

Derin Senkesen Research Paper

Circassian Genocide

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Introduction

Tribes	Before	After	Percent Remaining	Percent died or deported
Kabardins	500,000	35,000	7.000%	93.000%
Shapsugs	300,000	1,983	0.661%	99.339%
Abzakhs	260,000	14,660	5.648%	94.362%
Natukhais	240,000	175	0.073%	99.927%
Temirgoys	80,000	3,140	3.925%	96.075%
Bzhedugs	60,000	15,263	25.438%	74.561%
Mamkhegs	8,000	1,204	15.050%	84.950%
Ademeys	3,000	230	7.667%	92.333%
Ubykhs	74,000	0	0.000%	100.000%
Zhaneys and Hatuqways	100,000	0	0.000%	100.000%

Table 1. Consequences of Russian Colonisation – Ethnic population after and before (Kazemzadeh & Shahrokh)

The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, held in a region symbolic of Circassian suffering, reignited international awareness of the Circassian genocide, leading to widespread protests. *(Catic 1)*

This raised awareness of an event in history that was virtually unknown to the rest of the world, yet continues to affect the Circassian diaspora, many of whom have maintained ties with their homeland and even attempted to re-immigrate. *(Bram 1)*

The indigenous people of the Northern Caucasus region, which was a buffer zone between Russia and southern states like Persia and the Ottoman Empire, faced one of the most extreme examples of ethnic cleansing, including systemic expulsion, massacres, and forced exodus. Ottoman records indicate that 595,000 Circassians left Circassia for the Ottoman Empire between 1856 and 1864. *(Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada)* “Within two years, about

half-a-million Circassians or about 90 per cent of Western Circassians fled by boats across the sea to the Ottoman Empire...” (Rawashdeh)

A key development leading up to the tragedy of the Circassian genocide was the Crimean War, fought between Russian, Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire, which exposed the Russian Empire’s internal vulnerabilities and exacerbated its interests in securing strategic access to the Black Sea region. The outcome of the Crimean War influenced Russia’s policies of consolidating control over the Caucasus and eliminating potential threats along its Southern borders. Therefore, this essay aims to elaborate on how Russia’s push for territorial expansion had a vital role in shaping their policies towards the Circassians.

Moreover, Tsar Alexander II’s reign was characterised by his reforms, a notable example being his decision to emancipate the serfs in 1861. The need for modernization in Russian society was a motivating factor for Alexander’s abolition of serfdom, especially in the wake of the empire’s defeat in the Crimean War. While regarded as a significant leap in social advancement, it had unintended consequences for the Russian Empire, and this reform would also contribute to broader imperial ambitions and internal power dynamics, raising the question of its influence on the decision to deport the Circassians. This essay will probe the extent to which the abolition of serfdom was a decisive factor in the deportation of the Circassian community.

Religion also played a significant role in defining the century-long conflict between the Eastern Orthodox Russian Empire and the Circassian community, which practised Sufi Islam. Not only was the Russo-Circassian war a matter of territorial supremacy for the Russian Empire, but it also had a patriotic objective, emphasised as a civilizational struggle between Orthodox Christianity and Islam, leading to policies of Russification and religious suppression. The essay will further explore the extent to which these religious tensions,

along with the socio-economic reforms of the period, contributed to the mass deportation.

(OpenAI)

Finally, the research question guiding this analysis is: *To what extent was Tsar Alexander II's liberation of the serfs in 1861 the primary reason behind his deportation of the Circassian community from Russia in 1864?* By examining the aftermath of the Crimean War, along with the Russian Empire's socio-economic reforms and the religious dynamics of the Caucasus, this essay will delve into how these contributed to one of the 19th century's worst events of ethnic cleansing.

The Crimean War (1853-1856)

A conflict that immensely altered the geopolitical state of Europe and the Middle East was the Crimean War (1853-1856) and it played a crucial role in the subsequent domestic policies of Alexander II, including the abolition of serfdom and the forced relocation of Circassians.

The Crimean War can be traced back to the secret Anglo-Russian understanding of 1844 between the Russian Empire and Great Britain, where both nations mutually agreed to maintain the status quo in the Middle East and partition the Ottoman Empire in case of its collapse. The agreement aimed to challenge French influence in the region, particularly concerning the protection of Orthodox Christians in the region. As David Wedgwood Benn notes in *The Crimean War* (2012), *"The Russian tsar sought to establish a protectorate over the Ottoman Empire's Orthodox subjects."* (Benn 2) However, exacerbated by Britain's aggressive economic policies and the rising tensions over the *"Eastern Question,"* the

agreement fell apart, leading to the onset of the Crimean War. Under Tsar Nicholas I, the Russian Empire's objective was to expand its influence over the Balkans, Asia Minor, and the Caucasus, further fueling the conflict as it aimed to secure the southern coasts and assert its role as the protector of Christians. According to Mira Ahmad, the Crimean War gave hope to the Circassians that Western powers such as Great Britain might intervene on their behalf, protecting them from Russian aggression. (*Ahmad*) Mira Ahmad is an expert on Circassian history, and her article in the *Middle Eastern Studies* journal gives a comprehensive analysis of the struggles of the Circassian people.

As the war unfolded, Great Britain's economic policies, including quarantines and disruptions of Russian trade routes, intensified the economic and geopolitical pressures on the Russian Empire. These pressures brought vulnerabilities within the Russian Empire to light, showing the country's need for significant reforms, particularly after its defeat in the Crimean War, which exposed the primitiveness of its military and administrative systems. (*Wortman 3*) The impact of the Crimean War was not only felt in the Russian Empire's heartland but also in its peripheries, particularly in the Caucasus, as the outcome of war pressured the Empire to frontiers and gain a better hold on strategic territories in the Caucasus. The Circassian expulsions, lasting from the end of the Crimean War to 1864, were a direct consequence of these imperialist ambitions. Military efforts in the Caucasus escalated directly after the Crimean War, with military figures such as Dmitry Milyutin advising Tsar Alexander on the strategic value of removing the Circassians from their homeland. According to historian Charles King in *"Imagining Circassia"*, Milyutin's influence was decisive in getting the Tsar's approval for the deportations, which he argued was necessary to "*cleanse the land*" of any resistance. (*King 94*) King's work offers insight and analysis of Russian imperial motivations and their impact on ethnic groups like the Circassians. Also, as a result of the Russian

Empire's increasing imperial ambitions in response to the Crimean War's aftermath, Polish soldiers escaped the Russian army and began to join the Circassians in the conflict, in part to distract from the increasing Polish independence movement on the Empire's western borders. (*Köremezli 36-39*)

Another critical factor that influenced the Crimean War and the following actions of the Russian Empire, was the decline of the Ottoman Empire during the 1850s. The Ottoman Empire was weakened by internal failures and its dependence on external powers like Great Britain, and therefore struggled to modernise its military and maintain its territories. The Anglo-Ottoman Commercial Treaty of 1838 opened Ottoman markets to British goods, which posed a problem to local industries and further weakened the Empire's ability to resist Russian advances. (*Smiley 74*) Figures like Mustafa Resid Pasha led to diplomatic efforts to alleviate these challenges, but the Ottoman Empire's military weakness made it vulnerable, especially within the context of the broader rivalry between the Great Powers over the fate of the ailing Sick Man Of Europe. Ottoman-Circassian relations during the Crimean War basically consisted of a passive Ottoman policy, as the empire focused on preserving peace with the Russian Empire as opposed to actively supporting Circassian resistance against Russian expansion. *"Eventually Turkey ceded Circassia, which it possessed only nominally, to Russia, thus presenting the latter with the uneasy task of conquering the Circassian territory."* (*Chirikba 1*) While Russia portrayed its intervention in the Ottoman Empire as a mission to protect Christians, it was undeniably to the same degree driven by the desire for expansion and securing strategically advantageous territories. This type of pragmatism was evident from the broader theatre of the Crimean war, which extended from initial confrontations in the Black Sea region to engagements in the Caucasus, Baltic Sea, and even the Far East. *"The logical continuation of that policy would have been to gain control over*

the Turkish Straits in order to gain access to warm water ports in the Mediterranean.” (Yilmazata 45) Caught in this geopolitical struggle were the Circassians, who received minimal assistance from various quarters, including Polish and Russian deserters who secretly provided Russian military information, and this support was insufficient to counter Russian advances. According to *The Fall of Circassia: A Study in Private Diplomacy* (1956) author Peter Brock, despite British figures like Lord Palmerston and James Longworth being involved in the “*Great Game*” between Great Britain and Russia, British efforts to support Circassia were also largely limited and ineffective by the time of the Crimean War, further contributing to their eventual defeat and displacement. (Brock 7)

As the Crimean War continued, Circassian resistance to Russian expansion intensified. Despite their primitive forces, the Circassians were particularly resilient to Russian incursions, with the *Bay of Bardan* standing as a symbol of their strong resistance. According to the late Admiral *Saumarez Brock*, repeated Russian attempts to land in the Bay were fiercely repelled by Circassian forces, demonstrating the substandard military prowess of the Russian army that defined this period. (Brock 2) The Treaty of Paris in 1856 ended the Crimean War and imposed significant restrictions on Russia, including the neutralisation of the Black Sea and the independence of the Moldavia and Wallachia territories. (Gooch 47) These losses were what prompted reassessment of the military and administrative strategies of the Russian Empire, directly influencing the timing of the Circassian deportations. In the end, the Russian Empire implemented policies that led to the tragic displacement, seeking to consolidate its control over the Caucasus and eliminate potential threats to Russia’s national security. (OpenAI)

Therefore, the Crimean War was a critical moment that not only exposed the weaknesses of the Russian Empire but also sparked a series of events that altered the course of its

territorial ambitions and its internal policies, which eventually culminated in the forced displacement of the Circassians.

Tsar Alexander's Abolition of Serfdom (1861)

A moment in Russian history that was a turning point for the political landscape of the empire was the abolition of serfdom in 1861, decreed by Tsar Alexander II. Far from just being a dated political institution, serfdom was a functioning system that supported the state's needs, particularly in terms of agricultural production and preventing economic recession. While contradicting modern economic practices, it was adaptable and provided a stable workforce which in turn reinforced the autocratic power structure of the Russian state. *(OpenAI)*

Tsar Alexander II's decision to abolish serfdom in 1861 was largely motivated by the need to modernise the Russian Empire after its defeat in the Crimean War. *"The main catalyst for reform was the Crimean War (1853–6), which resulted in Russia's humiliating defeat and clearly demonstrated the country's backwardness."* *(Finkel 6)* This decision was driven largely by pragmatism rather than purely humanitarian consideration, as the realisation came that serfdom could no longer sustain the empire's ambitions, leading to the decision to abolish this system. As Roger Bartlett notes in *"Serfdom and State Power in Imperial Russia"*, serfdom was a flexible yet coercive system that served the state's needs, particularly in terms of agricultural production and military service, but its limitations were starkly revealed by the Crimean War. *(Bartlett 47)*

Tsar Alexander II understood well enough that a serf-based economical practice was increasingly incompatible with the country's need for military and socio-economic modernity. As stated before, the defeat in the Crimean War had devastatingly exposed the ineffective nature of the Russian military, which relied heavily on a serfdom system that was outdated compared to the industrialised economies of Western Europe. (Hellie) There were also increasing concerns about state security, as the worsening dissatisfaction among the peasantry posed a significant threat to the country's stability. It is for this reason that the war on serfs was seen as necessary to modernise the economy and prevent future uprising by integrating the peasantry into the empire's modernization agenda. It was a solution that would ensure the empire's survival in a world of rapid social advancement. The abolition of serfdom was culturally and symbolically layered by profound moral and spiritual significance. According to *The Cambridge World History of Slavery* (2016) "*The process of emancipation was rooted in the delegitimization of serfdom that began with the Enlightenment thinkers in the eighteenth century.*" (Eltis et al. 19) The debate over the continuation of the evidently primitive system was sometimes described in Christian terms, with both opponents and proponents using religious symbolism and sentiments to argue their positions. The spiritual dimension transformed it from simply a political issue to a moral one. "*It lasted there for centuries until, as a result of the development of a new economic and political system, it became morally abhorrent.*" (Kahan 14) However, when the policy of emancipation was handed down by the Tsar, it faced multiple setbacks and was met with widespread opposition among the newly freed peasant population. While the reform granted personal freedom, many critics, both within Russia and abroad, argued that the abolition was flawed in its implementation, leaving many former serfs worse off. In his analysis of book critic Robert Michell's criticism of the abolition, historian David Saunders notes that while the

serfs were freed, they remained economically bound to the land, which undercut the true extent of their emancipation." (*Saunders 273*) As Olga Crisp notes in her review *The End of Serfdom (1978)*, the abolition faced significant opposition from the nobility and bureaucracy, who were deeply infatuated with the serf-based economy. (*Crisp 2*) In the long term, the abolition of serfdom had far-reaching consequences for the Russian Empire. Modernising Russia without completely removing the autocratic ruling system encountered difficulties in implementing the reform. The persistence of the autocratic system along with economic hardship, exacerbated simmering discontent that would lead to revolutionary sentiments in the early 20th century. (*The Presidential Library*) While it mainly aimed to rebuild the economy, the underlying motivations of the abolition of serfdom, as in enhancing state control and suppressing threats to national security, may have moderately contributed to the Circassian deportations in 1864. So the deportations can be seen as being part of the same imperial framework, where the Russian state sought to eliminate any obstacles to their expansionist objective. (*OpenAI*)

Historians have long debated the successes and failures of the emancipation of the serfs. 'Consensus' historians argue that the reform was a necessary step toward modernization, albeit flawed, while 'Revisionist' historians emphasise the state's control over the peasants even after their liberation. One again, historian David Saunders highlights contemporary critics of the policy in his book *An Anglo-Russian Critic of the Abolition of Serfdom (2014)*, such as those of book critic Robert Michell, who believed that the abolition of serfdom did little to truly liberate the peasants, as they were still tied to the land and the state's control over their movements persisted. (*Saunders 278*) As further discussed, the abolition was more of a shift in control rather than true freedom for the serfs, influencing the Russian Empire's internal and external policies in the years that followed. (*Hobart*) For this reason,

the abolition of serfdom in 1861 was not an isolated event but a decisive moment amongst the Russian Empire's state-building programs. The tensions brought about by failing to integrate the peasantry into a modern Russian state would eventually contribute to subsequent policies of repression, including but not limited to the deportation of the Circassian community in 1864. (*Finkel 17*)

In the end, the objective of securing Russia's territorial gains in the Northern Caucasus was driven by the same theme that led to the abolition of serfdom: the desire to strengthen the empire via modernization in the wake of military failure and threats to national security after the Crimean War. As a result, the emancipation of the serfs can, to an extent, be viewed as a precursor to and a minor impact on the Circassian deportation, but not a direct influence.

Religion in the Russo-Circassian War

Religion played an important role in the deportation of the Circassian community following the Russo-Circassian War, as an influence for both the motivations of resistance and the rationale behind the Russian policies that led to ethnic cleansing. The event and its aftermath was shaped to a large extent by religious dynamics, including different themes such as political strategy, preservation of culture, and imperialist goals. (*OpenAI*)

According to Paul B. Henze's book *"Islam in the North Caucasus"*, the conflict itself, which used religion both as a justification for military aggression and as a means to alter the demographic and cultural of the Caucasus, was portrayed by Russia as a civilizational struggle between the Christian Russian state and the infidel Muslim Circassians. (*Henze 4*)

Paul B. Henze is a noted historian who specialises in the Caucasus and Russian imperialism,

and whose work *"Islam In The North Caucasus"* goes into the intersection of politics and religion in shaping the Russo-Circassian conflict. The Circassians' shift towards Sufi Islam during the Russo-Circassian war was also crucial in terms of resistance against Russian expansion. Historically a region of religious diversity, Circassia saw an increasing alignment with Sufi Islam, driven by political necessity. William Horak (2012) emphasises how *"the increasing intensity of war and foreign interference caused the Circassians' actuation of revolutions through Islam, councils, and their force of arms."* (Horak 71) Facing a Russian Empire that was closely associated with Christianity, Circassia predominantly embraced Islam as both a form of cultural distinction as well as a means to secure alliances, particularly the Ottoman Empire, which at the time was a powerful caliphate. (Tsibenko 1) So while this alignment wasn't only a matter of religion, it also served as a statement of resistance against Russian imperialism and Christian domination.

Religious figures such as Hadji Ismail, Kasi Mollah, and Imam Shamil were instrumental in the unification of the Circassians under a common religious banner which merged Islamic zeal with nationalist sentiments. The teachings and leadership of these scholars infused the conflict with a divine and moral obligation by portraying the struggle against Russian encroachment as a form of jihad. As stated, for example, by the 1902 *"New International Encyclopedia"*, Imam Shamil played a key spiritual and military role in organising resistance against Russian imperialism as he implemented changes to centralise his power and unify the Eastern Caucasian tribes. (Peck et al.) In sustaining the Circassian struggle, blending religious leadership into military resistance was vital as it provided a strong ideological foundation which helped maintain the morale of rebel fighters, and Shamil's success in rallying the tribes against Russia, particularly during campaigns in 1843 and 1844, made him a formidable opponent. (Peck et al.) However, his capture and exile, combined with the lack

of foreign support, would eventually lead to the collapse of resistance in the Caucasus. *"The New International Encyclopedia"*, written around the turn of the century, provides a brief account of Imam Shamil's role in the Russo-Circassian wars.

On the other hand, the Russian Empire also used Christianity as a tool for imperial expansion and as a justification for the actions in the Caucasus, framing the war as part of a broader Christian civilization mission. Under leaders such as Tsar Alexander II, the Russian state viewed the Muslim Circassians as a political threat that needed to be neutralised to solidify the empire's southern frontier against the Ottoman Empire. The forced migrations were described in religious terms, viewed as a *"cleansing"* necessary to create a more secure Christian-dominated region. Russia's use of Christianity as a device for expansion mirrored the use of Islam by Circassian leaders. *"Russian utilization of Christianity as a device for imperial expansion encouraged those opposed to Russia to utilize Islam as a counterforce."*

(Henze 4) Genocidal policies included the systematic destruction of Islamic institutions and spiritual symbols, such as mosques and schools, and aimed to undermine the religious foundation of the Circassian rebellion. Not only serving to weaken the structure of the Circassian opposition via a tactical "scorched Earth" policy, the deliberate targeting of Islamic identity was also a justification for the mass deportation as a necessary step towards the Russification of the Caucasus. (Bashqawi) The Russian Empire's efforts to suppress Islam and impose Christianity on the region worsened the religious divide, making the religion of Islam a symbol of resistance and unity among the Circassians. The brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing, characterised by military violence and religious suppression, was a threat to their Islamic identity. It is for this reason that the vast majority of displaced Circassians chose exile in the Muslim Ottoman Empire over submission to Russian occupational control. However, this migration was riddled with immense suffering, as the Circassian refugees faced harsh

conditions, consumption, and insufficient provisions during their journey to the Ottoman Empire. Interestingly, according to *Circassian Genocide (2013)* author Walter Richmond, the Russian Empire sought to frame the deportations in a manner that would avoid international scrutiny by disguising some early deportations as pilgrimages to Mecca, concealing the full extent of Russia's plans from the Ottoman Empire. (*Richmond 67*)

In summary, religion was a critical factor in both the Circassian resistance movement and the deportations that followed the Russo-Circassian War. While the Russian Empire's policies were heavily motivated by the desire for suppressing Islam and promoting Christianity, the embrace of Islam by the Circassians was a political rallying point. Thus, religion provided a meaningful justification for the Russian Empire's campaign of displacement and served as a unifying force for Circassian resistance.

Conclusion

The deportation of the Circassian community from the Russian Empire in 1864 was a convoluted event influenced by a multitude of factors that lead up to it, with Tsar Alexander II's liberation of the serfs playing a negligible role and not a primary one. While the emancipation of the serfs was a significant event in Russia's history, influenced by the need for modernization and preventing internal unrest, it was not the main catalyst for the Circassian deportations. (*OpenAI*)

Instead, the deeply profound religious dimensions of the Russo-Circassian War, which had lasted for over an entire century, played a much more critical role in shaping the policies that led to the expulsion of the Circassians. The religious dimension of the Russo-Circassian War

was much more central to the Russian Empire's motivations and strategies in the region. The war was portrayed by Russia as a conflict between civilizations: between the Christian Russian state and the Muslim Circassians, who were perceived as both a political and religious threat. By this point, religion had become a powerful theme of identity and defiance for the Circassian community, with Sufi Islam serving as a rallying point for collective Circassian collaboration against Russian imperial aggression. Key spiritual figures such as Hadji Ismail, Kasi Mollah and Imam Shamil unified the Circassian community under a common patriotic banner, making resistance a matter of a holy war against Russia, as opposed to only an issue of territorial defence. A similar fashion to which the Russian state would reinforce the perception of the Circassians as an irreconcilable "other" that needed to be subdued or removed.

In contrast, while the emancipation of the serfs influenced broader Russian domestic policies, its direct impact on the Circassian deportations was far less dominant. The abolition of serfdom's primary aim was to address internal socio-economic problems, such as modernising the structure of the Russian Empire's economy and mitigating unrest among the peasantry. Although it initiated a need for now and led to Russian expansionist policies in the Northern Caucasus to achieve proximity to the Black Sea, it did not specifically target the Circassians or directly led to their ultimate mass exodus. The forced relocation was driven more by the motivation to consolidate control over the Caucasus and eradicate potential threats posed by Muslim opposition along southern borders. (*OpenAI*)

Therefore, the religious context of the Russo-Circassian War, including Russia's mission to Christianize and Russify the region, was a far more important and direct factor in the deportations than the liberation of the serfs. As stated before, religion was one of Russia's primary justifications for imperial aggression and served as a means of mobilising support

for the removal of the Circassian community from their native lands, providing a foundation for the policies that ultimately led to one of the 19th century's most grievous episodes of ethnic cleansing and cultural re-engineering.

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