

The Circassian Genocide

Antero Leitzinger - 12/14/2004

A professor of the university of Munich (München), Karl Friedrich Neumann (not to be confused with the later Naumann), wrote in 1839 a book titled "Russland und die Tscherkessen" (published in the collection "Reisen und Länderbeschreibungen", vol. 19, in 1840). He describes, how Russia settled Christians to the parts of Armenia gained from Persia in 1828 - actually, Neumann had written about the issue already in 1834. (p. 68-69) Neumann considered this a very sound policy and predicted, that all Caucasus would become under firm Russian rule within the next decades. (p. 125) European powers would not intervene, because it was the destiny of all Europe to rule over the lands of Turks, Persians, and Hindus. (p. 129-130)

Neumann was no racist, but he certainly advocated colonialism and was a Russophile in relation to the southern lands. He had a Darwinist approach many years before Charles Darwin or Herbert Spencer presented their ideas. This appears to have been more typical to 19th century German thought than any anti-Armenian sentiments. Neumann makes it clear in his very first words of the preface: "The European humanity is selected by divinity as ruler of the earth."

Although Neumann respected the bravery of Circassians, he anticipated their destruction by Russia, because in a modern world, there would be no place for chivalrous "uncivilized" people. Neumann estimated the total number of Circassians, including the Kabardians and Abkhaz, at 1.5 million persons, or 300.000 families. (p. 67) Both the Russian figure of 300.000 persons, and the Circassian figure of four millions, were exaggerated.

Neumann divided the Circassians into ten tribes: Notketch, Schapsuch, Abatsech, Pseuduch, Ubich, Hatiokech, Kemkuich, Abasech, Lenelnich, Kubertech (in German transliteration). They formed a loose confederation very much like old Switzerland, with democratic majority votes deciding the affairs of villages. Their princes had no privileges, and were regarded only as military commanders. Women were more free than anywhere in the Orient. There was no written law, and death penalties were unknown. Many Circassians were Muslims, but there were also Christians and pagans, all completely tolerated.

Russian prisoners-of-war were used as slaves, but if they were of Polish origin, they were regarded as guests. Therefore, Poles recruited in the Russian army, deserted en masse at every opportunity, and even Russians often declared themselves to be Poles. (p. 123) Slavery as such included no shame. Circassians used to sell their own family members as slaves to Turkey and Persia, and many went to slavery voluntarily, returning later on back home as rich and free men. (p. 124) This system could be compared to the Gastarbeiter emigration from Turkey since the 1960s. We should also remember, that in those times, slavery or serfdom existed in Romania and Russia as well.

The Circassians had been fighting against Russia already for forty years when appealing to the courts of Europe in a "Declaration of Independence": "But now we hear to our deepest humiliation, that our land counts as a part of the Russian empire on all maps published in Europe... that Russia, finally, declares in the West, that Circassians are their slaves, horrible bandits..." (p. 140-141)

The fight continued for two more full decades, until a national Circassian government was set up in Sochi. In 1862, Russia began the final invasion, annihilation and expulsion, as predicted by Neumann well in advance.

According to Kemal H. Karpat, "Ottoman population 1830-1914" (Madison 1985), "Beginning in 1862, and continuing through the first decade of the twentieth century, more than 3 million people of Caucasian stock, often referred collectively as Cerkes (Circassians), were forced by the Russians to leave their ancestral lands..." (p. 27)

Salaheddin Bey mentioned, in 1867, a total of 1.008.000 refugees from the Caucasus and Crimea, of whom 595.000 were initially settled in the Balkans. (p. 27) Half a million followed by 1879, and another half a million until 1914. (p. 69) Most of them were Circassians, although there were Crimean Tatars, Chechens, and other Muslim people among them. Hundreds of thousands Circassians perished on their way.

Neumann's estimate of 1.5 million Circassians corresponds to 1/30 ethnic Russians, or 1/3 Czechs, or 3/4 Slovaks. (p. 66) According to Neumann, there were over two million Armenians in the world. (p. 69) Now, according to the Soviet census of 1989, the number of Russians has increased to 145 millions, whereof 1/30 would be almost five millions. There are 10 million Czechs and 5 million Slovaks, which would lead us to assume that there should be over 3 million Circassians. Armenia alone has a population of over 3 million Armenians, despite of the past ordeals; 2 million Armenians live elsewhere. The number of Czechs, Slovaks, and Armenians has more than doubled in 150 years, while the number of Russians has tripled; but where are the missing millions of Circassians?

"The Encyclopaedia Britannica", 11th edition (Cambridge 1911), divided the Armenian population equally between Russia and Turkey (little over a million in each empire), and numbered 216.950 Circassians (including Abkhaz etc.) in Russia. Again we must conclude that about 1.5 million Circassians had been massacred or deported. This disaster exceeded both absolutely and proportionally whatever fell upon Armenians in 1915. Was it intentional? Yes. Was it ideological? Yes. The conquest and Christian colonization of the Middle East was expected not only by Germans, but by most Europeans during the 19th century, and the expulsion of Muslims from Europe was considered a historical necessity. Russia had practiced massacres and mass deportations in the Crimea and Caucasus, and "ethnically cleansed" Circassia specially in 1862-1864. During that period, Panslavists like Mikhail Katkov provided the Russian public with nationalistic excuses for what had started as imperial ambition ("Third Rome") and strategic interests ("Access to sea").

A vicious cycle was created and increased the stakes at both frontiers: the Caucasus, and the Balkans. Circassian refugees settled in the Balkans were provoked to commit the "Bulgarian atrocities", that inspired some of the Armenian revolutionaries. After the Balkan Wars, Muslim refugees were roaming in Anatolia, thus spreading terror, and hostility. This was exploited by Russia, at the cost of many innocent Armenians. The massacres of 1915 were a tip of the iceberg - the part best visible for Europeans, who had been actively seeking and expecting horror news to justify anti-Muslim prejudice, and to prevent interventions on behalf of Turkey, as had happened in the Crimean War of the 1850s.

Was it a genocide? That depends on the definition. Rather than of separate, selectively researched genocides, we should speak of a general genocidal tendency that affected many - both Muslim and Christian - people on a wide scene between 1856 and 1956, continuing in post-Soviet Russia until today.

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