

Article history: Received 26 May 2017 Accepted 26 August 2017

Kurds in the USSR, 1917-1956 | J. Otto Pohl [±]

Abstract

Soviet policy towards its Kurds fluctuated and remained fragmented, ambivalent, and inconsistent throughout the existence of the USSR. On one hand, the Soviet government provided for the material and cultural development of Kurds in Armenia and Azerbaijan during the 1920s and 1930s. On the other hand, in 1937 it deported a number of Kurds from Azerbaijan and in 1944 an even larger number from Georgia to Kazakhstan and Central Asia as special settlers. The Soviet government only freed Kurdish special settlers from the legal restrictions limiting their movement and other rights in April 1956. Former Kurdish special settlers, however, could not return to the Caucasus. The Kurds remained a diaspora group in the USSR without any national territory and only limited cultural institutions. Only in the late 1980s did this situation change.

Keywords: Georgia; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; NKVD; special settlers.

ABSTRACT IN KURMANJÎ

Kurd li Yekîtiya Komarên Sosyalîst ên Sovyetan ji 1917 heta 1956

Siyaseta Sovyetan beramber kurdên xwe, di hemû tarîxa YKSS de, pir caran guherî û hêrgav pirserî, xumam û nelihev bû. Li milekî, salên 1920an û 1930yan, dewleta Sovyetê îmkân dabîn kirin ji bo pêşketina çandî û samanî ya kurdên Ermenistan û Azerbeycanê. Li milê din, heman dewletê sala 1937an hejmareke kurdên Azerbeycanê û sala 1944an jî hejmareke pir mezintir a kurdên Gurcistanê wek muhacirên taybet şandine Qazaxistan û Asyaya Navendî. Dewleta Sovyetê şertên taybet ên li ser kurdên muhacir, yê ku bo nimûne nedihêlan ew ji cihêkî biçin cihê din, bes di nîsana 1956an de rakirin. Lê belê, muhacirên kurd ên destê pêşiyê nekarîn bizivirine Qeqazyayê. Kurd li YKSS wek cemaeteke diasporayê veman bêyî ti erdekî xwe yê neteweyî û bi tenê bi hindek dezgehên çandî. Bi tenê salên dawî yê 1980an ev rewş guherî.

ABSTRACT IN SORANI

Kurd le Yekyêtî Sovîyet 1917 ta 1956

Siyasetî Yekiyetî Sovyet le beramber Kurdekanî xoyda berz û nizmî be xoyewe bîniwe û le hemû temenî Yekiyetî Sovîyetda be şeweyekî natewaw, rarrayî û neguncaw mayewe. Le layenêkewe, hikumetî Yekiyetî Sovîyet, le nêwan salleanî 1920 û 1930ekan, helumercî bo geşey binerretî û kultûrîyî Kurdekan le Ermeniya û Azerbaycan rexisand. Le layenêkî tirewe, le salî 1937 jîmareyek le Kurdekanî le Azerbaycan derkird û tenanet le salî 1944 jîmareyekî zor ziyatir lewanî, wekû koçerî taybet, le Corciyawe rewaney Qezaxistan û Asyay Nawendî kird. Tenya le aprîlî 1956da, hikumetî Yekiyetî Sovîyet berbende yasayîyekanî le ser azadî hatûcû û mafekanî tîrî em koçere taybetane hellweşandewe. Bellam, ew kurdaney ke pêştir kirabûn be koçer yan nêştetecîy taybet boyan nebû bigerrênewe bo nawçey Qeqaz. Kurdekan wekû grupêkî diyaspora le Yekiyetî

[±] J. Otto Pohl, Department of Social Sciences, American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, Sulaimani - Kirkuk Main Road Raparin, Sulaimani, Iraq. Email: jonathan.otto@auis.edu.krd.



Sovîyetda manewe, bê ewey herêmekî niştîmanîyan hebê û tenya çend enistîtoyekî kultûrîy sinûrdaryan pê dra. Tenya le kotayî heştakanî sedey bîstemda doxeke gorrankarî beserda hat.

Introduction

The Kurds in the USSR like almost all other nationalities including diaspora minorities received concrete benefits from the policy of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization)¹ during the 1920s and 1930s.² Like many other diaspora minorities, however, they came under suspicion and suffered from persecution at the hands of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (*Narodnyi Kommissariat Vnutrennikh Del*, NKVD) during the "Great Terror" of 1937-1938 and again during World War II. During these two periods the NKVD deported a large number of Kurds from the Caucasus to Central Asia and placed them under special settlement restrictions after 1945.³ These restrictions greatly limited the ability of the Kurds to move and choose their residences. In turn these restrictions also limited the educational and employment options of the Kurds during this time. The deported Kurds and their children remained special settlers until 1956. Even after the removal of the special settlement restrictions, however, they still remained confined to Kazakhstan and Central Asia. Soviet policy towards its own citizens of Kurdish *natsional'nost'* would continue to be fragmented throughout the post-Stalin era.⁴

Literature Review

Most English language scholarship on the Kurds in the USSR has focused on the era of *korenizatsiia* in Armenia and Azerbaijan rather than on the later forced resettlements from the Caucasus to Central Asia. Two good examples of such scholarship are Michiel Leezenberg, "A People Forgotten by History": Soviet Studies of the Kurds" and Harun Yilmaz, "The Rise of Red Kurdistan" focusing on Armenia and Azerbaijan respectively. However, most of the literature on the forced resettlements, particularly those in November 1944 from Georgia, has been published in Russian. One partial exception is Terry Martin's "The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing" which has some material from the British archives on the 1937 deportation of Kurds from Azerbaijan. In particular the 1944 forced resettlements along with the much larger Meskhetian (Ahiska) Turkish population has been part of the focus of Russian scholars working on the issue of the Stalinist forced resettlements in general

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

² The Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia* officially started in 1923 and sought to promote the Sovietisation of non-Russian nationalities by supporting their national development within a socialist framework. This included support for educational and cultural institutions in their native languages as well as policies to increase their membership in Soviet state and party organs and among industrial workers. See (Martin, 2001).

³ The NKVD or People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs was the political and security police in the USSR from 1934-1946.

⁴ The Soviet term *natsional'nost'* has no direct translation into English. But, the closest one is racialised ethnicity. It was a state assigned category based upon biological descent from ethnic groups usually defined on the basis of ancestral language.

such as Bugai, Zemskov, and Pobol and Polian.⁵ This has left a lacuna in the English language literature on the Kurdish diasporas in Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan where almost the entire Kurdish population is descended from deportees in 1937 and 1944. It is perhaps not a coincidence that these diasporas, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, have experienced a material level of development in the 20th century far below that of many other nationalities in the USSR. Their plight has attracted some scholars among the small Kurdish intelligentsia in the former USSR and a few Russian scholars dealing with nationality issues. But, it has not attracted much attention from academics elsewhere.

The nature of this article precludes an extensive discussion of the historiography of Kurds in the USSR. However, a brief note on the main sources used in this article is in order. For primary sources I have relied upon several document collections in Russian. A number of these focus on the fate of the Kurds deported from Azerbaijan and particularly from Georgia to Kazakhstan and Central Asia during the Stalin regime.

Bugai the godfather of forced resettlement studies has contributed a considerable amount of research on the fate of Kurds deported to Kazakhstan and Central Asia as special settlers. His 1992 collection of Soviet archival documents on the national forced resettlements *Iosif Stalin – Lavrentiū Berii: “Ťeb nado deportirovat”*: *Dokumenty, fakty, kommentarii* (Josef Stalin – Lavrenty Beria: “They need to be deported”: *Documents, facts, commentary*) has a section on the forced resettlement and exile in Central Asia of the Meskhetian Turks, Kurds, and Hemshins deported from Georgia in November 1944. In 1993 he coauthored *Sovetskie Kurdy: Vremia Peremen* (Soviet Kurds: Time of Change) with Broev and Broev. Nearly twenty years later he came out with *Kurdskaia mir Rossii: Politiko-pravovaia praktika, integratsiia, etnokul’turnoe vozrozhdenie* (1917–2010–e-gody) (*Kurdish world in Russia: Political-legal practice, integration, ethno-cultural rebirth* (1917–2010)). Both of these works which include the reproduction of a number of Soviet archival documents are attempts to write general ethnic histories of the Kurdish minority in the USSR.

An important source in Soviet ethnic histories are the various Soviet censuses of 1926, 1937, 1939, 1959, 1970, 1979, and 1989. K. Amoev and N. Mosaki, *Kurdy I Yezidy perepisiakh naseleniia Rossiiskoi imperii, SSSR I stran postsovetского prostranstva* (*Kurds and Yezidis census population in the Russian empire, USSR and countries of post-Soviet space*) makes use of this data to trace a demographic history of the Kurds and Yezidis in the USSR throughout the seven decades of the USSR’s existence. It provides a good basic outline of the changing population dynamics of this group in the Caucasus and Central Asia

⁵ The Meskhetian (Ahiska) Turks are the Turkish speaking Muslim population of the area of Meskheta in Georgia that came under Russian rule as a result of the 1828 Russo-Turkish war. Their origins are a mixture of Turkish migrants and other groups most notably Georgians that adopted the Ottoman Turkish language and Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school under Ottoman influence.

⁶ Lavrenty Beria was head of the NKVD from 1938 to 1945.

from the years of *korenizatsiia* in the 1920s through the repression in the 1930s and 1940 and up through the last four decades of Soviet rule after World War II.

The Early Years

The Kurdish population in the Russian Empire like many nationalities only became largely incorporated at the beginning of the 19th century. It is during this time that the Russian Empire expanded southward into the Caucasus. Earlier a smaller number of Kurds had been settled by the Persian shah into Khorasan part of which is now Turkmenistan. The growth in the Kurdish population of the Russian Empire during the 19th century occurred due to both territorial expansion into the Southern Caucasus leading to the annexation of the territory of present day Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia and immigration from the region of Kurdistan into these newly acquired territories of the Russian Empire. This migration took place over a period of about a century from the start of the Russian-Persian War of 1804-1813 to World War One in 1914-1918 (Amoev and Mosaki, 2004: 4). A large wave of Kurds from the Ottoman and Persian Empires immigrated into the Russian ruled Transcaucasian region in 1874 (Ibid: 5). The 1897 Russian census counted nearly 100,000 people that designated Kurdish as their native language (Ibid: 10-11). Another large wave arrived in 1916 in the middle of the First World War (Ibid: 5). The Kurdish population of the USSR thus has mixed origins.

Korenizatsiia

The Kurds in the Transcaucasian republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia enjoyed a number of national institutions during the 1920s and 1930s. This was especially true in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The 1926 Soviet census counted 54,662 Kurds and 14,526 Yezidis for a total population of 69,184⁷. This distinction between Kurds and Yezidis disappeared in the 1939 census and later Soviet sources. The vast majority of the population designated as Kurds rather than Yezidis was distributed as follows: 41,193 people, lived in Azerbaijan. Another 7,955 lived in Georgia, 3,025 in Armenia, and 2,308 in Turkmenistan. (Amoev and Mosaki, 2014: 16-17). Most of the Yezidis lived in Armenia, 12,237 in 1926 and they are counted as Kurds rather than a separate group in the 1939 census (Ibid: 18, 32). The Kurdish populations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are almost all the result of the Stalinist forced resettlements of 1937 and 1944.

The 1920s and early 1930s represented the height of *korenizatsiia* for the Kurds and other non-Russian nationalities in the USSR. The Kurds received one territory in the Azerbaijan republic bearing their name. The vast majority of Kurds in Azerbaijan, which constituted a significant majority of the Kurds

⁷ This is the total listed in the census. But, it is obviously an error as the two component parts of the sum add up to 69,188.

in the USSR, lived in this territory in 1926 (Amoev and Mosaki: 30). The Kurdistan *Uezd* or “Red Kurdistan”, which centered on the Lachin district existed from 1923 to 1929 (Yilmaz, 2014: 802). Despite having Kurdistan in its name it was not a national autonomous territory like Nagorno-Karabakh also in Azerbaijan. In April 1929 the Soviet authorities eliminated all *uezds* and replaced them or absorbed them into the larger *okrugs* units.⁸ This was simply a redrawing of administrative lines on the map. The population remained in place. The Kurdistan *uezd* initially became subsumed into Nagorno-Karabakh *Okrug* until May 1930 when the Azeri Central Executive Committee created the Kurdistan *Okrug*. However, like *uezds* in 1929, the Soviet government abolished all *okrugs* including Kurdistan on 23 July 1930 (Ibid: 803-804). After this abolition, no further territories named Kurdistan or including the word Kurdish were ever again established in the USSR.

The promotion of the Kurdish language and education in the USSR, however, only saw results in the 1930s after the Kurdistan *Okrug* ceased to exist. These results remained limited despite an official commitment by Moscow to provide for native language education for all national and ethnic minorities in the USSR. According to the 1926 Soviet census out of 37,182 Kurds in the Kurdistan *Uezd* only 3,123 of them spoke Kurdish (Yilmaz, 2014: 813). The vast majority of Kurds in Azerbaijan at this time spoke Azeri as their primary language. In 1930 immediately after the elimination of the Kurdistan *Okrug* Azerbaijan did not have any Kurdish language primary schools or textbooks (Ibid: 818). A push to provide Kurdish language education to ethnic Kurds in Azerbaijan only started in 1931 and the first classes in primary schools started in autumn of 1933 (Yilmaz, 2014: 820). Azerbaijan published some Kurdish textbooks in 1934 and again in 1936. By 1938 only 808 pupils had received some Kurdish language education in 12 schools in Azerbaijan (Ibid: 821). The limited results of *korenizatsiia* for Kurds in Azerbaijan during the early Soviet era coincided with a dramatic drop in their official numbers during this time. The 1926 census listed 41,193 Kurds in Azerbaijan while the 1939 census listed only 6,005 (Amoev and Mosaki, 18, 32). This massive decrease in the official numbers occurred primarily due to the identification of people previously listed as Kurds in 1926 as Azeris in 1939. It appears that both of these facts were the result of a strongly national chauvinist local leadership in the Azerbaijan republic to monopolise the benefits of the Soviet nationalities policy for the Turkic Azeris to the exclusion of national and ethnic minorities in the republic such as Kurds.

In contrast the Kurds in the Armenian republic benefited considerably more from *korenizatsiia* than did their co-ethnics in Azerbaijan. Indeed Leezenberg (2015) argues, “The Kurdish national identity was formed primarily in Soviet Armenia, and arguably shaped by the conceptions and conditions obtaining in that republic” (p. 748). Yerevan along with Leningrad was one of two academic

⁸ The Soviet territorial designations of *Uezd* and *Okrug* are roughly equivalent to the Western concept of counties. *Okrugs* were larger than *Uezds*.

centers in the USSR for the academic study of the Kurdish people and Kurdish language (Leezenberg, 2015: 754). Already by 1921, Armenia had five Kurdish language schools with 250 pupils (Ibid: 755) and the Soviet government sponsored a major Kurdology conference in Yerevan in 1934 (Ibid: 758). During the 1920s and early 1930s scholars in the Armenian SSR created a Kurdish alphabet, collected folklore, compiled textbooks, and promoted teaching in Kurdish. The Kurdish language spread both in print form and orally through radio broadcasts (Ibid: 762). The Armenian republic from 1920 to 1935 was the first government to provide such wide ranging official support for creating a modern Kurdish national identity.

From 1935 to 1953 there was an end to the promotion of the Kurdish language and Kurdish scholarship in the Armenian republic. But, unlike in Azerbaijan support for Kurdish cultural and scholastic projects resumes after Stalin's death. This was part of a larger revival of *korenizatsiia* in the USSR. The Kurds were unusual at this time in benefiting from these policies without having a national territory in the USSR. Instead their culture and related scholarship on it was promoted in an extra-territorial fashion in the Armenian republic. In particular by people associated with the Armenian Academy of Sciences and University of Yerevan such as Hacıye Cindi (Leezenberg, 2015: 757). It was in Armenia that Soviet Kurdish culture has its greatest flourishing.

In 1946 the Soviet government introduced a new unified Kurdish alphabet based on Cyrillic for all Kurds in the USSR (Bugai, 2012: 13) which replaced the earlier Latin and Armenian based alphabets used by Soviet Kurds (Ibid: 12). From this point on the Kurdish writing systems were divided between Cyrillic for the USSR, Persian for Iraq and Iran, and Latin for Turkey.

Forced Resettlement and Repression in 1937

During the late 1930s as part of the "Great Terror" the Stalin regime began to physically repress some Kurdish communities in the USSR as "unreliable people" living on the Soviet borders with ethnic ties to communities connected to Turkey and Iran.⁹ At this time the Soviet government liquidated a number of Kurdish language institutions such as schools and newspapers and the NKVD simultaneously arrested a number of Kurdish communists and members of the intelligentsia (Kasymov, 1993: 97). The Soviet government also forcibly resettled a number of Kurds, Armenians, and Turks from the borders of Armenia and Azerbaijan to Kazakhstan during this time. This resettlement occurred on the basis of Council of People's Commissars (*Soviet Narodnykh Kommissarov*, SNK) Resolution no. 2123-420ss of 17 December 1936.¹⁰ An NKVD report from 23 April 1939 on deportees from Armenia and Azerbaijan

⁹ In 1937-1938, the NKVD undertook a massive series of campaigns against "enemies" of the Soviet state that involved the arrest of more than 1.5 million people and the execution of nearly half this number. Most of the remainder of those arrested were sent to Corrective Labor Camps. Collectively these campaigns are referred to as the "Great Terror."

¹⁰ The SNK was the chief executive organ of the Soviet state.

to Kazakhstan noted that they had resettled 3,101 (553 families) Kurds to Alma-Ata and South Kazakhstan *oblasts*.¹¹ The report claimed that all of these people were either guilty of “counterrevolutionary crimes”, dealing in “contraband”, or “bandits” and members of their families. These became standard collective accusations for mass national forced resettlements and the Soviet authorities did not bother to cite individual cases either for the Kurds or other groups. These deportees had been resettled on *kolkhozes* (collective farms), *sovkhazes* (state farms), and rubber factories (Pobol and Polian, 2005: 77). These deportees constituted the first wave of Kurds repressed in the USSR for national reasons.

Initially the Kurds resettled in Kazakhstan came under the authority of the Section of Corrective Labor Colonies – Labor Settlements People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the Kazakh republic. In July 1938 the Soviet regime transferred responsibility for the deportees to the district sections of the NKVD where they had been settled. On 25 March 1938 the GULag (Main Administration of Camps) clarified the legal restrictions on the Kurdish resettlers. Like Poles resettled from Ukraine they could not leave the districts in Kazakhstan where they had been deported. (Pobol and Polian, 2005: 77-78). Unlike the kulaks deported earlier or national groups deported during World War II the Kurds sent to Kazakhstan from Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1937 did not have any special commandants supervising them. This lack of security to prevent the deportees from leaving their places of exile resulted in a large number of escapes. In July and August 1938, 196 Kurds (54 families) returned from Kazakhstan to Azerbaijan without authorization. Other Kurdish resettlers moved from one oblast in Kazakhstan to another without permission (Ibid: 78). One reason for such movement was the failure to provide livestock to the resettled Kurds in contrast to the Armenians resettled at this time who mostly did receive animals.

Flight also characterised the Kurds resettled in Kyrgyzstan at this time. In 1937 the Soviets settled 122 Kurdish families at the site of the “Kok-Yangak” mine located in Osh *Oblast*. By April 1939 only 84 of these families remained at the mine. The other 38 had fled to unknown regions. The descendants of those that did not escape, however, continued to live in the region throughout the entire Soviet era (Kasymov, 1993: 97). Almost all of the Kurds in Kyrgyzstan remained in rural areas where most of them engaged in sheep herding (Ibid: 98). Unlike a number of other diaspora minorities in Kyrgyzstan such as Germans, Russians, Greeks, Jews, Chechens, and others the Kurds have not returned in large numbers to their historical homeland. This means that there are still Kurdish populations spread throughout remote rural regions of Kyrgyzstan. In large part this has been due to the lack of an independent Kurdish state outside the USSR or an autonomous republic with in it.

¹¹ An oblast was a Soviet territorial division roughly equal to a province.

The combined effects of national reclassification, pressure to assimilate, forced resettlements, and other forms of repression greatly altered the demographic situation of the Kurds in the USSR. In 1939 the total Kurdish population including Yezidis had been reduced to 45,877 from 69,184 in 1926. In Azerbaijan the Kurdish population dropped from 41,193 to 6,005. This is a decrease of nearly 84.5% (Amoev and Mosaki, 2014: 33). Some of this was due to the forced resettlement of Kurds to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and other forms of repression. The Kurdish population of Kazakhstan had increased from zero in the 1926 census to 2,387 in 1939 or 5.2% of all Kurds in the USSR. Likewise the number of Kurds in Kyrgyzstan increased from none to 1,490 or 3.2% of Soviet Kurds (Ibid: 32). Most of the loss of the Kurdish population in the USSR and especially in Azerbaijan from 1926 to 1939, however, occurred due to a high level of official assimilation or change of stated nationality by Muslim Kurds. In contrast the Kurdish populations of Georgia and Armenia increased significantly during this time. Armenia went from 3,025 Kurds to 20,481 and Georgia from 7,955 to 12,915 (Ibid: 17 and 32). This growth in the two Christian Transcaucasian republics resulted from three factors. The most important factor was the reclassification of Yezidis as Kurds in the 1939 census. This accounts for over 12,000 people in Armenia. The next factor was the high natural growth rate of the almost completely rural Yezidi population especially in Armenia. Finally, there was some in migration into Armenia from Azerbaijan of people classified as Kurds. By 1939 the majority of Kurdish speakers in Armenia consisted of Yezidis (Ibid: 31-34). The decline in the overall Kurdish population between the 1926 and 1939 censuses due to assimilation and reclassification in Azerbaijan was a demographic anomaly. The 1959 and subsequent censuses showed an overall increase in the Kurdish population of the USSR despite World War II, a new wave of repression starting in November 1944, and continued assimilation of Muslim Kurds into the larger Azeri and Meskhetian Turk populations.

Kurds in the USSR during World War II

Kurds like other repressed nationalities in the USSR fought in the ranks of the Red Army and the pro-Soviet partisans in Ukraine against Nazi Germany. They also participated in the Soviet intervention and occupation of northern Iran in 1941 (Bugai, 2005: 307). This demonstration of political loyalty, however, did nothing to prevent the forced resettlement of thousands of Kurds from Georgia to Central Asia in 1944 including a number of military veterans. At Smolensk early on in the war, Annamedov from near Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan served with distinction as did the poet Khashe Muradov (Ibid: 307-308). Already on 1 October 1941, the Kurdish soldier Siabandov received the award, Hero of the Soviet Union. At the battle of Sevastopol the Kurdish sniper Akhmedov from Azerbaijan killed 17 enemy soldiers in the course of ten days. Nadirov, Jafarov, and Chatoev among other Kurdish officers defended Leningrad. During the course of 1942 the Kurdish sniper Navrozov again from

Azerbaijan killed 80 enemy soldiers. At the battle of Stalingrad which turned the war decisively against the Germans a large number of Kurds from Armenia and Azerbaijan fought including Aloian, Asadov, Shamil-zade, and Akhmedov. Soviet Kurds also enthusiastically participated in the partisan movement resisting Nazi occupation. Karasev received both the Hero of the Soviet Union and the medal Partisan of the Fatherland War (First Degree) for his organization of guerrillas to fight against the German occupation in Volhynia Oblast in Ukraine. Among those that fought with him were Mamedov. Other Kurds involved in organising partisan warfare against the Germans included Naumov and Jangoian. Participating in the advance through Hungary were Kurds from Armenia like Yarmatov and Kurds from Azerbaijan like Shirnov (Ibid: 308). On 31 October 1945, the NKVD moved Kurds and other representatives of “punished peoples” from the Red Army to Central Asia and placed them under special settlement restrictions (Bugai, Broev, and Broev, 1993: 81). The participation of Kurds in the Soviet Red Army and partisan units against the Nazis was quite significant given their small numbers. A 1949 NKVD count of surviving military veterans among Kurdish special settlers from Georgia showed four former officers, 15 sergeants, and 122 rank and file soldiers. This same count also found 25 Kurdish members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union among the special settlers (Ibid: 89). Soviet Kurds also participated in the brief war against Japan from August to September 1945. Major Ajoev was second in command of a self-propelled artillery regiment in Manchuria during this time (Bugai, 2005: 309). The patriotic participation in the defense of the USSR against Nazi Germany by Soviet Kurds, however, did not save the Kurds of Meskheta and Adzharia from punitive resettlement as special settlers in Central Asia.

Forced Resettlement and Special Settlement from 1944-1956

The NKVD sent thousands of Kurds from Georgia to Central Asia in November 1944. This second wave was much larger than the first wave of Kurds deported from the Caucasus in 1937. This new wave of deportees totaled 8,694 people and was part of the much larger forced resettlement of Meskhetian Turks and a small number of Hemshins sent eastward (Bugai, 1995: 169-170). The Soviet motivation for the forced resettlement of the Kurds from Georgia had to do with their association with their Meskhetian Turkish neighbors. The Stalin regime believed that the Turks, Kurds, and Hemshins in Meskheta and Adzharia formed a single unreliable cohort of Muslims politically linked to the Turkish Republic. The first lines of the forced resettlement order signed by Stalin in July 1944 reads:

With the goal of strengthening the protection of the state borders of the Georgian SSR the State Committee for Defense resolves:

1. To resettle from the border zones of the Georgian SSR – Akhaltsikhe, Andigen Aspindza, Bogdanovka raions and Adzhar

ASSR – 16,700 households with a population of 86,000 Turks, Kurds and Hemshins; of this number to Kazakh SSR – 40 thousand, to Uzbek SSR – 30 thousand, to Kirgiz SSR – 16 thousand. (Bugai, 1992: 151-152)

The Stalin regime believed that the Kurds along the border region had been sufficiently Turkicised both under the Ottomans and later by their neighbors that they too constituted a security threat. Beria, the head of the NKVD wrote in a telegraph to Stalin, Molotov, and Malenkov on 28 November 1944 that the Turks, Kurds, and Hemshins endangered the border of Georgia with Turkey by virtue of their connections with Turkish intelligence agents:

In response to the resolution of the State Committee for Defense, the NKVD undertook to resettle from the border regions of the Georgian SSR, Turks, Kurds and Hemshins.

A significant part of the population in the border regions had family relations in Turkey, had been occupied in smuggling, displayed a desire to emigrate and served Turkish intelligence organs as a source for recruiting spies and planting bandit groups. (Bugai, 1992: 155-156).

On 31 July 1944 GKO Resolution No. 6279ss ordered the resettlement of 86,000 Turks, Kurds, and Hemshins from the border regions of Georgia to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan (Bugai, 2012: 163). An NKVD decree (No. 001176) of 20 September 1944 ordered the execution of this forced removal during the period of time between the 15th and 25th of November 1944 (Ibid: 163-165). This forced resettlement removed almost all the Kurds from Meskheta and Abkhazia. The only exception were women married to men of Russian, Georgian, or other unstigmatized nationalities (Bugai, Broev and Broev, 1993: 75). However, it represented less than a quarter of the Kurdish population of the USSR as a whole. The much larger Kurdish population in Armenia as well as several thousand Kurds living in the interior of Georgia remained without being subjected to forced resettlement. In this sense the Kurdish forced resettlements more closely resembled those of the Greeks¹² rather than the Meskheta Turks.

Material conditions both during the forced resettlements and after arrival in Central Asia and Kazakhstan for the Kurds were extremely substandard. During the transportation itself a number perished from the cold as the train wagons used to deport them could not be properly heated. Upon arrival they

¹² In both the cases of the Kurds and the Greeks in the USSR a large minority were forcibly resettled in several waves from areas where they had settled as diaspora groups to eastern areas of the Soviet Union. The majority of Greeks and Kurds in the Soviet Union, however, were not subjected to resettlement. Most ethnic Greeks in the USSR remained in the Black Sea region during the Soviet era just as most Kurds remained in the Caucasus. This differentiated them from groups like the Koreans, Germans, Meskheta Turks, Chechens, Ingush, Karachais, Balkars, Kalmyks, and Crimean Tatars where the vast majority were forcibly resettled to either Kazakhstan, Siberia, or Central Asia.

suffered from epidemics of acute typhus that contributed greatly to an increase in premature mortality due to a severe lack of any kind of medical service for the deportees. The official Soviet figures on deaths among the deported Meskhetian (Ahiska) Turks, Kurds, and Hemshins from 1944 to 1948 is 11.8% (Bugai, Broev, and Broev, 1993: 84). There is no breakdown of deaths among the individual nationalities. Additionally, they lacked basic food stuffs and would have suffered much higher death rates except for the provision of thousands of tons of emergency assistance provided to them by the Soviet government. Construction material for housing also was in short supply (Ibid: 85). Malnutrition and overcrowded and unhygienic living conditions contributed substantially to the spread and severity of acute typhus among the deportees.

The forced resettlement of the Kurds from Georgia in 1944 and their subsequent resettlement in Kazakhstan and Central Asia involved considerably more security than the 1937 resettlement. The Kurds deported from Georgia to Central Asia in November 1944 unlike those deported from Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1937 came under the control of the special commandants of the NKVD. This meant they were under direct police surveillance. The 812 Kurds in Kyrgyzstan that had been deported from Azerbaijan in 1937, only came under the special settlement restrictions in 1944 (Bugai, Broev, and Broev, 1993: 80). The special settlement regime was a confined system of internal exile that sought to severely limit the mobility of deported groups and individuals. Special commandants from the NKVD supervised and controlled the deportees' residency, employment, and movement. Legal restrictions codified on 8 January 1945 made the deported Kurds and other special settlers in the USSR second-class citizens.

Council of Peoples Commissariats Union of SSRs

Resolution No. 35

From 8 January 1945

Moscow, Kremlin

On the legal situation of special settlers

Council of Peoples Commissariats Union of SSRs RESOLVES:

1. Special settlers enjoy all rights of citizens of the USSR with the exception of restrictions, provided for in the present Resolution.

2. All able bodied special settlers are obliged to be engaged in socially useful labor.

Towards this goal local Soviets of workers deputies in coordination with organs of the NKVD are to organize labor arrangements of the special settlers in agriculture, industrial enterprises, construction, and economic cooperative organizations and institutions.

The violation of labor discipline by special settlers is subject to punishment according to existing laws.

3. Special settlers do not have the right without the authorization of the NKVD special commandant to be absent from the boundaries of the region of settlement served by their special commandant.

Voluntary absence from the boundaries of the region of settlement, served by the special commandant, will be viewed as flight and treated as a criminal matter.

4. Special settlers – heads of families or people substituting for them are required within a three day period to report to the special commandant of the NKVD all events that change the composition of the family (birth of a child, death of a family member, flight, etc.).

5. Special settlers are obliged to strictly observe the established regime and social order of the places of settlement and obey all orders of the special commandant of the NKVD.

The violation of the regime and social order in the places of settlement by settlers is subject to administrative sanction in the form of a fine up to 100 rubles or incarceration up to five days.

Deputy Chairman

Council of Peoples Commissariats Union of SSRs V. Molotov

Administrative Affairs

Council of Peoples Commissariats Union of SSRs Ia. Chadaev.

(Zemskov, 2005: 120-121)

Despite these harsh rules, the NKVD, still found considerable resistance to abiding by them among the special settlers. In particular, escapes from the boundaries of the special settlement territories by deportees continued to be a major problem for the NKVD and later Ministry of Internal Affairs during the years 1945 to 1948.¹³ To counter this trend the Soviet government increased the restrictions on special settlers significantly on 26 November 1948. An *ukaz* (decree) by the Supreme Soviet on this date made the internal exile of deported nationalities in the USSR permanent.

UKAZ

PRESIDIUM of the SUPREME SOVIET of the USSR

¹³ In 1946 the Soviet government renamed the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs).

On the criminal responsibilities for flight from places of obligatory and decreed settlement of people exiled to distant regions of the Soviet Union in the period of the Fatherland War.

With the goal of strengthening the regime of settlement for those exiled by Supreme organs of the USSR in the period of the Fatherland War Chechens, Karachais, Ingush, Balkars, Kalmyks, Germans, Crimean Tatars and others, that at the time of their resettlement there was not a specified length of their exile, this decree establishes that those resettled to distant regions of the Soviet Union by decrees of people in the high leadership are exiled forever, without the right to return to their previous places of residence.

For the voluntary leaving (flight) from places of obligatory settlement those exiles that are guilty will be subject to being prosecuted for criminal acts. It is determined that the punishment for this crime is 20 years of hard labor.

Cases related to the flight of exiles will be reviewed by Special Boards of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR.

People, guilty of harboring exiles, fleeing from places of obligatory settlement, or assisting their flight, giving permission for exiles to return to their places of previous residence, and rendering them help in accommodations in their places of previous residence, are subject to criminal penalties. It is determined that the sentence for this crime is deprivation of freedom for a period of five years.

Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR

N. SHVERNIK

Secretary of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR

A. GORKIN

Moscow, Kremlin

26 November 1945. (Zemskov, 2005: 160).

Although Kurds were not listed specifically in the above decree, later Soviet documents make it clear that it did indeed apply to the Kurds deported from Georgia to Kazakhstan and Central Asia in 1944. A circular from 22 December 1948 by Ministry of Internal Affairs chief Kruglov and Chief Procurator of the USSR Safonov on implementing the ukaz of 26 November 1948 specifically mentioned Kurds as one of the nationalities subject to eternal banishment (Bugai, Broev, and Broev, 1993: 87-88). The eternal banishment of course only applied to the Kurds deported from the Caucasus and designated special settlers.

The number of Kurdish special settlers from Georgia and their children in January 1953 numbered 8,843 of which 3,921, almost half were children under 16. The largest number of them lived in Kazakhstan, 5,404 of which 2,926 were children. The next largest number lived in Kyrgyzstan with 2,591 of which

1,429 were children. Finally, 686 including 396 children lived in Uzbekistan (Bugai, Broev, and Broev, 1993: 94). The Kurdish communities in Kazakhstan and Central Asia are largely descended from these deportees.

The deported Kurds and their descendants remained under the special settlement restrictions in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan until 28 April 1956. On that date the Soviet government lifted them from the special settler lists along with Meskhetian Turks, Hemshins, Balkars, and Crimean Tatars (Bugai, 1992: 273). Despite being freed from the rule of the special commandants, all of these deportees, except the Balkars, were prohibited from returning to their ancestral homeland for the next thirty years. Those deported from Georgia and Crimea remained in exile in Central Asia for most of the remaining years of the USSR.

Release from the Special Settlements

After Stalin's death on 5 March 1953, the situation for Kurds in the USSR along with other special settlers improved dramatically. The special settlement regime for the deported peoples was steadily dismantled in a piecemeal fashion. In 1955-1956 the Soviet government released most of the national deportees from the special settlement restrictions starting with the Germans, continuing on to the Kalmyks, then the Crimean Tatars, Balkars, Meskhetian Turks, Kurds, and Hemshins, and finally the Chechens, Ingush, and Karachais (Zemskov, 2005: 251; and Bugai, 1992: 270-275). On 28 April 1956, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet passed resolution No. 136/142 "On Lifting the Restrictions of Special Settlement from Crimean Tatars, Balkars, Turks – Citizens of the USSR, Kurds, Hemshins and members of their families, exiled in the period of the Great Fatherland War." This decree removed the above nationalities from the count of the special settlement lists and freed them from administrative surveillance by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. However, it also explicitly banned them from receiving compensation for property lost during the forced resettlements or returning to their former places of residency before the forced resettlements (Bugai, 1992: 273). Despite later rehabilitation decrees, as a practical matter the Kurds deported from Georgia to Kazakhstan and Central Asia and their descendants were never able to return to their former ancestral home Meskheta. They instead remained largely in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan where they formed new ethnic minority communities.

Conclusion

The Soviet government failed to grant the full rights to its Kurdish citizens that most other nationalities gained and maintained from the 1920s. Unlike Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Uzbeks, and others the Kurds in the USSR never had a national territorial state formation to support their national culture. The brief experiment of Red Kurdistan was unable to sustain Kurdish national institutions during its brief period of existence. On the other hand despite significant repression in the 1930s and 1940s only a minority of the Kurdish

population in the USSR became subject to internal forced resettlement from the Caucasus to Central Asia. In this way their situation resembles that of the Greeks in the Soviet Union. In both cases a significant minority of a diaspora nationality living in the Caucasus found itself the victim of Soviet ethnic cleansing. This contrasts with the fate of other Caucasian nationalities such as the Karachais, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, and Meskhetian Turks where the Stalin regime forcibly relocated almost the entire population of these groups. The Kurds also suffered from fewer premature deaths in exile compared to these groups, especially the Chechens. After Stalin's death the deported Kurds were released from the special settlement restrictions and there was a revival of Kurdish culture in the USSR.

References

- Amoev, K., & Mosaki, N. (2014). Kurdy i yezidi perezisakh naseleniia Rossiiskoi imperii, SSR i stran postsovskogo postranstva. Moscow: Institute of Oriental Research House of Yezidis Georgia.
- Bugai, N.F., (ed.) (1992). Iosif Stalin – Lavrentiiu Berii: “Ikh nado deportirovat”: Dokumenty, fakty, kommentarii. Moscow: “Druzhba narodov.”
- Bugai, N. F. (1995). L. Beria – I. Stalinu: Soglasno vashemu ukazaniu. Moscow: AIRO – XX.
- Bugai, N.F. (2005). Srazhalis’ z rodinu: Predstaviteli repressirovannykh narodov SSSR na frontakh velikoi Otechestvennoi voyny: Kniga-khronika. Moscow: Novyi Khronograf.
- Bugai, N.F. (2012). Kurdsii mir Rossii: Politiko-pravovaia praktika, integratsiia, ethnokul’turnoe vozrozhdenie (1917-2010-e-gody). St. Petersburg: Aleteia.
- Bugai, N., Broev, T. and Broev, P. (1993). Sovetskie kurdy: Vremia peremen. Moscow: Kar.
- Kasymov, S. (1993). Kurdy ocherk. In S.U. Alieva (ed.), (1993). Tak eto bylo: Natsional’nye repressii v SSSR, 1919-1952 gody, vol. 1. Moscow: Insan
- Leezenberg, M. (2015). A people forgotten by history: Soviet Studies of the Kurds. *Iranian Studies*, 48(5): 747-767.
- Martin, T. (1998). The origins of Soviet ethnic cleansing. *Journal of Modern History*, 70 (4), 813-861.
- Martin, T. (2001). *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press.
- Pobol, N.L., & Polian, P.M. (eds.) (2005). Staliniskie deportatsii 1928-1953. Dokumenty. Moscow: Materik.
- Yilmaz, H. (2014). The rise of red Kurdistan. *Iranian Studies*, 47 (5), 799-822.
- Zemskov, V.N. (2005). Spetsposelentsy v SSSR: 1930-1960. Moscow: Nauka.