

**THE OTTOMAN POLICY OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ETHNO-DEMOGRAPHIC  
STRUCTURE OF ERZRUM PROVINCE OF WESTERN ARMENIA  
(FROM THE 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY TO THE BEGINNING OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)**

**Melkonyan A. A.**

*Academician of NAS RA*

Between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, calamitous demographic and ethnographic changes occurred in the region of Erzurum and throughout all of Western Armenia: the influx of Turkic and Kurdish tribes, the periodic violence and calamities, the forced conversion of many Christians to Islam, and the flight of masses of people to safer localities.

During the fifteenth century, the emerging Ottoman state, after conquering western Asia Minor and much of the Balkans, also turned eastward. Defeating Uzun Hasan and his Ak Koyunlu Turkmen confederation at the battle of Derjan in 1473, Sultan Mehmed II annexed much of the Armenian Highland, and Sultan Selim I extended the empire further in 1514 by overpowering Shah Ismail of Persia (Iran) in the decisive battle of Chaldran, northeast of Lake Van near Mount Ararat. The administrative divisions of the conquered territories were marked by frequent, destabilizing changes resulting from the political and economic interests of the Muslim ruling elite. By the 1530s, Western Armenia had been divided into the *eyalets* or provinces of Erzurum, Sivas (Sebastia), Van, Diarbekir (Amid, to the south of Tigranakert), Kars, and Akhaltskha<sup>1</sup>. The *sanjak* or *liva* (county) of Bayazed (Bayazid/Bayazit, ancient Armenian Kogovit gavar), sometimes mentioned in the sources as a separate eyalet, actually constituted part of the province of Erzurum but with broad autonomy. This expansive province covered an area of 70,000 to 80,000 square kilometers (27,300 to 31,200 square miles), including the following administrative districts: Erzurum, Upper Basen (Passin), Lower or Interior Basen, Khnus, Kghi, Derjan (Terjan), Erznka (Eriza), Baberd (Baiburt), Sper (Ispir), and Tortum, together with the sanjak-liva of Bayazed - the residence of the local pasha - with its four subdistricts: Bayazed, Alashkert, Diadin, and Khamur.

What was the demographic situation in the central provinces of Western Armenia from the end of the fifteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth century, that is, during the period of the Turkish conquests? Examination of various sources clearly reveals that, in spite of the unfavorable ethnic processes during the preceding period, the territory of the province of Erzurum remained populated primarily by native Armenians. In the course of time, however, ethnically alien groups increased in numbers. Valuable information is preserved in the seventeenth-century chronicle «Շիւնուած Կարնոյ քաղաքին» (*Structure of the City of Karin*) by Hakob Karnetsi, “who

---

<sup>1</sup> About the administrative divisions of the Ottoman Empire, see Birken A., *Die provinzen des Osmanischen Reiches*, Wiesbaden, 1976.

had profound knowledge of the geography of Bardzr Hayk/Upper Armenia. His Chronicle includes demographic information on the twenty-three *gavars* or districts of the Erzurum eyalet in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. According to this primary source, most districts remained inhabited almost exclusively by the Armenians. Examples of Karnetsi's descriptions are as follows:

Ghzijan (Kuzijan) - "a most beautiful gavar, the baron's residence, grassy, with ample water, full of animals and sheep and Armenian villages".

Derjan - "has many villages with Armenian dwellings, and land in the form of a plain, full of grain, animals, lard, and honey, and the town of Bagarich on the shore of the Eprat [Euphrates]".

Erznka - "has a broad plain with many villages and towns and twenty-four monasteries.... It has the great Armenian city of Erznka, which is full of all manner of wealth, cotton, vineyards, and orchards. And there are now five churches in the city".

Kamakh - "the land of Daranaghi which has villages and towns and a fast, impregnable fortress above the Euphrates. . . . And it is a very attractive, fruit-bearing small town inhabited by the Armenian nation and has illustrious churches and monasteries"<sup>2</sup>. Similar testimonies are given about Bayazed, Khamur, Diadin, Basen, Karin-Erzrum, and other gavars.

According to Karnetsi, in some administrative units there were also alien elements of Turkic origin (in Armenian sources identified by the common name of *Tachik* or *Tajik*) as well as Kurds. The Tachiks were found mainly in the northern districts of the province. Hakob Karnetsi wrote the following about the gavar of Gayl or Kelkit: "It has many villages in gorges. It also has the town of Karmri. The inhabitants of the country are Armenians and Tachiks". The neighboring gavar of Sherian or Sharian had "a population consisting of many Armenians and also of the Romans [Greeks] and Tachiks". About the district of Upper Basen, situated in the northeastern part of the province, Karnetsi noted: "The inhabitants are Armenians and a few Turks". It is clearly attested, therefore, that Armenians constituted the majority of the population, with "also Tachiks" or "a few Turks" in some places.

Notwithstanding the fact that some northern districts came to have a mixed Armenian-Turkish population because of the Ottoman government's measures to transfer and resettle Muslim elements there, the area remained largely Armenian populated. Tachiks constituted a relatively small element. It is seen also from materials published by Turkish researcher Izmet Miroglu<sup>3</sup>. In the sixteenth century, according to this data, Christians incontestably formed the majority of the population in Baberd, located northwest of the administrative center at Erzurum. Aside from Turks, Kurds made up the other alien element in the Erzurum eyalet, living mainly in the southern districts.

<sup>2</sup> Յակոբ Կարնեցի, Շինուած Կարնոյ քաղաքին, որ կոչեցաւ Թէուդուպօլիս, որ այժմ Արզրում վերայձայնիալ կոչի, Մանր ժամանակագրութիւններ (XIII-XVIII դդ.), աշխատ. Վ.Ա. Հակոբյան, հ. 2, Երևան, 1956, էջ 550-551:

<sup>3</sup> Izmet Miroglu, XVI. yizyilda Bayburt sancagi [The Sixteenth-Century Baiburt Sanjak] (Istanbul: Ulper Matbaasi, 1975), s. 119, Table 10.

There were "many villages and settlements of Armenians and Kurds" in the gavar of Kghi and, to the east, in the gavar of Khnus at the foot of the Biurakn (present Bingol) Mountains. Overall, during the first half of the seventeenth century, the province of Erzurum remained relatively monoethnic. But this situation did not last for long.

In order to establish absolute rule over subjugated peoples, the sultan's government followed a policy of repopulating the conquered territories with Turkish-speaking and Iranian-speaking (mainly Kurdish) tribes. As a result of such measures, the ethnic complexion of Western Armenia gradually changed. Muslim "islands" appeared in once-monoethnic Western Armenia. Month after month and year after year, the Armenians were forced to leave their Homeland. In 1478, for example, Lala Pasha, the most ferocious general in the Ottoman army, was sent to Baberd, Sper, Tortum and other gavars in Western Armenia to put the Ottoman administrative oppression machinery in motion, including the imposition of heavy taxation. In a short time, he laid waste to hundreds of villages in Upper Armenia and Tayk and annihilated thousands of people. More than 50,000 Armenians, seeking to escape physical extermination, converted to Islam<sup>4</sup>. Mass slaughter and forced conversions increased during and after the Turko-Persian war of 1512-14. A contemporary author and witness to the events wrote: "While engaging in raids they destroyed and devastated as far as the valleys of Mush, Khnus, and Alashkert, the regions of Diadin and Khamur, Batnots, and Bayazed. They destroyed everything; women and boys were carried off into captivity. They ravaged these fertile lands in such a way that from Erzurum to Erevan only the fortresses remained intact"<sup>5</sup>. From this passage, it is seen that the gavars of Karin-Erzurum, Upper Basen, Lower Basen, Alashkert, Bayazed, and Diadin, all the way to Erevan were turned into ruins. Shortly after the Ottoman-Persian treaty in 1639, which brought to an end more than a century of warfare and resulted in a new partition of Armenia, the sultan sent Jafar Pasha, a "very unjust, vicious, and severe man" to Erzurum in 1643 to conduct a thorough census for taxation purposes. The burdens of discriminatory taxation and accompanying violence were so onerous that large numbers of Christians in the northern gavars "converted to the law of Muhammad because of great fear"<sup>6</sup>.

The brilliant historian-geographer Ghukas Intchitchian (1758-1833) described another mass forced conversion to Islam in the northern part of the province. "Being exhausted by violence and hardships they adopted the religion of the Tachiks". He added that "the inhabitants of Berdagrak were mainly Armenian, [but] then many of them converted to the Tachiks and only a few of them remained Christian"<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Koch K.H.E., *Wandemngen im Oriente während der Jahre 1843 und 1844* (Weimar, Druck und Verlag des Landes-Industrie-Comptoirs, 1846), S. 75-82, 140-225; Հ. Յակոբոս վ. Տաշեան, Հայ բնակչութիւնը Սեւ ծովէն մինչեւ Կարին, պատմա-ազգագրական ակնարկ մը, Վիեննա, 1921, էջ 3-20.

<sup>5</sup> Մանր ժամանակագրություններ, էջ 565-566:

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 554.

<sup>7</sup> Ինճիճեան Ղ., Աշխարհագրութիւն չորից մասանց աշխարհի, հ. 1, Վենետիկ, 1806, էջ 93, 132:

These forcible conversions were accompanied by the destruction of churches or transforming them into mosques. Hakob Karnetsi has recorded that in 1662, on the initiative of a great mullah by the name of Vani and the grand vizier of the Ottoman Empire, “ten Roman [Greek] and Armenian churches were torn down and destroyed, and every Christian up to Sebastia and Tokat wore black... And taking the church within the citadel of Arzrum, they turned it into their mosque and the Armenian nation sank into great mourning”<sup>8</sup>.

Sper, another northern gavar of Erzurum, in 1723 became victim to one of the subsequent Turkish expeditions, during which more than a hundred Armenian villages were reduced to ashes<sup>9</sup>. Each such incursion was accompanied by enslavement of the Armenian population: “Tachik troops captured the Armenians and sold them or forced them to renounce Christ. Some apostatized and those who refused were killed or sold. ... So many people were carried away from Erzurum that we are incapable of describing it”<sup>10</sup>.

Aside from measures to convert and Turkify the Armenian Christian population, the Ottoman rulers implemented another means to undermine the ethnic structure of Western Armenia. From the beginning of the sixteenth century, the sultans encouraged the influx of Kurdish tribes into the Armenian Highland in order to create a military-political buffer zone. In 1515, Sultan Selim, assisted by the Kurdish chieftain Idrissi, brought into subjugation the nomadic Kurds of Diarbekir and the region to the south. As a reward Idrissi was granted the right to administer those regions. In cooperation with the central government he pressured many of his tribe to migrate northward into the province of Erzurum<sup>11</sup>.

In 1635 another migration of Kurdish tribes was organized by Sultan Murad, who directed them to the gavars of Erzuka and Derjan. At the same time a mass migration took place to Basen and Alashkert. Writing about the Kurds in Derjan, later Armenian authors noted that they had come from Sekmanapat<sup>12</sup>.

The processes of de-Armenianization continued and intensified in the eighteenth century. If in the initial stages the Kurds moved northward just in the summer months to graze their sheep in Alpine meadows of Armenian mountains, later they settled permanently in the Armenian villages. During the entire winter the Armenian population had to provide not only for the Kurds but also for their flocks. This unbearable practice, known as *gshlagh*, was sanctioned by the sultan and could not but encourage a greater influx of Kurds, especially in and around the Byurakn Mountains.

Thus, between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries the Muslim elements increased throughout Western Armenia, including the province of Erzurum, as the result

<sup>8</sup> Մանր ժամանակագրություններ, էջ 567:

<sup>9</sup> Ատրպետ, Ճորոխի աւագանը, Վիեննա, 1929, էջ 110:

<sup>10</sup> Մատենադարան, ձեռ. №. 6332, ք. 552.

<sup>11</sup> Полковник Троттер, Малоазийские курды, Известия Кавказского отдела, т. 7, Тифлис, 1873, с. 1-3.

<sup>12</sup> Ինճիճեան Ղ., Աշխարհագրութիւն չորից մասանց աշխարհի, էջ 97:

of forced conversion, flight of the native Armenian population, and organized migrations of Turks and Kurds. Those Armenians who were forced into professing Islam did so only outwardly. The sources show that for a long time they acted as Muslims in daytime and secretly took part in Christian rituals at night. This population became known by name of "kes- kes" (half-half), that is, half Armenian Christian and half Muslim. Still, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Armenians were more numerous than any other ethno-religious group in all gavars except in some parts of Kamakh. The province as a whole had 978 Armenian villages and 14 towns with more than 400,000 Armenians, of whom 308,000 were peasants and 93,000 were urban dwellers<sup>13</sup>.

The Russo-Turkish War of 1828-29 awakened among the Western Armenians hopes of liberation from oppressive rule. During the war, the Russian armies defeated the Ottoman army and entered some parts of Western Armenia, including Karin-Erzrum. But immediately after the war, news of an impending Russian retreat under the pressure of the European powers, plunged the Armenians into despair. In the months following the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish Treaty of Adrianople in September 1829, approximately 75,000 Armenians abandoned their native villages and moved to the north of the Armenian Highland, especially into Akhaltska and Akhalakalak in Javakhk, the Armenian districts that had just been taken by the Russian Empire. The emigration of these 9,600 Armenian families further altered the ethnic composition of the province of Erzrum.

From 1830 onward, a new process began that affected the demographic structure of Western Armenia. The Armenian population of various districts, mainly in the west and north, started to move to areas located near the new border with Russia, particularly to Basen, Alashkert (Vagharshakert), Nahin, and Bayazed. It was felt that there might be less oppression in districts adjacent to the Russian Empire and that at least this proximity afforded an escape hatch in case conditions became unbearable<sup>14</sup>. Thus, the eastward movement of population also acquired a political implication. Even during the height of the mass emigration of 1829-30, Armenians from other districts had moved to the east and the southeast and settled in the villages that had been abandoned by those who had departed for Eastern Armenia within the bounds of the Russian Empire<sup>15</sup>.

It seemed that after the exodus of 1829-30 the depopulated or thinned out villages of Erzrum would never be restored. But already in the 1830s the beginnings of a revival were noted by contemporary authors. In 1830, Eli Smith, a Protestant missionary in Western Armenia, expressed anxiety that the region was becoming so deserted that his preaching would be for naught. But in April of 1831, when Armenian re-settlers from other regions as well as some natives who decided to return from Eastern Armenia had begun to bring new life to the half-empty villages, Smith wrote with inspiration: "We

<sup>13</sup> Մելքոնյան Ա., Էրզրում. Էրզրում նահանգի ազգաբնակչությունը XIX դ.. առաջին երեսունամյակին, Երևան, 1994, էջ 115-117:

<sup>14</sup> Մատենադարան, Զանազան հեղինակների արխիվ, գ 54, փ. 13, թ. 23բ:

<sup>15</sup> Էփրիկեան Ս., Պատկերազարդ բնաշխարհիկ բառարան, հ. 1, Վենետիկ, 1902, էջ 492:

doubt not that an Armenian population will again assemble here, and then it may be made an important center for missionary operations”<sup>16</sup>.

During the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century the deepening Armenophobia of the Ottoman rulers and Muslim inhabitants made life of the Armenians increasingly difficult in the provinces of Western Armenia. After the Crimean War of 1853-56, news that the tsar would have to restore to the sultan the territories occupied by the Russian armies led to a new wave of emigration from Erzurum, Kars, Alashkert, and Bayazed<sup>17</sup>. Of the many thousands who crossed the frontier into the Russian Empire, one part settled in the villages of the Talin district, between Alexandropol (Gyumri) and Erevan, while others created new homes in the coastal regions of the Black Sea, in the North Caucasus, and elsewhere. Some 4,000 families settled in the region of Stavropol alone<sup>18</sup>. At the same time, a great number of Caucasian mountaineers, especially after the capture of their leader Shamil, moved to the Ottoman Empire and occupied abandoned Armenian villages. Most of the mountaineers, known by the general name of Lezgin or Cherkez, were purposely settled by the Turkish government in the eastern districts of Erzurum province, particularly in Basen, near the frontier with Russia<sup>19</sup>.

The table at the end of this essay reflects the number of Armenian-populated localities and individual Armenians in the thirteen gavars of the province of Erzurum. A comparison of the figures for 1809 and 1909 provides a concise picture of the demographic changes that took place during the span of one century<sup>20</sup>. The disastrous state in which the Armenians of the province existed during one century is easily seen from the table. The number of the Armenian-populated localities fell by 58 percent, and the Armenian population decreased by 60 percent. The districts that sustained the greatest losses, Bayazed, Alashkert, Sper, and Erzurum, were located near the Russian border where the retributions following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 and the extreme violence during the Hamidian massacres of 1895-96 were particularly demoralizing. A large proportion of the survivors emigrated to Eastern Armenia or some parts of the Caucasus<sup>21</sup>. Meanwhile, in the northern districts of Sper, Tortum, and Baberd, the renewed anti-Armenian persecutions resulted in the further forced Turkification of Armenians. For several centuries, therefore, up to the time of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, the processes of ethnic elimination - sometimes slowly and at other times very rapidly - were uninterruptedly in motion in Western Armenia.

<sup>16</sup> Eli Smith, *Researches of the Rev. E. Smith and Rev. H.G.O. Dwight in Armenia, Including a Journey through Asia Minor, and into Georgia and Persia, with a Visit to the Nestorian and Chaldean Christians of Oormiah and Salmas*, 2 vols. (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1833), vol. 2, p. 306.

<sup>17</sup> Россия, Кавказская археологическая комиссия, т. 12, Тифлис, 1904, с. 313.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1389.

<sup>19</sup> Մատենադարան, Զանազան հեղինակների արխիվ, գ54, փ.13, թ. 23b.

<sup>20</sup> Մելքոնյան Ա., Էրզրում, էջ 113-17, 158: Ա-Դո [Մարտիրոսյան Հ.], Վանի, Բիթլիսի և Էրզրումի վիլայեթներ, Երևան, 1912, էջ 226:

<sup>21</sup> Մատենադարան, Մկրտիչ Խրիմեանի արխիվը, գ. 101, փ. 1, 137, 248; գ. 102, փ. 639; գ. 103, փ. 429:

The policy of de-Armenianization of the western part of the Armenian Highland from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century, to which insufficient scholarly attention has been given, is in itself strong evidence of the destructive policies of the Ottoman rulers. Bardzr Hayk, like the rest of Western Armenia, was ethnically cleansed over a long period through the genocidal policies of forced conversion to Islam, assimilation, massacre, and expulsion. The final blow was struck in 1915.

**TABLE: ARMENIANS IN THE PROVINCE OF ERZRUM, 1809 and 1909<sup>22</sup>**

	Gavar (kaza)	Armenian- Populated Sites		Number of Armenians	
		1809	1909	1809	1909
I	Karin (Erzrum)	129	52	67,960	34,376
2	Derjan	57	31	32,920	9,128
3	Baberd	79	30	30,960	14,314
4	Erznka (Eriza with Kamakh, Chorget-“Dryriver”, Kertchans)	124	52	44,760	25,095
5	Kghi	75	50	25,440	18,705
6	Sper	81	18	28,300	3,122
7	Tortum	53	13	16,960	2,829
8	Basen (Upper and Lower)	87	57	35,130	12,404
9	Khnus	59	33	20,960	15,295
10	Alashkert (with Karakilisa)	88	22	28,160	10,248
II	Khamur and Dutagh	23	22	7,360	1,421
12	Diadin	36	7	11,520	1,092
13	Kogovit (Bayazed)	40	4	30,800	3,920
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>931</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>381,230</b>	<b>151,949</b>

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Armenian Karin/Erzrum, edited by R. G. Hovannisian, California, 2003, pp. 134-145.