

RUSSIAN IMPERIAL POLICY IN ABKHAZIA (XIX-XX CENTURIES)

Tsaava Gela

Ph.D. Student, Tbilisi State University, Georgia, polge2006@yahoo.com

Abstract

The aspects of the colonial policy of Russia discussed in the article, reflecting the events of the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The attempt of Russia to denationalize Abkhazia (Historical part of Georgia) and to assimilate it totally in the Empire space is evident from the material. Tsarist Russia authorities clearly understood the significance of highlanders submission to strengthen firmly in the Caucasus and inevitability of total supremacy in Abkhazia to solve this problem.

Russia needed to strengthen at the Black Sea North-East coast and in the West Caucasus to put an end with bullets purchasing and smuggling as well, which inflicted harm to strategic, political and economic interests of the country in the Caucasus. Russia never adapted to Georgian ethnic prevails at the territory, which was very important for it and even more, their opposition to defense own country and people. It was necessary to create conditions to carry out Russian colonization and they fought with all the methods.

Keywords: Abkhazia, Colonization, Russia.

1 INTRODUCTION

The study of Abkhazian conflict is actual problem of Georgia's recent history. At present, this conflict is major vector between domestic and foreign policy of Georgia. The tense relations between Georgians and Abkhazians started yet XIX century. The Russian government is trying to get rid of Abkhazia and Abkhazians from Georgia. Russians taught Abkhaz people, that Georgians are their enemies, that settled in the XIX century on the territory of Abkhazia and so there was no Georgian population. Accordingly, arguing that this land is property of Abkhazians and Georgian plan to assimilate the culture and identity of Abkhazians.

2 RUSSIAN IMPERIAL COLONIZATION

2.1 The Imperial Policy's Aspects

In the second half of the XIX century, the Russian imperial authorities started to actively master and colonize historical Georgian lands. They presented as though that was the time when Georgians "annexed" Abkhazia and Georgians "invaded" this region and that was the reason for demographic changes in favour of Georgians

In reality in the above-mentioned period, Russia founded more than 35 villages for Russians and other Russian-speaking peoples in Abkhazia. Numerous archive materials clearly show how unfoundedly Russian officials harassed Georgians in Abkhazia.

In the second half of the 19th century Empire, authorities of Russia began the process of the colonization of the historical lands of Georgia very actively. The aspects of the colonial policy of Russia discussed in the article, reflecting the events of the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The attempt of Russia to denationalize Abkhazia (Historical part of Georgia) and to assimilate it totally in the Empire

space is evident from the material. Abkhazia, Svanetia, and Shida Kartli regions have always been the subject of Russia's permanent and particular interest, as these areas adjoin Kuban, Kabardo, Karachaevo, Circasia, and Ossetia. It was possible to establish influence across Georgia only by controlling the Shida Kartli region (Maisuradze, 2010 p.11).

That is the reason why Russia has always had a special administrative relationship with these regions, and has sought to promote a special administrative regime there. In the 30-ies of the 19th century, the task of firm strengthening in Abkhazia and Black Sea North-East coast was the major problem of Russia authorities. Positions of Russia in the South Caucasus could not be firm without resolution of this problem, since this place cut off Empire center. Therewith, to struggle against West Caucasus highlanders Abaza and Adyghe tribes, Tsarist Russia needed to strengthen at this convenient bridgehead without fail.

At the beginning of the 30-ies of the 19th century, command authorities of Russia refrained from broad offensive operations and were content with Anapa and Gagra fortresses guarding. This place remained for Russia as Achilles heel. In August 1831 Infantry General, General-Aide-de-Camp, Baron Gr. Rozen was appointed to the post of Vicegerent and Caucasus Corps Commander-in-Chief. As soon as the new Vicegerent and Caucasus Corps Commander-in-Chief arrived to Tbilisi, he paid special interest to Abkhazia, which, in his opinion, could reach higher prosperity with its location at the Black Sea coast and with natural wealth.

Tsarist Russia authorities clearly understood the significance of highlanders submission to strengthen firmly in the Caucasus and inevitability of total supremacy in Abkhazia to solve this problem. Russia needed to strengthen at the Black Sea North-East coast and in the West Caucasus to put an end with bullets purchasing and smuggling as well, which inflicted harm to strategic, political and economic interests of the country in the Caucasus.

In the second half of the 19th century Empire, authorities of Russia began the process of the assimilation-colonization of the historical lands of Georgia very actively. Well-known Russian historian V. Kliuchevski considered colonization as main factor of the history of Russia (Charaia 1897, #13).

At the beginning of 1860 command of Russia, stimulated interest in road construction connecting Abkhazia with North Caucasus having not only military and administrative significance but also it was important way for final conquest of the country. In August 1860 the commander of the Russian army, located in Abkhazia, General I. Korganov, arranged punitive expedition in the village Pskhu, 3 thousand militiamen participated in the expedition. At the same time, warships of Russia arranged raid at the Ubykhs coast and gave the impression of landing intention.

The objective of this operation was to frighten Ubykhs and thus to suppress the possibility of their help to Pskhu inhabitants. In September 1860 Tsar's vice-regent in Caucasus Alexander Baryatinskiy held military meeting in Vladikavkaz to undertake the activities and to end the war in Caucasus rapidly. At the meeting, it was decided to attack from the river Labi and the river Belaya to subdue West Caucasus and to exile Abadzekhs, Shapsukhs, Ubykhs from mountains to the Black Sea. As High Command of Russia considered, without that, conquest of the Caucasus would not be complete and final (PLL 2009, p. 36)

2.2 The Implementation of "Colonization" by Empire of Russia

In 1864, after Abkhazia principality abolition, Tsarist Russia obtained vast territory for colonization and launched the effort of Abkhazia colonization. Tsarist Russia confiscated the estates of the former prince and the members of the princely house. Great number of the (unoccupied lands) arose in Abkhazia. In that period Russia founded more than 35 villages in Abkhazia, which would be rather enough for full colonization of that region. Russian officials wished to turn Abkhazia into their own native land. In his report Russian colonization of Abkhazia Kutaisi general-governor D. Sviatopol-Mirski informed the only radical way that will decline any danger from the Sukhumi department, - is Abkhazia inhabitant exile to Ottoman Empire, if a part of Abkhaz people wants to go to Turkey, we should not prevent. Occupying both shores of Bzipi it will be possible to settle Abkhazia by Russian population. Thus, according to the Caucasus headquarters plan, West Caucasus mountaineers relocated from their dwellings and the Russians settled there.

In April 1877, Russia-Turkey war began, the field of which became Caucasus as well. From the beginning of the war, rather complicated condition created in Abkhazia. Dissatisfaction provoked by Russia colonial regime reached culmination by that time and revolt began. On April 29, in such strained and complicated situation Turkey landing party landed troops near Gudauta, which was mainly composed of Abkhaz Muhajirs.

In April-May Turks had occupied almost whole Abkhazia. At the same time, rebel Abkhazians joined Turks landing party. From spring 1878, the authorities started practical measures for Abkhazia colonization. In May 1 1878, the governing board of Pitsunda region made a statement on one-year lease of village Anukhvi

vineyards and fruit trees gardens. In the Pitsunda region three plots were allocated and granted Russian colonists the possession of land in perpetuity. In 1879, 137 families of Russian peasants moved into Pitsunda region, but already in 1881, only 99 families remained there. (Khorava 2004, p. 58).

Thus, in 60-70-ies of the 19th century colonization progress in Abkhazia was insignificant. In spite of Tsarist Russia great desire, colonization of Abkhazia delayed. Russians could not adapt themselves to natural conditions of Abkhazia – humid climate, forest, mountainous country, marshy shoreline. Wheat harvest could not be collected, the only cereal crop was corn. Tsebelda land, free of malaria, which spread so much in the shoreline of Abkhazia, distinguished by healthy, mild climate, rich soil; therefore, bringing of the population could not cause any problem. Therefore, Tsebelda and Dali could become prosperous place-with wonderful vineyards and fruit-trees gardens, mining, but one more and main condition needed – to build roads. It was difficult for peasants moved from Russia internal provinces to get accustomed with Tsebelda and Dali mountainous conditions.

Despite the fact, that the lands of Abkhazia were given to Russian officials, territory of Abkhazia was not populated, lands were left uncared – for. In Dali, where before Muhajirs of 1867 the population was about 5 thousand, nobody lived even at the end of 19th century. Georgian figure Petre Charaia wrote about Dali gorge: “Not long ago Dali was crowded by Abkhazians. In the old days country, famous for bravery of the population is so much neglected today, that nobody lives there” (Maisuradze 2010, 268).

2.3 The Activation of Colonization Processes by Tsarist Russia Vicegerents

After Russia-Turkey war, (1877-1878) Abkhazians announced to be - guilty population. After Abkhaz Muhajirity, when the large part of Abkhazia became depopulated and neglected, and Russians and foreigners did not come here to settle with wish, from West Georgia – from Imereti and Samegrelo - peasants, oppressed with land smallness and bareness, moved and settled in Abkhazia, dried marshes, cut down bushes and managed their estates. In the 80-ies of the 19th century, Tsarist Russia abolished ruling by general-governor and reinstated ruling by vicegerent. Reactionary Alexander Dondukov-Korsakov appointed to the position of vicegerent (1882-1890).

The head of the Sokhumi region colonel V. Braker made dinner-party for the members of the expedition, where member of the expedition S. Sharapov delivered his speech and frankly spoke about Russia's intentions in Abkhazia. Particularly, he mentioned: “Through its long historical struggle, aspiring to the South, warm sky and warm sea, people of Russia at the cost of sacrifice at last have this sky and this sea. Here Russian flag flies, Russian eagle waves, but why the Russians do not feel themselves free, why are they oppressed and suffocating? Why are they strange at this warm shore, under the bright sun? I think because owing to Russian kindness here, at this land, which obtained by Russian blood, every foreigner has settled down at the best places and not only oppresses the Russians but tweaks at them.

In 1896, reactionary Grigori Golitsin appointed to the position of vicegerent of the Caucasus (1896-1905), and began Russification actively. Numerous archival data testify that Russian officials groundlessly chased Georgians in Abkhazia. Distinct expression of the Russian colonization real aims is Russian administration attitude towards ethnically Georgian population, living in Sukhumi region, village Parnauti.

Facts on so-called Parnauti matter evidently testify events, happened in the mentioned settlement that developed as follows: inhabitants, living there, almost totally gave up to muhajir. This place, remaining without inhabitants almost entirely neglected and became depopulated, soil became unbroken, and it needed much labor and means to return economic purpose. By this reason, Russian colonist peasants refused to settle in Parnauti. Also refused to settle those, who were taken orderly from the Empire internal provinces and were suggested to settle here free of charge.

Russian peasants, who settled in Abkhazia earlier, also refused to settle in this village. By way of exception, following the request-entreaty, Sukhumi forestry allowed Georgian peasants, who mainly had moved from Zugdidi and Senaki, to take a lease of the land. As they promised, this lease would be eternal or prolonged. Georgians paid also for cattle: 40 copecks for one in a year. Georgian peasants purchased tooling, cultivating the land, while Russian settlers given free of charge.

Parnauti new settlers applied great efforts to that place. Those people, who had concluded leasing contract with Parnautis, generally, were representatives of the Russian nation or Russian authorities. As it ascertained afterwards, they had deceived leaseholders, made them to cultivate and make prettier the wild place and then decided to create Russian village at their personal plots.

Moreover, they announced as slyly crept (invaders). Russian officials understood that the issue of colonization was very neat and by authorities, it was risky, therefore, it implemented in the politically advantageous period,

when reaction raged, after 1905-1907 Revolution severe suppression. Parnauti peasants did not believe that the circumstances would so much be complicated.

Russian chauvinism seen also from the fact that Parnauti population not mentioned in any document as Georgians, they named Megrels. Russian bureaucracy expressed Empire motto -divide and rule over all in it as well. They divided and named Georgian people as Svans, Imeretians, Megrels, Tushis, Khevsurs, Rachvels and so on, that could not be endured by Georgians. At last, Russian officials moved a part of Georgians, about 30 families, evicted from Parnauti, to the river Kodori gorge. History of Parnauti is an explicit expression of Russian colonial policy in Abkhazia, Abkhaz and Georgian population pursuit and settlement of the mentioned place by Russians.

2.4 About Intentions of Military Governor, General–Major F. Gershelman

Very interesting information on Russian colonial policy at the first half of the 20th century given in the archive data of the Ministry. In 1900 at the Kutaisi province, gendarmerie governing board proceedings initiated against Georgian patriots group, working in Abkhazia (according to the administrative-territorial division of that time Kutaisi province Sukhumi region). As it is ascertained from the investigation (according to the investigation data: — Georgian Party Tedo Sakhokia) the leader of this group Tedo Sakhokia with his likeminded persons actively opposed Russian colonial policy in Abkhazia. Reports, submitted by Kutaisi Military Governor, Major-General F. Gershelman to Kutaisi colonial administration in the process of investigation are very interesting, that sent from Kutaisi to Tbilisi with — “confidential” or “secret” stamp.

Therefore, Military Governor, Major-General F. Gershelman spoke openly about imperial plans of Russia in Abkhazia. He knew the essence of the Russia colonial policy perfectly well. He had well comprehended the ways of this policy implementation and those problems that Caucasus colonial administration faced with in the process of colonization in Abkhazia. Interesting information on Russia Empire colonial policy in Abkhazia are given in the following documents: 1. Kutaisi Military Governor, Major-General F. Gershelman’s report, dated August, 3, 1900 “To the Head of the Caucasus Military-National Board of Administration Ruler’s Office.” 2. Kutaisi Military Governor, Major-General F. Gershelman’s report, dated September, 2, 1900 “On Georgian Movement in the Sukhumi region”.

Kutaisi Military Governor wrote in September 2, 1900: - Lately, region colonization possibility and obtained use were recognized by Russians, which can be reached, using those territories, that were exempted from the former invaders emigration, affairs in this direction are rather successful and great number of Russian peasants, who expressed the desire for settlement in Sukhumi region, did their part. Russian Governor forms more clearly the tasks of the colonial policy: Russian colonization of the region has great state significance from the political standpoint. Abkhazian people, who are the region population basic mass, until today remain less cultured, less educated nation, from both, development and moral, standpoints.

Everything requires especial attention. The situation can be improved by bringing Russian citizenship in the region, which is gradually implemented in, but still much time is needed to achieve the goal and the best way is region colonization by Russians. It was clear, that deliverance of Abkhazia from Georgia and local population assimilation would be possible only after Georgian language removal. Following the discussion on the necessity of Georgian language removal from Abkhazia church and schools Kutaisi Military Governor concluded: —Taking such arrangements Sukhumi region local population would be reliably protected from Georgian influence . . . it will not matter for Abkhazian people, who have not own written language, know neither Russian nor Georgian language, will their confessor be Russian or Georgian.

Kutaisi Military Governor also touches upon demographic issue and mentions clearly, that by 1900 only in Sukhumi, lived 1500 Georgians (1300 Imeretians, 200 Georgians) besides Megrels. If only in Sukhumi, besides Megrels lived 1500 Georgians, how would 12 Georgians, besides Megrels live in total Sukhumi? In his report dated September 2, 1900 Kutaisi Military Governor gives such statistics: population of the Sukhumi region distinguished by particular variety. Population consists of 96.377 both sexes representatives, where Abkhazian people prevail – 71 %, Murzakaneli apply to their number – 37,5 % (Abkhazs – 33,5%, Murzakani – 37,5 %). Russian population is 6% of the total population, Megrels, Imeretians, Gurians and Georgians together are 13% of the population, the rest 10% of the population are the other nations.

Military Governor considered Murzakani as exactly Abkhazs. He obtained 71%. In fact, the number of the historical Murzakani population - 37,5 % - should be added to the Georgians number – 13%, though this last number is evidently reduced. For the Caucasus, colonial authorities, particularly for Kutaisi Military Governor, existed one administrative district – Sukhumi region. However, for Kutaisi Military Governor there were two districts – Abkhazia (probably, historical territory of the Abkhazia principality) and Murzakani (probably, historical territory of Murzakani).

It is important, that Kutaisi Military Governor had involuntarily slipped in speaking the truth when producing statistics in his report, dated September 2, 1900. It realized from the archival data, that the Governor recognizes the reality in this letter. The following phrase of the report is as such – by Georgians, primary by Megrel. i.e. Governor knew, that Megrel is the same Georgian. For the second time the Governor indicates correctly the priests' national composition in the Sukhumi region (okrug): As of today from 80 priests, 4 are Russians in Sukhumi region (2 of them work in Sukhumi), 2 Abkhazs, 10 Greeks, and the rest 64 – Georgians (Megrels) (Khorava 2011), 104).

Positions of Russia in Abkhazia gradually strengthened and Tsarist Russia implemented the plan of the whole Caucasus capture successively. Tsarist Russia tried to make Georgia integral part of the Empire, which would stipulate colonization of the country. Empire gave the leading importance to the border territories, among which Abkhazia had the leading duty. Tsarist Russia tried to deliver Abkhazian people from Georgians and to implement the idea of Russian Abkhazian creation. Abkhazia found itself under imperial principle pressure “disconnect and rule over” and Tsarist Russia policy started working with full sharpness to oppose different parts of Georgia, to remove Abkhazia from Georgia and to dissociate local population historically cultural-religiously.

Russia never adapted to Georgian ethnic prevail at the territory, which was very important for it and even more, their opposition to defense own country and people. It was necessary to create conditions to carry out Russian colonization and they fought with all the methods. The abovementioned facts are the obvious expression of Russian colonial policy in Abkhazia, Abkhaz and Georgian population pursuit and settlement of the place by Russians. It is evident, that Russia tried to assimilate in the imperial space.

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