

THE PROBLEM OF THE RETURN OF WESTERN ARMENIAN REFUGEES IN 1902

Lilit Qosyan

Institute of History NAS RA

Junior Researcher

L.Qosyan@gmail.com

Abstract

Part of the Western Armenians who survived the mass massacres organized by Abdul Hamid II in 1890s was forced to migrate and settle down around the world. Only 50,000 refugees found shelter in Eastern Armenia.¹ The latter survived owing to various funds. However, aid and alleviating the condition of the Western Armenian refugees to some extent did not solve the difficult problem of their survival. It was necessary to take steps to return them to their place of birth, which was a vital necessity for the Western Armenians. The catastrophic decrease in the number of the Armenian people had a very negative impact on the demography of Western Armenia, which was an important part of the policy adopted by the sultan. That is why hundreds of depopulated settlements were inhabited by Muslim tribes. Under the name of “muhajirs” (refugees), they settled down in Western Armenia and Cilicia.²

Keywords: *Western Armenian, refugees, return, Gr. Golitsyn, Governorate of the Caucasus*

The problem of return of refugees

It was obvious that it was necessary to take steps to transfer the Western Armenians to Western Armenia, but first it was necessary to prepare the basis for that process. But despite all that in 1901, by the order of Gr. Golitsyn, the governor of the Caucasus, the refugees faced a difficult situation. Golitsyn, who hated all non-Russian peoples,³ issued an order in November 1901 that the refugees who came to Transcaucasia since 1893 would either leave or accept Russian citizenship.⁴ At the same time, he added that those who wish to return will get relief. And those who do not want to leave will accept Russian citizenship and will be obliged to:

- to enlist in 1902 like the rest of the nationalities of the empire.

¹ Ananun 1926: 11, “Droshak”, 1902, N 3, p. 42.

² Barkhudaryan *et al.* 2010. 544.

³ Z. Kh. Ibragimova, *World of Chechens. XIX century*, Moscow, Probel, 2000, p. 150, 151. /1024 pp.: ill./, <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/3269125.html>

⁴ Ananun 1926: 12.

- they will have the right to purchase real estate outside the urban area 20 years after becoming a Russian citizen.
- the abovementioned rules apply to refugees who crossed the border before February 1, 1901, and those who arrived later will be deported.⁵

The goal of the Russian government was not to return the Western Armenians at all, because his goal was to create Armenia without Armenians. And the moment of realization of that desired goal had arrived. This is evidenced by Golitsyn's secret report made in Petersburg, which he presented to the Council of Ministers in 1901, announcing that he had finally found a way to get rid of the dangerous Armenians: "to send the Armenians to Siberia, to free the Transcaucasia from the presence of the Armenians and to establish in their place the Orthodox immigrants from Russian regions."⁶ However, the Council of Ministers did not respond to this idea and Golitsyn continued to use all his hatred towards Armenians on the issue of returning Western Armenian refugees.

They found themselves in a difficult situation after the order was issued. The Armenians found themselves in a desperate situation. Accepting Russian citizenship would mean renouncing the place of birth, and it was impossible to return, first of all, because the Turkish government would not allow it, and besides, they were not sure that it would ensure their safety. The Western Armenians in the governorate of the Caucasus engaged in all kinds of work: some were workers, some others were porters, merchants, servants, farmers, shepherds, cultivators and so on. They did everything just to earn money⁷ and were satisfied with the limited possibilities. Also, they could breathe freely for a while, to plan and clarify their further steps.⁸

As a result, Armenians were divided into two groups: "the one who wants to return is "the village man, the farmer", and the merchant has already found his warm place outside the homeland."⁹ For example, according to the list made by the chief of Police of Tiflis, 361 people out of 494 accepted Russian citizenship, and according to the list made by the Police chief of Baku, 52¹⁰ out of 72 families accepted Russian citizenship. It can be concluded from all this that Armenians were afraid to return to their homeland because they had no confidence in security. Therefore, the refugees began to find some way out to stay in the Governorate of Caucasus for a few more years hoping that after some time situation will change in their place of birth. They began to appeal to the governors to allow them to take refuge in the Governorate of the Caucasus for some time. Not receiving any answer, they thought the issue was resolved until the order of the governor of Tiflis was issued on August 5, 1902. The refugees who will stay in the

⁵ Lazean 1957: 115-116.

⁶ "Droshak", 1902, N 3, p. 44.

⁷ "Apaga", 1907, N 9, p. 3.

⁸ "Hnchak", 1902, N 5, p. 37.

⁹ "Mshak", 1902, N 181.

¹⁰ "Mshak", 1902, N 222.

country until August 10 will be considered Russian citizens. In order to get out of this situation, they convene a meeting and decide to move to the border and put pressure on the Turkish government to allow them to return to their birthplace.¹¹ A large number of Armenians reach Kars, where the border guards, after delaying until the end of the month, do not allow them to cross the border.¹² But contrary to that, the number of people returning to their homeland in Kars was increasing. And already on August 24, their number reached 1000.¹³ They were forced to live in the villages of Basen for about a month, but they could not cross the border. There was even an attempt to move to Persia, but the Russian border guards returned them to Kars.¹⁴

But they were not allowed to cross the border and they even threatened to shoot the refugees if they tried to cross the border. Having no other way out, on September 23, 1902, Armenians turned to the foreign ministers of Russia, France and England, explaining their situation and asking for help to get out of this unbearable situation.¹⁵ Before receiving any answer, they also addressed the Catholicos of All Armenians and the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople with petitions. They offered the refugees to form small groups and secretly go through Persia to the Motherland. Accepting this variant, the first group of 120 people moved to Etchmiadzin, but there they were arrested by the tsarist authorities and locked up in the Kaghzvan prison.¹⁶

It is not known whether the British and French governments responded to their petition, but when Gr. Golitsyn, the governor of the Caucasus, received that petition, he lost self-control. In 1903, he turned to the Minister of Internal Affairs, proposing:

1. to deport abroad all those Armenians who settled in Russia after February 1901
2. to close Russia's borders to Western Armenians, even if they have a passport
3. to transfer (or it would be more correct to say exile) to the remote regions of the empire, all the refugees, who had settled in the empire.

Those proposals of the governor were discussed in Petersburg in 1904 at the Council of Ministers and the following was decided:

1. to do a favor those Armenians who settled in Transcaucasia after 1893 and want to go abroad
2. to do a favor those Armenians who are going to move to the internal border of the empire
3. to allow others to live in the Caucasus, with the exception of Yerevan Province and Kars Province, that is, Eastern Armenia, finding that there will be a consolidation of Armenians, which will cause anxiety for the government.

¹¹ "Droshak", 1902, N 11, p. 163.

¹² For details, see pp. 163-165 *ibid.*

¹³ Hambaryan 1999: 18.

¹⁴ "Droshak", 1902, N 10, p. 160.

¹⁵ "Droshak", 1902, N 9, pp. 132-133.

¹⁶ Hambaryan 1999: 19.

4. to allocate land plots to Armenians, settled in the Caucasus, after 20 years.

Although these decisions were more favorable than Golitsyn's recommendations, they did not go beyond the anti-Armenian policy of Tsarism.¹⁷

In fact, from the beginning, this order contained several goals, one of which was to send the Western Armenian refugees to the remote regions of Russia. That order was justified by the fact that the Western Armenians, having a desire to restore the Armenian kingdom, could spread similar ideas among other peoples of the Caucasus and cause serious trouble to the sovereignty.¹⁸ However, this was also decided by both powers, because Golitsyn knew for sure that the Ottoman government would not accept the Western Armenian refugees back, because its plan - Armenia without Armenians - had finally been realized. And in fact, by imposing Russian citizenship, they fulfilled the main goal of the Sultan and simultaneously carried out the policy of assimilation of Armenians.¹⁹ With this policy, during the Russo-Japanese war, the Tsarist government did not aim to strain its relations with the Ottoman Empire and in this way ensure border peace.

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¹⁷ NAA, fund 560, list 22, file 282, sheet 19.

¹⁸ NAA, fund 560, list 22, file 282, sheet 2.

¹⁹ Hnchak 1902, N 5, p. 38.