



## SOVYET POLİTİKALARININ MAĞDURLARI: AHISKA TÜRKLERİ ÖRNEK OLAYI (1944-1968)

VICTIMS OF THE SOVIET POLICIES: THE CASE OF THE AHISKA TURKS  
(1944-1968)

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### ABSTRACT

Once a group of people are labelled as outsiders and removed from a given territory forcefully, they become the subject of a deportation practice. Additionally, the experiences during and after the deportation constitute an important component of in-group collective consciousness of deportees. This study is a case study built on the conceptual framework, which is also known as analytical framework. The study first aims to determine the reasons of the deportation of the Ahiska Turks. Then the study intends to connect the traumatic experiences of the Ahiska Turks during and after the process of the deportation and their years in exile to the construction of their collective group identity.

At this point, this study argues that although the ideological dichotomisation of the world constituted the essential component of the Soviet identity, this binarised understanding of the world flamed the fear of foreign penetration into the socialist community and triggered the Soviet xenophobia at home. Last but not least, although it is acknowledged that the identity construction is an ongoing process and the Ahiska Turks were subject of discrimination and violence after 1968, this study limits itself by focusing on the experiences of the Ahiska Turks from 1944 to 1968 since 1944 was the year of their deportation was executed and 1968 was the year when their deportation was officially recognised and they were rehabilitated by the Soviet government.

**Keywords:** Deportation, the Soviet Union, the Ahiska Turks, Soviet Identity, Ahiska Turkish Identity

### ÖZ

Bir grup insan, yabancı olarak etiketlenip belirli bir toprak parçasından zorla ayrılmak zorunda bırakıldıklarında sürgün eyleminin konusu haline gelmektedirler. Ayrıca sürgün süreci ve sonrasında deneyimler, sürgün edilenlerin grup içi kolektif bilinçlerinin önemli bir parçasını oluşturmaktadır. Örnek olay incelemesi olan bu çalışma analitik yaklaşım olarak da bilinen kavramsal çerçeve üzerine kurulmuştur. Çalışma öncelikle Ahiska Türklerinin sürgün edilme sebeplerini tespit etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Daha sonra çalışmada Ahiska Türklerinin sürgün süreci ve sonrasında yaşamış oldukları travmatik deneyimler ile Ahiska Türklerinin kolektif grup kimliği oluşumu arasında bağlantı kurmayı hedeflenmektedir.

Bu noktada çalışma, dünyanın ideolojik olarak iki zıt parçaya bölünmesinin Sovyet kimliğinin esas bileşenini oluşturduğunu ve bu şekilde dünyanın ikileştirilerek anlaşılmasının sosyalist topluma dışarıdan nüfuz edilmesi korkusunu alevlendirdiğini ve içeride ise Sovyetlerin yabancı korkusunu tetiklediğini ileri sürmektedir. Acı verici deneyimleri ise onların kimliklerinin bir parçası haline gelmiştir. Son olarak bir diğer önemli husus ise kimlik inşasının devam eden bir süreç olduğu ve Ahiska Türklerinin ayrımcılık ve şiddete 1968 yılından sonra da maruz kaldıkları kabul edilmekle birlikte bu çalışma Ahiska Türklerinin 1944 -sürgünün başlangıç yılı- ve 1968 -sürgünün Sovyet hükümeti tarafından resmi olarak tanındığı ve Ahiska Türklerinin itibarının iade edildiği yıl - yılları arasındaki deneyimlerine odaklanarak kendini sınırlandırmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Sürgün, Sovyetler Birliği, Ahiska Türkleri, Sovyet Kimliği, Ahiska Türk Kimliği

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## 1. Introduction

The term ‘Meskhetian’ is widely used in official documents, media and academic studies to refer the Turkish-speaking Muslims who resided in the Akhaltzikhe region of Southern Georgia. The term is derived from the province of southern Georgia called ‘Meskhety’ where Meskhs, one of the ancient Georgian tribes, inhabited.<sup>1</sup> Although Wimbush and Wixman conducted one of the most early studies on the deportation imposed on the small Akhaltzikhe region of Southern Georgia and employed the term ‘the Meskhetian Turks’ to indicate the connection of deportees with the territory,<sup>2</sup> Soviet and post-Soviet historiography in Georgia made use of the term to present the deported population as the descendants of the ancient Georgian tribe of ‘Meskhet’.<sup>3</sup>

However, the region in question was ruled by several empires throughout centuries and located on trade and migration routes and became a point where different cultures interacted and merged.<sup>4</sup> At this point, the movement of Turkic tribes towards the region goes back to the fifth century and the consolidation of Turkic population in the region accelerated after the sixteenth century when today’s Georgian lands came under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>5</sup> Ottoman rule lasted in Georgia for more than two centuries. At this point, this study adopts the term ‘Ahiska Turks’ in referring the people deported during Soviet era from southwest Georgia because this term is emphasising the Turkishness, language, culture, group history and Ottoman roots of the group which is also acknowledged by the group members.

Even the discussion of naming the group members hints the competition among the communities with different ethnic, religious and cultural origins to ensure their dominance over the region which ended up with inter-communal rivalry in reality. The historical background of this antagonism goes back to the 16th century. By 1578, the Ottoman Empire conquered the South Caucasus as a result of Lala Mustafa Pasha’s Caucasian campaign. Nevertheless, Tsarist Russia gained territories in the Caucasus as a consequence of peace accord of 1812. After the Persian-Russian Treaty of Turkmençay in 1828, Tsarist Russia annexed Ahiska region from

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1 Alexander Ossipov, “Ideological Environment and Identity of Some Moslem Groups”, *Global Bioethics*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 1995, pp. 159-165.

2 S. Enders Wimbush and Ronald Wixman, “The Meskhetian Turks: A New Voice in Soviet Central Asia”, *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, Vol. 17, No. 2-3, 1975.

3 Oskari Pentikäinen and Tom Trier, “Between Integration and Resettlement: The Meskhetian Turks”, *European Centre for Minority Issues*, Flensburg, Germany, 2004, p. 9.

4 Steve Swerdlow, “Understanding Post-Soviet Ethnic Discrimination and the Effective Use of US Refugee Resettlement: The Case of the Meskhetian Turks of Krasnodar Krai”, *California Law Review*, Vol. 94, No. 6, 2006, p. 1833.

5 Pentikäinen and Trier, *ibid*, 2004, p. 10.

Ottoman Empire. However, even after the region came under the domination of Tsarist Russia, Ahiska Turks stayed loyal to Ottomans. During the Russo-Turkish War, 1877-78, Ahiska Turks sided with Ottoman Empire and demonstrated their closeness and support as well. Whereas Russian Empire exerted its influence over the region to make it an integral part of its Empire, Ahiska Turks continued to support Ottoman Empire in World War I when the Turkish army began to encroach across the border towards Transcaucasia in February 1918.<sup>6</sup>

Although the Soviet authorities promoted a level of tolerance of differences in the first years of the October Revolution in line with the policy of *Korenizatsiia* which was serving for the advancement of national, economic and cultural improvement of the non-Russians together with the amelioration of local and native language schools, the implication of this policy for the Ahiska Turks remained short-lived and limited. In this context, 1926 Soviet Census covered the Ahiska Turks and allowed them to have access to education in Turkish until 1935-1936 when Azerbaijani became their education language. As a result of the Russification policies, Ahiska Turks were not mentioned in the Soviet statistics after 1930s and they were classified as Azerbaijanis in addition to the removal of the category Turk from the list of recognised nationalities.

Being recognised and unrecognised nation created a big difference for ethnic groups in the Soviet Union because recognition provided some degree of advantage for a nationality. In this sense, a level of autonomy, receiving education and making publication in native language and freedom to exercise the religious practices were the benefits of being recognised nationality. However, Ahiska Turks did not attain to the fact of being recognised nationality. They suffered from exclusion in political life, decision-making process and higher education.

Besides Ahiska Turks' temporary and small-scale gains, the experience of the Civil War and especially World War II gradually exacerbated Soviet Union's anxiety for foreign intervention. In this sense, Soviet authorities adopted hard-line policy of deportation, so Ahiska Turks became the subject of preventive actions of Soviet distrustfulness.<sup>7</sup>

Turning to the concept of the deportation, the term refers to a practice aiming at removing unwanted individuals or groups of people from the physical, juridical and social space of the state and thus brings normative boundaries standing

6 Ayşegül Baydar Aydıngün, "Creating, Recreating and Redefining Ethnic Identity: Ahiska/Meskhetian Turks in Soviet and Post-Soviet Contexts", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2002a, p. 188 and Malika Mirkhanova, "People in Exile: The Oral History of Meskhetian Turks (Akhyskha Turkleri)", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 26(1), 2006, p. 36.

7 Chong-Jin Oh, "From a Diaspora Community to Distinct Ethnic Group", *Korean Middle East Academic Review*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2008, p. 117, 119.

between citizens and non-citizens and within different sub-groups regarded as non-citizens.<sup>8</sup> Containing coercion, deportation functions to distinguish insiders from outsiders, wanted from unwanted and whole from part.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, deportation is a compulsory relocation of non-citizens and excludes them from the physical boundaries of a political entity.<sup>10</sup>

Differently from expulsions on the basis of faith in the ancient time, territoriality, nationality and state membership became the main dynamics of expulsion and exile in the 19th century.<sup>11</sup> Yet, race and ethnicity appeared as the determinants of state-sponsored expulsions during World War II.<sup>12</sup> The connection between deportation and minorities became evident in the 20th century under totalitarian regimes as in the former Soviet Union where mass deportations emerged as a widespread practice.<sup>13</sup>

Although there are historical examples of deportations which were imposed on troublemakers or insurgents, state has power to compel people, who live within its territory, in order to settle different places with or without legal basis. The exercise of sovereignty is the main premise of deportation. Therefore, the execution of deportation is legitimised on the basis of the right of the state. The second element completing the exercise of deportation is the administrative power. Thus, governmental power provides the state elites to perform their control over the power and knowledge. Hence, sovereign and governmental powers lay the subjects of a state open to the exercises of authority in terms of punishment and definition. In this regard, deportation also serves to label a group of people as political enemies of the state.<sup>14</sup> While deportation is being used as an instrument of control the minorities and non-citizens, the pursuit for border based national security policies incite the implementation of deportation practices as well.<sup>15</sup>

To this end, differently from the studies in the literature, this study aims at explaining the deportation of the Ahıska Turks by focusing on the Soviet identity and Soviet understanding of the world affairs. The ideological roots of Soviet

8 Bridget Anderson, J. Gibney Matthew and Paoletti Emanuela, *The Social, Political and Historical Contours of Deportation*, Oxford: Springer, 2013, p. 3.

9 Heike Drotbohm, "Deportation. An Overview", *Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, Hrsg, 2013, p. 1182.

10 Alice Bloch and Liza Schuster. "At the Extremes of Exclusion: Deportation, Detention and Dispersal", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2005, p. 493.

11 Drotbohm, *ibid*, 2013, p. 1182.

12 Benjamin Z. Kedar, "Expulsion as an Issue of World History", *Journal of World History*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1996, p. 168.

13 Drotbohm, *ibid*, 2013, p. 1182.

14 William Walters, "Deportation, Expulsion and the International Police of Aliens", *Citizenship studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2002, pp. 277-278.

15 Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz, *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space and the Freedom of Movement*, ed. Nicholas De Genova and Nathalie Peutz, Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2010, p. 4.

anxiety towards the non-socialist world shaped its perception of Turkey within the framework of the fear of foreign influence and foreign contamination into the socialist community. Its reflection on the Ahiska Turks emerged as the Soviet hysteria resulted in their deportation in the name of securing Soviet border region against its non-socialist neighbour, Turkey. The ideologically-determined practices of Soviet identity were transformed into ethnic discrimination of the Ahiska Turks in reality. Therefore, in addition to religion, language and family ties which are the factors mostly mentioned in the literature, the traumatic experiences of the Ahiska Turks during and after their deportation and their years in exile played role in generating their in-group collective identity.

## 2. The Reasons of the Deportation of the Ahiska Turks

In Soviet era, state machinery was directed against many ethnic groups living in the Union. One of the biggest fear of the Soviet government was the cross-border ethnic ties of national minorities and so the resettlement of these groups from the border regions became a frequently implemented practise. The deportation of the Ahiska Turks should be assessed within this context.<sup>16</sup> However, the calamitous experience of the Ahiska Turks cannot be understood independently from the conjuncture evolving into the course of the Cold War.

As the process of construction of the threat perceptions in both the US-led Western and the USSR-led Eastern camps, Soviet identity at home matched together with the Stalinist outlook. Any deviation from the New Soviet Man, which represented an ultra-modern, supranational and secular working-class consciousness and any potential imperialist expansion were perceived as a threat to the very existence of socialism.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, any non-socialist government was considered as a foe of the Soviet Union and friend of the imperialist Other - the US, which was the external Other of the Soviet Union and played central role in shaping the Soviet identity.<sup>18</sup>

While the two leading actors of the blocs endeavoured to draw the boundaries of and to set the limits against expanding their spheres of influence,<sup>19</sup> Soviet authorities regarded the non-Russian groups, who lived in the Union as

16 Kathryn Gillian Tomlinson, *Coping as Kin: Responses to Suffering amongst Displaced Meskhetian Turks in Post-Soviet Krasnodar, Russian Federation*, Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University College London, Department of Anthropology, 2002, p. 43.

17 Ted Hopf. "Moscow's Foreign Policy, 1945-2000: Identities, Institutions and Interests", ed. Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Cambridge History of Russia*, 3, 2006, p. 663.

18 Hopf, *ibid*, 2006, p. 667.

19 David Engerman. "Ideology and the Origins of the Cold War, 1917-1962", ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 33.

the components of the imaged Soviet community, that must be secured from threatening effect of the West.<sup>20</sup> Still, the efforts of Soviet cadre to form and ensure the security of the Soviet administrative territory ignited Soviet xenophobia composed of the fear of foreign influence and foreign contamination. The roots of Soviet xenophobia emerged on the basis of ideological hostility and distrust towards foreign capitalist governments rather than ethnic splits.<sup>21</sup> The possibility of penetration of foreign influence by means of cross-border ties through the non-Russian border regions led the Soviet authorities to worry about the frontier security of the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup>

As geopolitical approaches emphasis the role of borders in terms of military, political and cultural security, securitisation of countries is linked to separating us from others. The perceptions of external threats and undesirable and dangerous neighbours motivate countries to establish a barrier against other.<sup>23</sup> To ensure the security of the socialist motherland in the face of imperialist penetration, any process prompting identity transformation were deemed inherently a threat that needed to be eliminated.

The ideological demarcation of the borders between socialism and capitalism allowed Soviet policy-makers to performing social engineering techniques which appeared as the forced mass movements along the borderlands.<sup>24</sup> The increasing paranoia in Soviet decision-making resulted in expanding intolerance of differences at home and accusing local nationalities of becoming the fifth columns allied with the West.<sup>25</sup> Together with the identification of the concept of Soviet people with specific ethnic groups, the loyalty of some ethnic identities to the Soviet homeland came into question.<sup>26</sup> Especially, Russian and Ukrainian ethnicities were valued as the loyal communities in the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the fear of cross-border connections outside the USSR made local nationalities, who had relatives across the border, to be regarded as the least trustworthy groups in the socialist community.<sup>27</sup>

20 Ted Hopf. *Reconstructing the Cold War: the Early Years, 1945-1958*. Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 67.

21 Terry Martin. "The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing", *The Journal of Modern History*, 70(4), 1998, p. 829.

22 Martin, *ibid*, 1998, p. 830.

23 Vladimir Kolosov. "Border Studies: Changing Perspectives and Theoretical Approaches", *Geopolitics*, 10(4), 2005, p. 619, 621.

24 David Wolff. "Stalin's Postwar Border-making Tactics. East and West", *Cahiers du monde russe. Russie-Empire russe-Union soviétique et États indépendants*, 52(52/2-3), 2011.

25 Hopf, *ibid*, 2006, p. 668.

26 Zbigniew Wojnowski. "The Soviet People: National and Supranational Identities in the USSR After 1945", *Nationalities Papers*, 43(1), 2015, p. 2.

27 Kate Brown. "Securing the Nuclear Nation", *Nationalities Papers*, 43(1), 2015, pp. 8-9.

Although Turkey had established close relationship with the USSR during the Turkish War of Independence and following years and did not entered World War II, Turkey's cautious stand against Communism incited Stalin's hysteria towards Muslim and Turkish groups in the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup> Within the strict framework of friend and foe dichotomy in the Soviet view of outside world, Turkey was associated to be the ally of the West. Supposing the Ahiska Turks as the extension of Turkey in the Soviet community, Soviet authorities became sceptical about the Ahiska Turks' faith in the USSR.

In line with this assessment, it is evidence that Beria, who was the chief of the Soviet security and secret police organisation (NKVD - People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs), expressed the general distrust towards the Ahiska Turks in his report to Stalin, Molotov and Malenkov on November 28, 1944 by indicating their kinship with the Turkish population in the border area.<sup>29</sup> Supported the removal of suspect nationalities from strategic areas of the USSR as a routine security measure, Beria treated the Ahiska Turks as potential Turkish intelligent agents and accused them to facilitate Turkish intelligence to penetrate into the USSR.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, Khazanov argues that Stalin aimed to clear the untrustworthy ethnic elements from Transcaucasia to be able to execute his menacing plans towards Turkey and therefore the Ahiska Turks aroused Stalin's suspicion as a result of their close ties with Turkey in terms of language, religion and their pro-Turkish sympathy rooted in history.<sup>31</sup> Pohl also supports this argument that the forceful deportation was the result of the Stalin's expansionist policies towards Turkey and the Middle East by underlining the Soviet Union's post-war demands from Turkey.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Aydingün puts an emphasis on the historical background of the Ahiska Turks' loyalty to the Ottoman Empire since the Turkish-Russian war.<sup>33</sup>

In sum, Soviet elites used the border security against the rival imperialist expansion and the defence of soviet community in the face of external threats and foreign influence as a pretexts in legitimising the deportation of local ethnic groups including the Ahiska Turks. Yet, the aggressive stance of the Soviet Union after the World War II in its foreign relations paved the way for the discussions of whether the aim of the Soviet Union at deporting the Ahiska Turks from the

28 Nurhayat Bilge, "Conflict and Cultural Identity: Meskhetian Turks", *24rd Annual International Association of Conflict Management Conference*, Istanbul, Temmuz, 2011, p. 8.

29 Anatoly Michailovich Khazanov, *After the USSR: Ethnicity, Nationalism and Politics in the Commonwealth of Independent States*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1995, p. 198.

30 J. Otto Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999, p. 130.

31 Khazanov, *ibid*, 1995, p. 197.

32 Pohl, *ibid*, 1999, p. 129.

33 Ayşegül Baydar Aydingün, "Ahiska (Meskhetian) Turks: Source of Conflict in the Caucasus?", *The International Journal of Human Rights*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2002b, p. 50.

borderlands was to create the basis for the execution of their expansionist strategies threatening Turkey.

### 3. The Deportation of the Ahiska Turks

The Ahiska Turks were told that they would be relocated for their security against Turkey and they would come back within a few days or weeks, so that they left enough feed for their animals until they returned.<sup>34</sup> However, they did not receive any written or oral explanation about the reason of their deportation and so their deportation was not mentioned in the Soviet official documents.<sup>35</sup>

Unlike the justification of the deportations of Chechens, Ingush, Crimean Tatars and many other groups, Soviet officials could not employ their most frequently used pretext which impeached the locals for cooperation with advancing German Army since there was a hundred miles distance between German Army and the Ahiska region.<sup>36</sup> Ahiska Turks were considered as a potential fifth columnists of Turkey as a result of their strategically-located living area where was treated as a high security zone due to its proximity to Turkey.<sup>37</sup>

On 24 July 1944, Lavrentiy Beria advised Stalin to replace the Turks, Kurds and Khemshils<sup>38</sup> residing in the border regions of Georgia. In response to Beria, Stalin issued GKO (State Defence Committee) 'resolution no. 6279 ss, "On Resettling from the Border Belt of the Georgian SSR—Akhaltskh, Aspindzsk, Akhalkalask and Bogdanov Raions—the Turks, Kurds and Khemshins".<sup>39</sup> Thus, Stalin assigned NKVD troops to execute the deportation. Different from those resolutions issued for the deportations of other nationalities, this decree did not provide any clear answer for the reason of the deportation in question and defined the action as a matter of security of the borders of the Georgian SSR and the USSR.<sup>40</sup>

Empowered by Stalin, Beria issued 'NKVD order no. 001176, "On Resettling from the Border Raions of the Georgian SSR the Turks, Kurds and Khemshins" and he determined responsible NKVD and NKGB (People's Commissariat of State

34 Kakoli Ray, "Repatriation and De-territorialization: Meskhetian Turks' Conception of Home", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2000, p. 393 and 407.

35 Khazanov, *ibid*, 1995, p. 197.

36 Pentikäinen and Trier, *ibid*, 2004, p. 11 and Ayşegül Baydar Aydingün, Çiğdem Balım Harding, Matthew Hoover, Igor Kuznetsov and Steve Swerdlow, "Meskhetian Turks: An Introduction to Their History, Culture and Resettlement Experiences", *Cultural Orientation Resource Center - Culture Profile*, Washington, DC, 2006, p. 6.

37 Alexander Mikaberidze, *Historical Dictionary of Georgia*, First Edition. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, p. 368, 456.

38 Khemshils are the Turkicised Armenians speaking Turkish and converted to Islam (Pohl, *ibid*, 1999, p. 16 and J. Otto Pohl, "Stalin's Genocide Against the "Repressed Peoples"", *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol., No. 2, 2000, p. 267.).

39 Pohl, *ibid*, 1999, pp. 130-131.

40 Pohl, *ibid*, 1999, pp. 131-132.

Security) officers together with the briefing for the chain of command. Deputy Commissar of the NKVD of the USSR Kobulov, People's Commissar for State Security of the Georgian SSR Rapava and People's Commissar for Internal Affairs of the Georgian SSR Karandze were designated for the control of the entire operation.<sup>41</sup>

'Stalin allocated 30 million rubles and 750 tons of gasoline to the NKVD, 4 million rubles and 100 tons of gasoline to the Georgian SNK, 75 tons of gasoline to the Kazakh SNK, 70 tons of gasoline to the Uzbek SNK and 35 tons of gasoline to the Kirghiz SNK'.<sup>42</sup> In this context, 20.000 NKVD internal troops, 4.000 NKVD-NKGB operative workers and 900 Studebaker trucks were entrusted with the task to perform the process. This is the evidence that the plan of the Soviet authorities was to transport the Ahiska Turks to some of the Soviet Republics in Central Asia.

The Soviet decision-makers expected to eliminate and assimilate the Ahiska Turks and their language and culture in the larger nationalities living in Central Asia.<sup>43</sup> In the summer of 1944, NKVD officers arrived in Ahiska villages and troops appeared at the end of October in the region. Started on 11 November 1944, any entry to and exit from the villages were not allowed.<sup>44</sup> And the Ahiska Turks were deported from the Ahiska region of southern western Georgia, composed of five administrative districts, between 15-17 November 1944 to Central Asia,<sup>45</sup> mainly in Uzbekistan (53,163 persons), Kazakhstan (28,598 persons) and Kirgizstan (10,546 persons).<sup>46</sup>

In various studies, different numbers were presented about the total number of deported Ahiska Turks. While Mikaberidze says that 90.000-100.000 Ahiska Turks were the subjects of the deportation,<sup>47</sup> Pentikäinen and Trier notes 90,000-120,000 people as the number of deportees.<sup>48</sup> Pohl states that Beria determined 91,095 exiles from Georgia, but the telegram sent him in December 1944

41 Pohl, *ibid*, 1999, p. 132.

42 Pohl, *ibid*, 1999, p. 131.

43 Pohl, *ibid*, 2000, p. 288.

44 Tomlinson, *ibid*, 2002, p. 44.

45 Ekaterine Pirtskhalava and Lali Surmanidze, "Identity Strategies of Muslim Meskhetians (Meskhetian Turks) in Cultural Context", *Cultural and Religious Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2015, pp. 100.

46 Pohl, *ibid*, 1999, p. 132. Pohl relies on the numbers of deportees by referring N.F. Bugai who reveals the Soviet documents. Bugai, Nikolai Fedorovich. "Iosif Stalin-Lavrentiiu Beri: 'Ikh Nado Deportirovat' Dokumenty, Fakty, Kommentarii", *Moscow: "Druzhba narodov*, 1992. Citing the work written in the last years of the Soviet Union, Khazanov indicates that 42.618 persons to Uzbekistan, 29.497 persons to Kazakhstan and 8.911 persons to Kyrgyzstan were deported. Khazanov, *ibid*, 1995, p. 198. Modebadze specifies 55.500 persons to Uzbekistan, 29.500 persons to Kazakhstan and 11.000 persons to Kyrgyzstan as the total number of deportees without giving any reference. Valeri Modebadze, "Historical Background of Meskhetian Problem and Major Obstacles to the Repatriation Process", *IBSU Scientific Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2009, p. 115.

47 Mikaberidze, *ibid*, 2007, p. 457.

48 Pentikäinen and Trier, *ibid*, 2004, p. 11.

estimated 92,307 deportees.<sup>49</sup> Yet, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union updated the number to 94,955 in October 1948. In his article published after one year of his book, Pohl notes that only 94,955 Ahiska Turks deported between 15 and 26 November 1944.<sup>50</sup> Khazanov indicates while the Ahiska Turkish sources mentions 115.500, some Western and Georgian publications show the figure between 150.000 and 200.000.<sup>51</sup> For instance, Yemelyanova points out the total number of deportees reached up to 150.000.<sup>52</sup>

Khazanov also refers to the report presented by the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs dated 1 January 1949. According to this document, there were 81.575 deportees composed of 19.421 men, 25.107 women, 37.047 children, about 3.000 of them were born in exile. Lastly, he notes that 40.000 men who were serving in the Soviet army were sent to exile in a later time. Nevertheless, this fact marks the characteristic of the deportation which was executed without any exception.<sup>53</sup>

As revealed, the number of deportees ranges from 80.000 to 200.000. The cause of this disparity among studies is the absence of reliable record kept by Soviet authorities. Therefore, primary actors of the subject matter and other parties concerned with the question at hand present different numbers of the Ahiska Turks deported from Georgia.

Still, there was only one exception based on ethnical features rather than political factors. "On Measures for Conducting the Resettlement of the Germans Living in the Volga German Republic, Saratov and Stalingrad Oblasts" of the NKVD instruction allowed German women married to non-Germans to avoid the exile. Later, this exemption was extended to Kalmyk, Ahiska Turkish, Kurdish and Khemshil women having spouses from other nationalities. Consequently, a few Ahiska Turkish women overcame to be deported as they would bring up their children in accordance with Russian culture.<sup>54</sup>

#### **4. Suffers of the Ahiska Turks During and After the Execution of the Deportation**

Beyond the discussion about the number of deported Ahiska Turks, the process shows similarities with the other deportations executed by Soviet forces.

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49 Pohl, *ibid*, 1999, p. 132.

50 Pohl, *ibid*, 2000, p. 286.

51 Khazanov, *ibid*, 1995, p. 198.

52 Galina Yemelyanova. "Georgia's European Quest: The Challenge of the Meskhetian Turks", *Caucasus International*, Vol. 3, No. 5, 2015, p. 79. She does not cite any source, but she adopts a strong rhetoric by saying that 'there is no doubt that up to 150,000 of them were deported in 1944'.

53 Khazanov, *ibid*, 1995, p. 198.

54 Pohl, *ibid*, 2000, p. 275.

According to the stories told by elder people, they were rounded up and deported in a few hours.<sup>55</sup>

Aydingün et al. conducted an interview in 2001 with an Ahiska Turkish community leader. His memories are very useful to capture and understand the events as happened. He said:

*“At 4 a.m., four soldiers came into our house and said we had one hour to pack. We were not told where we would be sent. About 120 families were loaded into one freight car. We travelled 18 days and nights to Central Asia. Many died of typhoid. At each stop they would unload the dead.”*<sup>56</sup>

As told, decaying corpses were kept in the freight cars until they were taken out once or twice during the transportation process.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, deportees did not get any hot food until they reached their final resettlement destination.<sup>58</sup>

Another core component of their deportation is their experience en route to Central Asia. Thousands of the Ahiska Turks died during the transportation.<sup>59</sup> Pohl reports that 457 deaths were recorded by NKVD.<sup>60</sup> Yet, the actual number of en route deaths is much higher. Even though numbers scale from 15.000 to 50.000 people,<sup>61</sup> people lost their lives during this deadly transportation by cause of hunger, cold and disease.<sup>62</sup>

During the years of their Central Asia in exile, the Ahiska Turks were forced to live under so-called special regime. Under this regime, their basic civil rights including freedom of movement were restricted.<sup>63</sup> These special settlers had to go to special commandants' offices to register once a month and were not allowed marrying with someone from another settlement.<sup>64</sup> In general, the implementation of this so-called special regime separated family members from each other and hampered the perception of ethnic collectivity.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, if anyone would leave the zone without permission, they would be punished with 15-years of

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55 Ray, *ibid*, 2000, p. 407.

56 Aydingün et al., *ibid*, 2006, p. 6.

57 Ray, *ibid*, 2000, p. 393.

58 Pohl, *ibid*, 1999, p. 132.

59 Mikaberidze, *ibid*, 2007, p. 457.

60 Pohl, *ibid*, 2000, p. 287.

61 Khazanov, *ibid*, 1995, p. 198.

62 Ray, *ibid*, 2000, p. 393.

63 Mikaberidze, *ibid*, 2007, p. 457.

64 Khazanov, *ibid*, pp. 198-199.

65 Ray, *ibid*, 2000, p. 408.

forced labour in a Gulag camp.<sup>66</sup> The punishment of escape may be resulted in twenty years in a labour camp.<sup>67</sup>

One of the most bitter part of the exile showed itself after a while later. Whereas one third of deportees lost their lives within six months after the deportation,<sup>68</sup> between 15% to 20% of the total population of the Ahiska Turks perished within four years following the deportation.<sup>69</sup> In addition to threatening life conditions, the Ahiska Turks had to deal with hostile attitudes of local population since they were labelled as enemies of the people.<sup>70</sup>

Additionally, exiled people were deprived of education and publications in their native language from the time of their deportation until their status in the special settlements were ceased.<sup>71</sup> Hence, the Ahiska Turks were the subjects of the Soviet policy aimed to russify the deportees linguistically and they received education in Russian and the national languages where they were forced to live.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, they had to struggle with problems when they wanted to enter universities due to discriminatory quotas and barriers.<sup>73</sup> Especially after the death of Stalin, a relative improvement in the condition of their daily life was observed.<sup>74</sup>

However, after the deportation, mainly Armenians had been already settled in Ahiska homeland.<sup>75</sup> In addition to 30.000 Christian Georgians from various parts of the country,<sup>76</sup> Adzhar and Imeretians (West Georgians) were other groups settled in Ahiska where was declared an 85-kilometer-wide special frontier zone. It should be pointed out that Ahiska Turks could not visit the region even as guest or tourist.<sup>77</sup>

## 5. The Status of the Ahiska Turks Following the De-Stalinisation Campaign

The death of Stalin left the Soviet policy-makers no choice but adopt a new perspective at home and abroad. The strictly binary understanding of world

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66 Bilge, *ibid*, 2011, p. 8.

67 Ayşegül Baydar Aydıngün, "A Deported Nationality: The Ahiska Turks", *Journal Of International Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1999 (1998).

68 Modebadze, *ibid*, 2009, p. 116.

69 Aydıngün et al., *ibid*, 2006, p. 6.

70 Aydıngün et al., *ibid*, 2006, p. 7.

71 Pohl, *ibid*, 1999, p. 133.

72 Pohl, *ibid*, 2000, p. 288 and Aydıngün et al., *ibid*, 2006, p. 25.

73 Aydıngün et al., *ibid*, 2006, p. 25.

74 Ray, *ibid*, 2000, p. 393.

75 Mikaberidze, *ibid*, 2007, p. 456.

76 Modebadze, *ibid*, 2009, p. 115.

77 Khazanov, *ibid*, 1995, p. 199.

affairs was abandoned, Stalin's excesses were exposed and disapproved.<sup>78</sup> In addition to the empowerment of the discourse of difference at home, it was admitted that the Soviet Union may be able to err. Such an acknowledgement changed the Soviet Union's stance against the ethnic groups once stigmatised as the enemies of the people.<sup>79</sup>

Ahiska Turks were one of the eight ethnic groups in the Soviet Union deported to Central Asia. Although Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, Karachais and Kalmyks were rehabilitated during the de-Stalinisation campaign initiated by Khrushchev and were allowed to return to their homeland, Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans and the Ahiska Turks could not gain permission to go back to their fatherland.<sup>80</sup>

In 1956-1957, Nikita Khrushchev decided to rehabilitate the deported people of the 1940s except Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans and the Ahiska Turks.<sup>81</sup> In his famous Secret Speech in February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev named Karachai-Balkars, Chechens, Ingush and Kalmyks and the subsequent decrees mentioned the Volga Germans and Crimean Tatars as the nationalities deported during the war, but not the Ahiska Turks in this scope.<sup>82</sup> Within this context, Ahiska Turks did not receive any compensation for their properties confiscated during the deportation.<sup>83</sup> Wimbush and Wixman explain why the Ahiska Turks were not classified together with other deported nationalities. They say that the Ahiska Turks were not officially condemned as the collaborators in the files and were not one of the nations recognised, so they were overlooked in this large-scale rehabilitation process.<sup>84</sup>

However, as a result of the de-Stalinisation campaign, the Ahiska Turks were allowed to move within the USSR but not to resettle in Georgia. For that matter, a decree of the presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR dated October 31, 1957 was published and emphasised the disapproval of Georgian government about the return of the Ahiska Turks.<sup>85</sup> Georgian authorities in the USSR mainly opposed the return of the Ahiska Turks since their repatriation may trigger ethnic conflict between them and the Christian Armenians and Georgians resettled the Ahiska Turks' homeland.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, the Ahiska was considered as a sensitive and geo-politically

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78 Hopf, *ibid*, 2006, pp. 673-674.

79 Hopf, *ibid*, 2012, pp. 143-164.

80 Pentikäinen and Trier, *ibid*, 2004, p. 6.

81 Mikaberidze, *ibid*, 2007, p. 457 and Aydingün, *ibid*, 1999 (1998).

82 Wimbush and Wixman, *ibid*, 1975, p. 328.

83 Pohl, *ibid*, 1999, p. 135.

84 Wimbush and Wixman, *ibid*, 1975, p. 330.

85 Khazanov, *ibid*, p. 199.

86 Aydingün et al., *ibid*, 2006, p. 7.

important region by reason of the rivalry between Soviet Union and NATO and this Cold War conjuncture prohibited the Ahiska Turks from repatriation.<sup>87</sup>

In these years, the Ahiska Turks initiated a peaceful campaign for repatriation to Georgia and they sent petitions and letters to Soviet government officials and organised peaceful demonstrations, but they could not achieve their goals.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, an estimated 20.000-25.000 Ahiska Turks started to settle in Azerbaijan in the late 1950s,<sup>89</sup> when they received permission to migrate in Azerbaijan SSR.<sup>90</sup> However, they were registered as Azerbaijanis.<sup>91</sup>

Although the death of Stalin changed the Soviet policies towards the nationalities that were displaced from their homelands as a result of victimisation, the Soviet regime systematically and deliberately hid information about the Ahiska Turks from 1945 to 1968. While the Ahiska Turks were being mentioned as a part of the Georgian population in Volume XXVII of the Bol'shaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia in the second edition published in 1954, the Entsiklopediia of 1959 did not cover any information about them.<sup>92</sup>

The 1968 Decree of the Presidium of the USSR can be assessed as a milestone during post-deportation years of the Ahiska Turks.<sup>93</sup> They were granted full citizen rights in 1968 and their return was guaranteed by the Soviet Presidium but the Ahiska Turks were not allowed to return their ancestral lands.<sup>94</sup> In this regard, Georgian authorities posed an obstacle once again.<sup>95</sup> They could not obtain the special residency permits which were required to enter the Ahiska region where was designated as a border-zone.<sup>96</sup> Yet, some Ahiska Turks found opportunity to return to Georgia informally and illegally in 1969.<sup>97</sup>

Unlike Crimean Tatars who were rehabilitated after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Volga Germans who emigrated to Germany during the same period, the Ahiska Turks have struggled with ethnic discrimination in the land of their

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87 Pentikäinen and Trier, *ibid*, 2004, p. 12.

88 Modebadze, *ibid*, 2009, p. 116.

89 Mikaberidze, *ibid*, 2007, p. 457.

90 Khazanov, *ibid*, 1995, p. 199.

91 Modebadze, *ibid*, 2009, p. 116.

92 Wimbush and Wixman, *ibid*, 1975, p. 329.

93 Aydingün, *ibid*, 2002a, p. 189.

94 Mikaberidze, *ibid*, 2007, p. 457.

95 Aydingün, *ibid*, 1999 (1998).

96 Parikrama Gupta, "De Facto Stateless: The Meskhetian Turks", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 5, No. 41, 2006, pp. 128.

97 Mikaberidze, *ibid*, 2007, p. 458.

exile and local Georgian authorities exerted themselves to keep the Ahiska Turks away from their homeland.<sup>98</sup>

## 6. The Impact of the Deportation on the Ahiska Turkish Identity

The origin of the Ahiska Turks is a widely-disputed topic. While official Georgian Soviet and post-Soviet sources accept that the ancient Georgian tribe of Meskhs, who converted to Islam,<sup>99</sup> became the members of the Hanafi tradition and began to speak the Kars dialect of Turkish,<sup>100</sup> were their ancestors, there are arguments insisting the existence of a direct link between Turkic tribes and the Ahiska Turks.<sup>101</sup>

Nonetheless, there is a third stance on the explanation of the origin of the Ahiska Turks and mainly argues that the group is composed of four different sub-groups.<sup>102</sup> First, Ahiska Turks who are the largest component of the community share the same ethnic and linguistic features with the Turks living in Eastern Anatolia. Second group is the Karapapakh population who are defined as Muslim Turkic people whose language similar to Turkish. Third component is the Khemshins. This group of people are turkified Sunni-Muslim Armenians who are speaking Turkish.<sup>103</sup> And the last group was Kurds living with this big composition of people.<sup>104</sup> However, this type of decomposition of the Ahiska Turks would serve to dilute their individual ethnic identity. Aforementioned groups can be addressed together with the Ahiska Turks in the context of their living in Georgia before the deportation. Yet, the existence of separate Ahiska Turkish identity and their close ties with Turkishness and Ottoman history need to be recognised rather than seeing their group identity as a mixture of other groups inhabited in the region.

At this point, it is acknowledged that shared history and common language and culture are the factors what serve to preserve the collective identity among the members of an ethnic group that are the subject to displacement and ordeal

98 Pentikäinen and Trier, *ibid*, 2004, p. 6.

99 Swerdlow, *ibid*, 2006, p. 1833; Marine Beridze and Manana Kobaidze, "An Attempt to Create an Ethnic Group: Identity Change Dynamics of Muslimized Meskhetians", ed. Karina Vamling, *Language, History And Cultural Identities In The Caucasus*, 2005, p. 64; Pentikäinen and Trier, *ibid*, 2004, pp. 9-10; Khazanov, *ibid*, 1995, pp. 195-196; Pavel Polian, *Against Their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR*. Central European University Press, 2003, p. 55.

100 Mirkhanova, *ibid*, 2006, p. 34.

101 Swerdlow, *ibid*, 2006, p. 1833; Beridze and Kobaidze, *ibid*, 2005, p. 64; Pentikäinen and Trier, *ibid*, 2004, pp. 9-10.

102 Wimbush and Wixman, *ibid*, 1975, pp. 321-322; Beridze and Kobaidze, *ibid*, 2005, p. 64; Nana Sumbadze and George Tarkhan-Mouravi, "Repatriation and Adaptation of Deported Meskhetians: Society and State in Supranational Context", *Centre for Geopolitical & Regional Studies*, 2005.

103 Khazanov, *ibid*, 1995, pp. 197; Wimbush and Wixman, *ibid*, 1975, p. 322.

104 Wimbush and Wixman, *ibid*, 1975, p. 322.

as a result of deportation. These factors are the fundamental senses that generate the perception of sameness linking people to each other. Once a group is exposed to the humiliation, victimisation and threats of the Other in the name of the latter's group identity, the subject group realise and maintain their sense of wholeness and value their features that separate them from the Other. The impact and consequences of traumas produced by the Other are spread emotionally among the group members.<sup>105</sup>

The shared experience of deportation and being the victim of the Soviet policies that ripped the local nationalities out of their ancestral lands cemented their collective memory and identity.<sup>106</sup> The deportation experience of the Ahıska Turks in time when they lived in the Soviet Union marks an integral part of their group identity. The forceful actions taken against their different origins and cross-border ties played an important role to create a specific in-group social identity among the Ahıska Turks. Moreover, their years in exile advanced and strengthened their consciousness level of having separate ethnic identity as an outcome of ethnicity-based discriminatory policies.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, the traumas includes their disastrous losses, humiliation and their feeling of helplessness and these mental history of the events have been passed down from generation to generation and become the part of their collective identity and connect individuals each other within the group.<sup>108</sup>

Ahıska Turks developed a strong understanding of ethnic identity as a result of their deportation once they faced violence, hatred and discrimination against them.<sup>109</sup> In this context, they did not get married with the person outside of their ethnic community and their experience in the exile led them to generate a separate and distinct identity.<sup>110</sup> The trauma and ordeal they suffered became the parts of their historical legacy.<sup>111</sup>

By considering the repression against their religious freedom and practices, religion emerged as a unifying element among the Ahıska community.<sup>112</sup> Family and village ties contributed to resistance against assimilation as well.<sup>113</sup> Further-

105 Vamik D. Volkan. "Large-group Identity, International Relations and Psychoanalysis", In *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2009, p. 207, 208.

106 Sophie Tournon, "The Deportation of Muslims from Georgia", *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence*, 2009.

107 Aydingün, *ibid*, 1999 (1998).

108 Vamik, *ibid*, 2009, p. 212 and Vamik D. Volkan. "Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: an Aspect of Large-group Identity", *Group Analysis*, 34(1), 2001, p. 88.

109 Bilge, *ibid*, 2011, pp. 14-15.

110 Aydingün et al., *ibid*, 2006, p. 7.

111 Ray, *ibid*, 2000, p. 407.

112 Bilge, *ibid*, 2011, p. 17.

113 Aydingün et al., *ibid*, 2006, p. 17.

more, the Ahiska Turks attributed great importance to their language in identifying themselves and in preserving their cultural features against assimilation.<sup>114</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Soviet Union's ideologically-dichotomised understanding of the world merged with Stalin's hysteria. Whereas the defence of socialist community against foreign influence and foreign contamination played a determinative role in shaping Soviet identity, its reflection at home appeared as ethnic discrimination as a result of the suspicion on local groups sharing cross-border ties and having relatives across the border. Soviet authorities pursued policies to protect the harmony of the socialist community and to prevent any capitalist expansion that may utilize these ethnic groups living in the border areas to the detriment of the Soviet Union's security. To ensure the border security, Soviet elites implemented plans such as deportation that resulted in humiliation, discrimination, othering, hatred, violence against local ethnicities. Therefore, any ideological incentive of the Soviet identity to defend socialism and socialist community evaporated and turned into a suppression of and intolerance against local ethnicities in practice.

The reason why the Ahiska Turks became the subject of the deportation was the agitation of the Soviet government because of its concerns about the Ahiska Turks' cross-border ethnic ties with Turkey. As a consequence of the dichotomization and binarization of identity relations between the Soviet Union and its Others, Turkey was categorised as an ally with the West and so the Ahiska Turks were labelled as the agents and potential fifth columnists of Turkey. Therefore, the deportation of the Ahiska Turks was executed between 15-17 November 1944 and they were sent to Central Asia. It is also understood that the deportation aimed at eliminating and assimilating the whole community and their language and culture in the larger nationalities living in Central Asia.

After the deportation, the Ahiska Turks lost a significant part of their population and faced the threat of the erosion of their identity, cultural features and collective consciousness under the implementation of so-called special regime. During the de-Stalinisation campaign initiated by Khrushchev in 1956, they were not allowed to return to their homeland. Therefore, some argues that the Ahiska Turks were overlooked in this large-scale rehabilitation process. Nonetheless, it is also clear that Georgian authorities opposed the return of the Ahiska

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<sup>114</sup> Chong-Jin Oh, "Comparative Analysis of the Ahiska (Meskhetian) Turks and Koreans in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan: The Making of Diaspora Identity and Culture", *Millî Folklor Uluslararası Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Vol. 94, 2012, p. 20; Aydıngün, *ibid*, 2002a, p. 193.

Turks since their repatriation may trigger ethnic conflict between them and the new settlers in Ahiskan homeland such as Christian Armenians and Georgians.

Against all the series of disastrous events, the Ahiska Turks are able to preserve their communal heritage. Their experience during and after the deportation and their years away from their homeland became a part of their communal memory and the traumatic events bound them by strengthening their in-group collective consciousness. In addition to the role of the deportation's itself, their shared societal characteristic such as religion, family and village ties and language served for the development and deepening their separate in-group identity.

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