

**CATASTROPHIC CONSEQUENCES OF DEMOGRAPHIC POLICY OF
OTTOMAN AUTHORITIES IN WESTERN ARMENIA
(the 16th century-beginning of the 20th century)**

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Prior to the Armenian Genocide of 1915, permanently, and during several hundred years sometimes slowly and sometimes rapidly, the process of ethnic cleansing in Western Armenia had already taken place; the Ottoman Empire's anti-Armenian demographic policy had been put into service for its realization in Western Armenia.¹

In the second half of the 16th century the Ottomans defeated the Turkmen tribes and occupied Western Armenia. The administrative and demographic policies of the Turkish Sultans was stipulated by the national, political and economic interests, and was distinguished by instabilities and constant changes.

By the 1530s Erzurum (Karin), Sebastia, Kars, Van, Diarbekir (Amid) and Akhaltskha eyalets (administrative divisions or provinces in the Ottoman Empire) were formed in the territory of Western Armenia.² What was the demographic situation in Western Armenia during the period from the end of the 15th to the first half of the 17th centuries?

The comparison of different sources definitely shows that despite the unfavourable for the Armenians demographic processes, which occurred in Western Armenia during the preceding period the country was in major part inhabited by the indigenous Armenian nation, but gradually new alien ethnical groups appeared and settled in separate provinces.

Thus, at the end of the 16th century according to a Turkish tax list, "The Great Book of Gyurjistan Vilayet³", the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of 1250 settlements of Cehlder (Akhaltskha) province had Armenian or Georgian names, or their names were widely spread among the Armenians and Georgians, i.e. the province was inhabited by Christians. Muslim names were rather scarce⁴.

¹ Melkonyan A.A., Tendencies of demographic policy of the Ottoman authorities in Western Armenia (16th century-beginning of the 20th century). - The Main Issues of Western Armeniacy's Claims (International research and practical Conference, Cyprus, Nicosia, April 18-19, 2008, pp. 101-116. Մելքոնյան Ա., Հայաստանի պատմության և ժողովրդագրության հիմնահարցեր, Երևան, 2011, էջ 401-411:

² Administrative division of the Ottoman Empire. For details see: Birken A., Die Provinzen des Osmanischen Reiches. Wiesbaden, 1976.

³ Vilayets - chief administrative divisions or provinces of the Ottoman Empire.

⁴ Melkonyan A., Javakhk in the 19th Century and in the First Quarter of the 20th century, Yerevan, 2003, pp. 76-82 and "The Great Book of Gyurjistan Vilayet", volume 2, Tbilisi, 1941 (in Georgian).

According to Hakob Karnetsi, in the first half of the 16th century the major part of 23 districts of Karin-Erzrum region were inhabited by the Armenians exclusively.⁵ The fact that the northern provinces of Erzrum (which had suffered most from the consequences of the undertakings of the Ottoman government that populated the regions with Muslims and had mixed population) nonetheless, were principally populated by the Armenians, and the number of Turks was minor. But this situation did not last long.

With the aim to introduce the Ottoman administrative machine in Western Armenia and subject to taxes the local Armenian population of Baberd, Sper, Tortum and other districts in the north-western part of Western Armenia, the Turkish bands destroyed hundreds of Armenian settlements in Upper Armenia (Bardzr Hayk) and Tayk putting to the sword tens of thousands people.

Over 50 thousand Armenians were forced to convert to Islam rather than the physical destruction.⁶ The cases of massacre and forced Islamization became more frequent since 1512, with the beginning of the long lasting Turkish-Persian War. "...Sacking, demolishing and destroying in general from Kars and Ani and the shores of Lake Van to the valley of Mush, Khnus and Alashkert, Diatn and Kamuray, Batnots and Payazet, the whole country was burnt and destroyed, the women and the children were driven away as captives... and the country turned to desert so that only the fortresses remained intact in the territory from Erzrum to Erevan", - an eyewitness author wrote.⁷

In order to establish a complete hegemony over the homage nations the Sultan's Government started the process of populating the conquered lands with Turkic and Iranic language speaking (mostly the Kurds) tribes.

Just after concluding the Persian-Turkish Peace (1639) in 1643 the Turkish authorities violently carried out general census of the population in Erzrum province. Collection of taxes and violence were so brutal that the Christians of some districts of the province "converted to Islam out of fear"⁸.

Ghukas Inchichyan, historian and geographer at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th centuries witnessed about other cases of forced Islamization in the, "tired of the violence and deprivations (the Christians - A. M.) in general adopted Islam." Population of Berdagrak "was of Armenian origin, yet most of them converted to Islam and very few stayed dedicated to Christianity", - Ghukas Inchichyan wrote.⁹

The process of forced Islamization of the Christian population was accompanied by destroying and demolishing of the churches or turning them into mosques. In 1662

⁵ Հակոբ Կարնեցի, Շինուած Կարնոյ քաղաքին, Մանր ժամանակագրություններ, XIII-XVIII դդ., հ. II: Կազմեց՝ Վ.Ա.Հակոբյան, Երևան, 1956, էջ 550-551:

⁶ Koch K. Wanderungen im Oriente während der Jahre 1843 und 1846. Weimar, 1846. Տաշեան Յ., Հայ բնակչութիւնը Սեւ ծովէն մինչեւ Կարին, Վիեննա, 1921, էջ 3-20:

⁷ Մանր ժամանակագրություններ, հ. II, էջ 566:

⁸ Ibid, p. 554.

⁹ Ինճիճեան Դ., Աշխարհագրութիւն չորից մասանց աշխարհի՝ Ասիոյ, Եւրոպիոյ, Ափրիկոյ և Ամերիկոյ: Մասն առաջին. Ասիա, հտ. Ա, Վենետիկ, 1806, էջ 93:

Roman (Greek - A. M.) and Armenian churches were destroyed and demolished or turned into mosque, and every Christian wore black cap by the sanctions of the Ottoman authorities¹⁰.

In 1723 over one hundred Armenian villages were burnt to ashes in Sper, a northern district of Erzurum province, many Armenians were captured, they were forcibly converted to Islam, those who refused were killed¹¹.

The new calamities of the lasting Turkish-Persian War were added to all these. In 1730s, the army of Nadir Khan invaded Kars and Ardahan provinces and forcedly took around 6 thousand Armenians to Persia."... And captured the Nariman province, Javakhk, Chldr (Chelter) and Ghayi Ghulu, which were all our nation, and drove the men and women, the elderly and youth to Khorasan, and they were six thousand as we heard," Abraham Cretatsi (Cretan) wrote¹².

In order to imagine the disastrous demographic shift, which took place in the period of approximately one century in the same state, a simple comparison of the taxation lists "The Great Book of Gyurjistan Vilayet," which represents the status by the end of the 16th century, and "Chelder Eyalet Jaba Defter," which refers to the end of the 17th century and the first thirties of the 18th century¹³, will show the obvious fact that during this period the number of settlements in eyelet had rapidly decreased.

During one century or a little more the number of settlements in Javakhk was reduced from 352 to 142, i.e. about 2,5 times. If formerly there were more than one villages having the same name with definitions "Upper" or "Lower", and "Big", "Medium" or "Small", then a part of those villages was not mentioned at all, whereas the others were indicated as one village per name.

"*The fruits*" of such policy appeared in the historical Daranaghi province - Kamakh as well. The appearances that occurred there may be noticed in the following lines by Gh. Inchichyan: "The population of the province flourished, especially Armenian and Turkish, the latter in the major part have Armenian origin,"¹⁴ i.e. Armenians who were forcedly assimilated. According to the same author, the Islamic flood was so strong that a part of the local Armenians had to leave and to settle in the Mountains of Tekir Dag¹⁵.

Tortum province is one of the Western Armenian provinces, which most probably underwent forced Islamization in the period under study. The existing ruins of 120 churches and 10 monasteries are the evidence of massacres, deportations and

¹⁰ Մանր ժամանակագրություններ, հ. II, էջ 567.

¹¹ Ատրպետ, Ճորոխի աւագանը, Երևան, 1934, էջ. 110. Մատենադարան, ձեռ. No. 6332, p. 552:

¹² Աբրահամ Կրետացի, Պատմություն, Երևան, 1973, էջ 67:

¹³ Which represents the status by the end of the 16th century, and "Chelder Eyalet Jaba Defter," See the names of the villages in three livas; cf Javachk (Akhalkalak, Khertvis and Chelder) mentioned during this period in "The Great Book of Gyurjistan Vilayet", volume 2, pp. 332-386, 393-402. Also see: "Chelder Eyalet Jaba Defter," Tbilisi, 1979 (in Georgian) pp. 106-199.

¹⁴ Ինճիճեան Ղ., op. cit., p. 123.

¹⁵ Ibid.

devastation of the province¹⁶. Nevertheless the majority of the population, which are called "keskes"¹⁷, having half Armenian and half Muslim nature did not differ from the other Armenian population. Most of them even did not speak Turkish well; others did not know Turkish at all. Some others spoke a mixture of Turkish and Armenian¹⁸.

An original ethnic and religious situation occurred in the mountainous Hamshen province, which was situated between the Pontic mountain chain in the south and the Black Sea to the north. The Turkish hegemony was catastrophic for these places as well. The population suffered political and religious suppression; extremely high taxes were established for the Christian population. Under the influence of all these serious ethnical and religious transformations took place. Gh. Inchichyan wrote about all these, "Initially the population living in these lands were of Armenian origin, yet at the end of the 17th and in the beginning of the 18th centuries the population of the villages in neighbourhood were Islamized due to violations and grave taxes..."¹⁹ Others, especially in 1708 through 1710, in order to avoid violations left the province and settled in Trabzon, Baberd and elsewhere²⁰.

Yet, such forced Islamization or assimilation, according to assertion of the same author was unable to change the Armenian description of the province, "but yet there are still Christians among them, whose villages still survive, and there is a church still standing there, though they have no priest of their own... ." From time to time a priest from the neighbouring villages came to their village to conduct religious rites. As for the Armenians who converted to Islam and had already become "Turks", "... they speak Armenian until now, use the names given by the godfathers and godmothers, keep the fast, and other rites and Christian rules, go to church, etc.: others are "keskes" by the faith, and only pretend to be "Turks"... "²¹.

Notably, while in the most of Western Armenian provinces, such as Kiskim, Tortum, Sper, Erznka, etc., the major part of "keskeses" gradually lost nearly all elements of their national identity, the Armenians of Hamshen ("Hemshin") falsely showing that they were "Muslims," in fact had remained devoted to their national roots for the centuries.

In fact, the major part of "keskeses" in Hamshen did not differ from the other Armenians living there. Most of them even did not speak Turkish well or did not know Turkish at all. Some others spoke a mixture of Turkish and Armenian.²² One could meet a lot of "keskeses" having Armenian names and surnames, which had the Turkish ending "oghly", such as Kirakosoghly, Petrosoghly, Grigorogly, etc²³.

¹⁶ See: Տաշեան Յ., op. cit., pp. 77-79.

¹⁷ Կես (kes) in Armenian means half.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 78-82.

¹⁹ Ինճիճեան Դ., op. cit., p. 396.

²⁰ Տաշեան Յ., op. cit., p. 34:

²¹ Ինճիճեան Դ., op. cit., p. 396.

²² Տաշեան Յ., op. cit., p. 78-82.

²³ When the travelers asked them about their nationality they answered "Islam", a reply, which does not include any information about the nationality. According to information of Carl Koch, a German author of travel notes of the 40s of the 19th century, the only term to indicate the nationality in Turkey was "Osmanli" (K. Koch, op. cit., pp. 57-59).

One of the secrets of surviving of the main features of Hamshen Armenians' national identity is stipulated by the geographical environment. The Armenians lived there in mountainous and dense wooded areas. They were involved in subsistence farming, animal husbandry, gardening, apiculture, and partly in agriculture. The beeswax from Hamshen was especially well-known. The Sultan government was gathering the notable part of taxes from the province for this product: 2000 *okas* (a unit of weight used in Turkey, equal to about 2.75 pounds or 1.24 kilograms) annually. In fact, on the condition to pay specific taxes, the province of Hemshin, like some other mountainous communities, such as Sassun, Zeytun, Mekk, had obtained a half-dependent status. "A state under two masters, one of which was also Armenia," one of the sources informs²⁴.

Notably, under such conditions, the Armenians of Hamshen had little relations with the neighbouring Turks, Lazes, Greeks, as well as with Christian Armenians. Gradually the phenomenon of distinguishing from the outer world and establishing their own identity for surviving - "Hamshinian", i.e. proud highlanders - was formed in this way. Actually, in this case the fact of being "keskes" did not pave the way for transforming them into Turks, but this was a strong defensive shield against the encroachments of the authorities upon their national identity.

Thus the Armenians of Pontus-Lazistan in general and the Armenians of Hamshen in particular preserved their specific identity not only during the Armenian Genocide (Mets Eghern) of 1915, but also after it and till present, often secretly, and from time to time openly opposing to the Turkish authorities by their primordial Armenian character.

Along with forced Islamazation, assimilation and forced displacement, the Ottomans started another "initiative", damaging the ethnical description of Western Armenia. From the beginning of the 16th century, aimed to establish a military and political buffer against its rival country - Safavid Iran, the Turkish Sultans encouraged the inflow of Kurds into the Armenian Highland from the southern and south-western regions of the Empire. By the beginning of the Persian-Turkish War in 1515, with the support of Edris, one of the Kurdish tribal chiefs, Sultan Selim the Great had conquered the Kurds of Amid-Diarbekir and those living in the territories to the south from it. In return of his services Edris received the right to rule in those regions and forced his nomadic kinsmen to move to the territory of Erzurum province²⁵.

In 1635 Sultan Murad organized another migration of Kurds. Assisting to the wish of the Kurdish tribes to migrate, he organized a mass and great inflow of Kurds into Erzinka and Derjan provinces. Speaking about appearing of the Kurds in Derjan, which most probably took place during the 17th century, the Armenian authors testified that "The Kurds living there (in Derjan - A. M.), were called wearing clothes made of skin."²⁶ At the same time an inflow took place into Basen and Alashkert provinces as well.

²⁴ Տաշեան Յ., *op. cit.*, pp. 78-82.

²⁵ Trommer. Kurds of Asia Minor - Известия Кавказского отделения, т. VII, Тифлис, 1873, с. 1-3.

²⁶ Ինճիկեան Ղ., *op. cit.*, p. 97.

The abovementioned ethnical processes became stronger in the middle of the 18th century. While initially the Kurds moved to the north only during the summer months to graze their numerous herds in the alpine meadows, now with the permission of the Ottoman authorities, they settled here in the Armenian villages. The Armenian population was obliged to keep during the whole winter not only the Kurds and their families, but also their numerous livestock. This odd privileged system, provided to the Kurds by the Sultans was known under the term "kishlakism". As a result of such policy the number of Kurds grew, particularly in the provinces neighbouring to Byurakn ("Bingyol") mountains.

The mass inflow of the Kurds resulted in migration of the Armenian population from Western Armenia, as well as in the processes of their assimilation to Kurds. Thus since the 18th century on the northern slopes of Mndzur (Dersim) mountains where the Kurdish element was stronger and the Armenians living there were separated from Erzinka, Kghi, Derjan and other neighbouring Armenian communities, the partial assimilation to the Kurds had been noticeable among the Armenians living there. The inhabitants of villages there, "... all have preserved their native language in some distorted (a mixture with Kurdish - A. M.) form,"²⁷ - Andranik, the author who was familiar with this region, wrote.

In 1878, Poghos Natanyan, whom N. Varzhapetyan, the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople had sent to carry out a statistical census of the Armenian population of the Armenian provinces in Western Armenia, paid special attention to assimilation of the Armenians of Guzu[n]jan, a western region of Erzurum province, with Kurds. He noticed that in the villages there were "... not numerous Armenians mixed with the Kurds, they, being half Armenians, were assimilated to Kurds as a consequence of violations, and now they do not even know Armenian, yet they are aware of their Armenian origin."²⁸ The same author informs that not long ago there were "villages, which were inhabited by many Armenians." The population of those villages unwilling to be forcedly assimilated with Kurds migrated to the neighbouring provinces, which were densely populated with Armenians.²⁹ Selyan, another Armenian author believes that "Ghzbashes of Ghuzujan..., who till our days (1895 - A. M.) are defeating the Ottoman armies are not Turks, but they are rather close to the Armenians"³⁰.

It is due to mention that the major part of the local Armenian population here very often pretends to be Muslims, and sometimes even Lazes, in order to avoid the violence of Lazes. It is not a mere chance, that sometimes they are called Armenian-Lazes and not "keskeses". There were such Armenian-Lazes in Sper, Baberd, Kelkit³¹, and those

²⁷ Անդրանիկ, Դերսիմ, Տիգրիս, 1900, էջ 149:

²⁸ See: Նաթանյան Պ. Վ., Արտուր Հայաստանի կամ տեղեկագիր Բալուայ, Քարբերդու, Չարսանճագի, ճապաղջորի և Երզնկայու, Կոստանդնուպոլիս, 1883, էջ 159.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Սելյան, Տաճկա-Հայաստանի ազգաբնակչությունը, «Մուրճ», 1895, N 7, էջ 959:

³¹ Ancient form of the name Kilkit is Armenian hydronim Գայլ գետ (Gajl get).

provinces of Western Armenia, which were neighbouring the settlements of Lazes who lived in the Pontic Mountains and their slopes.

However, during the 15th-18th centuries, as a result of forced Islamization, migration, intentional inhabiting by Turks and Kurds, the number of Muslim population noticeably grew in Western Armenia. Nevertheless, even under such conditions, the population of Western Armenia was predominantly Armenian at the beginning of the 19th century. It is enough to mention that in those days there were 978 Armenian villages and 14 cities in the territory of Erzurum province, where over 400.000 Armenians lived, of which 308.000 were rural and 93.000 urban population³².

After the 1828-1829 Russian-Turkish war, 75.000 Western Armenians, who were mainly from Erzurum province, preferred to migrate rather than to live under the Ottoman power, and settled in the Transcaucasian regions, which had passed to Russia. Notwithstanding the fact that the number of the Armenians who migrated from Erzurum province was about 9.6 thousand families, and the ethnical characteristics of the province noticeably changed, yet this administrative unit remained one of the areas with numerous Armenian populations. The migrants from other Western Armenian provinces moved to East and South-East and settled in the villages neighbouring to the Russian Empire³³.

The anti-Armenian demographic processes deepened during the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. After the 1853-1856 Crimean war, the news about the returning of the eastern regions of Erzurum province and Kars, which were occupied by the Russians, to the Turks caused a new wave of migration of the Western Armenians. Many thousands of Armenian inhabitants of Erzurum, Kars, Alashkert and Daruynk (Bayazet) migrated to the Transcaucasian regions, which had passed to the Russian Empire.³⁴ Most of them settled in the village of Talin (in Eastern Armenia), as well as in the coastal regions of the Black Sea, in the North Caucasus and elsewhere. Four thousand families settled in the territory of the present Stavropol Krai.³⁵ At the same time, a great number of highlanders from the Caucasus, especially after suppression of their leader Shamil, flew to Western Armenia and occupied the emptied Armenian settlements. By the active efforts of the Ottoman Government the major part of the highlanders (they are known by the collective name of Lezghins or Circassians) were placed in some districts of Western Armenia, in particular, in Basen.³⁶

The anti-Armenian initiatives of the Ottoman Government became even stronger at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries. Thus, as a result of this policy, by the beginning of the First World War, and as compared with the beginning of

³² Մելքոնյան Ա. Ա., Էրզրում (Պատմաժողովրդագրական ուսումնասիրություն), Երևան, 1994, էջ 115-117:

³³ Էփրիկեան Ս., Պատկերազարդ «Բնաշխարհիկ բառարան», Կ. Ա, Վենետիկ, 1902, էջ 492. Also see: Smith E., Researches of the rev. E. Smith and rev. H.G.O. Dwigth in Armenia. Vol. 2. Boston, 1833, p. 306.

³⁴ Acts of Caucasian Commission on Studies and Publications of Early Texts, vol. XII, Tiflis, 1904, p. 313.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 1389.

³⁶ Մելքոնյան Ա., Հայաստանի պատմության և ժողովրդագրության հիմնահարցեր, Երևան, 2011, էջ 410:

the 19th century, the population of Erzurum province reduced from about 400.000 inhabitants to 150.000, at the same time the number of the settlements was reduced from 992 to 391,³⁷ i.e. by 60 percents. Notably, the most affected territories were Bayazet, Alashkert, Basen, Sper, Erzurum provinces, which were neighbouring the Russian Empire, and where the Hamidian massacres were of extremely massive character and great scale migration to Eastern Armenia and other Transcaucasian regions took place³⁸.

Thus, since the 16th - 19th century, prior to the Armenian Genocide the process of ethnical cleansing in Western Armenia had already taken place. The cases of massacres of the Armenian nation in Western Armenia during that period are also the facts of genocide in the Ottoman Empire.³⁹ And what is more, the United Nations Resolution of 1948 describes genocide not only as acts committed with intention to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such, but also the acts aimed at forced assimilation, forced conversion of the religion, deliberately inflicting on the group's conditions of life aimed to displace people forcibly and deportation from their motherland and other such acts. That is to say all the occurrences which took place in the Ottoman Empire during the period from the 16th century till the years of the Armenian Genocide (1915-1923).

³⁷ Մելքոնյան Ա., Էրզրում , էջ 113-117, 158 and Ա-Դո, Վանի, Բիթլիսի և Էզրումի վիլայեթները, Երևան, 1912, էջ 226:

³⁸ Մատենադարան, Մկրտիչ Խրիմեանի արխիվը, գ. 101, փ. 1, 137, 248; գ. 102, փ. 639; գ. 103, փ. 429:

³⁹ Safrastyan R., Ottoman Empire: the genesis of the program of genocide (1876-1920), Yerevan, 2011.