
THE CONSTRUCTION OF TURKEY'S CIRCASSIANS AS A DOCILE MINORITY

U I a ş S u n a t a

Introduction

Remembrance can be regarded as a social as well as a personal incident. More precisely, remembering “*our*” past is a social activity.¹ Halbwachs coined and initially developed the term “collective memory,” referring to a body of knowledge about a past shared by a social group in a given present time.² In other words, it is a “representation of the past embodied in both historical evidence and commemorative symbolism.”³ Assmann also determined that “human memory is ‘embodied’ in living personal memories and ‘embedded’ in social frames and external cultural symbols (e.g., texts, images, and rituals) that can be acknowledged as a memory function insofar as they are related to the self-image or ‘identity’ of a tribal, national, and/or religious community.”⁴ Moreover, Schwartz argued that it is socially constructed to serve the recent needs of the group such as identity belonging, social cohesion, and group continuity.⁵ Furthermore, Wertsch and Roediger underlined that it is

¹ Celia B. Harris, Helen M. Paterson, and Richard I. Kemp, “Collaborative recall and collective memory: What happens when we remember together?,” *Memory* 16, no. 3 (2008): 213–230, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658210701811862>.

² Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1925).

³ Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the forge of national memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 8.

⁴ Jan Assmann, “Communicative and cultural memory,” in *Cultural Memories* (Springer, Dordrecht, 2011), 15–27.

⁵ Barry Schwartz, “The reconstruction of Abraham Lincoln,” in *Collective Remembering*, ed. David Ed Middleton and Derek Ed Edwards (London: Sage Publications, 1990).

not a static process, but covers “contention and contestation among people.”⁶

There are various forms of collective memory which constitute oral history. Assmann and Czaplicka defined “communicative memory” or “everyday memory” as a form of collective memory differing from other fixed and materialized forms.⁷ Collective memory is based on the historical perceptions of those who make up a social group and are also affected by intergenerational dynamics and the evolution of the related oral narratives. Moreover, there are discrepancies in how memory works among different people. The creation and transfer of memory affected by different factors also impacts the writing of history. Official historical records that tend to be different from the oral historical narratives of diasporic and minority groups are a version of history embraced by the victorious of a society as well as by its ruling elite. Alternatively, oral history, which has the potential to bring different perspectives on historical incidents, should not be overlooked. Still, collective memory in oral history is not independent from individual memory, but collective memory is memory shared by all group members.⁸ Hence, typical narratives in the oral history of any given social group are significant indicators in socially constructing group identities. Structural contexts mainly shape the social construction of minority,⁹ or diasporic identities; but the related social group as an agent activates collective memory and becomes involved in its own social construction. The social representation of history with the collective memory of diasporic and minority groups mostly concentrates on collective traumas.¹⁰ In this study, we

⁶ James V. Wertsch and Henry L. Roediger III, “Collective Memory: Conceptual Foundations and Theoretical Approaches,” *Memory* 16, no. 3 (2008): 318–326, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658210701801434>.

⁷ Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (Spring–Summer 1995): 125–133, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488538>.

⁸ Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁹ Stephanie J. DiAlto, “From ‘Problem Minority’ to ‘Model Minority’: The Changing Social Construction of Japanese Americans,” in *Deserving and Entitled: Social Constructions and Public Policy*, ed. Anne L. Schneider and Helen M. Ingram (SUNY Press, 2005), 81–103.

¹⁰ See Arthur G. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century* (ME Sharpe, 1998); Aleida Assmann and Sarah Clift, *Shadows of Trauma: Memory and the Politics of Postwar Identity* (Fordham University Press, 2016).

examine the social construction of Circassian diasporic/minority identity in Turkey in relation to the historical deportation from their homeland through their collective memory. The Russian expansion in the 19th century brought about a massive forced migration of the indigenous peoples of the north Caucasia to the Ottoman Empire. Regardless of their ethnic groups such as Adyghe, Abkhaz-Abaza, or Ubykh, all north-western Caucasian peoples in diaspora are generally lumped together under the name “Circassians.” Circassians are the peoples whose ancestors were forced to migrate from their native lands due to the Russian-Caucasian Wars. In the ensuing years Circassians were subject to several more forced migrations, but in this study we will examine the deportation most refer to as “the exile.”¹¹ At that time, in 1864,¹² the Ottoman Empire admitted the Circassians into their territory. According to the reception and settlement policy of the Ottoman Empire, Circassian exiles were mostly relocated to Anatolia (Turkey), Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and the Balkans. While nationalist uprisings and World War I were weakening the Empire, Circassians showed their appreciation to the Ottomans for being granted permission to live in resettled regions. During and after the collapse of the Empire, Circassians struggled for national independence from their host countries and became a founding element of the newly established nation-states. Circassian peoples who did not want to lose their homes were once more highly motivated to protect their new abodes. Although they attempted not to lose their diasporic identity by preserving the habits of their former homeland, they belong to a minority in their new homes. After Kurds, Circassians are the second largest ethnic minority of the Turkish Republic, established in 1923. In addition to their numbers, they are mostly used by the state in the process of Turkification in a discriminatory man-

¹¹ There were also deportations during World War II, when around 600 thousand Chechens, the Ingush and Circassians were deported from the Caucasus to Siberia and Central Asia, and after their rehabilitation in 1956 approximately 50 thousand returned, which led to conflicts with the Russians who had taken over their territories.

¹² Ulaş Sunata, “Büyük Çerkes Sürgünü’nün 151. yılı: Acılar, talepler ve isyan,” *Al-Jazeera Türk*, May 21, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/gorus/buyuk-cherkes-surgununun-151-yili-acilar-talepler-ve-isyan>; Ulaş Sunata, “Çerkeslerin Kolektif Hafızası: 21 Mayıs ve Ötesi,” *Birikim Dergisi Güncel*, May 21, 2020, <https://birikimdergisi.com/guncel/10111/cherkeslerin-kolektif-hafizasi-21-mayis-ve-otesi>.

ner. Despite their controversiality in the national discourse, Circassians are known for their high degree of loyalty towards Turkey. Social constructivist theory examines the foundation of shared assumptions about reality and reveals the development of meanings that are jointly rather than separately constructed.¹³ Public policies and discourses are critical to the social construction of minority identities and minority-majority relations, and mostly play out by highlighting the differences between “model minorities” and “problem minorities”.¹⁴ In this work, I prefer to use “docile minority” rather than “model minority”, since the majority benefits from the binary opposition of minorities – either model or problem – by underlining “deserving and entitled” and the minority has more than a passive role in this social construction by addressing their group identity needs. This paper is related to the transmission of memory among Circassians regarding their stories of diaspora to the present and their mutual destiny in “becoming the docile minority” in their host societies. The main focus of this study is the social construction of the Circassian minority in Turkey.

In 2014–2015, I led a project entitled “Diasporas in Turkey: The Example of North-Eastern Caucasus,” funded by the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TÜBİTAK) (113K833). For this project my team and I performed a nation-wide study in a total of 12 cities, 23 districts and about 50 villages near the cities and created a considerable qualitative dataset including 129 oral history interviews with Circassians in Turkey. For this analysis, I re-read the transcripts of these interviews related to their immigration, reception and resettlement, and instrumentalization. I then examined critical oral historical narratives from the related dataset via content analysis in order to determine features of the minority identity construction with its historical milestones and to understand their relationship with the majority as well as with other minorities in Turkey.

¹³ Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, “Social construction of reality,” in *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, ed. Ingrid Volkmer, Stephen W. Littlejohn, and Karen A. Foss (California: SAGE Publications, 2009).

¹⁴ DiAlto, “From ‘Problem Minority’ to ‘Model Minority,’” 81–103.

Circassians' Migration to the Ottoman Empire

As the autochthonous people of North-Western Caucasus, Circassians lived in their homeland located near the Kuban River and which stretched from the Kerch Strait on the shores of the Black Sea to Anapa and Tuapse north of the Caucasus Mountains. The Russian-Ottoman War of 1676–1681 had been won by the Russians, who then claimed the land on the shores of the Black Sea. In 1700 the Istanbul Treaty was signed between the Czarism of Russia and the Ottoman Empire and the Russians captured the Azov fortress. This served to increase Russian-Circassian tensions. Afterwards, the Greek Independence movement sparked the start of the next Russian-Ottoman War. It ended with the signing of the Edirne Treaty in 1829 and led to the legal separation of Circassia from the Ottoman administration. When the Ottomans gave the Circassian fortresses on the Black Sea coast to Tsarist Russia as a part of the Edirne Treaty, the Russian occupation of Circassia gained legitimate ground in the international arena. Circassians who fought the Ottomans in the war were forced to leave their homeland. Circassians were either to be sent to the arid steppes of Russia as prisoners of war or were forced to migrate to the Ottoman Empire. Although Circassians resisted Russian occupation in the so-called Caucasian War of 1817–1864, the departures from their homeland, which started as small groups during the war, were a mass migration until the end of the 19th century. During this period, Russian troops systematically evacuated the villages in the Caucasus and the Russians colonized the Caucasus territory; to Circassians, this was done for the purpose of ethnic cleansing, and therefore almost all Circassians still call it the “Circassian exile,”¹⁵ or “Circassian genocide.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Nihat Berzeg, *Çerkes Sürgünü* (Ankara: Takav Matbaacılık, 1996).

¹⁶ Walter Richmond, *The Circassian Genocide* (Rutgers University Press, 2013). Historical Circassian lands were called Kuban and Terek Oblasts until the end of Tsarist Russia and separated into two administrative units called Krasnodarsky Krai and Stavropolsky Krai and four autonomous governments – Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Abkhazia in the Soviet era. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Abkhazia left the Russian Federation as an autonomous republic under Georgia and later declared independence to fight for its status as a separate country.

Shenfield determines “the number who died in the Circassian catastrophe of the 1860s could hardly, therefore, be less than one million, and may well have been closer to one and a half million.”¹⁷ Moreover, it is estimated that about 1.5 million Circassians had to leave their homeland,¹⁸ although there have been varying estimates of the numbers affected by the exile. It has been claimed that more than 500 thousand people were directly killed by the Russians.¹⁹ In addition, it has been calculated that at least one third of the Circassian immigrants died on the road and in their places of exile due to starvation and epidemics. According to the information obtained from General Katraçev from the Russian consul in Trabzon, the death toll is as follows: an average of 7 out of 70 thousand Circassians died en route to Batumi; almost 80 percent of the 25 thousand people travelling to Trabzon; and between 180 and 250 people died daily, an average of 200 people from the 110 thousand coming to Samsun; out of 5 thousand an average of 40 to 60 people died on the road to Trabzon, Varna and Istanbul.²⁰ The renowned Dutch author van Lennep, who had been in Samsun in 1864, wrote what he had observed regarding the immigrants; malaria spread very quickly among migrants as they adjusted to a new climate and an average of 700–800 immigrants died on a daily basis.²¹ He went on to say that the survivors were sent to other ports and cities.

In fact, almost all Circassians read the Caucasian War as an invasion of the Caucasus between the years 1817–1864 by the Russian Empire with “tragedies of loss and sorrow.”²² It seems Circassian lands were

¹⁷ Stephen D. Shenfield, “The Circassians: A Forgotten Genocide?,” in *The Massacre in History*, ed. Mark Levene and Penny Roberts (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), 154.

¹⁸ Seteney Shami, “Circassian Encounters: The Self as Other and the Production of the Homeland in the North Caucasus,” *Development and Change* 29, no. 4 (October 1998): 617–646, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00093>.

¹⁹ Almir Abreg, “Tehlike Çanları ve Umut Arasında Adıgeler,” in *Geçmişten Günümüze Kafkasların Trajedisi* (Istanbul: Kafkas Vakfı Yayınları, 2006), 43.

²⁰ Shenfield, “The Circassians: A Forgotten Genocide?”

²¹ Henry John Van-Lennep, *Travels in Little-Known Parts of Asia Minor: With Illustrations of Biblical Literature and Researches in Archaeology* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1870).

²² Madina Tekueva, Marina Gugova, Elena Nalchikova, and Andrey Konovalov, “The Meaning of Death for Adygs during the Years of the Caucasian War,” *Journal of History Culture and Art Research* 7, no. 4 (2018): 313–323, <https://doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v7i4.1852>.

captured by Tsarist Russia and cleansed of Circassians as a result of “Russian colonization.” Also, the Russians’ annexation of the North Caucasus and the indigenous peoples of that area resulted in the ethnic cleansing of the Circassians. On May 21, 1864, Russian Czar Alexander II announced the end of the war. However, that day is a black page in the history of the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus. Similarly, 1864 is referred to as the year of exodus of Circassians from their homeland, the year of Circassian exile and genocide, even though the process spanned years. For them, May 21 also symbolizes the forced departure from their homelands, meaning exile and genocide. The memorial as a ritual for facing the history of Circassian displacement and remembering the related sorrows marks the anniversary of the shared memory of the Circassian peoples.

Although it started in small groups in the 1820s–1830s, it would not be wrong to say that the migration movements from the Caucasus to the Ottomans took place in two waves, 1850–1876 and 1877.²³ In the first wave, most of the Caucasian refugees journeyed by sea through the Black Sea ports (Samsun, Trabzon, Sinop, Batumi, Akçakoca, Giresun, Fatsa, İnebolu, Ereğli, Ayancık and Şile) and Istanbul; and some were scattered through Anatolia through Batumi and Kars. Caucasian migrants settled mainly in the regions of Giresun, Sivas, Kayseri, Ankara, Bolu, Sakarya, Kocaeli and İstanbul to the coasts of the Middle Black Sea and the West Anatolia region. Among these regions, Samsun, Ordu, Sakarya and Bursa are the important settlement areas. Still and since their early time in the Ottoman Empire, the Adyghe population, Circassians, in Turkey have mainly lived in the Uzunyayla region. Uzunyayla is a large plateau chain in the Central Anatolian region. It lies from northern to southern Turkey and partly covers Sivas, Kayseri, and Kahramanmaraş. There are about 80 Circassian villages and annual Circassian festivals in Uzunyayla.²⁴

In the oral history fieldwork conducted in 2014, we came across similar narratives about the emigration of Circassians from Russia and

²³ Ferhat Berber, “19. yüzyılda Kafkasya’dan Anadolu’ya yapılan göçler,” *Karadeniz Araştırmaları* 31 (2011): 17–49.

²⁴ Ulaş Sunata, “Diasporanın Sosyokültürel Hafızası Olarak Çerkes Köyü,” in *Sosyokültürel Yönleriyle Çerkes Toplumunu*, 9–48 (Ankara: Kaf-dav Yayınları, 2015).

the early resettlement which took place during the Ottoman period. For example, one typical narrative is as follows:

The first arrival was from Batumi, by boat, in 1865. From Russian provinces. During the wars with the Russians. Once they learned their secrets, they could not make it there, they were forced to flee to Turkey, because it is an Islamic country. They came from Batumi, over Trabzon, by ships and boats. Back then, these places were a part of Ünye. Once they arrived to Ünye they said, “we came to settle here, show us a land.” They told them, “go and find any place you like and let us know.” They found here, they settled here. For a long time, I mean for how many years they stayed here. They came to see that there are a lot of mosquitoes around. This time they went to the province (*eyalet*) again. They said “we wake up sick when we sleep at night. There is a strange sense of numbness. Show us someplace else.” This time, my father’s uncle, they were six siblings. Grand Hadji Mövlet gets on his horse and finds Hamamözü in Amasya after a long journey. Hamamözü is similar to the region they left in terms of climate. There is no humidity. He goes and says, “I want to settle here.” They say okay “settle there.” They go and settle there and bring his other five siblings. Only my father’s family stays here. It is a long journey to Hamamözü, so they stay back here. The rest of the siblings stay in Hamamözü. Here, the mosquitoes hurt them very much. They were broken from malaria, swamps and mosquitoes. Then some of them move to Harşit Creek... For example, my grandfather drank dirty water from Harşit Creek during the Russo-Turkish war, he came here and died. When my father was 5–6 years old. My father’s grandfather came from Caucasia. Hadji Hapuh. They were two brothers, Hapuh and Hatuh. [...] Those who come after Hapuh stayed. For example, our lineage goes back to Hapuh. Hatuh remained in Russia. [They are still there!]. My uncle was captured by the Russians. My father’s uncle I mean. They kept him for seven years. [...] (KA-063, Samsun, Woman, 80)

As we see, Circassian collective memory includes suffering from great human loss. In spite of being forcibly removed from their homeland, Circassians do not prefer to talk about their failure during the war, probably since they see their warriors as an integral part of Circassian identity. Instead, they prefer to mention their feats of arms. As a matter of fact, the persecution narrative of Circassians is particularly dominated by loss linked to epidemics and road conditions. In other words, they remember their ancestors as forced immigrants who battled epidemics and the harsh conditions of the journey. It is still com-

mon for Circassian migrants to not eat fish as thousands of immigrants drowned in the sea as a result of sinking ships. Quotations below also display emphasis on challenges met while travelling or first settling in their new homes.

They were talking about their journey from Caucasia with great difficulty my dear. Some of them were thrown overboard, some made their way here, some were stranded during the journey... Some made it from the land and some from the sea, based on their final destinations. They referred to the journey as very difficult my dear. Who would think otherwise? They left everything behind, my child, everything. Back there, their situation was better, but they had no money, no land, no property... They wandered off here on their own. Nevertheless, they came as a family, in good condition, *Allah razı olsun* (may God be willing). If we were in the same predicament, we would have starved to death my child! I mean we are not handymen, but they were farmers, they were good farmers. My grandfather was doing well. (KA-208, Bilecik, Woman, 82)

Our grandparents said that 50 thousand Circassians died or were thrown overboard from ships during a 5-6 month period where they stayed on the shores of the Black Sea on their way from Russia. We were told about these stories. (KA-105, Kahramanmaraş, Man, 69)

They were broken from malaria, swamps and mosquitoes. (KA-063, Samsun, Woman, 80)

It is said that people were broken from mosquitoes and malaria. Many of our people were broken from the disease. They died of untreatable diseases. Actually, my mother's village, my father's village, they relocated to three different places. They scattered to escape from floods and water. First settlers still live here. We are the 5th generation here. It continues. For 150 years. (KA-053, Samsun, Man, 50)

Now our Circassians first settled in [the district] Niksar of the province] Tokat. My cousin talks about what he heard from his elders. Niksar was a mosquito-infested swamp back then. Some of our elders had died, they were distraught. They emigrated from there. On their way, they settled in Eğrap, which is a Circassian village. They did not like Eğrap either. Finally, they deliberated with some families from Caucasia and came here. This is a forested plateau, a beautiful place. That's how they settled here, over 130 years ago. (KA-158, Sivas, Man, 71)

During our interviews, most of our respondents reported memories concerning the experiences of the first-settlers. It is apparent that a considerable number of interviewees determined the movements around before they settled in their own village. It can be inferred that natural factors such as geography and climate played a significant role in this mobility.

What I remember is that they went through many difficulties. But they moved to many places. They first settled in a village [...] in Kahramanmaraş. From there, they moved to [another village]. They stayed there with [their beautiful] horses because the land was more fertile. [...] I mean that's how it is [laughs]. They moved around a lot. (KA-109, Kahramanmaraş, Woman, 76)

First, they came to Istanbul and stayed there for about 3-4 months. They moved to Adana from there. They stayed a long time in Adana. Due to malaria, it was swamp and reeds in Adana, Çukurova in those times, due to malaria many Circassians died. Afterwards – Circassians worked with horses – they came here and liked it. This is a plateau, beautiful and cold. Longer winters and shorter summers. They showed them some places. They did not like those. Then they came here. Abdülhamid gave them spacious land. That's how Uzunyayla was gradually established. (M-055, Kayseri, Man, 58)

Now for example, we cannot know the full history. If we are 70 years old, this is the village that was established 150 years, 170 years before. While we do not know how they got here but surely everyone came from Caucasia. They collectively settled in a village ahead of here [...]. These villages were dispersed from there. [...] Everyone used to be in the village. (KA-105, Kahramanmaraş, Man, 69)

[...] My grandfather, they first went to a village near Kavak [district of Samsun]. They did not want it. Our village is close to the creek. They settled there. My grandfather's father came later. [...] (KA-036, Samsun, Woman)

They had a chance to select their destination, but this selection took time, as they moved several times. In this early period of resettlement in the new land, they escaped swamps, reeds, malaria and mosquitoes. In addition, they preferred locations which were forested, with plateaus, mountainous and green, like their homeland.

[...] because Adana is a bit warmer, our villagers did not want to go there, they preferred the plateaus, so they settled in our village. (KA-121, Adana, Man, 75)

They were given land first in Istanbul and then in Düzce. They refused. They came all the way here. Now there is a place [...] in Adana. It was empty and they gave it to us. There were a lot of flies back then, mosquitos. Our old hodja refused by saying that “you are letting us be preyed upon by the mosquitos.” Water was not clean. There is a nice spring called Akpınar here. They came to that spring and we have been living, we have been allowed to live, *Alhamdulillah* (praise be to Allah). (KA-103, Adana, Man, 79)

Our arrival story, according to our elders, is a very broad one. We could not take it upon ourselves to learn it. But what we heard from hearsay is that Kabardians migrated to our village in 1864. They migrated to Düzce from Istanbul and to Kayseri from Düzce. Our group has moved from Kayseri to Tokat. On their way from Tokat, they spent the night. It was the Silk Road, so it had water, plenty of greenery, appropriate weather. Just like the weather in Caucasia. Our elders said “let’s settle here if the governor allows us.” They go down to talk to the governor with everything they have, their horses, the carriers, everything. They ask him that “we would like to settle here if you allow us.” The governor accepted and said okay. He advised them to discuss, deliberate and cooperate to build houses. For example, this house is 112 years old. This is the earliest house that was built when we first settled here. Until this house was built, they lived in tents. They built the houses later. When they first settled, there were around 45–50 households. But they were separated as time passed; right now the number is around 15–20. This is how we coped, our way of settlement. (KA-010, Tokat, Man, 68)

Our ancestors came here by dying, they settled here. As you can see, Circassian villages are always mountainous and away from the city. For example, there is a village [...] where the wolves can come down during the night. They all lived in such places. [...] (KA-026, Samsun, Kadın, 18)

There was nothing here darling, in terms of life, in terms of humans. It is mountainous... but not quite, it was bushes or thorny, but they nevertheless liked it. They cleared the land of course. Then people started to come; it became a 45-household village. But very lively, very beautiful, respect and love towards one another... You know our Circassians, good and bad. They were a respectful people towards one another. We have had very good livelihood, very good friendships, neighbours my dear. Of course, we had, I could not imagine otherwise [...] (KA-208, Bilecik, Woman 82)

According to Pul, due to epidemics and for security reasons, it was preferred to place immigrants in rural areas and on farms that belonged

to foundations instead of city centers.²⁵ During the first migration wave, 80 percent of the immigrants died due to epidemics and it was thought that in this second migration wave it would be better for the Ottoman Empire to place the immigrants in the highlands.²⁶ Still, Eser says that the barely established Circassian villages were replaced by large Circassian cemeteries due to climate change and epidemics.²⁷

Kind Reception and Resettlement

The Circassian relocation was of great importance to the Ottomans. The so-called “*hüsn-ü iskan*” (kind resettlement) is the key concept in the relocation of the Circassian peoples, which stood for an unproblematic settlement. Due to the small number of immigrants up to the 1850s, special institutions were not needed; housing was arranged by edict and municipalities were mostly left to deal with these works. However, increasing numbers necessitated the establishment of many committees, the first of which was *İdare-i Muhacirin* (Administration for Migrants/Refugees). The resettlement commissions worked closely with local administrators; in some areas, officers responsible for the settlement and also interpreters were appointed. The settlement of immigrants essentially consisted of providing them with land, subsistence allowances until they were permanently settled; and places where they could stay as guests. Taxes and military exemptions were granted until after their settlement. In order for the migrants to connect to the land and to be productive, they were given agricultural tools and animals. While preferential treatment diminished over time, the Ottoman Empire still provided shelter and grain for immigrants, agricultural land, seeds and oxen. In fact, Circassians describe the state as dealing with

²⁵ Ayşe Pul, “1877–78 Osmanlı-Rus Savaşı Sonrası Beykoz’da Muhacirler İçin İskân Yeri Çalışmaları,” *Tarih Okulu Dergisi (TOD)/ Journal of History School (JOHS)* 6, no. 15 (2013): 165, <http://dx.doi.org/10.14225/JOH265>.

²⁶ Ahmet Halaçoğlu, *Balkan Harbi Sırasında Rumeli’den Türk Göçleri (1912–1913)* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1994), 108.

²⁷ Mehmet Eser, “Uzunyayla Bölgesindeki Çerkes Köylerinde Sosyo-kültürel Değişme,” in *Türkiye Çerkeslerinde Sosyo-Kültürel Değişme* (Ankara: Kaf Der Yayınları, 1999), 55–142.

the settlement problems by providing positive responses to their demands.²⁸

Our ancestors would say when we first came here the governor told them “you want this land but think carefully. We can give you land in Kazva, in Geras outside of Tokat, in Niksar, in Erbaa.” The elders went to investigate. Back then those places were swamps and mosquitoes were plenty. Our elders lived in airy, high places. They were living in clean air. When they saw the swamps and the mosquitoes, they refused. They said that this is the best place for us. What I am trying to say is that they were very kind towards us; they gave us what we wanted. According to what they say, we did not have any fights or quarrels. (KA-010, Tokat, Man, 68)

The fact that the administrators did not follow the settlements for a long time was a source of problems. Some administrators tried to solve problems independently. The financial obligations brought on by the settlements were covered by the state and local residents, philanthropists and notaries were also asked for help. The names of philanthropists were published in the newspaper to encourage others to donate. In the 1860s and 1870s, the increasing number of Circassian foundations also contributed to the resettlement of newcomers. Though it has been stated that local citizens helped the new immigrants in addition to state support, McCarthy, however, emphasizes the public's discomfort at having to help “these predatory Circassians.”²⁹ Most affected communities, particularly Avşars, ran from the Circassians saying that “Blue-eyed Circassians. What they wear is leather, what they eat is corn, their eyes are like the sky.” They say “A distinct beast has arrived. They would wear leather shalwar back then.” During the course of my fieldwork I often heard variations of this expression in various regions in Turkey.

In the context of relocation, it has been observed that settlement units were to be *villages*. The Ottoman Administration for Migrants/Refugees was more experienced during the second migration wave (1877) compared to the previous one. However, with the arrival of those previously settled in the Balkans, land shortages began to emerge. To

²⁸ Pul, “1877–78 Osmanlı-Rus Savaşı Sonrası Beykoz'da Muhacirler İçin İskân Yeri Çalışmaları,” 162.

²⁹ Cited in Berber, “19. yüzyılda Kafkasya'dan Anadolu'ya yapılan göçler,” 17–49.

organize the settlement, the *İskân-ı Muhacirin Talimatnamesi* (Regulations for Settlement of Migrants/Refugees) was published including 10 articles. The basic points emphasized were: settlements will be permanent, help from the locals will be demanded and due to the land shortage in rural areas, those who will be settled are those who have occupational skills. Migrants settled in urban centers in the second wave due to the increase in numbers and reactions from those who lived in the countryside, created migrant neighborhoods between the countryside and the city in Anatolian cities. In addition to the migrants who settled in small or abandoned villages, new settlements were also established for migrants. As can be observed in oral history narratives, the settlers thought that the lands that they were settling on were uninhabited and that they were establishing life on empty land. They mostly emphasize “this is our village.”

When the peoples of the North Caucasus came to the Ottoman Empire, the Empire also met their need for soldiers and used them as a force against “separatist” minorities such as the Kurds, Balkan and Arab communities.³⁰ A part of the Adyghe was used as a military force against both Armenians who were rising for an independent state and to protect the Russian border. Moreover, they had problems in the area in adapting to the predominant Kurdish tribes in the region; to obey orders, do military service, pay tribute and adapt to certain traditions. This situation came to an end in 1908 as a result of the Young Turk’s gaining control in the region. Whereas Caucasians settled in Western and Central Anatolia (mostly Abkhaz-Abazin and Adyghe) were living in better conditions.³¹

Hundreds of Circassian villages were populated on the vertical line from Samsun (northern Turkey) to Amman (Jordan). The location of villages was chosen in a line which borders diverse minority groups who were found to be an administratively problematic population in the

³⁰ Ayhan Kaya, “Circassian Diaspora in Turkey: Stereotypes, Prejudices and Ethnic Relations,” in *Representations of the Other/s in the Mediterranean World and Their Impact on the Region*, ed. Nedret Kuran-Burçoglu and Susan Gilson Miller (Istanbul: The ISIS Press, 2005), 229.

³¹ Georgi Chochiev, “On the History of the North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 11, no. 2 (2007): 215, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25597334>.

Empire.³² Importantly, Circassians also recognize the instrumentalization of their ancestors by the Ottoman Empire against the “rebellious” minorities such as the Avşar people, Greeks and Armenians.

I do not know how they came but as exile. The Avşar people used to live here. When the Circassians came, they sent them someplace else. They themselves settled here. That’s how it happened. [...] (KA-099, Kayseri, Woman, 63)

Armenians used to live here, this was their settlement. We came whenever they left. (KA-161, Sivas, Woman 64)

There were Armenians here. Armenians were kicked out and the Ubykh people settled here. (KA-124, Kahramanmaraş, Woman, 75)

Armenians had to flee from here. I mean they were kicked out when the Circassians came. They kicked out the Avşars too. The Avşars were banished beforehand but our people kicked the Armenians as well as the Avşars out. (KA-179, Kayseri, Man, 85)

But the Avşars were using this place as a plateau. They would come during the summer, leave during winter. We did not have any issues with the Avşar people but Abdülhamid³³ had some problems. The Avşars think we took the land away from them but that’s not the case. Abdülhamid placed us here, he gave us land. You know what the Avşar’s were? They did not do their military service, they were treasonous, they were spies, they avoided taxes. Abdülhamid declared “Hit them, do not let the Avşar people be.” Dadaloğlu³⁴ said, “If the declaration belongs to the emperor, mountains belong to us.” They sought refuge in the Tauros Mountains. That’s how they managed to escape. They repopulated afterwards. Otherwise they were broken just like the “15 incidents” and Armenian incidents (laughs). But we do not have any quarrels with anybody. [Abdül] Hamid banished them. It has nothing to do with Circassians, it was the state who banished them. They declared “Do not leave one Avşar alive, put all of them through the sword.” They were massacred, they ran to the mountains. That’s how they managed to escape. (M-055, Kayseri, Man, 58)

³² Sunata, “Diasporanın Sosyokültürel Hafızası Olarak Çerkes Köyü,” 9–48.

³³ Abdulhamid II, or Abdül Hamid II, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, ruled from 1876 to 1909. During his reign, the Ottoman lost the war with the Russian Empire (1877–1878), whereas he is remembered for his political decisions and modernization reforms and regular system as well as Pan-Islamism.

³⁴ Dadaloğlu was a famous Avşar folk poet-singer.

They left Caucasia because the Russians were infidels. Otherwise it is a beautiful place. They banished them through force. They gave them land as migrants. [...] It is a warm swampy land. They gave it as a plateau. They came here because of the cold weather. [...] Yamaç was an Armenian village. They were banished after they were forcibly settled. The government had a hand in it too. [...] They established a village near the Circassians. Then they were sent way, exiled. Just like how we escaped from Russia, they escaped here. They did not go willingly. They were made to go. Only one of them was left. A man who became Muslim later on. They married him to a Circassian. Hachurey. No one knew he was Armenian, not even himself. [...] No matter what you are, you have to be Muslim. It is very bad to interact with non-Muslims. You cannot marry a Christian even if he is Circassian. It does not end with being Caucasian, you must be Muslim after all. (KA-112, Kahramanmaraş, Woman, 72)

Of course, they came here because they were Muslims. Our mosque did not have a community (*cemaat*). We loved to pray. We would go to *tarawih*. Thank God we had lots of men, women and elders. (KA-133, Kayseri, Woman, 80)

I heard that there were some infidels living here and that they kicked them out before settling here. I do not have much information. There were Greeks on the upper side of the village earlier. They kicked those Greeks out and then the Circassians settled. The Circassians kicked them out. Neither the Turks nor the Circassians embraced them. They always banished them. Then we acquired the lands. Their stone houses still stand today. Not only the Circassians but the Turks as well. In hodja's village there was a non-Muslim child working in construction and he was thrown off a building. They made them suffer very much. They devastated them, kicked them out. The elders are gone now, for example my aunt's mother-in-law in Karapınar [district of Konya], she knew about these things. She also took part in the mistreatment of the non-Muslims. (KA-024, Samsun, Woman, 50)

[These areas were empty back then.] Actually, there is a fountain at the center of our village. This was when the Armenians lived here. The area with the fountain was called the "Fountain of Migrants" (*Göçer Çeşmesi*). The ones who travelled to the plateaus, hunters would spend a few days in that area. When our people were coming here, they gathered at Kuzutepe [village of Göksun district of Kahramanmaraş]. When they were separating from there, they discovered this place. They came during the night. The sides we are seeing right now used to be forest areas. They cut down the trees during the night and built the house from wood. They settled by the fountain. Then the migrants and hunters were not able to come anymore. They were saying "the

Circassians have occupied the fountain, they would kill us if go there.” That’s how they seized it. (KA-105, Kahramanmaraş, Man, 69)

Whereas the Ottoman administration wanted to benefit from the “belligerent” temperament of the Circassian migrants in the military field, this temperament posed a threat to internal security on various occasions; discontent led to small-scale quarrels and the administration feared the possibility of bigger events and therefore tried to eliminate the attempts without using excessive force. There was an attempt at preventing through legislation the illegal activities of the immigrants, which grew in parallel with their discontent, via a ban on carrying illegal weapons. They were also obliged to sign papers that forced them to remain in place and their passports were confiscated. As a principle, the Administration for Migrants/Refugees frequently attempted to resettle noble Circassian families from their slaves if they had any.³⁵ The migrants also voiced their threat of returning to Russia on several occasions. Interviewees who think the state policy of *scattered settlement* was conducted on purpose, talk about some of their acquaintances with whom they managed to stay in touch over the years.

My grandfather told me the stories of the exile with tears in his eyes. He would tell me Abkhazian wailings while telling me the stories. We were not able to understand but he would sometimes translate saying that “this is how much we suffered,” especially internal migration devastated them. He tells me they came from Kalanç but they know nothing about settlement. To go through another exile from Kalanç to Hurdaz was also tiresome. To be forced to separate in the country where you painfully sought refuge was very difficult. I am thinking that yes, we sought refuge here but why are they separating us. Because there were people separated from the same family. (KA-026, Samsun, Woman, 18)

³⁵ Traditional Circassian society was broken into strict castes. The highest was the caste of the “princes” and the lowest were slaves. The Circassian slave class was significant to the Ottoman Harem for several centuries, even before the Circassian influx around 1864. Although a declaration of Sultan Mahmud II in 1830 gave freedom to white slaves – mostly Circassians, Circassian slavery and the slave trade for not only Harem but also agriculture partially continued until the Turkish Republic, established in 1923. For more details, see Ehud R. Toledano, “Circassian Slavery and Slave Trade - An Ottoman Solution,” in *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression: 1840–1890*, ed. Ehud R. Toledano, 148–191 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

When the Circassians came from Caucasia, they settled from one place to another. They were scattered to mountains; they were scattered to meadows. Our grandfathers first came to Bursa. (KA-008, Tokat, Man, 85)

They were dispersed throughout Turkey. I guess with the mindset that if the Circassians are concentrated in one place, they would revolt. They were of course dispersed all around. The highest number was in Samsun during that time. I guess that number has decreased over the years. Pinarbaşı Kayseri for example. The highest number is there. Also, Göksun. There are 20–22 villages in Göksun. Additionally, there are a couple villages in Antalya too. This is the Circassian policy that they followed. They did not send big groups of people to the same place. Düzce for example, there are a lot of Circassians there too. (KA-105, Kahramanmaraş, Man, 69)

One of my sisters-in-law is in Istanbul, the other is in Dalaman, the other is in Eskişehir, two of them are in Bozüyük; they are all over the place. (KA-208, Bilecik, Woman, 82)

Since they were made to settle in various places, there are either one or two pure Circassian villages left. Let me say they are being mixed as well. (KA-49, Samsun, Woman, 27)

They were scattered all over the place. (KA-161, Sivas, Woman, 64)

Six thousand people came to Istanbul at first. They were scattered all over Turkey from that point. For example, Pinarbaşı, Yozgat or Samsun and Adana. That means either the government or the Circassians themselves wanted it so. I cannot know that for sure. (KA-121, Adana, Man, 71)

As I said, first they were settled according to the preference of Circassians, they were allowed to move places similar to Caucasia. [However] they were then dispersed with the aim of keeping them separate. They were placed amongst Turks and Laz people³⁶ to prevent them from unification. (KA-130, Kahramanmaraş, Man, 71)

A Docile Minority Construction for the Republic of Turkey

The Ottomans, reluctant to lose the Balkans to Russia's Pan-Slavism goal, first placed the Circassian communities as a force in this region. Almost half of the immigrants of the 1850s–60s (the majority are the

³⁶ Laz people, or Lazi, is another ethnic group in Turkey indigenous to the Black Sea region.

Adiges and Abazins) were placed in the territory of present-day Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia and northern Greece, against local liberalization movements.³⁷ After the defeat in the Russian-Ottoman War in 1877–1878, many Caucasians resettled to Anatolia, Syria and Palestine. Chochiev stated that the reason behind this was the pressure the Ottoman Empire received from European countries. Caucasians still live in the lands left from Yugoslavia today.

With the idea of Pan-Turkism, Circassians gained new social status in 1908 through the Young Turk Movement. With the transition from autocratic management to constitutional regime, the Young Turks granted equal rights to every Ottoman State citizen, regardless of their ethnic or religious ties. At the same time, minorities received cultural and political freedoms. Circassians played an active role in the ideological and organizational preparations during this process.³⁸ According to Chochiev, there was a motive for these preparations: The Caucasus is in a region that separates Turks from Asia Minor and Central Asia. The idea of Pan-Turkism would not be possible without including this region. Thus, encouraging Caucasian people to embrace Turkish ideas and allowing them to play a role in the processes became one of the government's most powerful pieces of propaganda. With the support of the Muslim Caucasians, the Young Turks demonstrated the importance they gave to the Circassian minority at every opportunity.³⁹ At the same time, those whose ancestors had been migrants were localized through the utilization of religion and nationalization in order to create a docile minority. This idea was constructed by the Ottoman Empire and to ensure order within the Empire and the Circassian minority, as well as to use them as a buffer in areas where other minorities were also settled in through the use of religious and nationalist propaganda. Circassian collective memory underlines their service to Islam and their belonging to Turkey as follows:

³⁷ Chochiev, "On the History of the North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey," 214.

³⁸ Chochiev, "On the History of the North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey," 217.

³⁹ Chochiev, "On the History of the North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey," 218.

Our arrival story is clear. We came during the 1860s. We first settled in Merzifon Tavşandağ. Then they came here and settled. They did farming, they served the country and the people. They served Islam. (KA-028, Tokat, Man)

They say that “this land is ours.” I mean to say that “they kicked us out and they settled you here.” They are fighting back against it. But three villages in Uzunyayla belong to the Avşar people. The rest were generally Turkmen and Alevi villages. Actually, the Ottomans put us there as a buffer zone. Because Avşars and Alevis were not getting along, so they put us there as a barrier. It cut the tensions like a knife. The Ottomans were actually smart with this. I mean they knew what they were doing. But it worked for us too because we worked with horses and these are all forested areas. (KA-097, Kayseri, Man, 64)

Circassians were used by the political and military elite to help create an ethnic and culturally homogenous society, subjecting them to the nation-state creation process in the 1920s.⁴⁰ Turkification policies were reinforced by Turkish history theory, “Sun-Language Theory” and educational laws.⁴¹ In his study, Tekinalp⁴² has identified ten ways to incorporate non-Turkish ethnic minorities into the political system through the example of Turkish Jews.⁴³ These include the Turkification of names, speaking Turkish, praying in Turkish at synagogues, Turkification of schools, sending children to Turkish schools, taking part in national events, living alongside Turks, including themselves in collective life, performing duties for the national economy, being aware of their rights. It is possible to say that besides non-Muslims, these conditions include many ethnic minorities such as Kurdish and Circassian communities. That is, Circassians in Turkey are confronted by the dominance of Turkishness and Islam in every aspect of life: the

⁴⁰ Kaya, “Circassian Diaspora in Turkey,” 217–240; Ulaş Sunata, *Transnational Solidarity of Circassians in-between Caucasus and Middle East*, Conflict and Forced Migration (Studies in Symbolic Interaction, Vol. 51) (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 71–88, <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0163-239620190000051004>.

⁴¹ This linguistic pseudoscientific hypothesis, known as the Sun-Language Theory, developed in the early period of the Turkish Republic and proposed that all human languages are descendants of one proto-Turkic primal language (İlker Aytürk, “Turkish Linguists against the West: The Origins of Linguistic Nationalism in Atatürk’s Turkey,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 6 (2004): 1–25, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4289950>).

⁴² Metin Tekinalp, *Türkleştirme*, trans. Ö. Ozankaya (Ankara: T.C. Kültür Bakanlığı, 2001 (original work published in 1928)).

⁴³ Kaya, “Circassian Diaspora in Turkey,” 228.

language spoken in the public sphere, citizenship, national education, industrial life and resettlement policies, etc.⁴⁴ Many Abkhazians who migrated to the Ottoman Empire continue in their Sunni Islam beliefs. Since the region was under Ottoman rule in the 1500s, many of the resettled Abkhazians were Muslims. Today, many Abkhazians in Abkhaz are, however, Orthodox Christians.⁴⁵

More statist and conservative Circassian individuals, thinking that they have adapted to Turkey; referenced their commitment to Turkey through the roles they played in the War of Independence in the early years of the Republic. At this point, there is an important Circassian community who define themselves as “Circassians as well as Turks.” It would be important to say for the sake of analysis that these definitions are made with caution when speaking about the establishment years of the Republic, and with caution regarding their demands for speaking in their mother tongue. Although both points are formed by the older generation who are generally more conservative, it is possible to say that they are also included in the younger generation’s points.

On the other hand, people who have more radical views and critical thinking criticize the Ottoman State, the settlement policy, the Turkification policies of the early years of the Republic (prohibition of mother tongue languages) and ongoing Circassian statist structure. This point of view comes more from the more critical younger generations who play an active role in associations and who are curious about history; while the political stance can be effective regardless of age group.

Discussion

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the influx of migrants/refugees from the Balkans, Crimea and the Caucasus to Anatolia started. There are three distinct views on the Ottoman Empire’s migrant/refugee acceptance policy. The first view is that the Ottomans accepted

⁴⁴ Kaya, “Circassian Diaspora in Turkey,” 229.

⁴⁵ Frederik Coene, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2009), 56.

immigrants in the name of “Islam and humanity.”⁴⁶ The second is that the Ottoman Empire was forced to accept migration despite not wanting it.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, this view does confirm to the view of encouraging immigration to increase population.⁴⁸ Lastly, the Ottoman administration saw immigrants as an asset and was therefore highly welcoming towards immigrants.⁴⁹ Although these views differ, behind the politics of a positive reception, there are four main targets all views can confirm: (i) improving swamps and adding them to agricultural lands, (ii) meeting the military needs of the army, (iii) buffering problematic regions, and (iv) the desire for the hegemony of the Muslim population.

Importantly, whereas the last two targets display two main ideologies - nationalism and co-religionism - leading to conflicts at that time, the latter is more decisive. In other words, the main population policy aimed at increasing the Muslim population in the Ottoman Empire and balancing problematic areas with newcomers, mostly Circassians. The Ottoman Empire utilized Circassians who had strong military traditions to suppress independence movements and riots.

The ideology and discourse of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis that emerged in the 1982 constitution resulted in Circassians gaining new meaning in the 1980s: the Circassian-Turkish discourse and Circassian nationalism emerged.⁵⁰ With regard to the discourse and idea of Caucasian Turks, Circassians were one of the most recent examples of the Turkification policy. The right-conservative group supported this discourse and maintained Turkish national history, further arguing that the Northern Caucasians were of Turkish-Islamic origins. Many North Caucasian thinkers opposed this discourse.⁵¹ It can also be said that the nationalist atmosphere after the collapse of Soviet Russia and the wars

⁴⁶ Pul, “1877-78 Osmanlı-Rus Savaşı Sonrası Beykoz’da Muhacirler İçin İskân Yeri Çalışmaları,” 159-182.

⁴⁷ Faruk Kocacık and Mehmet Eser, “Kafkasya’dan Anadolu’ya Göçler (Sivas İli Örneği),” *Zeitschrift für die Welt der Türken/Journal of World of Turks* 2, no. 1 (2010): 187-196.

⁴⁸ Kemal Karpat, *Ottoman Population, 1830-1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

⁴⁹ Berber, “19. yüzyılda Kafkasya’dan Anadolu’ya yapılan göçler,” 17-49.

⁵⁰ Kaya, “Circassian Diaspora in Turkey,” 232.

⁵¹ Kaya, “Circassian Diaspora in Turkey,” 232.

between some countries in the North Caucasus (Abkhazia, Georgia, etc.) have an effect on these ideas.

Co-religionist population preference is not only for the land of the Ottoman Empire but also valid for the Russian Empire. For example; while Russian and Kazakh dwellings spread through North-Western Caucasus as a result of the population transfer of the significant amount of Muslim nations in the Circassia and Abkhazia, the biggest buffer zone between Christian Armenian and Georgian lands, with wars and exile of survivors with forced migration, the shores of the Black Sea were emptied of Circassians and populated in particular with Armenian migrants aside from Russians and Kazakhs. This co-religionist resettlement policy in their former homeland after Russian occupation stimulates Circassian aggression against the peoples connected to other religions, especially Armenians. Like the concept of “Caucasian Turks” with Turkish-Islam synthesis, there are “Circassian Armenians” in Orthodox beliefs. Although the population exchange is known only as part of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 between Greece and Turkey, it can be stated here that there is an unofficial agreement for a massive population exchange between Circassians and Armenians.

This work emphasizes the religious aspect of the social construction of the minority. Since their exile from their ancestral homeland, Circassians have jointly constructed their diasporic and minority identities based on religious dichotomy – to be or not to be Muslim – empowered by the socio-political context. The related public policies and discourses in the social construction of Circassian identity have exploited the binary opposition based on religion.

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