

Importance of Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878 for the Circassian History

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The Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-78

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The Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878 was the largest military conflict of the second half of the XIX century in the region of Europe and Caucasus. It broke up 13 years later the ending of the Caucasian war and did not involve the territory of Adygheya (Circassia) but still had the most direct relation to Adygheyan people whose greater part to the moment of the conflict's beginning lived on the lands of the European Turkey and Western Anatolia.

The conflict between Turkey and Russia during that period had inevitable character for several reasons:

- 1) as continuation of the expansionist policies of the Russian Empire in the region of the Black sea when the Tsar Cabinet openly started with the ideas of pan-Slavism and transformation of the Black sea into internal lake of the Russian Empire;
- 2) because of the Bulgarian crisis of 1875-1876 that had caused a sharp aggravation of the Russian-Turkish relationship;

and

- 3) in connection with some aspirations of Petersburg to rise above its defeat in the Crimean (Eastern) war.

Ripening of the new conflict seemed to be obvious right after the end of the Crimean war: many Russian dignitaries and generals – Evdokimov, Milyutin, Bariatinsky, and others – wrote about it after 1857. In that connection the role of Circassia as the most probable battlefield between Turkey (supported by the Western countries) and Russia was extremely important. Russia could suddenly lose all positions in the region of Northwestern Caucasus it had got at very expensive cost of continuation of the almost a hundred years' war. That idea was quite definitely expressed by Frankini – the military advisor of the Russian embassy in Istanbul: “The opportunity of appearance of the Allies' fleets in the Black sea has been foreseen again. In such circumstances prudence advises to cure our inner wounds, to complete as soon as possible invasion of Caucasus, which have equal importance both for defensive and offensive actions in the East”. [1] Moreover, even in January of 1863 the senior military officials of the Russian Empire did not have confidence in their victory over Circassians. About that, for example, the next abstract from Frankini, with which Russian military minister Milyutin agreed, testified: “The best system of defense for Circassians is offensive and if they fearlessly begin to attack simultaneously several points of our new positions then all the results of our three-year's success will be exposed great danger. If Circassians manage to

liquidate a part of our front lines yet weakly communicated with each other, if they manage to throw us down from the mountains to the plane, then the moral efficiency of our present system tasked to grip the enemy in a vice will be ruined. Long time should have passed until we – at the cost of new victims and efforts – would manage to get back superiority”.[2] General Rostislav Fadeev remarked that despite of noteworthy achievements of the Russian army the situation in Western Caucasus was still rather dangerous for Russia: “Yet in 1863 a mountaineer by accident disconnected with his compatriots and surrounded by a detachment did not surrender and died with weapon in his hands. Congestions of the mountaineers were as numerous as before”.[3] Those were the reasons for fast-moving increase of the Russian military grouping in Western Caucasus (280,000), and continuous warfare actions during all the winter of 1862-1863. The threat of a new war – similar to the Eastern (Crimean) war – like Damocles’ sword hanged over Russia. Fadeev warned the senior officials of the Russian Empire: “The very first gunshot in the Black sea would rise them again against us and annihilate our all previous efforts”.[4] In 1857 Bariatinsky wrote: “For execution of the task we have to do so many things that only in 1860 we will manage to proceed to the final driving out of Natukhais and to the large scale settling their lands. That operation is among the most important measures in the plan of the future actions in Caucasus as in the case of a new external war the seacoast between the mouth of Kuban and Gelendjik would give our enemy significant chance for landing if we left that territory for our inner enemies”.[5] D.I. Romanovsky, Bariatinsky’s biographer, excused his idol’s cruelty: “It would be simple to image in what terrible conditions we could appear in 1877 if the Caucasian war did not end and we had in the Caucasus the position of 1853-1859”.[6] Assurance of the war’s inevitability set the Russian military and political leadership against Circassians in the most intolerant way. They saw the way-out in the single direction: obligatory deportation of Circassians and settlement on their lands of Russian population. The Grand Prince Michael Nicolaevich, the Caucasian army commander, in his letter to the military minister underlined: “The required condition of this war’s ending should be total releasing of the areas of the eastern Black sea coast and the mountaineers’ deportation to Turkey”.[7] In November 1863 Alexander II made special instructions for the army Commander Evdokimov: “It is extremely important to draw the border line of Russian settlements on Bzyb river as in other case even a small part of the mountaineers, remained on the bank under any conditions, in the case of new external war will represent a lure for our foes”.[8] In March of 1864 the Grand Prince Michael Nicolaevich informed the military minister: “The whole space of the northern mountainside to the west from Laba river as well as the southern mountainside – from the mouth of Kuban up to Tuapse – are released from the foe population”. On the paper by the hand of Emperor Alexander II it was written: “Thanks God”.[9]

The Ottoman government during 1857-1864 helplessly looked at the process of the stage-by-stage devastation of Circassia – its unique effective military ally in the Black sea area. For all analysts there were absolutely clear both inevitability of Circassia’s military fiasco, and inevitability of further Russian expansion and new extent military conflict between the two Empires. The policies of concessions from England and France as well as absence of any real military help for Circassia and Shamil’s imamate during the Caucasian war had paved the way for the attack Tsargrad in 1877.

Thus, the war of 1877-1878 became a very natural continuation of the Caucasian drama, when Istanbul was compelled to enter that conflict in the most unprofitable conditions. Moreover, it hardly escaped Circassia’s destiny. Figuratively saying, we can name that war a bloody epilogue of the Caucasian war. Turks met the Russian army brilliantly trained in the mountains of Circassia and Dagestan. And the both battlefields – Transcaucasia and Bulgaria

– were mountainous regions. Thousands of officers of the Russian operating army met in that war their old opponents-mountaineers, and their reports were filled with interesting details concerned Shapsugh, Ubykhs, Kabardinians, Abadzekhs, Chechens, and Dagestanians. According to the data of the Russian headquarters Circassian cavalry in Western Bulgaria counted 9250 sabres; in Eastern Bulgaria – 5000 sabres; in Babadag area – 1800 sabres.[10] According to the journal of the general P.D. Zotov, in Gassan Sabli-pasha's division there were 800 Circassians; in Shefnet-pasha's division – 1000 Circassians; in the division of Zefi-Pasha – 2200 Circassians. In total quantity of the Circassian cavalry seriously exceeded the number of the Turkish cavalry: for example, in October, 1877 in the region Plevno-Lovcha 5000 Circassians and 40 squadrons of the regularly Turkish cavalry (against which 118 squadrons of the Russian cavalry operated) were located.[11] Circassians were represented in the Ottoman senior military staff: Rauf Pasha, Deli Hosrev Pasha, Cherkes Hasan, Cherkes Osman Pasha, Shevket Pasha, Cherkes Ibrahim Pasha, Dilaver Karzeg Pasha, Cherkes Dilaver Pasha, Fuad Pasha, Suleiman Pasha, Mehmed Muhlis Pasha and others. According to Skobelev's report the army of Osman Pasha in Plevna counted 28,000. Among that number 20,000 were Turkish infantrymen and 8000 were Circassian horsemen.[12] According to Nemirovich-Danchenko in the staff of Suleiman Pasha's army there were 1000 of Circassian volunteers.[13] According to Russian reports, Circassians were armed better than Turks and much better than Russians.[14] In the battles for Shipka they were often described as snipers.[15] Cossack colonel Dukmasov, Skobelev's adjutant, in his memoirs paid great attention to Circassian tactical manners. He was very impressed with an attack of two Circassian regiments of the Sultan Guards.[16] We also find significant information about Circassians in the letters of N.P. Ignatiev, Russian ex-ambassador in Istanbul who during the warfare actions was in the Emperor's Staff.[17]

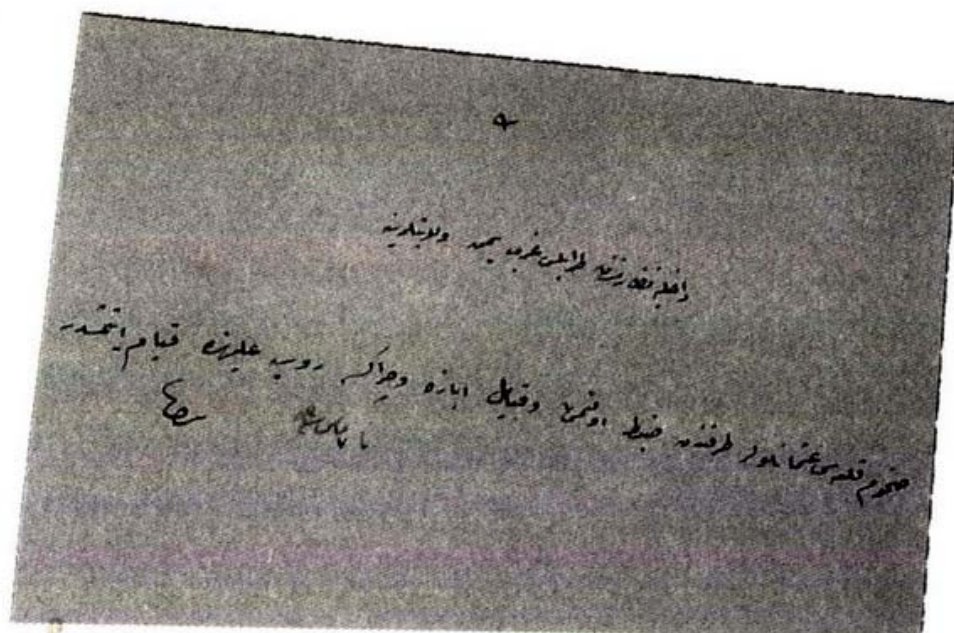
The ties of the two wars were also proved by Turkish landing in Abkhazia commanded by the Turkish army regular officers of Abkhazian origin.



Circassian Prince Medi-kusi-hann

So, what were the political results of that war for the rests of Circassia in Caucasus and for Circassian Diaspora in Turkey?

- 1) The year 1878 had finally closed for Circassians the opportunity of their homecoming.
- 2) Scale participation of Circassian volunteers in the structure of the Ottoman army, and also the landing of Abkhazians and Circassians in Abkhazia had created for those peoples the status of the “guilty” population in the Russian Empire.
- 3) The war spur on migratory moods among Adyghes of Kuban area and Kabarda. On the data of Kuban historian E.D. Felitsyn from Kuban area to Turkey since 1871 till 1883 13586 people migrated, among them Adyghes – 11417, Abazins – 1809. In 1900-1902 from Nalchik district to Turkey 3382 Kabardinians and Balkarians resettled.
- 4) It caused a scale deportation of Abkhazians, who were accused in complicity to the Turkish landing. G.A. Dzidzaria points to the information from Russian, Turkish and European sources according to which the total number of Abkhazian exiles made 50,000 people.
- 5) Under demand of Russia and Greece, and also in connection with Bulgaria’s detachment from the Ottoman Empire, almost universal resettlement of Circassians in Anatolia and Syria did not take a place, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan would not exist. For the reason that during its creation the most important role belonged to combination of the two major factors: Circassian community and Hashemite Dynasty.
- 6) The war made Circassians and Turks brothers in arms and fixed the special prestigious status of Circassians in the Ottoman Empire.



Document: Sohum Castle was captured by the Ottomans and Abaza and Circassian tribes revolted against the Russians

Notes

[1] Zapiska voennogo sovetnika pri Rossiyskom posolstve v Konstantinopole V.A. Frankini voennomu ministru D.A. Milyutinu o neobhodimosti i ob usloviah skoreishego vodvorenia spokoistvia na Kavkaze // Tragicheskie posledstvia Kavkazskoi voiny dlia adygov. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov. – Nalchik, 2000, p. 95.

[2] Ibid. p. 115.

[3] Fadeev R.A. Kavkazskaya voina. – M., 2003, pp. 129-130.

[4] Ibid. p. 152.

[5] RGVIA. F. VUA.D.6669 (1): Predpolozhenie o deistviah i zaniatiakh voisk Otdelnogo Kavkazskogo korpusa s oseny 1857 po esen 1858 g. – L.15.

[6] Romanovsky D.I. Prince A.I. Bariatinsky i Kavkazskaya voina. – SPb., 1888, p.7.

[7] Otzyv komanduyushego Kavkazskoi armiei velikogo kniazia Mihaila Nikolaevicha voennomu ministru // Problemy Kavkazskoi voiny i vyselenie cherkesov v predely Osmanskoi imperii. Sbornik arhivnykh materialov. – Nalchik, 2001, p. 264.

[8] Otnosheie nachalnika glavnogo shtaba Kavkazskoi armii Kartsova komanduyusheimu voiskami Kubanskoi oblasti Evdemikovu // Problemy Kavkazskoi voiny i vyselenie cherkesov, p. 233.

[9] Otnoshenie general-feldtseihmeistera velikogo kniazia Mihalia Nikolaevicha voennomu ministru o zavershenii zaselenia predgornoi zony i ob uspekhnykh deistviah Dahovskogo i Bzhedugskogo otriadov // Problemy Kavkazskoi voiny i vyselenie cherkesov, p. 260.

[10] Sbornik materialov po russko-turetskoi voine 1877-1878, na Balkanskom poluostrove. – SPb., 1898. – Vyp. VIII, p. 37.

[11] Zotov P.D. Dnevnik // Russkiy orel na Balkanah. Russko-turetskaya voina 1877-1878 gg. Glazami eio uchastnikov. Zapiski i vospominania. M., 2001, p. 93-94.

[12] Sbornik materialov po russko-turetskoi voine. Vyp. II, pp. 268.

[13] Nemirovich-Danchenko V. Ch. God voiny (dnevnik russkogo korrespondenta), 1877-1878. – SPb., 1878. – T.1, p.88.

[14] Ibid., p. 52.

[15] Ibid., p. 71.

[16] Dukmasov P. Vospominania o russko-turetskoi voine 1877-1878 gg. i m M.D. Skobeleva. – SPb., 1889, pp. 60-61, 110, 118.

[17] Ignatiev N.P. Pohodnye pisma 1877 goda. Pisma k E.L. Ignatievoi s balkanskogo teatra voennykh deistviy. – M., 1999, pp. 49, 75, 111-113, 124, 134, 140, 155, 157-158.

Circassian World is an independent non-profit web site dedicated to create an informational resource for Circassians and non-Circassians who wish to learn more about the heritage, culture, and history of the Adyghe-Abkhaz people. For more information regarding CW, please contact: info@circassianworld.com