees and to gradually get them involved with agricultural work did succeed to an extent (Dunav, year II, No. 67, 24 April 1866; Kanitz 1995, Vol. I, 84, 124; Obretenov 1983, 48–49).

The other serious problem for the administration of the Danube Vilayet was the high death rates among the refugees. Their much higher mortality rate when they were being transported from the Caucasus through the Black Sea into the Ottoman ports is well documented and is widely known about. The arrival of unexpectedly large number of refugees at the ports led to overcrowding and caused diseases such as typhus and smallpox to spread rapidly. The effects of such diseases were multiplied by the state of undernourishment and poverty, in which the refugees were forced to live (Pinson 1972, 73–74; McCarthy 2010, 53–56). Despite the authorities' attempts to gain control over the situation to assist the immigrants, the death rate did not decrease even after they were moved to the Ottoman interior. The situation in the Danube Vilayet is illustrated by the register for the civil status of the Circassian immigrants, who were settled in 30 villages from Gerlovo (nahiye) of Shumen district (kaza). The records dated 20 April 1865 shows that 28% of all Circassians who settled in this administrative unit in the spring of 1864 perished within just a year (Penkov, 1967: 145–157). Such high mortality rates among the refugees forced the vilayet authorities to take special measures that included building hospitals where constant medical care could be offered to those in need of it. In 1865- 1866 new hospitals were built in such towns as Ruschuk

(Ruse), Varna, Hacıoğlu Pazarcık (today's Dobrich), Tulcha (Tulcea), Pleven, Vidin and Sofia, which hosted sizable number of refugees. Not only the refugees, but also the local poor and needy had the opportunity to have treatment in these hospitals (Dunav, year I, No. 10, 5 May 1865; No. 21, 21 July 1865; year II, No. 67, 24 April 1866; No. 138, 28 December 1866; No. 142, 11 January 1867; No. 144, 18 January 1867; year III, No. 218, 15 October 1867; Pletnyov 1994, 80; Bakardzhieva 2009, 83–84; Kenderova 2015). Vaccination campaigns for smallpox among the children of the immigrants in the Danube region were launched. Doctors and administrators were given the task of organising these campaigns, which were initiated in 1865 and 1866 in such different districts of the Vilayet – from the region of Vidin to the region of Tulcha in North Dobruja (Dunav, year I, No. 15, 9 June 1865; No. 27, 1 September 1865; No. 49, 2 February 1866; year II, No. 57, 16 March 1866).

On the initiative of Midhat Pasha, orphanages (*islahhane*) were built in Ruschuk and Constanța, and Niš before them, to offer shelter and education to orphans not only from the local communities but also from the immigrant families (Dunav, year I, No. 4, 24 March 1865; No. 21, 21 July 1865; year II, No. 58, 20 March 1866; Bakardzhieva 2001, 325–338). At the end of 1866, an orphanage was set up in Sofia, too (Dunav, year II, No. 136, 21 December 1866). In August 1867, around 400 orphans were already being taught science and crafts in the orphanages of Ruschuk, Niš and Sofia (Dunav, year III, No. 202, 20 August 1867). Some of the students of these establishments were later on sent to the capital of the empire, Istanbul, and to Western Europe (mainly France) to continue their education there. (Dunav, year II, No. 56, 13 March 1866; year III, No. 202, 20 August 1867; No. 215, 4 October 1867; year V, No. 372, 30 April 1869; year VIII, No. 699, 6 August 1872). The vilayet authorities made great efforts for adaptation of the refugees from Crimea and the Caucasus, especially the Circassians, who had the hardest time fitting in, into their new environments. Midhat Pasha placed great hopes on their inclusion in the Ottoman religious and educational system. Many mosques and adjacent schools were built for this purpose in places with large concentration of immigrants (Dunav, year II, No. 76, 25 May 1866; No. 135, 18 December 1866). Steps

towards joint education of Muslim and non-Muslim boys were taken in order to disseminate “science” among the immigrants, too (Dunav, year III, No. 216, 8 October 1867). However, these measures resulted in a backlash from large sections of the Bulgarian society, and as a result ended in failure (Bakardzhieva 2009, 122–136).

The construction of mosques and other religious buildings was part of an effort to finalise the complete inclusion of Circassian refugees within Sunni Islam. For the same aim, doctors and surgeons were tasked in many places in Danube Vilayet in 1865–1866 with circumcising the immigrants who had not had this Muslim ritual performed on them. (Dunav, year I, No. 15, 9 June 1865; No. 33, 13 October 1865; No. 36, 3 November 1865; year II, No. 74, 18 May 1866; No. 106, 7 September 1866; No. 111, 25 September 1866; No. 116, 12 October 1866). Additionally, some efforts were made to restrict the practice of common law among the refugees. In 1866 the desire of the vilayet administration to force the Circassians to forget their old customs and to take in the new rules were declared several times on the pages of the “Dunav” newspaper (Dunav, year II, No. 74, 18 May 1866; No. 111, 25 September 1866). The practice of slavery amongst Circassian immigrants presented the Ottoman authorities with serious social issues to tackle (Todorova, 2008–2009: 107–116; Kolev, 2008: 93–94). Any action taken to restrict it did not initially lead to the desired results; moreover, senior representatives of the ruling classes in the Empire were also involved in this lucrative “business” (Vremya, year I, No. 14, 6 November 1865; Dunav, year VI, No. 526, 11 November 1870; Pravo, year VIII, No. 21, 6 August 1873; Pinson 1972, 78–79; Baker 1994, 108–112; Kanitz 1995, Vol. III, 258–259).

The financial aspects of the efforts to deal with the Circassian refugee crisis should also be looked into, for during the governorship of Midhat Pasha, the authorities faced enormous financial difficulties and suffered from chronic underfunding. This was precisely the reason why they simply continued to place the burden of carrying out such tasks as construction of housing for and transportation of refugees and their livelihood on the local people –Christians and Muslims alike (Dimitrov, 1896: 248). While this policy certainly alleviated the financial weight on the authorities and the Treasury, it

hardly contributed to the efforts to overcome the conflicts and clashes between the “old” residents and the newcomers from the Caucasus, which had begun to surface immediately after the arrival of the latter in large numbers. Nevertheless, such issues should not be used to belittle what Midhat Pasha tried to achieve during his governorship in Danube Vilayet in 1864–1868 that an overall programme for dealing with a severe refugee crisis in this part of the Bulgarian lands was put in practice. Rather than dictating terms and regulations forcefully, this programme placed the emphasis on non-confrontational methods for the adaptation of Circassians to their new environment. The purpose was to show that the plight of the refugees was felt not only by the central and local Ottoman authorities, but also the ordinary people of the local communities – Christian and Muslim. That is why a lot of measures were taken concerning the improvement of the economic situation and health state of the immigrants and their inclusion in the Ottoman religious and educational system. The purpose of these actions is to achieve results in long term, more precisely – to gradually integrate the refugees to the social and economic life in the Bulgarian lands under Ottoman rule.

Nevertheless, following Midhat Pasha’s departure from his post in early 1868, many of the projects and practices he had put forward were either abandoned completely or not materialised in the intended way. Their realization in the following years was hampered by the constant changes in the administration of Danube Vilayet. In the decade after the replacement of Midhat Pasha, i.e. from 1868 to 1877, there were eight different governors, and every time a governor was sacked or transferred to another position, his cadres in the vilayet administration were also replaced (Tafrova, 2010: 191). As a result, from then on the efforts lacked consistency and coordination. Plans to build mosques and schools in the immigrant settlements were also neglected. Not only did this hamper the immigrants’ socialization and their adaptation to the social and economic life in Bulgarian lands, but it also resulted in an upsurge of criminal activity (Yakimov, 2004: 74–76; Muchinov, 2013: 185–187), for the Ottoman authorities never fully managed to get under control the robberies and violence committed by Circassians. In fact,

these security-related issues escalated even more during the Eastern Crisis from 1875–1878, and the aggravated relations between the Caucasian immigrants and the local Bulgarian population determined the fate of the former in that during and after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, Circassians were forced to leave the Bulgarian lands, which came under Russian control, permanently to move to the territories still under Ottoman rule. The outcome was clearly reflected in the first population census in the Principality of Bulgaria conducted in 1880 that recorded barely a hundred Circassians (Chankov, 1935: 130), down from a population of more than 150.000, who had arrived in Danube Vilayet in the 1860s.

Conclusion

The fate of the Circassian refugees settled in the Bulgarian lands after the Crimean War clearly shows that without consistent policies, it is impossible to find solutions to the problems caused by large waves of refugees, and achieve integration of the surviving immigrants to their new social and economic realities. In their absence, the difficulties encountered by the Ottoman authorities to deal with the problems actually led to increasing the tensions between the local population and the refugees, which, in turn, aggravated the already precarious ethno-religious relations in the Bulgarian lands, before Bulgaria achieved independence from the Ottoman rule.

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