

ISSUES OF THE SETTLEMENT AND ADAPTATION OF GEORGIAN MUHAJIRS IN FATSA

Nodar Shoshitashvili

Doctor of Historical Sciences, Ivane

Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

Email: nodar_shoshitashvili@yahoo.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7286-0087>

Saba Kalandarishvili

Master of Cultural and Social Anthropology, Ivane

Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

Email: sabakalanda@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1815-9810>

Abstract: This paper examines the process of settlement, historical prerequisites, and initial stages of adaptation of Georgian Muhajirs in the Fatsa region (Ordu Province, Turkey). The research is based on oral histories gathered through ethnographic fieldwork, the cultural memory of the descendants of migrants, Ottoman archival materials, and a critical analysis of existing historiography. Particular attention is paid to the circumstances of the arrival of Georgian Muhajirs in Fatsa, the settlement policy of the Ottoman Empire, the role of Ali Pasha Tavdgiridze, the process of land distribution, and the difficulties of adapting to a new social environment. The paper demonstrates that the settlement of Georgians in Fatsa was not the result of an initial Ottoman plan but was significantly determined by accidental circumstances. Furthermore, the relationships between the migrants and the local population, the causes of social tension, and their impact on the ethno-political situation of the region are analyzed. The study reveals that cultural memory constitutes a vital source for reconstructing historical events that are incompletely or not at all reflected in written sources, offering a new perspective on the history of settlement and integration of Georgian Muhajirs in the Central Black Sea region.

Keywords: Muhajirism, Fatsa, Ordu, Muhajirs, Cultural Memory, Oral History, Ottoman Empire, Migration, Ethnography.

Introduction: The Muhajirism that commenced following the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–1878 represents one of the largest migration processes in the nineteenth-century history of Georgia. During this period, tens of thousands of Muslim Georgians migrated from Adjara, particularly from the Çünüksu (modern-day Kobuleti) region, to the Ottoman Empire, where they founded numerous Georgian settlements. Although the history of Muhajirism has captured the interest of many Georgian and foreign scholars, the specific processes of the settlement of Georgian Muhajirs and their adaptation in individual regions – especially in the Fatsa district of the Ordu Province remain insufficiently studied.

Fatsa emerged as an important settlement center for Georgian Muhajirs. However, the circumstances of their arrival in the region, the initial stages of settlement, the settlement policy of the Ottoman authorities, relations with the local population, and adaptation processes are only fragmentarily represented in Georgian historiography. The study of these issues is rendered particularly significant by the fact that, amidst a scarcity of written sources, a prominent place is occupied by the cultural memory and oral histories of the migrants' descendants, which preserve information regarding their ancestors' migration and settlement to this day.

The purpose of this article is to provide a historical reconstruction of the settlement and adaptation process of Georgian Muhajirs in Fatsa. The research relies on oral histories obtained through ethnographic

fieldwork, interviews with descendants of Muhajirs, Ottoman archival materials, diplomatic reports, and a critical analysis of contemporary historiography. Based on the cross-referencing of various types of sources, the circumstances of the arrival of Georgian Muhajirs in Fatsa, their settlement policy, the process of adaptation to the social environment, and the dynamics of relations with the local population are discussed.

The novelty of the research lies in the fact that historical sources are systematically cross-referenced with ethnographic field material for the first time, enabling a more comprehensive reconstruction of the settlement and adaptation process of Georgian Muhajirs in Fatsa and presenting the migratory experience from a new perspective.

Methodology: The study is based on qualitative research methodology, combining historical and ethnographic research methods. The primary empirical material was obtained through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Fatsa district of the Ordu Province, Turkey. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with the descendants of Georgian Muhajirs, the oral history method, participant observation, and cultural memory analysis were utilized during the research process. The ethnographic data are cross-referenced and corroborated with Ottoman archival documents, reports from British and French consulates, and contemporary historiographical literature. Based on the comparative and critical analysis of these sources, a historical reconstruction of the Muhajir settlement process and their adaptation in Fatsa was achieved.

Discussion: During the period of Muhajirism, the largest number of people emigrated from Kobuleti (Çürük-su). In present-day Turkey, descendants of Muhajirs who left Kobuleti can be found both in Georgian settlements along the Aegean coast and in the Central Black Sea region. However, with the opening of the Turkey-Georgia border and the emergence of modern research, it has been established that the majority of Kobuleti Muhajirs settled in the Central Black Sea region, specifically in the vicinities of Ordu, Fatsa, Ünye, and Samsun, where they formed compact settlements and subsequently expanded into adjacent territories.

Given that Georgian written sources say nothing about their transportation to Fatsa or their general fate, the primary historical source is the cultural memory of the migrants descendants, which has been transmitted from generation to generation over the years.

The fourth and fifth generations of descendants of Georgian Muhajirs living in Fatsa remember oral traditions regarding the arrival of their ancestors here. All narrators identify the period following the War of 1877–1878 (the "War of '93" according to the Islamic calendar) as the time of their ancestors arrival. One narrator recalled: *"We are Muslims, our dedes (grandfathers) were Muslims; it wasn't like that over there, so they left, they fled. They died of hunger on the way, many died; how far can you walk from there? There were ox carts, horses, donkeys. They were completely starving... They were told that everything was there—land, houses, like cennet (paradise), they said. But when the first voyage arrived and they saw that there was neither land, nor houses, nor a good life—there was nothing. From here, information slowly reached back there that there was nothing here, and people stopped coming. The hodja also begged the people, saying you will end up in cennet, but the people wouldn't come; then many were taken to the Batumi station by force."*

The arrival of the Muhajirs in the city of Ordu and its neighboring districts, Fatsa and Ünye, was a completely accidental event. One of the narrators, surnamed Golomanidze, whose ancestor presumably came from the village of Bobokvati, recalled the history of his dedes' settlement in Fatsa: *"Nothing is precisely verified about that; from over there, from Batumi, ships used to go to Bursa. They say that the ship broke down somewhere near here, in Fatsa, and the people were brought ashore. Bolomani is 8 kilometers from here, and they left the people there in a field. There is a second version: they say that so many people came from there, they had no food or anything, so they seized the captain and came here by ship, refusing to go further. We do not know which version is correct. First, when the people came, they settled; later, some relatives, like first cousin Taiashvili, arrived on foot. The very first ones came by ships."*

Ahmed Bezhioglu (Bezhanidze), who possesses a good command of the Georgian language and is a prominent figure in Fatsa, shares an interesting and emotional story about the arrival of his ancestors: "Back then, at that time, we were Muslims, and they said that if you do not die in a Muslim place, you cannot enter paradise, so go there, they said. Then our people said we must go. First, they went to the cemetery—baba, nene, dede, they were all there. They cried, saying we must go to Turkey, you must not return. Then they locked the doors, and took bedding and things like that in their hands. They opened the gates for the sheep and calves and let them loose. Then they came down to the port of Batumi. It turns out Adjarians and Abkhazians came from there to Turkey by ships. Then our people went there too. They boarded a ship in Batumi; they did not know about ships, they loaded the ship, and when they arrived here, they were told you will have a house there and we will give you land..."

An interesting study regarding this issue is offered by the historian of Georgian descent working in Turkey, Oktay Özel (Katamadze), in his work *"Migration and Power Politics: The Settlement of Georgian Immigrants in Turkey (1878–1908)"* (Özel, 2010).

The Ottoman administration had a plan to settle these migrants in the territory between Adapazarı and Bursa. However, according to locals, during the difficult sea voyage, the organizer of the resettlement, Ali Pasha Tavdgiridze from Kobuleti, fell ill. When the three ships of the convoy reached the shores of Ordu, the migrants threatened the captains and demanded to disembark and settle in Ordu. This request was forwarded to Istanbul. Ultimately, after approximately three days of negotiations, the migrant families were granted permission to disembark in Ordu. Thus, according to history, their arrival in the region was not the result of the Ottoman government's original plan. It was entirely accidental (Özel, 2010, p. 478).

Özel relies on archival materials regarding the actual process of migration. Through the study of British consular reports, it was established that the ships carrying hundreds of Muhajir families bound for Bursa were indeed stopped by the passengers along the way and ultimately arrived in Ordu. This record is dated 1879. The French consular report of the same year particularly emphasizes that among those who arrived in Ordu, alongside ordinary immigrant families, there were wealthy and prominent figures from the Batumi-Çürüksu region (Özel, 2010, p. 478).

Some informants note that their ancestors arrived by land rather than by sea. For instance, the great-grandfather of one of my narrators, Zati Inaishvili, reached Fatsa in the following manner: *"You won't have heard what I am about to tell you now—Seyid Aga Inaishvili left, he came with two horses; he shod the horse's horseshoes backward, so the tracks pointed one way while the horse went the other, so they wouldn't catch us (the police were searching for him). He brought food and drink from there, whatever fit on the horse, and one horse loaded with gold. They stopped there in Perşembe; then he had boys with him—my grandfather's father was 15 years old when they left. From there, it turns out, they entered the government here, they started working in the government. He bought land in our village, Karataş, from Fatsa, got married, and settled here."*

During the first two years of migration, from 1879 to 1881, approximately 6,000 Georgian families (about 30,000–40,000 people) disembarked at the ports of the Trebizond Vilayet. Of these, about 4,500 families arrived in the districts (*kaza*) of Ordu, Fatsa, and Ünye. Two thousand of these families settled in the Ordu district alone. Seven months later, in February 1882, according to data from Ali Pasha of Çürüksu himself, who by that time had been appointed as the official responsible for the settlement of migrants in the region, the total number of Georgians who arrived by sea was approximately 80,000. The number of people arriving by land was approximately 40,000 (Özel, 2010, pp. 478-479).

After 1881, the treaty concluded between Russia and the Ottoman Empire was extended for another two years. Özel suggests that the second wave of migration took place in 1883–1884, albeit on a smaller

scale. If the reports related to the number of Muhajirs are not exaggerated, it is entirely possible that at least 150,000 Georgians migrated to Ottoman territories in the five-year period following the Treaty of Berlin. The majority of the Muhajirs were directed toward regions located to the west, such as Samsun (including the districts of Terme, Çarşamba, and Bafra), Sinop, Kocaeli, Adapazarı, İnegöl, and Bursa, while several small groups also settled in the interior parts of the Black Sea region, in districts such as Sivas, Tokat, and Amasya (Özel, 2010, pp. 478-479).

In general, the issue of settling Muslim migrants in Turkey is quite interesting in terms of the policies pursued by the Porte for the adaptation of migrants. Beginning in the 1860s, the creation of various institutions and commissions commenced, which worked on settling migrants arriving from the Balkans and the Caucasus and ensuring their integration with the locals.

Based on the Russo-Ottoman War and the new migration wave, several new institutions were established for the Muhajirs within the framework of the Migrant Assistance Commission. The growth of such institutions after 1877–1878 was not solely connected to the number of migrants, but was rather a kind of macro-policy driven by the demographic, economic, political, and especially ideological transformation of the Empire. At the state level, Islamism and intellectual Turkism (primarily driven by state-funded intellectuals) constituted two new political ideologies. Abdulhamid II, utilizing his charismatic title of the "Caliphate," developed new macro-political projects in which migration commissions played a significant role. It is noteworthy that Sultan Abdulhamid II himself was at the center of these institutionalization activities. Three commissions were founded and led by him: the General Migration Commission, the Commission for Muslim Migrants, and the Supreme Council of Migrants. A fourth commission—the Commission of the General Administration of Migrants—was responsible for technical aspects (Dündar, 2018, p. 174)

One of the important institutional manifestations was the inclusion of the migrants themselves or their prominent figures—who shared a similar ethnic or religious background with the Muhajirs—into these commissions. The best example of this is Ali Pasha Tavdgiridze of Çürüksu, who was appointed as an "honorary settlement officer" specifically for the resettlement of Georgian Muhajirs (Dündar, 2018, 83. 174).

This method of involving leaders and figures of the immigrant community, such as Georgians, in the commissions was considered a means to facilitate the adaptation of Muhajirs into the new Muslim society. This strategy aimed to establish stronger bonds and full integration with local conditions (Dündar, 2018, 83. 174).

Ahmed Bezhanidze recalls what his ancestors told him and confirms that the distribution of land and the settlement of the population in Fatsa occurred under the leadership of Ali Pasha Tavdgiridze: *"Tavdgiridze Ali Pasha came to Kabakdağ; the Bezhanidzes were here, Makharadze was here, Golomanidze was here, 30 here, 20 here, that's how he distributed them. He gave land to all the people, distributing 11 hectares to each. Our people built houses on those lands."* Huseyin Uygun (Moatskobili) recounts a similar story: "When they arrived here, nothing was waiting for them. When the first voyage of our people disembarked from the ship in Fatsa, they sat them down there in a field. Nothing happened; one day passed, two days passed. The people grew hungry, what could they do? Someone went and stole—stole a chicken, stole a sheep, and then it became a problem. The news reached the government, and whoever was the chief person here was tasked with settling these people and giving them land. And present-day Kabakdağ, starting from where it begins, that large area was given to the Georgians by Ali Pasha. Ali Pasha Haznedaroğlu of this place—he was also Georgian, but from a family that had come much earlier—he settled them and gave them land. He gave 10 dönüms to one family. Approximately 2 dönüms (hectares) of forest and the rest fields, but it wasn't fields, it was forest and brush wood, and the people cleared it. The people sowed, then began working and suffering, so much suffering. Then they multiplied, the land was no longer enough, and they moved to other villages.

The first was Kabakdağ. That's how it started; when the ship broke down, then more came from there, from Georgia, and settled in other villages."

The arrival of Georgian Muhajirs in Fatsa further exacerbated the condition of the Muslim peasantry (Özel, 2010, pp. 479-480). The local population was unprepared for the arrival of such a large number of unexpected guests. According to Ottoman government regulations and customary practice, the Muhajirs were supposed to be received by the local Muslim peasants. They were responsible for the temporary accommodation of these people and their lands at least on paper. They were obliged to provide the newcomers with shelter and food until each family was allocated a plot of land for settlement (Özel, 2010, pp. 479-480). A large portion of the local Muslim peasants possessed meager lands for subsistence, while the rest, including the majority of Christian peasants, were employed on lands owned by the local elite Aga-Beg families, who wielded unrestricted power in the region. Consequently, providing land and sustenance to the Georgians was extremely difficult for the already impoverished locals.

The local population living in Fatsa consisted predominantly of Muslims, along with Christian (Greek and Armenian) minorities. The local Muslim population of these districts was divided into three main groups: large landowners, the urban merchant bourgeoisie, and peasants. Mention must also be made of the Circassian Muhajirs, who had been present in the western districts of the region (the Ünye, Terme, and Çarşamba districts of the Canik sub-province) since the 1860s and posed a serious threat to both the local peasantry and the elite rural families. Against the backdrop of such difficult social conditions, the locals could barely manage to feed themselves. As for the Georgian Muhajirs, their situation was even more arduous. They lacked sufficient land to cultivate a subsistence amount of vegetables and crops, and most of them did not even possess proper shelter. They had money only to purchase food or necessary goods. During the first wave of migration, only a small fraction of the migrants were granted land. For instance, one-third of the Muhajirs who arrived in Fatsa in 1879 remained landless and homeless even a year later, while the rest settled with great difficulty in ten villages where very small plots of land were owned by local peasants (Özel, 2010, p. 480).

The first settlement where the Georgians arrived is the center of the present-day village of Kabakdağ, also known as the plateau. This was a vast, untouched area covered with forest. The environmental conditions here were much better than on the coast, which abounded with swamps and insects. Furthermore, there were no Greek or Armenian settlements in this territory. As the narrators recount, after selecting the site, the ancestors first took into account and designated the location for the mosque and the cemetery, establishing a rule that no one should encroach upon this area chosen for living. This rule remained in effect for 143 years. The first group that reached the plateau consisted of 80 households. Later, some ascended to the area where the present-day village of Hasancık is located.

It becomes clear from the ethnographic materials that they chose an area that they perceived as a homeland. It was an open, free, untouched territory close to the sea. I asked Ahmet Bezhanidze, who visited Kobuleti after the opening of the border and saw the environment there: "In your opinion, did the dedes really find this place similar to Çürüksu?" He gave me a surprising answer: *"If we compare Fatsa to Kobuleti, then so to speak, if you look out from Konakbaşı, you will see the Ilija River and the sea. If you go up to the village of Gvara in Kobuleti and look down, you will see the Kintrishi River and the sea. The village of Kvirike below, by the riverbank, resembles the Zavo settlement. This is the similarity between Fatsa and Kobuleti."* Seventy-eight-year-old Erdogan Meskhidze, who has never been to Georgia and only remembers what his father told him, told me: *"Those who came from there stayed in places similar to the ones they left. They came and said, 'This place is mine,' fenced it off; it is not close to one another's houses. They are far apart."*

Now that we have multiplied, we live close, but formerly they were far apart... I want to visit, to see my village; I imagine it will be just like this."

It should be noted that prior to the full settlement of the Muhajirs and for a certain period thereafter, a tense situation existed between the Georgians and the Turks. Homeless and destitute of any means of subsistence, the Georgian Muhajirs were forced to maintain themselves through theft and extortion. This was intensified by the fact that the majority of the Georgians were armed. They had brought along rifles, mostly Martinis, which they had kept from the time when they were in the local militia in Georgia and fought against the Russian Empire. The Muhajirs, severe by nature, were well known in their native country, Çürüksu, for their love of firearms (Chichinadze, 1917, pp. 121-122). These firearms soon proved vital for their survival in such harsh conditions.

Brigandage also became a trademark of the Georgian Muhajirs. It was primarily prevalent where the Georgian Muhajirs were settled. A direct consequence of the robberies carried out by Georgian bands was the emergence of tension among the communities existing in the region. With the increase of such incidents, tense public relations gradually transformed into animosity between the Georgians and the local communities. Zati Inaishvili recounts: *"They used to fight with the Turks. Many left from here and brought friends from over there, saying the Turks cannot tolerate us here, and because of this, it was quite an event. Then our people here had minor incidents involving stealing, beating, and women and children. Because of this, for a long time, the Turks could not grow to love us; they didn't forget the old stories. They were angry, saying they robbed us and took our women and children."* Out of mutual animosity arose what the Ottoman authorities termed the "Georgian problem" (Özel, 2010, p. 481), which further contributed to political instability and rising insecurity not only in the Ordu region but throughout the entire Trebizond Vilayet.

Another consequence of this problem was the mass migration of local non-Muslims, primarily peasants, from unstable villages, mostly to the Caucasus, which was under Russian administration at the time. Court records and archival documents reveal that the brigandage associated with the Muhajirs was not the sole cause of this migration. Throughout the Black Sea region, Russian embassies and their agents actively encouraged Armenians and Greeks to move to Russian territory in order to replace the departed Muslim Georgians and resettle the lands left vacant after the war. Whatever the real reasons for their departure, many non-Muslims who left their villages and abandoned their lands in the Ordu, Giresun, and Samsun regions presented themselves as victims of Georgian Muhajir brigandage, indicating that the harassment by the Georgians was almost the sole reason for leaving the region (Özel, 2010, p. 481). According to Ahmed Bezhanidze, the confrontation between Georgians and Turks often escalated to murder: *"When we arrived here, there were Begs. They said, 'Come work in the fields.' Golomanidze Khustagh (he was a big man in Kabakdağ) said, 'We will not work on your land.' Subsequently, one Georgian was killed by the Begs, and then the Georgians killed two Turks. It didn't stop, they said we are not like that, and the Turks supposedly intimidated the Georgians, and that night our people killed 6 men. They showed them that we are not like the Circassians. The Circassians had arrived 30 years before us, and the Turks intimidated them and they fled from here; they couldn't intimidate the Georgians. Those who came from there had weapons—Russian pistols—on their belts. They couldn't scare us."*

The problems arising from cohabitation, which were initially caused by the struggle for survival and insufficient conditions, rapidly escalated, fueling public disorder and ethnic animosity. As Özel notes, the severe problem created was driven by Ali Pasha's political ambitions. This confrontation continued in various forms - through power struggles, local conflicts, and violent incidents from the early 1880s until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Conclusion: The presented research demonstrates that the process of settlement and adaptation of Georgian Muhajirs in Fatsa was multifaceted and contradictory. Although the Ottoman authorities attempted the institutional management of the resettlement of migrants, their mass arrival posed serious challenges to the local social and economic environment. The scarcity of land, poverty, inadequate housing conditions, and competition for resources generated tension between the Georgian Muhajirs and the local population, which over time escalated into violent confrontation.

The results of the study reveal that the situation referred to by the Ottoman administration as the "Georgian problem" was not driven solely by the actions of the Georgian Muhajirs. The existing conflicts must be viewed within a broader socio-political context, where the harsh conditions of migration, scarcity of resources, struggles for local power, Ottoman settlement policies, and the interests of the Russian Empire intersected. Consequently, the migration of the non-Muslim population from the region cannot be explained solely by the actions of the Georgian Muhajirs.

The cross-referencing of ethnographic materials and historical sources has made it possible to reconstruct events that are fragmentarily or not at all represented in Georgian written sources. Oral histories, cultural memory, and archival documents complement one another to create a more comprehensive picture of the settlement, adaptation, and relations of Georgian Muhajirs with the local society in Fatsa. Thus, the study not only fills the less-studied episodes of the history of Georgian Muhajirs but also demonstrates the significance of cultural memory for the historical reconstruction of migratory processes.

References and Sources:

- Özel, O. (2010). Migration and Power Politics: The Settlement of Georgian Immigrants in Turkey (1878–1908). *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46(4), 477-496. DOI: 10.1080/00263206.2010.492984
- Dündar, F. (2018). How Migration Institutions "Think"? The Ottoman-Turkish Case. *Anatoli*, 9(9), 165–189. DOI: 10.4000/anatoli.731
- Chichinadze, Z. (1917). *The Great Resettlement of Georgian Muslims to the Ottoman Empire [Kartvel makhmadiana didi gadasakhleba osmaletshi]*. Tiflis: Printing House of N. G. Aganiants.