

# NORTH-WESTERN CAUCASUS IN THE POLICIES PURSUED BY RUSSIA AND THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE AT THE FINAL STAGE OF THE CAUCASIAN WAR

(KAFKASYA SAVAŞININ SON AŞAMASINDA KUZEY BATI KAFKASYA'DA  
RUSYA VE OSMANLI İMPARATORLUĞU'NUN İZLEDİĞİ POLİTİKALAR)

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**Abstract:** *In the opinion of the author, the terms underlying the 1856 Treaty of Paris exacerbated the North-Western Caucasus problem within the context of the Russian-Turkish relations. The differences between Russia and the Ottoman Empire were aggravated: due to the unstable position maintained by Russia along the Caucasian coast, the assistance provided by Ottoman Empire to the Circassian tribes and also the resumption of the Black Sea slave trade after the Crimean War. In view of these factors, the author has arrived at the conclusion that at the end of the Caucasian War, the North-Western Caucasus had a crucial impact on the Russian-Turkish relations.*

**Key Words:** *North-Western Caucasus, Russia, Ottoman Empire, the Black Sea, Circassia*

**Öz:** *Yazara göre 1856 Paris Antlaşmasının koşulları, Rus-Türk ilişkileri bağlamında Kuzeybatı Kafkasya sorununu daha da kötüleştirmiştir. Kafkas sahili boyunca Rusya'nın muhafaza ettiği konumunun istikrarsızlığı, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Çerkez aşiretlerine verdiği destek ve Kırım Savaşı sonrasında Karadeniz'de tekrar başlayan köle ticareti sebebiyle Rusya ile Osmanlı İmparatorluğu arasındaki anlaşmazlıklar daha da ciddileşmiştir. Bu etkenleri göz önünde bulundurarak yazar, Kafkas Savaşının sonunda Kuzeybatı Kafkasya'nın Rus-Türk ilişkilerine çok ciddi bir etki bıraktığı sonucuna varmaktadır.*

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *Kuzeybatı Kafkasya, Rusya, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Karadeniz, Çerkesya*

The end of the Crimean War (1853-1856) intensified the North-Western Caucasus problem in the Russian-Turkish relations. The Black Sea military neutralization opened its waters to the “commercial navigation of all nations”.<sup>1</sup> Under the circumstances when the Russian Black Sea Navy was destroyed, a ban on building up military arsenals imposed on Russia and the disruption of the Black Sea coastal line made the Russian positions on the Caucasian coast extremely vulnerable and shaky. A military journalist, General-Major R.A. Fadeyev wrote that the lack of Russian control over the Black Sea coastline had led to the situation when the Caucasian shore was totally open to forging connections with the outer world, primarily with Turkey. The view articulated by R.A. Fadeyev was upheld by his contemporaries.<sup>2</sup>

The situation was compounded by the commitment made by Russia and Turkey to admit European consuls into their Black Sea ports, pursuant to the terms of the 1856 Treaty of Paris.<sup>3</sup> This provided an opportunity for Great Britain not only to offer military assistance to the Circassian tribes, but also to reinforce its economic influence in the region. Russia’s weaker standing and Turkey’s dependent status allowed Great Britain to conduct trading activities in the Middle East countries and to resort to their exploitation. Consequently, despite Russia’s efforts, British contraband merchandise flooded the Caucasus.<sup>4</sup>

Under such conditions, Turkey’s posture was of paramount significance for Russia. Turkey’s position within the period under review was very complicated. On the one hand, Istanbul was perfectly satisfied with the fact that the Caucasian shore was not controlled by Russia. On the other hand, it was Turkey who bore the brunt of responsibility before Russia, as it was the country through whose territory the military contraband merchandise was smuggled to the Caucasian coast. Overall, Turkey’s policy was a follow-up on its pre-war course, while its assistance to mountain dwellers grew to be more intensive. Russian Ambassador Apollinary Butenyov reported that although the claims launched by the Russian government regarding the smuggling operations were accepted by the Porte, it did nothing to counteract the illicit activities. Apart from that, according to Ambassador Butevyov, the illicit military trafficking was encouraged by the Grand Vizier Reşid Pasha, Minister of War Riza Pasha, Minister of the Navy Mehmed Pasha.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, Ambassador Butenyov made

1 *Compilation of Russian Treaties with Foreign States, 1856-1917* (Moscow, 1952), p. 26.

2 “Letters about Turkey”, Letter No.13. 15 (27), October, 1858 [in]; P. A. Chikhachyov, *The Great Powers and the Eastern Issue* (Moscow, 1970), pp. 135-136.

3 *Compilation of Russian Treaties with Foreign States*, p. 26.

4 A. Kh. Kasumov, *North-Western Caucasus in the Russia-Turkey Wars and International Relations in the 19th Century* (Rostov-on-Don, 1989), p. 151.

5 “A. P. Butenyov – to A. M. Gorchakov”, 11 (23) February, 1857 [in]; *Shamil – Henchman of Sultanic Turkey and British Colonizers. Collection of Documentary Materials* (Tbilisi, 1953), pp. 456-467.

a conclusion that despite its friendly reassurances, Turkey did not seek any real improvement in the Russian-Turkish bilateral relations. Throughout the subsequent years, the situation was not subject to any change. In August, 1863, Alexey Lobanov-Rostovsky, who replaced Apollinary Butenyov as Russian Ambassador to Turkey, informed Russian Foreign Minister Alexander Gorchakov that the Turkish government had been inciting the resistance put up by the Black Sea Circassians by turning Istanbul into the center of illicit military trafficking.<sup>6</sup> Great Britain acted in such a way that only promoted the escalation of tensions between Russia and Turkey. The British government disclaimed Russia's right to own the Western-Caucasian coast and supported the ongoing smuggling operations. A considerable portion of such smuggling operations was conducted due to the military assistance provided to the Circassians. British agents were given a helping hand by the Turkish authorities.<sup>7</sup>

The policies pursued by Istanbul complicated the relationships between Russia and Turkey. Russian Minister of War Dmitry Milyutin was Chief of Staff of the Caucasian Corps within the period from 1856 through 1862. He wrote that at that time the Russian Naval Forces were not sufficient to carry out an effective blockade of the Caucasian coast at all.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, a decision was taken to set up a fleet of cruisers. It meant that the private trade vessels were fitted out specifically to safeguard the Caucasian coastline. Unfortunately, the materials published in Russia did not focus on the success scored in combatting the Turkish smuggling operations, but mainly asserted that it was impossible for the Russian shore service to guarantee a full blockade of the Black Sea coast.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the Black Sea slave trading, which had been widely practiced over the post-war period because of Russia's inability to cope with it, was

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6 Kasumov, *North-Western Caucasus in the Russia-Turkey Wars ...*, p. 160.

7 Absedariy, "The 1857 Landing of the Polish-British Troopers on the Circassian Coast" [in]; *Caucasus Compilation*, Vol. XI (Tbilisi, 1887), p. 586.

8 D. A. Milyutin, *Memoirs (In the Caucasus). 1856-1860* (Moscow, 2004), p. 57.

9 "Cruising along the Abkhazia Coast by the 'Vepr' (Wild Boar) Corvette", Excerpts from Reports made by Corvette Captain, Lieutenant Commander Dobrovolsky, 3 October and 2 November 1859) [in] *Nautical Collection*, Vol. XLV (No. 2., 1860), pp. 131-136.

resumed. It was described in a series of political essays entitled “Letters about Turkey” by a well-known Russian geographer and Oriental scholar Peter Chikhachyov.<sup>10</sup> The Russian press ran a lot of articles on the vulnerability of the Caucasian coast. The “Caucasus” newspaper ran stories on how the Turks went poaching near the Abkhazian shore.<sup>11</sup> The military press featured recollections of the Caucasian Corps officers about the Turkish propaganda among the Black Sea resident in the Caucasus.<sup>12</sup> The Russian magazines published articles that revealed that Great Britain had encouraged the illicit trafficking along the Circassian coastline.

The restricted capabilities of the Russian Navy in the Black Sea coupled with the inefficient attempts to blockade the Black Sea coast by cruiser operations forced Russia to expedite measures trying to finally annex the Caucasian region. In 1856-1859, the commanders of the Caucasian Corps, having left some troops with a view to shielding the Black Sea coastal strip, concentrated their efforts on conquering the Eastern Caucasus, which was controlled by Imam Shamil. This would provide an opportunity for precluding a reunification of the Eastern and Western Caucasus tribes. After being detained in 1859 Shamil, conquest of the Black Sea coast started. In the late 1859, a most talented leader of the Circassian resistance – Shamil’s naib in the North-Western Caucasus Muhammed Emin laid down arms. The success was accounted for by the deployment of additional military troops and the commencement of a campaign to evict Circassians from their former places of residence. The Black Sea coast in the Caucasus began to be settled by the Cossacks and people born in the European part of Russia.<sup>13</sup> The war for the North-Western Caucasus lasted until mid-1864. On 20<sup>th</sup> May, 1864, the last fortified point on the Western Caucasian coast - the village of Gubaadva (Kbaada, Kbaade) was seized.

The final seizure of the Black Sea region was hailed in Russia. A military Orientalist Major General Mikhail Venyukov wrote that the outcome of the Caucasian War “was received with gratification in Russia, the country could eventually breathe a sigh of relief after a six-year war with the Circassians”.<sup>14</sup> A most comprehensive description of the situation related to the “Circassian

10 “Letters about Turkey” [in] *The Great Powers and the Eastern Issue*, pp. 135-136.

11 *The Caucasus*, No. 77, 29 September (11 October), 1866.

12 S. Smolensky, “Memoirs of a Caucasian Man” [in] *Military Collection*, 1872. No. 10.

13 M. I. Venyukov, *Historical Essays on Russia. From the Crimean War Until the Conclusion of the Treaty of Berlin, Vol. 1* (Leipzig, 1878), pp. 171-172; *Essays on the History of Adygeya, Vol. 1-2, Vol. 1* (Maikop, 1957), pp. 383-384; E. D. Felitsyn and F. A. Scherbina, “Kuban Cossack Troops. 1696-1888” [in]; *Compilation of Summarized Data about the Troops* (Krasnodar, 1996), pp. 221, 224-228.

14 Venyukov, *Historical Essays on Russia*, p. 125.

issue” was given by Major General Rostislav Fadeyev. He noted that “the geographic position of Circassia did not allow us to be limited to the conquest of peoples who inhabited it in the normal sense of this word. ... We had to turn the Eastern shore of the Black Sea into the Russian land and, with this aim in view, to clear the entire coast of all mountain dwellers”.<sup>15</sup>

The opinion of Rostislav Fadeyev reflected the stance of those military circles who considered it appropriate to prevent a new extrication of Russia from the Caucasian coast in the event of another military conflict with Turkey or the great powers. The likelihood of such a scenario was not excluded, as Russia did not possess a large naval force in the Black Sea. Consequently, if Russia happened to lose the Black Sea region again, it could run the risk of losing it forever.

This explains why Russia resorted to very rigid and even brutal measures in handling the “Circassian issue”. Circassians positioned themselves as a self-supporting force. However, this factor did not make things easier for Russia, as the existence of an “independent Circassia” meant a constant precedent for external interference. For this reason, Russia was compelled to adopt repressive measures with respect to the population of the Caucasian shore. Those measures were applied to the new settlers as well, primarily Cossacks, who had been frequently resettled to new locations against their will.<sup>16</sup> As a result, according to Rostislav Fadeyev, only “in 1864, the Western Caucasus was not populated by force already”.<sup>17</sup> The attitude towards repressive measures was not homogeneous in the Russian society and among the government members. Dmitry Milyutin maintained that the idea of evicting the local population from the coast and settling the Cossacks there was met with resentment in St. Petersburg, where there was a lot of doubt over the expediency of such rigid initiatives.<sup>18</sup> In subsequent years, the policies were subjected to changes. The place of residence for the Black Sea tribes was

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15 R. A. Fadeyev [ed.], *Letters from the Caucasus to the “Moscow Vedomosti” Editor, 1864-1865* (St. Petersburg, 1865), pp. 69, 74-76.

16 Venyukov, *Historical Essays on Russia*, pp. 171-173; Felitsyn, “Kuban Cossack Troops. 1696-1888” [in]; *Compilation of Summarized Data about the Troops*, p. 227.

17 Fadeyev, *Letters from the Caucasus to the “Moscow Vedomosti”*, p. 154.

18 Milyutin, *Memoirs. 1856-1860*, p. 417.

designated to be the flat-bottomed land of Kuban, which was located at a distance from the Black Sea coast. Besides, while being resettled between the rivers Kuban and Lab, the mountain dwellers appeared to be constrained between the lands occupied by the Kuban Cossacks troops and the Russian settlers on the Black Sea coast. Thus, the mountain dwellers were isolated from the outer world and their fellow tribesmen in the Eastern part of the Caucasus.

The government measures targeted at the dispossession of Circassians were often the cause of resentment in the Russian society. Before the Crimean War, there was a lot of protest in Russia against the methods used in conquering the Caucasus. In 1841, the Chief of the Black Sea Coastline Lieutenant General Nikolai Rayevsky had to resign over his disagreement over the policy pursued by St. Petersburg in the North-Western Caucasus.<sup>19</sup> In the period of final conquest of the Caucasus, contemporary witnesses specified what price had been paid by Russia while “clearing” the Circassian coast. Dmitry Milyutin admitted in his memoirs that the mountain dwellers did not want to be resettled on a stretch of open terrain and to adopt the lifestyle of Cossack settlements.<sup>20</sup> The “Caucasus” newspaper chronicled the tragic developments in a truthful manner.<sup>21</sup> Rostislav Fadeyev in his “Letters” conceded that the measures undertaken by Russia over the period of conquering the North-Western Caucasus had been cruel.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, the Russian society tried to exert its influence on the government and to mitigate the measures undertaken by the latter in an effort to solve the problem of the Caucasian shore.

Over the period under review, the Russian-Turkish relations were affected by the Muhajirum problem (muhaceret - resettlement, emigration) - the resettlement to the Ottoman Empire of those Circassian residents who did not want to live in Kuban. The Muhajir phenomenon was ubiquitous in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ultimately, it grew to acquire massive proportions.<sup>23</sup> The resettlement of the Caucasian mountain dwellers to Turkey continued until 1910.<sup>24</sup>

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19 S. F. Oreshkova and Ulchenko N. Yu, *Russia and Turkey: Problem of Designating the Frontiers* (Moscow, 2006), p. 85.

20 Milyutin, *Memoirs. 1856-1860*, pp. 446-447.

21 *The Caucasus*, No.18, 2 (14) March, 1867.

22 Fadeyev, *Letters from the Caucasus to the “Moscow Vedomosti”*, pp. 131-134.

23 A. K. Cheucheva, *North-Western Caucasus in the Policies of Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire over the Last Quarter of the 18th Century-60's of the 19th Century* (Maikop, 2007), p. 174; G. A. Dzidzaria, *Muhajir Communities and Problems in the 19th Century History of Abkhazia* (Sukhumi, 1975), pp. 194-245, 276-293; Cheucheva, *North-Western Caucasus...*, pp. 174-209.

24 Dzidzaria, *Muhajir Communities...*, p. 68.



According to such Russian researchers, as Svetlana Oreshkova, Angela Cheucheva, Georgy Dzidzariya, Turkey was the chief initiator and planner of the Muhajir movement.<sup>25</sup> The same view was held by the US researcher E. Toledano, who had explored this subject profoundly.<sup>26</sup>

The reason for that lied in Turkey's desire to strengthen the combat capability of its army at the expense of Circassians, to consolidate its power on the Balkan Peninsula and to increase the number of Muslim subjects of the Turkic descend. Throughout the period of 1858-1864, a total of 175-200 thousand Circassians were resettled to the Balkans.<sup>27</sup> In Christian villages, the locals were obliged to build houses for the emigrants and to provide them with all basic necessities at their own expense.<sup>28</sup> This gave rise to multiple conflicts between the local population and the emigrants. The conflicts were further exacerbated due to the religious and cultural differences. As a consequence, after several years, the Turkish authorities resettled the greater part of Circassians to Asia Minor. After the 1877-1878 Russian-Turkish War, the Turkish government sent the Circassian resettlers to the remote areas of Anatolia. They were supposed to defend the troublesome border with Syria.<sup>29</sup> Thus, apart from Russia, Turkey was also responsible for the tragic consequences that the Circassian resettlement entailed, as it was not prepared to accommodate a large number of Caucasian refugees. This eventually resulted in a reduced number of Circassian emigrants.<sup>30</sup>

Russia sought to reduce the Muhajir movement in order to free the Caucasus from disloyal population, avoiding the displacement of the entire mass. In his letter to Russian Emperor Alexander II, Russian Vicegerent in the Caucasus Alexander Baryatinsky wrote that it was impossible to put an end to the

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25 Oreshkova, *Russia and Turkey: Problem of Designating the Frontiers*, p. 85; Cheucheva, *North-Western Caucasus...*, pp. 175-179, 183, 194, 196, 201, 204-205; Dzidzaria, *Muhajir Communities...*, pp. 197-200, 222.

26 E. Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression. 1840-1890* (Princeton, 1982), pp. 151-152.

27 G. V. Chochiev, "Resettlement of North-Caucasian Emigrants in the Arab Provinces of the Ottoman Empire (Second Half of the 19th Century – Early 20th Century)" [in]; *The Ottoman Empire. Events and People* (Moscow, 2000), p. 98.

28 Kasumov, *North-Western Caucasus in the Russia-Turkey Wars...*, p. 167.

29 Kasumov, *North-Western Caucasus in the Russia-Turkey Wars...*, pp. 167-168; Cheucheva, *North-Western Caucasus in the Policies of Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire...*, pp. 199-206; Chochiev, "Resettlement of North-Caucasian Emigrants..." [in]; *The Ottoman Empire. Events and People*, pp. 98-111.

30 *Essays on the History of Adygeya*, pp. 374-377; Dzidzaria, *Muhajir Communities...*, pp. 194-245; Kasumov, *North-Western Caucasus in the Russia-Turkey Wars...*, pp. 171-173; Cheucheva, *North-Western Caucasus...*, pp. 189-199.

Circassian emigration and suggested measures that could regulate the process.<sup>31</sup> With this aim in view, the Russian authorities set up a commission to deal with the Circassian resettlement in the cities of Taman, Novorossiysk and Tuapse. To transport the mountain dwellers, the Russian authorities chartered the freight carrying vessels owned by the Russian Navigation and Trade Society. The poorest of the emigrants were carried at the expense of the Russian state. They were provided with foodstuffs, small hospitals were set up for those who were ill. Designated naval officers saw to it that the passengers were not loaded on board in overcrowded conditions.<sup>32</sup>

Russia's position was set out in the "Letters" by Rostislav Fadeyev. He asserted in his work that the issue of resettling the mountain dwellers had been approached by Russia on the basis of its own national interests. For this reason, the policies pursued by St. Petersburg were justified, as the question at issue was the territory whose population refused to recognize the legitimate authority of Russia. The international environment after the Crimean War made it mandatory for Russia to adopt measures for the protection of its security in the Eastern part of the Black Sea region. In connection with the above, the actions accomplished by Russia in the North-Western Caucasus were considered a normal practice for a great power that defended its interests.<sup>33</sup>

Russia was not indifferent to the subsequent fate of its Caucasian emigrants. Rostislav Fadeyev gave credit to Turkey for its management of the Muhajir movement. At the same time, he underscored that owing to Russia, the number of victims involved in the resettlement policies had not grown higher. His statement carried a propaganda tinge to it. It was meant to diminish the responsibility of the Caucasian authorities for the occurrence of inevitable victims that the decision to "clear" the Caucasian coast was fraught with, and to influence those who did not make up their mind in favor of getting resettled to Turkey irrevocably. The attitude of the Russian authorities and the society towards those emigrants who wished to return was different. The Caucasian administration and the Turkish government did not want the Muhajirs to return. The Russian press displayed a sympathetic attitude towards the situation of Circassians in Turkey and did not carry any objection against their return.<sup>34</sup>

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31 "A. I. Baryatinsky – to Alexander II", 11 (23) May, 1860, Enclosure to Chapter IX [in]; A. L. Zisserman, *Field-Marshal Prince Alexander Ivanovich Baryatinsky. 1815-1879. Vol. 1-3*, Vol. 3 (Moscow, 1889), p. 342.

32 Fadeyev, *Letters from the Caucasus to the "Moscow Vedomosti"*, pp. 146-151.

33 Fadeyev, *Letters from the Caucasus to the "Moscow Vedomosti"*, pp. 146-151.

34 *The Caucasus*, No. 70, 8 (20) September, 1866; *St. Petersburg Vedomosti*, No. 19, 25 January (7 February), 1864.



After Russia conquered the Caucasus, the British press ceased to publish any pro-Circassian materials. Despite the public protests in Great Britain, on 26 May, 1864, the British government had to recognize the “Big Caucasus” being included in the Russian territory. Thereafter, Great Britain lost all interest in its Circassian allies and came to terms with their resettlement.<sup>35</sup> An important role was played by the economic factors. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 provided the British with a direct route to India. For this reason, Great Britain did not try to assert its monopolistic right to the ownership of the Trabzon-Tabriz trade route.

The Caucasian Black Sea coast had traditionally fueled a lot of controversy into the relations between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. After the Crimean War, this problem grew to be more acute. The terms of the 1856 Peace Treaty of Paris brought Russia’s sovereignty in the North-Eastern part of the Black Sea region into question. Russia sought to perpetuate its territorial expansion into the Black Sea basin, while the Ottoman Empire endeavored to retain its influence on the Caucasian coast and to use the Circassian human resources to the fullest extent possible. As a result, the North-Western Caucasus had all the attributes inherent to the international problem: it was a source of controversy between Russia and Turkey, it was the focus of attention for the European nations and it was one of the major transportation nodes in the Middle East. The list of most acute controversies included: Russia’s position in the Black Sea region and military contraband, slave trading on the Circassian shore, the resettlement of a significant part of the population of the Black Sea Circassia to the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, after the Crimean War, the North-Western Caucasus was the centerpiece of the Eastern issue and had paramount importance for the Russian-Turkish relationships.

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35 A. P. Berger, “Expulsion of Mountain Dwellers from the Caucasus” [in]; *Russkaya Starina*, Vol. XXXIII (No. 1, 1882).

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