TOWARDS THE HISTORY OF THE DESCENDANTS OF ABKHAZIAN MUHAJIRS[1]

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Abstract: Owing to its exceptional geostrategic and transit position, the Caucasus has been, and remains, a significant object of international politics across all historical periods. From the sixteenth century onward, the Russian state joined the Ottoman Empire and Iran in actively contesting influence over the Caucasus. Russia skillfully exploited the favourable circumstances that emerged at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries - the weakening of its principal rivals, the political fragmentation of Caucasian polities, and a degree of passivity among Europe's leading powers toward the "Eastern Question" in the wake of the French Revolution - ultimately achieving decisive supremacy in the Caucasian arena. Following the conquest of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in 1801, Russia expanded its influence through both military campaigns and diplomatic means, effectively incorporating the entire Caucasus within imperial boundaries by the second half of the nineteenth century. The Principality of Abkhazia was similarly brought within the Russian Empire.

The Russian authorities deliberately embarked upon a set of political, economic, social, cultural, religious, and demographic measures designed to bring about the large-scale colonisation, thorough assimilation, and final integration into the empire of the Caucasus - a region of considerable strategic and economic importance. To this end, tsarism systematically sought to alter the demographic balance in the Caucasus by displacing and expelling indigenous populations deemed "unreliable" (who often also differed in religious affiliation) and resettling these territories with "trustworthy elements." This process profoundly affected the indigenous ethnic groups of the Caucasus: the Adyghe, the Abkhazians, the Georgians, and others. In this regard, the interests of Russia and the Ottoman Empire largely coincided.

Following the abolition of the Principality of Abkhazia, the process of Abkhazian exile (*muhajiroba*) assumed an organised and large-scale character. During the *muhajiroba* of 1867 alone, nearly 20,000 inhabitants of Abkhazia abandoned their native land and were resettled in the Ottoman Empire. The process of Abkhazian exile continued thereafter, up to and including the First World War. A significant portion of the Abkhazian muhajirs settled in Adjara for various reasons. Evidently, some of those who had departed as muhajirs subsequently sought to return to their homeland; however, the Russian authorities no longer permitted this. Thus, members of families such as the Aikutsbas, the Kudbas, the Kishindba, the Muskhajbas, the Chazmavs, and others - sometimes even siblings - found themselves divided: some settled in Adjara, while others remained within the territory of the Republic of Turkey. Historical circumstances precluded even the possibility of communication among the descendants of Abkhazian muhajirs who had settled in different states. This situation began to change at the close of the twentieth century, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

[1] This article is published within the framework of the grant project funded by the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation entitled “From Muhajirism to Muhajirism: The Muhajirism of Abkhazians Settled in Adjara in the Second Half of the 19th Century and the 21st Century Reality of Relations between the Descendants of Muhajirs and Abkhazians Residing in Adjara” (Grant No. NFR-21-33194).

The present study, drawing upon archival, field, and press materials and taking into account available historiographical data, examines selected aspects of the relations between the descendants of Abkhazian muhajirs residing in Adjara and in the Republic of Turkey at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Caucasus; Ottoman Empire; Russia; Abkhazian *muhajiroba*; Abkhazians in Adjara; descendants of muhajirs.

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Introduction: The consolidation of Russian imperial rule over the Caucasus in the nineteenth century, while accompanied by certain ostensibly positive developments - such as the reduction of external threats, the suppression of internecine feudal conflict, and the introduction of progressive economic measures - also produced sharply adverse consequences. These included the imposition of an administrative and legal system alien to the Caucasian peoples, a colonial personnel policy, and the systematic mass persecution and deportation (*muhajiroba*) of indigenous populations distinguished by ethnic or religious difference and deemed untrustworthy by the Russian state. These outcomes differed fundamentally from the manner in which Russia had initially presented itself upon entering the Caucasian arena from the sixteenth century onward.

From the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the strengthened Russian state gradually became an active participant alongside the Ottoman Empire and Iran in the struggle for hegemony in the Caucasus. Having recently freed itself from Mongol domination, Russia aspired to secure its southern frontiers - a goal directly linked to the consolidation of Russian positions in the northern Black Sea region and the Caucasus. Russia's growing engagement in the Caucasian sphere was driven by both military-strategic and commercial-economic interests. This intensification coincided with a period in which the Caucasian peoples, fragmented into feudal principalities, were unable independently to resist the growing aggression of the Ottoman and Iranian empires and perceived the search for an external ally or protector as their only viable recourse. At that stage, the interests of Russia and the Caucasian peoples converged, laying the foundations for close mutual relations. The appearance of Russia in the Caucasian arena was greeted with particular hope by the Christian Georgians and Armenians. These relations followed an exceedingly complex and contradictory trajectory. From the eighteenth century onward, Russian supremacy became increasingly evident, facilitated by the weakening of Russia's principal rivals and by the passivity of the European great powers. With the conclusion of the Treaty of Georgievsk with the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in the 1780s and the annexation of the Crimean Khanate, Russia achieved decisive preponderance in the contest for influence over the Caucasus. Thereafter, Russia consistently consolidated and expanded its position in the Caucasus through both diplomacy and military force.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the question of relations between Russia and the Principality of Abkhazia moved to the forefront. Having established dominance in the Black Sea basin from the second half of the fifteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had exploited the political fragmentation of Georgia to subordinate the latter's western and southern territories - including Abkhazia - to its influence. By the opening of the nineteenth century, the Principality of Abkhazia was under Ottoman suzerainty. The Abkhazian prince Kelesh-Beg Sharvashidze, taking account of the deep crisis afflicting the Ottoman Empire and the radically altered situation in the Caucasus resulting from Russia's conquest of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti, addressed a petition to the Russian authorities in 1806 requesting protectorate status. The popular assembly (*sakhalxo kreba*) of Lykhny endorsed Kelesh-Beg's proposal. The Russo-Ottoman War of 1806–1812 soon commenced, further exacerbating the situation in Abkhazia. Driven by personal ambition, Aslan-Beg

murdered his father Kelesh-Beg in 1808 and seized the princely throne; however, Russia intervened decisively in the unfolding events. In 1810, Emperor Alexander I confirmed Kelesh-Beg's son Safar-Beg (George) Sharvashidze as Prince of Abkhazia, thereby formally completing the incorporation of the Principality of Abkhazia under Russian protection.

Methodology: In accordance with the objectives and tasks of the research, the present study employs the following methods: source analysis, comparative analysis, systematic analysis, comparative-historical analysis, logical analysis, linguistic analysis, and others.

Discussion: On 10 July 1810, a Russian landing force defeated the Ottoman garrison stationed in Sukhum and captured the city. In October, Prince George Sharvashidze was ceremonially invested with the symbols of authority and swore an oath of loyalty to Russia, thereby formalising the entry of the Principality of Abkhazia into the Russian Empire (Ocherk istorii Abkhazskoi ASSR, 1960: 140; Dumbadze, 1957: 215–223).

The Ottoman authorities persistently sought to reclaim Abkhazia, further aggravating an already tense situation. Prince George Sharvashidze died in 1821. With Russian backing, the princely throne passed to George's minor son Dmitri (1821–1822), who was soon poisoned on the orders of his uncle Aslan-Beg. With continued Russian support, the deceased prince's brother Mikheil Sharvashidze acceded to power (1823–1864). His rule was under constant attack by pro-Ottoman factions, who effectively exploited the widespread resentment generated among the Abkhazian people by tsarist policy (Tsurtsumia, 2012: 116).

During the Crimean War, Prince Mikheil Sharvashidze rendered considerable service to Russia, for which the Emperor awarded him the Order of the White Eagle. Nevertheless, in 1856, the Viceroy of the Caucasus, N. Muravyov, raised the question of abolishing the Principality of Abkhazia on the alleged grounds of Mikheil Sharvashidze's treachery during the Crimean War; the Emperor, however, rejected this petition. Since military operations in the North Caucasus were still ongoing, tsarism still had need of Mikheil Sharvashidze. Yet following the conquest of the north-western Caucasus, the situation changed. Russia's plan envisioned the settlement of Cossacks along the Abkhazian Black Sea coast - an objective that would have been impossible to realise in the presence of the princely authority and the landowning indigenous population (Dzidzaria, 1982: 250–252). Alexander II therefore resolved to abolish the Principality of Abkhazia and to introduce direct Russian administration (CSHAG, f. 416, inv. 3, d. 177, l. 48). The tsarist objectives in Abkhazia are made explicit in a letter of 1864 from the Governor-General of Kutaisi, D. Svyatopolk-Mirsky, to the Chief of Staff of the Caucasian Army, Kartsov: *"If part of the Abkhazians should wish, following the abolition of the Principality, to resettle in Turkey, we should not obstruct them"* (Janashia, 1988: 7).

Following the formal abolition of the Principality of Abkhazia on 12 July 1864, the last prince, Mikheil Sharvashidze, was exiled to Voronezh, where he died in 1866. In accordance with his testament, his remains were brought back to Abkhazia and interred in the Mokvian Cathedral (Khorava, 2011: 280–284).

Upon the abolition of the Principality, the Sukhum Military Department was established, subordinated to the Governor-General of Kutaisi. The failure of officials to take account of the particular customs and interests of the local population gradually intensified Abkhazian discontent. An uprising commenced on 26 July 1866 in the village of Lykhny. The authorities took immediate measures to suppress the insurrection. In its aftermath, a pretext emerged - convenient for the authorities - for justifying the deportation of Abkhazians to Turkey. The Governor-General of Kutaisi stated: *"There exists only one radical means of eliminating any danger on the part of the Sukhum Department - namely, the resettlement of the Abkhazian population in Turkey"* (CSHAG, f. 545, inv. 1, d. 91, l. 23).

The first wave of Abkhazian deportation was carried out in 1867. The government ultimately failed to fulfil its "plan" in its entirety: instead of the projected 4,500 households, 3,358 households - totalling 19,342 souls - were resettled in the Ottoman Empire (CSHAG, f. 545, inv. 1, d. 91, ll. 205–250; Khorava, 2011: 73). Regrettably, the process of Abkhazian deportation did not end there. Russia sought to exploit the newly annexed territory economically and demographically, transforming it into an organic and indivisible part of

the empire - an objective that necessitated large-scale colonisation of the region. This constituted the principal cause of the forced displacement and Ottoman resettlement (*muhajiroba*) of numerous Caucasian peoples, including the Abkhazians.

Expelled from their native land, the Abkhazians moved toward the Ottoman Empire. Those exiled from Abkhazia settled primarily within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire, including the territories of present-day Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, and elsewhere. A certain portion of the muhajirs settled in Adjara for various reasons. The first Abkhazian settlements there had appeared as early as the first half of the nineteenth century (Chichinadze, 1912: 169).

Abkhazians in Adjara initially settled along the coastal strip between Kobuleti and Sarpi. However, after Adjara came under Russian control in 1878, some returned to Abkhazia, while others moved further into Turkey - either voluntarily or by compulsion on the part of the Russian authorities. Groups of Abkhazians remained in various districts of Batumi (Bartskana, "Garadok," and the "Pivzavod" district) and in Georgian villages in the vicinity of Batumi: Peria, Urekhi, Mnatoba, Salibauri, Kveda Sameba, Angisa, Minda, Adlia, Kakhaberi, Charnali, and others. These resident Abkhazians were periodically joined by additional arrivals from the interior of Turkey who sought to return to their homeland (Abkhazians in Adjara, 2018: 26).

In this manner, the first Abkhazian settlements in Adjara were established: in the Nuria district, Angisa, Souksus, Salibauri, Chelta, Adlia, Gonio, Charnali, Makhinjauri, and elsewhere. According to Jifford Palgrave, on the eve of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–1878, approximately 10,000 Abkhazians and Circassians were living in Adjara. Migratory processes continued and demographic figures changed accordingly; nevertheless, Batumi and its environs remained - and continue to remain to this day - the principal area of Abkhazian settlement.

Based on the time and place of resettlement, Abkhazians residing in Adjara may be divided into several groups:

(a) Those who do not know precisely when or from where they relocated;

(b) Those who resettled in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, the motivation in such cases being personal or domestic in nature - for example, a conflict with a neighbour (such as a killing, as in the case of the Chambe family of Peria), or the abduction of a woman (as in the case of the Akvazba family of Charnali);

(c) Those who came to Adjara during the *muhajiroba* period of the 1860s–1870s (as the majority of Abkhazians in Adjara believe to be their own case);

(d) Those who know the specific year of resettlement, its location, and the identity of those who relocated. For instance, in the case of Anzor Kudba: in 1864, three brothers departed from Kudebstad in the Sochi region due to their resistance to Russian authority; two settled in Adjara, in Peria, while the third brother, Kerim, went to Turkey. In the case of Zaur Asadzba: in 1896, Ali Sadzba relocated to Adjara from the Bzipi Gorge (Abkhazians in Adjara, 2018: 28).

The circumstances of Abkhazians who settled in Adjara were far from tranquil - during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–1878, many were compelled to undertake a second *muhajiroba*. Subsequent political upheavals and revolutions brought further disruption. Citing urban development as justification, the authorities periodically demanded that they relocate to other areas.

Abkhazians had long maintained cordial relations with the local population, relations that frequently developed into close ties of kinship. For example, the Akvazba family of Charnali had established kinship connections with representatives of some twenty Georgian family names: Kviritidze, Gogitidze, Bektashvili, Rizhvadze, Kakabadze, Pevadze, Kakhidze, Apakidze, Dumbadze, Surmanidze, Lomadze, Malakmadze, Sirabidze, Khajishvili, Varshanidze, Cherkezishvili, Khalvashi, and Gorgiladze (Abkhazians in Adjara, 2018: 29).

According to materials collected during a field expedition to the Republic of Turkey in August 2023, the account of the resettlement of Muhammad Kaitamba's ancestors - a resident of the same village of Akbalyk

- differs from the foregoing. Muhammad's ancestors initially settled in Batumi; however, a killing subsequently occurred between the Kaitamba and Muskhajba families. The Kaitambas demanded, as a condition of reconciliation, the hand of a Muskhajba daughter in marriage, but their request was refused. Toward the close of the nineteenth century, Muhammad's great-grandfather Osman Kaitamba and his elder brother Yusuf departed for the Ottoman Empire; their descendants continue to reside in Turkey to this day.

An account of particular interest regarding resettlement is provided by Anzor and Muhammad Kudba of Batumi: in 1864, three brothers - Vaza, Tuki, and Kerim Kudba - first travelled overland through Batumi to the Ottoman Empire, but subsequently returned. What prompted their return? Each individual case is unique; however, the majority of respondents emphasise that a great many of those who departed as muhajirs subsequently sought to return to Abkhazia, but were predominantly refused permission by the Russian authorities. The precise circumstances of this particular case are unknown, but the outcome was that Vaza and Tuki remained in Batumi, while Kerim returned to the Ottoman Empire and settled in the village of Karadere in the Izmit district, where his descendants continue to live under the surname Tavani to this day. During the 2023 expedition, the authors had the honour of meeting Kerim's descendants - Ibrahim and Musa Kudba (*From Muhajiroba to Muhajiroba*, 2025: 48–49).

According to Muhammad Kudba's account, no members of the Kudba family currently reside in Abkhazia; eleven Kudba households remain in Adjara, while more than eighty are in Turkey. During the Soviet period, there was no communication whatsoever between these relatives; on the contrary, even the mere fact of having relatives abroad constituted a source of danger. The influence of this difficult history upon subsequent generations of Abkhazian muhajirs remains palpable to this day. They speak of their ancestors' ordeal with melancholy and reserve. According to Muhammad Kudba, when the borders opened in 1989, Tuncay Sakköl (Kudba - the name by which one branch of the Kudba family now residing in Turkey is known) sent a letter; in 1990, Muhammad visited relatives in Adapazarı. In 1992, Tuncay Sakköl travelled to Adjara together with an Atruzhba from Karadere. These relations continue to the present day.

Regarding the Kishindba family of Batumi, the precise date of their resettlement is unknown - as Jambul Kishindba informed the authors at the time of their meeting. The Kishindba family had resided in the Bzipi Gorge in the Gagra district. In the aftermath of the Caucasian War, in 1864, four Kishindba brothers were among those who left Abkhazia and settled in Adapazarı. Subsequently, one of the brothers - Jambul's great-grandfather Ahmed - was sent back to Batumi to ascertain whether return to the homeland was possible. Ahmed purchased land in Adlia, married, and remained in Adjara, while the return of the three brothers who had remained in the Ottoman Empire proved impossible to arrange. The Kishindba family had from the outset been a prosperous and influential presence in Turkey. During the Soviet period, the Batumi Kishindba family maintained no contact with their relatives in Turkey. In 1989, following the opening of the border, the well-known wrestler Shamba arrived in Batumi from Turkey and recounted, at a gathering of Batumi Abkhazians, that the Kishindba name was very distinguished in Turkey. That same year, Jambul's father Nazim Kishindba and his wife travelled to Turkey to visit and become acquainted with their relatives. These connections have been maintained from that time onward.

The Muskhajba family also passed through Batumi on their way into exile. One of the brothers, Huseyn, remained in Batumi, acquired a substantial estate in Peria, and settled there. With the assistance of Mr Niaz Muskhajba, the authors conducted a video call on 26 August 2024 with Emre Uğur, a representative of the Muskhajba family residing in Sakarya (currently approximately thirty Muskhajba households reside in Turkey, where the family bears the surname Uğur).

Particularly striking is the history of the Aikutsba family of Batumi and the circumstances of their settlement in Adjara. According to the account of Liana and Tamila Aikutsba, their great-grandfather Osman Aikutsba travelled from Turkey to Adjara to visit his sister Madina. At that time, he had a family in Turkey. It

was precisely at this juncture that the border was sealed (the border between Turkey and the Soviet Union was closed in 1936 - the authors). Unable to return to Turkey, Osman remarried and remained in Adjara.

The authors' respondents – Ms. Ada Kutelia, Zaira Chazmava, Tamila Aikutsba, Juna Kitazba, and Messrs Muhammad Kudba, Jambul Kishindba, Niaz Muskhajba, and others - described warm and deeply emotional meetings between descendants of muhajirs in both Adjara and Turkey.

A number of similar encounters were documented by the research group of the present project during the field expedition conducted in the Republic of Turkey (Sakarya) in 2023. For example, during a visit to the household of Gülhan Taş (whose Abkhazian surname is Hagush(i)) in the village of Balbal, Akyazı district, the team was received warmly and hospitably. The Abkhazian community of that village (300 households) preserves the traditions and practices of its ancestors. Upon departure, as a commemorative photograph was being taken in the courtyard, the hosts, moved to tears, asked the team to convey their greetings to both Abkhazians and Georgians in Georgia. This made a profound impression upon the authors, who affirmed - despite the scepticism of some - that the relations between these communities unquestionably hold promise for the future.

An equally memorable encounter took place in the village of Kayalarmemduihiye in the Erenler district. This single village is home to more than 250 Abkhazian households representing 37 different family names. Those assembled in the village centre came out to greet the team, and an emotional conversation ensued. As the authors made their way to their vehicle, their hosts accompanied them with an Abkhazian song. These encounters in Turkey confirmed once more that, notwithstanding events provoked by external forces, a great deal is held in common, which gives grounds for hope regarding the future.

Equally encouraging are the contemporary relations between the descendants of Abkhazian muhajirs residing in Adjara and in the Republic of Turkey.

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