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A DEPORTED NATIONALITY: THE AHISKA TURKS*

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“... after the Fergana events, we were evacuated to Russia, but we could not live there. After making the necessary arrangements we decided to migrate to Turkey by car. One night we stayed in my daughter’s house near Georgia, then we continued on our way to Turkey. My grandson asked me: ‘where are we going to sleep tonight grandpa?’ I did not know what to say. Tell me, what kind of a grandfather am I? I am not even capable of answering the question of my grandson because I did not know the answer myself. My father was deported, I was deported, my son is deported, and now my grandson. Isn’t that too much?”¹

The Soviet deportation of nationalities constitutes one of the dark sides of the former USSR. Among many ethnic problems, the case of the deported and dispersed peoples is nowadays one of the most acute problems in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the titular nationalities of the independent republics became dominant in their own territories. The situation of those minorities that lacked their own territorial units, such as the Ahıska Turks, deteriorated and they have been subjected not only to ethnic discrimination, but also to ethnic violence.

The present article will focus on the violation of the political, human and territorial rights of the Ahıska Turks, the preservation of their identity, and the political and strategic dimension of the issue.

The fieldwork of this research was carried out in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkey in 1996 and 1997. The fieldwork is based on semi-participant observation supported by in-depth interviews in a period of three months in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and one month in Turkey (Bursa and *negöl*). A part of the data is used in this article.

A Human Rights Issue: the Case of the Ahıska Turks

Accused of posing a threat to national security, Stalin deported the Ahıska Turks in 1944 and, since then they have not been able to return to their homeland. In fact, they have suffered from cultural oppression starting from the end of 1920s. Until the deportation, some of them had run away secretly across the frontier to Turkey and a number of them had been killed or exiled. The oppression reached its apogee with the deportation in 1944, which was done according to a decision of the Committee of State under the pretext of ‘frontier security’.² Ahıska Turks were not the only ones to be deported as Stalin organised a ‘cleansing operation’ along the Turkish border. Eight Soviet nationalities, Volga Germans, Karachai, Chechen, Ingush, Kalmyks, Balkars, Crimean Tatars and the Ahıska Turks were deported to Central Asia and Siberia. All these nationalities except the Ahıska

Turks had their own autonomous territory within the Russian Republic, established by the Soviet regime. It was because the Ahıska Turks lacked their own territory that their deportation remained unknown to the outside world for a long time.³

The Ahıska Turks were deported under inhuman conditions. Thousands of people died during and after the deportation because of frost, starvation and insanitary conditions. Their property was confiscated at the time of the deportation and never compensated for. Officially, the move was presented as not being of a penal nature but as a matter of evacuation from an area which might be reached by the enemy.⁴ They were told that they were being displaced temporarily to a safe place in order to protect them from the Germans, but the Germans never occupied the region. This happened at the end of the Second World War, when the Germans were already in retreat. Thus, this reason is far from being convincing. During the deportation, the Ahıska Turks together with other people were subject to a 'special settlement regime'. This term was used to define the places of penal exile or deportation where life went under a special system governed by harsh regulations drawn up by Soviet security organs.⁵ The special settlement was an extensive form of deprivation of freedom in the USSR. The deported nations were obliged to live in a restricted area without any right to travel outside their settlement. They had to register their addresses once a month in a special registration office. The regime became even stricter at the end of 1940s. Any attempt at escape was punished by twenty years in a labour camp.⁶ The region of Meskheta was declared an 85-km wide special frontier zone that was totally closed to them.⁷

With the decree of 28 April 1956, the deported nationalities were freed from the 'special settlement regime' and some of them obtained the right to go back to their homeland. However, the Crimean Tatars, the Germans and the Ahıska Turks were not among the restored nationalities. As a result of recent developments, Germans and Crimean Tatars started to return to their homeland, but the case of the Ahıska Turks remains unresolved. From 1956 until now, they have demanded from the Soviet authorities and their successors the right to return to their homeland, they have held numerous congresses, organised meetings and protests, and founded associations, but they have not been successful. Despite the decree of rehabilitation of the Ahıska Turks of June 1968, according to which they could enjoy full citizenship rights, in practice, they had still no right to return to their original villages in Georgia. On the one hand, the decree declared that people deported from Georgia had the same rights as other citizens of the Soviet Union, on the other hand, it declared that the settlement of citizens of Turkish, Kurdish, Khemshin and Azerbaijani origins in the Central Asian republics was permanent. Although decisions taken by the Soviet Presidium guaranteed legally the return of the Ahıska Turks to Georgia, these decisions were never put into action and were always rejected by Georgia.⁸

While living in exile, during the Gorbachov period and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the pressures of the titular nationalities on the Ahıska Turks increased. The massacre in Fergana (1989), a small town in Uzbekistan, was a second cause of deportation for them. Various explanations were made about the reasons for the Fergana events. Some argued that the confrontations occurring in the market of Fergana were the cause for the Uzbek-Ahıska Turk conflict. Some others argue that it was a provocation of Moscow, the KGB and the Uzbek allies of the centre. Whatever the real reason, the fact was that, as a result of the massacre, hundreds of houses were burned, around 100 Ahıska Turks were killed and hundreds of them were wounded. According to some survivors of the massacre who were interviewed in Bursa in July and August 1997, the disturbances were not spontaneous but very organised and planned in advance.

‘... the government let the Uzbeks do what they wanted. The wounded Turks were asking for the help of the police (Russians mainly) who were saying that they could not do anything since they had not received any orders. Once they realised that the Uzbeks had finished with us, they helped us in order to give the impression that the Russians are our allies. They took us to the military polygon saying that they could not protect us elsewhere and mentioned that if the Uzbeks attacked us in the polygon, we could beat the soldier waiting near the weapon store who already knows that he has to quit the store if the Ahıska Turks come. In such a case they said we could do what we wanted to protect ourselves. We were surprised since it was the Russian soldiers who some weeks before had collected all the weapons we had. Since all the Turks were not registered as such, some were registered as Uzbek, some others as Azeri, they marked the houses where Turks were living and the number of people in the household while collecting the weapons.’⁹

The authors Pain and Popov mention about the planned nature of the events, and state that those who were involved had not known of the existence of the Ahıska Turks before.¹⁰ After their evacuation from Fergana, those living in other places of Uzbekistan also started to migrate with them to Azerbaijan and other republics of the CIS. However, they were not welcomed in most of the places that they migrated to and an important number illegally migrated to Turkey. By 1991, as a result of being deported twice, the Ahıska Turkish population found itself dispersed across several countries of the former Soviet Union. Although according to the census of 1989, there were 207,502 Ahıska Turks in the former Soviet Union, the actual number is estimated to have been around 400,000. It is not possible to give their exact number because they are not necessarily registered as Turks, and they are highly dispersed both inside and out of the former Soviet Union, especially after the Fergana massacre.

Starting from 1956, the Ahıska Turks experienced constant migration because of either their wish to be closer to their homeland (migration to Azerbaijan) or out of fear for their lives (as in the case of the Fergana events, as a result of ethnic riots and conflicts). After the Fergana massacre, more than 16,000 Ahıska Turks were evacuated to the territory of Russia and more than 100,000 migrated to Azerbaijan. There has been also migrations towards other republics. In the case of Azerbaijan, they are dispersed in forty-eight villages. The case of Russia also constitutes another good example of their dispersion.¹¹

The Preservation of the Identity

While living in a part of Georgia and before their deportation, the Ahıska Turks had little consciousness of having a separate ethnic identity. At that time, ethnic peculiarities were of minor importance and, very often, religious differences were more fundamental than ethnic or national differences. Most of the time, local identities of kin, village, class and religion were very important, and national consciousness was only beginning to take shape. Before the deportation, the Ahıska Turkish population had two significant divisions within itself. On the one hand, there was the division of landlords (bey) and peasants, and on the other hand, people were also distinguished according to their villages, characterised sometimes by minor differences in dialect.

The Ahıska Turks, as an outcome of a complex interplay of historical processes, interethnic relations and specific group characteristics have developed a separate ethnic group identity. Within that context, external factors played a significant role in the strengthening of ethnic identity. The wars that have involved or affected them played an important role in reinforcing ethnic sentiments and national consciousness. During the war years (the Turco-Russian wars and the First World War), the

status of Meskheta remained unclear because it was demanded by both the Turkish and the Russian sides. This fact contributed deeply to the strengthening of Turkish identity. The Ahıska Turks were always on the side of the Ottoman Empire and, later, of Turkey. At the end of the First World War, during the Batoum Conference, they demanded to be left to the Ottoman Empire. However, the region was finally given to Georgia in 1921, and the Soviet government treated the Ahıska Turks as untrustworthy people, as potential enemies of the regime, and as a dangerous group close to the Turkish border. This attitude played a significant role in the development of the ethnic sentiment of the Ahıska Turks and later became the basic reason for their deportation.

The Soviet policy in general, and towards the Ahıska Turks in particular led also to the strengthening of their identity. Within that context, the deportation itself, which also resulted in extensive contact with different ethnic groups, strongly influenced their ethnic identification. This fact was deepened by ethnicity-based discriminatory policies such as ‘special settlement’. Consequently, being confronted with different ethnic groups and being discriminated against, they had to refer more strongly to their ethnic roots—something they did not need to do in their original village setting where there were mostly living in an ethnically homogenous environment. Thus, we can state that through interaction with other ethnic groups, they have experienced a strengthening of their identity.

Because of these reasons, the loss of territory and their wide dispersal did not lead to a breakdown of identity; on the contrary, it reinforced and strengthened it. Although at present, Georgians and Armenians live in the villages where the Ahıska Turks used to live, the hope for going back to their homeland continues to be a group myth and ideal. But, they do realise the practical impossibility of returning. Their case is special because they have a dual homeland: Ahıska and Turkey. They consider both to be the lands of their forefathers. Since most of them do not believe in the possibility of going back to Georgia in the near future, they tend to migrate to Turkey by both legal and illegal means.

Strong family ties make a resistance to assimilation possible. The essential criterion for the reinforcement of ethnic solidarity is the practice of strong endogamy, which is practised with only very rare exceptions. Furthermore, they have maintained a closed community and they have reduced their relations with other ethnic groups to a minimum. Another important factor in the maintenance of group identity is the survival of the native tongue in the family environment when there was no possibility of learning Turkish in the educational system.

The Present Situation and the Political-Strategic Dimension

Currently, the Ahıska Turks are in a continuing process of migration since they are still without a homeland. They have been in exile since 1944 and still constitute an unwanted nationality everywhere in the world. They are forced to migrate illegally. The official position of Turkey is to accept them as ‘national refugees’, but they are not automatically naturalised as Turkish citizens. The category ‘national refugee’ comprises people who are of Turkish ethnic descent and of Turkish culture, and states that these people are entitled to migrate, settle and receive Turkish citizenship (Law on Settlement No. 2510).¹² Currently, there are approximately 15,000 Ahıska Turks who migrated after 1991 in Bursa and İnegöl. Since they do not have Turkish citizenship, they are obliged to work for low wages and without any social security. Although they still have the citizenship of the country they used to live in, the former Soviet Union, they declared during interviews that they constitute a separate ethnic group in the CIS but not in Turkey, because they feel at home despite the lack of Turkish citizenship. A university professor made the following comment during an interview:

“... the Georgian scientists say that Ahıska Turks are not Turks. They argue that we have been forcefully turkified and converted to Islam by the Ottomans. This view is totally rejected by our people. Consequently, we no more use the term ‘Meskhetian’. We were using it before in order to go back to the homeland as soon as possible. Now we call ourselves Ahıska Turks. Our roots are from Anatolia because Turks came to Ahıska from Anatolia during the Ottoman period. We are the grandchildren of these people. However, the Georgians say that we are not Turks. They say that we can go to Georgia. But how? We have to say that we are Georgians, we have to change our names and we can not practice our religion ... few people have accepted these conditions and gone to Georgia but [they] could not stay and [they] came back.”¹³

Despite all the legal measures taken by Georgian, Russian and Turkish governments in relation to their rehabilitation, their problems have increased day by day. Nowadays, the Russian authorities are mainly disturbed by the violations of the rights of the Ahıska Turks in Krasnodar, and may consider their return to Georgia as a solution to the problem.¹⁴ The Georgian government is experiencing growing international political pressure, specifically from the European Union, which puts pressure on the Georgian government to rehabilitate them. This has not been approached seriously up to now. The Georgian government prepared a Presidential Decree in December 1996 in order to solve their judicial and social problems. In practice, however, the rehabilitation programme has not been put into action yet.

Southern Georgia is the ideal route for the oil pipeline from Baku to Ceyhan to transport Azerbaijani oil to the West. Thus, the strategic importance of the region because of the pipeline issue, and its ethnic composition—Akhalsikhe (Ahıska) and Akhalkalaki (Ahılkelek) are mainly inhabited by Armenians—are factors that render critical the return of the Ahıska Turks to their original villages. Considering the above mentioned factors, it is possible to argue that, the region is one of potential conflict, and since peace and stability in the region is very important for Georgia, Turkey and other neighbouring countries, the issue of Ahıska Turks is very significant in the analysis of the region.

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3 Kreindler, Isabelle, ‘The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities: a Summary and Update’, *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 38, July 1986, pp. 388-391.

4 Conquest, Robert, *Nation-Killers, the Soviet Deportation of Nationalities*, Macmillan, Glasgow, 1970, p.49.

5 Tolz, Vera, ‘New Information about the Deportation of Ethnic Groups under Stalin’, *Report on the USSR*, Vol. 3, No. 17, p.17.

6 *Ibid.*, p.16.

7 Khazanov, Anatoly, ‘Meskhetian Turks in Search of Self-identity’, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 1992, p. 4.

8 Zeyrek, Yunus, Dünden Bugüne Ahıska Türklüğü, Türk Federasyon Yayınları, No. 2, Frankfurt, 1995, p.108.

9 Interview with an Ahıska Turk, Bursa, April 1997.

10 Pain, A. and Popov, A.A., 'Mejnatsionanie Konflikt v SSSR', Natsionalnie Protsesi Sivodnia, 1990, p. 5.

11 See: Ossipov, A., Cherepova, O.I., The Violation of the Rights of forced Migrants and Ethnic Discrimination in Krasnodar Territory—The Situation of the Turks-Meskhetians, Memorial Human Rights Centre, Moscow, 1996; and 'Deported Peoples of the Former Soviet Union: the Case of the Meskhetians', IOM, Technical Co-operation Centre for Europe and Central Asia, January 1998.

12 Sönmez, Necmi and Kirişçi, Kemal, 'Report on Recent Movements of Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Illegal Immigrants into Turkey', Paper presented in the 45th International Study Congress on Refugees in Origin Countries and Country of Refuge, Republic of San Marino, September 25-27, 1995. This congress was organised by the Association for the Study of the World Refugee Problem.

13 Interview with an Ahıska Turk, Kazakhstan, July 1997.

14 See Ossipov, A and Cherepova, O.I., The Violation of the Rights of forced Migrants and Ethnic Discrimination in Krasnodar Territory-The Situation of the Turks-Meskhetians, Memorial Human Rights Center, Moscow, 1996.

* The term 'Meskhetian' is used in the international literature, whereas most members of this ethnic group call themselves 'Ahıska Turks' referring to their Turkish roots. For further detail see, Aydıngün, Ay?egül, 'The Analysis of the Meskhetian Turkish Identity', a paper presented at the APIG Conference on Linking Theory and Practice: Issues in the Politics of Identity, 9-11 September 1998, University of Wales.