

## The Greek Population of the Province of Alexandropol during the Turkish Invasions of 1918-1920: An Analysis based on Oral History

By Karine Bazeyan\* & Grigor Aghanyan<sup>‡</sup>

*The restoration of the popular perceptions of an episode of history, of the event, prepares a favorable base for a complete historical and ethnographic study, as it gives an opportunity to understand “from within” and represent numerous topics that are rarely mentioned in official historiography. The Greeks settled in Shirak province of the Republic of Armenia in the 30s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which mainly corresponds to the territory of the former Alexandropol, after the adoption of the Treaty of Adrianople in 1830. The invasion of Armenia by the Ottoman in 1918 and Kemalist armies in 1920, the atrocities committed by them were a direct continuation not only of the Armenian Genocide, but also the extermination of other Christian nations, the Greeks of Pontus and Assyrians. In 1918 and 1920 the Greeks of the villages of Baytar, Kaps, and Bayandur were completely massacred. Information about these events in historiography is scarce, but they are preserved in folk memory, which has been recorded by us and is presented in the article in combination with archival materials.*

### Introduction

Greeks have lived in Armenia since ancient times. The influx of the Greek population into Eastern Armenia intensified in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries related to the presence of rich copper mines in the northern regions of the country. Greek miners and coppersmiths founded the settlements of Yeghdan and Koghes in Lori province at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> After connecting Georgia and Eastern Armenia to the Russian Empire, the Russian authorities took measures to immigrate the Armenian and Greek population from the Ottoman Empire to the newly occupied territories. After the signing of the Treaty of Adrianople, the majority of Greeks who immigrated to Eastern Armenia settled in Alexandropol province. In general, Lori, Alexandropol province, and Kars region were

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\*Senior Researcher, Shirak Center for Armenological Studies of National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, Armenia.

<sup>‡</sup>Researcher, Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, Armenia.

1. E. Kharatsidis, *Khozyaystvennyy byt i materialnaya kultura grecheskogo nadeleniya Vostochnoy Armenii vo vtoroy polovine 19-ogo - nachale 20-ogo vekov /Istoriko-etnograficheskoye issledovaniye/* (Yerevan, National Academy of the Republic of Armenia Publishing, 1990), 30.

considered densely populated areas by Greeks, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

The Greeks living in the Eastern Armenia and the Caucasus were characterized by two ethnonyms "Romeos" and "Urum". Most Greeks adopted the form "Romeos" as their endonym. The "Romeos" spoke in the Trapezium dialect of Greek and preserved their mother tongue, Greek identity, and cultural features which were significantly different from the "Urum".<sup>3</sup> The "Urums" were Turkic-speaking Greeks, most of them lived in Tsalka region of Georgia. According to some scholars, the "Urums" are an ethnographic group, the followers of Greek, Georgian, and Armenian Orthodox religions were united to them, and lived compactly in the central and northeastern vilayets of Turkey before immigrating to the territory of the Russian Empire.<sup>4</sup>

The Greek population of the city and province of Alexandropol lived a safe and prosperous life till the collapse of the Russian Empire and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The invasions of the Ottoman and Kemal armies in 1918 and 1920 to Eastern Armenia were fatal for the Greek population of Alexandropol province.

During the collection of oral histories in the villages of Shirak province within the framework of the grant programme "*The 1918-1921 events in the context of the historical memory of Shirak region population*", we wrote down materials, which contained interesting materials about the actions of the Ottoman and Kemal armies against the Greek population of Alexandropol province<sup>5</sup>. Information about these events in historiography is scarce, but they are preserved in folk memory, which has been recorded by us and is presented in the article in combination with archival materials.

## Literature Review

Historiographical researches about the history of the Greek settlements in the province of Alexandropol and the state of the Greek population are unfortunately scarce. A brief article on the history of the Greeks of the Caucasus, their distribution, and ethnographic description was published in the book "Peoples of the Caucasus" in 1962. The author of the article "The Greeks of the Caucasus" P. Akritas briefly introduced the Greeks of Eastern Armenia and naturally did not

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2. Ibid, 38.

3. P. Akritas, "Greki Kavkaza," in *Narody Kavkaza*, vol. II (Moscow, USSR Academy of Sciences Publishing, 1962), 424.

4. Kharatsidis, *Khozyaystvennyy byt i materialnaya kultura grecheskogo nadeleniya Vostochnoy Armenii vo vtoroy polovine 19-ogo - nachale 20-ogo vekov /Istoriko-etnograficheskoye issledovaniye/*, 1990, 38-39.

5. Alexandropol province mainly corresponds to the modern Shirak region.

make any hint about the fate of the Greeks of Alexandropol province after 1918-1920.

Kharatsidis thoroughly referred to the Greek population of Alexandropol province in his dissertation "Economic life and material culture of the Greek population of Eastern Armenia in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century". Kharatsidis, while presenting the distribution of the Greek population, the economic occupations, and the lifestyle of the Greeks, did not refer to the realities of 1918-1920. The theme of the Genocide of Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, and other Christian peoples was "Taboo" in Soviet historiography and naturally, it was not allowed to speak about it and extend the facts into scientific field.<sup>6</sup> referred to the most famous Greek villages of Shirak in his monography "Greek lithographs of Armenia and the Greek community of the 10s of the 18<sup>th</sup> -21<sup>st</sup> century." Ayvazyan's book is extremely valuable for the study of the topic that interests us, despite the inaccuracies of some factual data.

### Methodology/Materials and Methods

In modern historiography, oral histories are considered as a source and a memory as a historical phenomenon, because knowledge about the past ensures the transmission of moral and ideological values, oriented to the specific historical time period and social space. In addition to written history, there is also living history, which preserves and renews itself through time and thus allows the recovery of many ancient realities that seem to have disappeared. If "history" is historical knowledge, then "memory" is based on national values. "Historical memory" is the applied use of historical knowledge, the movement of history towards the questions and demands of social memory. The autobiographical, collective, and historical memory of the population about the most painful issues of the past makes the past a real value, wealth, and a significant part of our lives. Based on the above and using the possibilities of the comparative method, an attempt was made to combine historical, oral histories with documentary materials in order to solve the problems faced by the authors.

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6. A. Ayvazyan, *Hayastani hunaren vimagrutynnery ev 18-21-rd dari 10-akan tvakanneri hunakan hamaynky* (Yerevan, Author Publishing, 2021).

### **The Historical Stylized Facts**

Reviweing this literature and oral traditions, two stylized historical facts emerge:

1. Collective memory was subjected to strict censorship in the Soviet and Kemalist dictatorial government systems, and repressive measures were prohibited mentioning those realities that were not beneficial or contradicted the prevailing ideological patterns.
2. The population of Greek villages of the province of Alexandropol was annihilated as a result of two Turkish invasions of Eastern Armenia in 1918-1921.
3. A specially planned and systematic policy was adopted by the Kemalist government to exterminate the Greek population living in the occupied territories, which was carried out with particular cruelty and consistency, as evidenced by written and oral information.

So: The interdisciplinary study of the existence of historical memory of the Genocide in Eastern Armenia, the issues and problems of recording and preserving folk narratives, based on a thorough analysis of archival sources and oral histories, allows us to perceive the character of this phenomenon more objectively. The priority in the scientific field is not only the study of factual material but also the search for historical justice, perception is the best manifested in the individual and collective memory of the population.

After the adoption of the Treaty of Adrianapole in 1830, a large part of Greeks from different vilayets of the Ottoman Empire joined the Armenian diaspora and settled in the territories of the Russian Empire. The Greeks settled in the city of Alexandropol, in the newly created province of Alexandropol, as well as in the villages of Baytar, Bayandur, and Kaps. After the collapse of the Russian Empire and the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on March 3, 1918, the Ottoman troops taking advantage of de facto anarchy in the Caucasus, attacked and invaded Transcaucasia. The invasion of Armenia by the Ottoman in 1918 and Kemalist armies in 1920, the atrocities committed by them were a direct continuation not only of the Armenian Genocide, but also the extermination of other Christian nations, the Greeks of Pontus and the Assyrians. Not only Armenians living in Eastern Armenia fell victim to the genocide of the Ottomans and Kemalists, but also other Christian peoples living next to them, particularly the Greeks of the province of Alexandropol.

The oral and written history preserved in the local population about the realities of 1918-1921 in the territory of the modern Shirak province refers to the description of the two Turkish invasions of 1918 and 1920 and their aftermath. The recorded histories are proof of the continuation of the Turkish genocidal policy in Eastern Armenia, which was a forbidden topic for decades during

Soviet rule. The reason for this was that the Soviet Union tried to build the identity of the society on an ideological basis, forgetting the other basic components of the identity (ethnic, confessional, cultural, community, family). One of its consequences of the emergence of a deformed, “cut”, traumatic historical memory. In the next phase of the search for identity, the authorities began to use the potential of the historical past through the “management” of memory, which became the state policy of historical memory. After 1920, according to that policy, due to friendly relations between the Soviet Union and the Republic of Turkey, the topic of the genocide of Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians was closed and removed from historiography. The transmission of information and the interpretation of historical events had become the monopoly of the governing parties in two newly formed states: the Soviet Union and the Republic of Turkey at the end of the 1920s. The reshaping of the historical past and the creation of nations' "new historiography" in these countries became part of the state policy and was controlled by their first figures, Joseph Stalin and Mustafa Kemal. A clear consensus was formed between the Bolsheviks and Kemalists to forget the fact of extermination of Christian peoples in Turkey and its territory and delete it from the official historiography. People started talking openly about the Armenian Genocide in Soviet Armenia only after 1965, a lot of research works were published, during the Turkish invasions of Eastern Armenia from 1918 to 1920, the fact of mass extermination of the Armenian and Greek population remained only in the oral history of Armenians and Greeks. The generations of Greek people in the province of Alexandropol who survived after the two Turkish invasions kept the memory of these realities in their minds. The people's deep mental shock and the people's tragedy were relegated to the sphere of individual memory and passed down from generation to generation in strict secrecy. Each family of Greek origin became the bearer of a secret memory of its tragic history. It is noteworthy that the bearers of that history, even the third generation, have preserved the memory in every detail that have been recorded by us. Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it become possible to overcome the political and historiographical taboo and the cases preserved in oral history were made public. A policy that could be called “commanded to forget” was applied to the above-mentioned peoples who survived the genocide in the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup>

Ancient Greek or Greek Orthodox Armenian settlements existed in the territory of present-day Shirak province in the Middle Ages. Later they were destroyed and deserted as a result of the plundering invasions of Shah Abbas I of Iran and later the Caucasian tribes in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. As mentioned above,

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7. H. Kharatyan, “Politika pokoreniya pamyati, ili «prikazano zabyt»: Prevrashcheniye pamyati v sotsialnuyu i semeynuyu «taynu» /Na primere armyanskogo genotsida/,” in *Ustnaya istoriya na postsovetском prostranstve*. (Barnaul, 2017), 127.

the dwelling of Greek migrants in Shirak and the establishment of new settlements were connected with the events of 1829-30. The urban Greeks of Erzurum and Kars settled in Alexandropol, and the rural immigrants from Mush, Khnus, and Kars inhabited the villages of Bayandur, Baytar, and Kaps.

We present briefly the mixed Armenian-Greek and purely Greek settlements in the province of Alexandropol below.

### **Alexandropol (Leninakan, Gyumri)**

The Greek population settled in Alexandropol in the 1830s, formed their own district, and built the Greek Orthodox Church of St George in the city center. The main part of the urban Greeks who settled in Eastern Armenia was concentrated here. The Greek population of the city was engaged in craft and trade. The descendants of the Greeks of Alexandropol were the famous sculptor Sergey Merkurov and the well-known theosophist-philosopher George Gurdjieff. Part of the Greek population of the city left as a result of the events of 1918-20, and a large part of them immigrated to their historical homeland, the Hellenic Republic in the 1990s.

### **Bayandur (Greek Bayandur)**

The village is located in Shirak province, ten kilometers away from the city of Gyumri, on the left bank of the river Akhuryan. The population of the historic village was displaced by Shah Abbas I in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and was deserted until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After the signing of the Treaty of Adrianople (1829), when mass immigration of Armenians began from the territories of the Ottoman Empire to Eastern Armenia, Armenians and Greeks from Mush, Kars, and Basen settled here. According to the population census, in 1833 there were 502 people living in Bayandur, most of them were Greeks about 326. The situation changed in 1877-1878, after the Russian-Turkish war, when the Kars province was formed, where many Greek families moved from Bayandur.

Bayandur was divided into two parts at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1899, the Georgian Exarch of the Russian Orthodox Church asked the representative of the Minister of Land Use and State Property Management of the Russian Empire in the Caucasus to separate the land of the Greek community of the village of Bayandur from the fellow Armenians.<sup>8</sup> Of ArmeniAfter several years of quarreling, ignoring the protest of the Armenian side, the former united village was divided by the order of the viceroy of Caucasus Golitsyn, known for

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8. National Archive of Armenia, Fund 966.

his anti-Armenian policies, a new community was recognized as a separate unit, called Greek Bayandur, with a population of about 30 houses, which ceased to exist after the Turkish invasions of 1918-1920 and the devastating earthquake of 1926. Only a few tombstones with Greek inscriptions have been preserved in the small part of the old village that was not flooded.

### **Baytar (Alakilisa)**

The only purely Greek village in the former Alexandropol province was Baytar-Alakilisa, now called Hovtun. It is located on the left bank of the river Akhuryan, fifteen kilometers away from Gyumri /Alexandropol/. The local Greek population immigrated to Eastern Armenia from Kars province. The name of the village was Baytar, according to local Armenians the word has had Greek origin. It means “doctor of horses”, which is highly doubtful. Until 1921, the villagers were entirely Greeks, who were engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry. Some of the men from Baytar, during the year extracting gray coal from the settlements of Jajur and Mets Keti of Alexandropol province. The Greeks of Old Keti extracted coal from the ground, before the arrival of the Baytars, who were massacred and expelled in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century by Lezgin bandits.

The Greek population of Baytar was massacred and taken prisoner during the Second Turkish invasion and according to written and oral sources, the Greek Baytar became a “village of Catholic Armenian immigrants”. Armenian settlers sacredly preserved the Greek tombstones, and the destroyed Greek Orthodox church which were not desecrated by the Turks.

### **Kaps**

A small Greek community has been here since the 30s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, about which little is known. However, oral tradition and some fragmentary archival information indicate that members of this small community, who like the inhabitants of other Greek settlements, were involved in going to other countries (earn money), especially in mining, which was mainly seasonal due to the harsh climate of Shirak.

The Greeks of Kaps, like the Baytars, got engaged in mining, in Jajur and Mets Keti, in the spring and summer months. It should be noted that the main owners of the mining industry of Eastern Armenia were Greeks, as evidenced by archival and other sources of the time. The Greek population of Kaps fell victim to the massacres organized by the Kemalist troops and the local Turkish tribes in 1920. Our informant Vrezh Margaryan managed to find tombstones of the Greek

inhabitants of Kaps, the dating of which and decoding of Greek texts are the subject of a separate study.<sup>9</sup>

There was no massacre in Baytar in 1918, as well as in Greek Bayandur. The Ottoman army and bandits of Turkish tribes of Aghbaba region of Alexandropol province looted the following villages causing extensive damage. After the signing of the Armistice of Mudros on 30 October 1918, the Ottoman troops withdrew from the province of Alexandropol in November-December.

By the decision of the Government of the First Republic of Armenia, state commissions were set up to assess the extent of the losses of the population of occupied regions, as a result of the Ottoman invasions, and special forms were made up, two of which are kept in the National Archives of the Republic of Armenia and refer to Greek Bayandur and Baytar.<sup>10</sup>

According to these documents, four people were killed and fifteen were taken prisoners in the Greek Bayandur. Almost all the property of the village was robbed. There are no documents on the killings and captivity in Baytar, but the list of thirty-two male members of Greek families whose property was looted by Ottoman soldiers and neighboring Turkish tribes is presented.<sup>11</sup>

According to our informants and what is confirmed by the archival data, the massacres and looting carried out by the Ottoman army in 1918 in the Christian villages of Alexandropol province were incomparable to the atrocities of the Kemalists in 1920-21. If the Greek villages continued to survive despite huge losses, after the invasion of 1918 and the six-month tyranny of Alexandropol province, then in April-May of 1921, when the Kemalist army left the province, they were deserted and deprived of the Greek population.

Our recorded oral histories show that most of the Greek rural population of Bayandur was captured in 1920-21 and taken to Kars by the Kemalists under the pretext of construction work, where their traces were lost. The captive men from the Armenian villages of Shirak, as well as the Greeks of Bayandur were either massacred on the way or died from unbearable hard work. The fact is that none of them returned to their native village.<sup>12</sup> Greek women, old people, and children from Bayandur who had no relatives in Alexandropol or did not manage to move there were killed by the sword.

After the Sovietization of the province of Alexandropol in 1921, there is neither mention of the Greek settlement of Bayandur in the document, nor

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9. Informant Vrezh Margaryan, Kaps 2020, Archives of Shirak Center for Armenological Studies of National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, Recording N 150104-0000.

10. National Archives of Armenia, Fund 221.

11. National Archives of Armenia, Fund.

12. Informant Arthur Arakelyan, Bayandur 2020, Archives of Shirak Center for Armenological Studies, Recording N 151213-2303.



anything about the population of this village in the data of the first Soviet national census in 1926.

The tragedy of the exclusively Greek village of Baytar has a special place among the stories about the bloodiest episodes preserved in the oral history of the people of Shirak. Soviet historiography has been silent for decades and has not even been archived in the form of documents; it has been preserved and passed down from generation to generation in the memory of the newly settled Armenians of Baytar and the descendants of a few Greeks who miraculously survived.

After signing the Treaty of Alexandropol on 2 December 1920, and the Sovietization of Armenia, the bandits of the Kemalist army and the bands of local Turkish tribes supporting them became crueler. Realizing that the Turkish army would withdraw from the province of Alexandropol under the Russian-Turkish agreements, the looting and massacre of the local Christian population began without delay. It should be noted that the Kemalists brutally destroyed the Greek elite, in particular, the most real evidence of which is the Baytar massacre.

According to the preserved oral history, in December 1920, the Turkish cavalry detachment which was stationed in the Armenian village of Bandivan entered Baytar. The men of the village were ordered to gather in the church, where they were informed that workers were needed to build a road to Georgia. When the convoy reached one of the gorges near the village of Bandivan, the Turkish cavalry surrounded them and started shooting. Wounded and survivors of the firing were stabbed with bayonets and swords. After monitoring for about three days and making sure that everyone was killed, the Turks left Bandivan. Feeling that the detachment had left, four surviving men came out under the corpses: Ivanov Ivan /Ivan Aper/, Minasov Tigran, Adam Gurdjieff, and Karapetov Sumbat. The last two rushed to the village to see what happened to their relatives but were killed on the way by soldiers guarding the settlement.<sup>13</sup>

Massacre and looting of the rest of the population began after the expulsion of the Baytar men from the village. The rich property of Baytar was loaded up on the carts belonging to the villagers. Some villagers were taken captive by robbery, especially elderly women who were killed in their homes. Shushanik told that her grandfather Ivan Aper coming home found the burnt bodies of his five children in the potato pit after the Turks left the village. Ivan and Tigran who lost their relatives, went to Alexandropol and returned to Baytar in spring, 1921 but could not find anybody alive in the village.<sup>14</sup> There were corpses everywhere, the gorge was full of corpses. Ivan and Tigran ask the people of Bandivan for help and

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13. Informant Shushanik Ivanyan Baytar 2020, Archives of Shirak Center for Armenological Studies, Recording N 150101-2022.

14. Ayvazyan, *Hayastani hunaren vimagrutynnery ev 18-21-rd dari 10-akan tvakanneri hunakan hamaynky*, 2021, 260.

turned the gorge into a mass grave, which the locals still call “Jardi Dzor”(The Valley of Slaughter).

In the same year, the Armenian Catholics who migrated from the village of Guleran of Kars province relocated to Baytar, with whom the two surviving Greeks of Baytar, Ivan Aper and Tigran Aper lived till their death, and formed a new family by marrying their new fellow Armenian girls.<sup>15</sup>

We consider it necessary to mention two interesting oral histories related to the resettlement of the village. According to one, when the representatives of the Armenian emigrants came to the destroyed and burnt Baytar, they find the priest of the village asking them to sell apartments to them. The priest says that there isn't anyone alive in the village, there are only corpses in the houses, go and open any door you want, it will be yours, but only bury the corpses in a Christian way.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, we could not find the name of the Greek priest of Baytar in the archival documents, but we hope that our search will finally yield results. According to another source, despite the Soviet authorities' urgings, the Armenian migrants did not want to settle in Baytar, arguing how they could live in those abandoned houses whose tonirs and wells are full of the bodies of innocent victims.

We have recorded an interesting episode in our oral histories, according to which in the 1950s Greeks captured by the Turks came to Baytar in 1921, met Tigran Aper, visited “Jardi Dzor”(The Valley of Slaughter), where their parents are buried in a mass grave. Later, for unknown reasons, the connection with the rest of the Baytars was severed.

To summarize, let's note that in order to present the topic in a complete and more historically grounded way, new materials need to be discovered and extend in scientific field.

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15. Informant Shushanik Ivanyan Baytar 2020.

16. Informant Garnik Arakelyan, Baytar 2020, Archives of Shirak Center for Armenological Studies, Recording N 150101-2023.

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