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KURDISTAN TODAY

Khanna Omarkhali

Georg-August University Göttingen, Germany

THE KURDS IN THE FORMER SOVIET STATES FROM THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES¹

ABSTRACT

The history of the Kurdish community in Russia concerns several centuries. The Kurds who live in the today's Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), before USSR, constitute about 2,5% of all Kurdish population, which is the most important part of the Kurdish Diaspora. The number of Kurds has increased in the Russian Federation especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the Kurds began to leave Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Central Asia and began to settle in the Russian Federation. This is a brief study of the Kurds in the former Soviet Union with the study of the demography of the Kurds and their development from historical and cultural perspectives. Special attention is paid to the contemporary situation of the Kurds in the post-Soviet states, in particular on the territory of the Russian Federation.

Key words

Post-Soviet states, Kurdish community, Kurds, Russian Federation

¹ This chapter is prepared on the basis of the article published in German, see Kh. Omarkhali, *KurdInnen in der ehemaligen Sowjetunion* [in:] *Kurdistan im Wandel. Konflikte, Staatlichkeit, Gesellschaft und Religion zwischen Nahem Osten und Diaspora*, Th. Schmidinger (Hrsg.), Peter Lang Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2011, pp. 225–239.

More than twenty years ago the USSR became a thing of the past; however, the Kurds, who live in the post-Soviet states are still named the “Soviet Kurds”...

1. Demography and historical sketch

1.1. Demography

No accepted statistics on the number of the Kurds in the former Soviet States exist. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, eastern Armenia, Georgia, and northern Azerbaijan became the territories of Russia. At the end of the 1820s, as a result of the Russian-Turkish and the Russo-Persian wars, Transcaucasia that included Georgia, East Armenia, and Northern Azerbaijan, permanently formed a part of the Russian Empire. From this time on, Transcaucasia became an integral part of the Russian empire.

The Kurds, who live in the former Soviet Union, historically could be divided into four branches,² namely Turkmenian Kurds; Armenian, Nakhichevan and Georgian Kurds; Azerbaijani Kurds; and a branch, formed from the inner migrations in the USSR and CIS: Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Moldavian Kurds, as well as Kurds in Kazakhstan and in Central Asia.

In the period of ruling of Nadir Shah (1736–1747), whose military genius was praised by some historians calling him the Napoleon of Persia or the second Alexander, a number of Kurds were resettled to the north and east-northern borders of Iran, especially in the province of Khorasan to protect Iran’s north-eastern frontier.³ Others remained on the new formed borders between Iran and Russian Empire, namely on the territory of Turkmenia; there were about 300,000 people. The overwhelming majority of the Kurds in Turkmenia suffered from the assimilation process.

The Kurds in Armenia and Nakhichevan appeared on these territories by two ways. The first settlement of the Kurds is considered to be indigene inhabitants of these areas, while another one is Kurds who during a hundred years begin from the Russo-Persian war (1804–1813) and till the World War I. (1914–1918) were resettled to this region. There is enough historical data, confirming that there

² The division is made by A. Hejar, *Kurdskaya Diaspora* [Kurdish Diaspora], Bishkek 2008.

³ M. van Bruinessen, *Behind the Iron Curtain* [in:] *Kurdistan in the Shadow of History*, S. Meiselas, Chicago–London 1997, p. 214. With historical introductions and a new postscript by Martin van Bruinessen.

some Kurdish tribes on the territory of Armenia lived even in 18th century. In the history of the Kurds – the famous work of Sharaf-khān Bidlīsī, *Sharaf-nāmē* (completed in the 16th century), there are already references of the Kurdish tribes living in the Caucasus and in the northern Khorasan.

The majority of the Kurds in Armenia and Georgia are Yezidis whose ancestors were forced to move to these regions at the end of the 19th and mostly in the beginning of the 20th centuries to escape from religious persecution by the Ottoman government. There are a lot of facts, which are evidence of the existence of the Kurds in the today's Georgia before 19th century. In 1897, according to the census of enumeration of the Russian Empire, in Tiflis province there were about 2500 Kurds. However, the majority of the Kurds in Georgia is the refugees from the Ottoman Empire of 19th–20th centuries, who came chiefly to Georgia via Armenia.

The Kurds, as a result of massive emigration from Armenia and Georgia and Middle Asia due to economic hardships of the post-Soviet period, were forced to move to the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Moldavia, and Central Asia. According to unofficial estimates, from the whole number of the Kurds in the Russian Federation, about 70–80,000 are the Yezidi Kurds. The Kurds in Russian Federation live mostly in Moscow and Moscow region, regions of Krasnodar, Nizhny Novgorod, Novosibirsk, Yaroslavl, Tambov, Saratov, Sverdlovsk, Rostov, Stavropol, Lipetsk, Volgograd, Samara, Saint Petersburg, and Leningrad oblast, as well as in the regions of Kursk, Voronezh, Tula, Tver, Tyumen, Irkutsk, Orenburg, Oryol, and others.

A very big group of the Kurds lives in Azerbaijan. However, this branch of the Kurdish Diaspora most of all suffered from the assimilation during centuries. Many Kurds in Azerbaijan practically lost their national memory, were torn off from their roots, and forgot their mothers tongue. The history of the Kurds in Azerbaijan, as well as in Turkmenia, is sometimes called in literature as a “white genocide”.

Obviously, religion played a crucial role for the preservation of the Kurdish culture and language. In Azerbaijan, where practically all Kurds are Sunni Muslims, they were mostly assimilated, while the Yezidi Kurds, whose religious texts and religious practices are in the Kurmanji dialect of the Kurdish language, also preserve the endogamy and marry with the Yezidi Kurds; they managed to keep not only their religion, but also the Kurdish culture and language.

Although there are no recognized Kurdish territories in the former Soviet Union, there are approximately 500,000 Kurds, mainly in the Caucasus, but with

some in Turkmenistan and other Central Asian republics. However, the number and distribution of Kurds must be extremely tentative.⁴ The estimation becomes much complicated also because of the definition of a Kurd; in Armenia the vast majority of Kurds are Yezidis, many of whom prefer this rather than a “Kurd” as their primary ethnic identity.

1.2. Historical sketch

A lot of scholars agree that by the middle of the twentieth century there were considerable Kurdish minorities in the republics of the Soviet Union in Transcaucasia and Central Asia. Some of the Kurdish communities had lived in these regions for centuries, at least since the 16th century. According to Vladimir Minorsky, the Kurds were living in Transcaucasia from the very ancient times. A Russian ethnographer Tatiana Aristova dates some Kurdish villages in the Nakhichevan region and the borderland between Azerbaijan, Nagorny Karabach and Armenia by the 10th century AD.

In 1760–70s years, the head of the Yezidi Kurds Choban-gha writes to the Georgian monarch Erekle II (Irakli II, 1720–1798) of the Bagrationi Dynasty, reigning as the king of Kakheti from 1744 to 1762, and of Kartli-Kakheti in Caucasus from 1762 until 1798⁵ that Yezidis would wish to be under the power of Georgia. After joining of Georgia to Russia the Yezidi Kurds began to count on the protection and support of Russians. Larger waves of arrival of the Kurds to the region, however, fall on the 19th century as a result of Gulistan treaty, concluded on October 24, 1813, and the Turkmenchay peace treaty, signed on February 21, 1828, between Russia and Persia.⁶ The further increase of the Kurdish population in the Caucasus took place after later Russia’s victorious wars against Turkey in 1828–1829 and 1877–1878. Beginning in 1813, after the agreement of Gulistan, part of Georgia and Azerbaijan came under the power of the Russian tsar. In 1921, all Caucasian districts came under the Russia’s power.

The Kurds moved to rural settlements in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Because of the very hard economical situation in Armenia in the beginning of 20th century, the majority of the male population of the Kurds used to move to the

⁴ D. McDowall, *The Kurds of the Caucasus* [in:] *A Modern History of the Kurds*, New York 2005, p. 490ff.

⁵ K. Hitchins, *Erekle II* [in:] *Encyclopaedia Iranica. Online edition*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org> [Access date: 3.07.2010].

⁶ Z. Aloyan, *The Kurds and the Caucasus*, http://www.ezid.ru/articles/zurab_aloyan/zourab_aloyan_2.html [Access date: 3.07.2010].

different cities in Georgia for a work and to seek earnings. They were employed as shepherds, mowers, transported salt, and worked as porters.

The Kurds took part in the October Revolution (1917) and the Russian Civil War (1917–1921). According to the Article IV of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty, signed on March 3, 1918, at Brest-Litovsk, the districts of Ardahan, Kars, and Batumi that Russia had got from the Ottoman Empire in the Russian-Turkish War (1877–1878), should be cleared of the Russian troops and must be returned to Turkey. However, in May 1918 Turks have passed the river Akhuriyan (Turkish: *Arpaçay*) and have moved ahead. The big battle has taken place from May 21 to May 29, 1918 near Sardarapat (now *Armarvir*). Along with Armenians, a thousand Yezidi Kurds fought against the Turkish army, protecting Armenia. The commander of the Kurdish cavalry was the head of the Yezidi *Zuqirî* confederation of tribes (Kurdish: *êla Zuqiriya*) Jangîr-agma.⁷ He played a key role in the battle of Sardarapat, when Yezidi forces under his command helped to secure victory for the Armenians in this decisive battle. He and his soldiers also protected Yezidi and Armenian refugees, enabling them to cross the river Araks (Kurdish: *Eres*) during their forced migration into what became Soviet Armenia. Jangîr-agma was later exiled under the Soviet regime and in 1943 he died in Saratov, Russia.

In May 1918, the independent republic Armenia has been proclaimed, and in the middle of 1919 elections were held. One place in parliament has been given to the Kurds, which was occupied by the leader of the Hesinî confederation of tribes (Kurdish: *êla Hesiniya*) Ûsib-beg Temuryan, son of Hesen-beg. It is interesting to mention that Ûsib-beg had passed through higher education; he finished the academy in Echmiadzin and studied with the great Armenian composer and musicologist Komitas Vardapet (Armenian: Կոմիտաս Վարդապետ) known as Soghomonyan and with Keremê Hemîd, the son of a Kurdish beg from the famous Kurdish home Kosa Gulî Jewahir-agma. Ûsib-beg was well respected by Yezidis and Armenians alike and from 1918 he was elected a member of parliament, representing the Yezidi community. During the arrival of Yezidi refugees in Armenia in 1918 he took an active part in their allocation, providing them with food and necessities.⁸

⁷ Jangîr-agma (Kurdish: *Cangîr-axa*), a son of Khetîb-agma, was born in 1874 in Chîbûghlî village, Bêgirî district, and was from the Mendikî clan of the mirid caste of Yezidi Kurds. For the more information about the Yezidi tribes and their flee to Armenia in the beginning of the 20th century see Kh. Omarkhali, *On the Structure of the Yezidi Clan and Tribal System and its Terminology among the Yezidis of the Caucasus*, “Journal of Kurdish Studies” 2008, No. 6, pp. 104–119.

⁸ See Kh. Omarkhali, *On the Structure...*, op.cit.

In the early 1920s, one district of Soviet Azerbaijan that was predominantly inhabited by Kurds (positioned between Nagorno-Karabagh and the border of Armenia proper) briefly achieved autonomous status (it is known as “Red Kurdistan”). After a few years, however, it was fully incorporated into Azerbaijan, and the Kurds there have been subject to attempts of assimilation ever since.⁹

Stalin’s repressions strongly affected the Kurds in Armenia. In 1930s and 1944s, as a result of Stalin’s policy, a part of the Caucasian Kurds were displaced to the Central Asia and Kazakhstan. Hundreds innocent people have been arrested. Among the Kurds who suffered from the Stalin’s repressions were Arab Shamilov (Kurdish: *Erebê Şemo*, writer), Ajiye Jindy (Kurdish: *Heciyê Cindî*, scientist and writer), Jardoyê Ganjo (*Cerdoyê Genco*, editor of the Kurdish newspaper “Riya Teze”), Jangîr-agma (*Cangîr-axa*, commander of the Yezidi Kurds cavalries), and many others.

With the establishment of the Soviet power in Armenia, active struggle against Yezidi clergy has begun. They forced some Yezidi Kurds to refuse fulfilment of religious ceremonies and in the Leninakan newspaper “Banvor” (“Worker”), in 1925, statements of some Yezidi Sheikhs from the Mîrek, Jerjerîs, Kuribogaz, and Duzkent villages with the refusal of fulfilment of religious ceremonies have been published.¹⁰ All main religious ceremonies, for instance, *rites de passage*, recitation of religious texts during the feasts and others, nevertheless, were continued to be conducted by the Yezidis and in spite of the policy, the religious tradition was transmitted from one generation to another.

In the 1930s, early 1940s, several deportations took place and tens of thousands of Kurds were banished from the Transcaucasian republics to Central Asia and Siberia. The deportations hit the Kurds of Azerbaijan especially hard. In the 1950s some, but not all, of the deportees were allowed to return.¹¹

Many Kurds, both Moslems and Yezidis took part in the World War II in the land, air, and naval forces. Taking into account that many Kurds were registered as Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Turkmen, one can hardly say the correct number of the Kurdish participants in the war.¹²

⁹ M. van Bruinessen, op.cit., p. 214.

¹⁰ Wezirê Esho, *Nûdem* 32, 1999, p. 48.

¹¹ M. van Bruinessen, op.cit., p. 215.

¹² On Kurdish participants of the World War II see: K.M. Chatoyev, *Uchastiye Kurdiv Sovetskogo Soyuzu v Velikoy Otechestvennoy Voynе 1941–1945 gg* [Participation of the Kurds of Soviet Union in the Great Patriotic War 1941–1945], Yerevan 1970.

In early 1947 Mulla Mustafa Barzani (March 14, 1903–March 1, 1979), the most prominent political figure in the modern Kurdish politics, with his 500 faithful warriors, marched into Soviet Azerbaijan and requested asylum. From the moment the fall of the Mahabad Republic was imminent, he had made various diplomatic overtures and appealed to Iraq for amnesty, but all his efforts were in vain. Ordinary villagers were allowed to return to Iraq, but he and his closest collaborators were threatened with the death penalty.¹³ The Soviet Union was the only alternative left, and there too he was not very welcome. The Barzanis at first stayed together in Baku, Azerbaijan's capital, where their arrival had a galvanizing effect on the remaining Kurds and caused a sudden rise in ethnic awareness. This probably contributed to the Barzanis' being sent, after some time, to Tashkent in Uzbekistan and then dispersed over various republics of the Soviet Union.

In the USSR to many of Barzanis the opportunity to study was given, some completed university during these years of exile. Just after the death of Joseph Stalin (5 March 1953), Barzani went from Tashkent to Moscow, where he could meet a leader of Union N.S. Khrushchev (April 15, 1894–September 11, 1971) and as result his people got the possibility to study in the Soviet institutes. Barzani by himself under the Azerbaijani surname Mamedov was sent to the Military Academy in the name of Frunze (Russian: *Военная Академия имени Фрунзе*). Barzanis returned to Iraqi Kurdistan in 1958.

From the late 1980s and especially after 1991 due to the post-Soviet economical hardships ten thousands of Transcaucasian Kurds migrated to Russian Federation, to some autonomous republics within the Russian Federation, to Ukraine and the Crimea, as well as to Europe.

The 20th century for all Kurds in the former Soviet Union began with the escape and migration, and finished tragically with the next migration. Askerov (Hejarê Shamil), a Kurd from Azerbaijan himself describes the history of the Soviet Kurds as “separations, exiles and an endless nostalgia”...¹⁴

¹³ M. van Bruinessen, *op.cit.*, p. 214ff.

¹⁴ H. Askerov, *Kurdskaja Diaspora* [Kurdish Diaspora], Bishkek 2008..

2. Kurds in the former Soviet Union from cultural perspective

2.1. Kurds in Azerbaijan

There is, however, another side of the history of the Kurds in the former Soviet Union, namely its incredible cultural development. Under the order of Lenin in 1923, the Kurdish districts, as a political independent centre, received autonomous administration and self-management in what was called Red Kurdistan; its capital city was Lachine, in the district of Nagorno-Karabakh. For five years, there was released a newspaper called Red Kurdistan. Apart from autonomy experience in Azerbaijan in 1920s, different valuable studies on the dialect and folklore of the Kurds living in Azerbaijan were made.¹⁵

2.2. Kurds in Armenia and Georgia

In Armenia, the Kurds achieved definite cultural rights; it was the first Kurdish Diaspora in exiled country which had radio, education, and press in their native tongue. In 1930 a partly sponsored newspaper in Kurdish started its work in Yerevan, which was closed down in 1937.

In the former Soviet Union in the 1920s, first the Kurdish alphabet on the basis of the Armenian script was created, followed by writing in Kurdish on the basis of the Latin script in 1927, then Cyrillic in 1945, and recently they mostly use the Latin script. From 1929 onward, the number of printed books increased in Armenia. Kurdish literature and culture in the former Soviet Union played a significant role in the development of the Kurdish literature in general.

Beginning in 1921, all Kurds used to send their children to schools. According to historical sources, after the 1930s, the overwhelming majority of the Kurds were literate. It is known that at the end of the 1920s, there existed more than 40 Kurdish schools in the Soviet Union.

In 1927 in the Soviet Union Republic of Armenia, a first silent 72-minute black-and-white Kurdish film titled *Zare* (Kurdish: *Zerê*) was produced by Armen-kino under the direction of Beg Nazarov. It talked about the life of Kurdish Yezidi nomads on the Soviet Union borders at 1915. After that several other films were produced in Kurdish.

In the years 1931–32, in the Republic of Armenia, more than nine books were translated from Armenian and Russian into Kurdish. And in the same period,

¹⁵ During the Soviet period Nicholas Marr (Nikolay Yakovlevich Marr) and Cherkes Khudoyevich Bakayev published their works on the dialect and culture of the Kurds of Azerbaijan.

there were 40 Kurdish schools with about 70 Kurdish teachers and about 2,000 pupils. An institution for teachers was opened, and in 1932, a branch for Kurdish authors was founded within the Armenian Authors Union.¹⁶ Their first published work was the novel *Shivanê Kurd* (Kurdish Shepherd) by Arabê Shamo. It is a fact that 1932–38 were the golden years in developing Kurdish culture in Soviet Armenia. In 1934, a conference was held for Kurdish authors about writing in the Kurdish language and about Kurdish literature, where very actual questions were discussed, as, for instance, development of the Kurdish terminology, which till now remains the question of current importance. During this short period of time, dozens of Kurdish academics, authors, journalists, and artists in Soviet Union republics, especially in the Republic of Armenia, appeared and became famous in all parts of Kurdistan.

From 1938 on, at the beginning of World War II, caring about Kurdish culture and language gradually dissolved; the newspaper “Riya Teze” (The New Way) was shut down, and the printing of Kurdish books was stopped.

As Stalinism was gradually receding, the Armenian Soviet Republic supported a Kurdish cultural revival. The newspaper in Kurdish “Riya Teze” appeared again; books in Kurdish were published, the Armenian Academy of Sciences offered courses in Kurdish Studies.

In the early 1960s, radio Yerevan began broadcasting programs in the Kurdish language, which could be received in the most parts of Kurdistan. As Martin van Bruinessen writes: “The impact of this first Kurdish radio transmission on the self-awareness of the Kurdish population of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq can hardly be overestimated.”¹⁷

With regard to Georgia, in 1970s and 1980s the interest towards Kurdish theme increased and Tbilisi soon became another centre for Kurdish cultural life. There appeared classes at schools, a theatre, musical groups, publication of books, weekly radio broadcasting, and the Kurdish section in the Writers’ Association of Georgia.

In the history of the Kurdish Studies in Russia, it is necessary to note the scientific activity of Academic Joseph Abgarovich Orbeli (1887 Kutaisi, 1961 Leningrad), who is considered to be the founder of the modern Kurdish Studies. In 1959 under his initiative at the Leningrad branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies the Group for Kurdish Studies was founded, which became the first

¹⁶ M. van Bruinessen, op.cit., p. 220.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 214.

Centre of Kurdish Studies in the world. This group of Kurdologists worked actively on the Kurdish language and its dialects; they published a big number of monographs in the field. The only historian in the group was Yevgeniya Ilyinichna Vasilyeva, who works till nowadays in the Kurdish department in St Petersburg. She translated and commented a number of the Kurdish historical chronicles from the Middle Ages. E.I. Vasilyeva made the first translation from Persian into Russian of the valuable text from the end of the 16th century *Sharaf-nāmē* by Sharaf Khān Bidlīsī. In Moscow there is a department of the Kurdish Studies, which is headed by Prof. Olga Ivanovna Zhigalina. There worked Shakro Khudoyevich Mhoyi, who was the director of the Centre of Kurdish researches and M. Lazarev. The destiny of Kurdish Studies of today both in St Petersburg, and in Moscow is not optimistic because of the absence of the young trained scientific personnel.

3. Kurds in the former Soviet States after the collapse of Soviet Union

3.1. Search for identity

In terms of religion, the waves of the Kurdish migration to the Caucasus since the 18th century were different for Muslim and Yezidi Kurds. The Sunni Muslim Kurds settled districts with Muslim majority alongside Adzharian and Meskhetian Muslims in Georgia and Turkic groups in Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁸ The Yezidi Kurds, however, found refuge in predominantly non-Muslim, Christian districts of Georgia and Armenia. For example, in Armenia Yezidis used to live near Molokans (Russian: *молокане*) and also there were a lot of villages, where Yezidis and Armenians lived side by side.

In 1988, with the purpose of separation of Nagorny Karabach from Azerbaijan and its joining to Armenia, in Armenia and Nagorny Karabach a strong movement began, which led to an armed conflict between the two republics. International conflicts have led to interreligious clashes, which forced more than 10,000 Muslim Kurds along with Azerbaijanis to leave Armenia. After the tragic events connected with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, all the Muslim Kurds had to leave Armenia, and now the republic's Kurdish population is practically all Yezidi. McDowall writes:

¹⁸ Cf. Z. Aloyan, op.cit.

Glasnost contributed to a resurgence of identity and expression, and also to recognition of the repression of the Stalinist years. In 1988 some 10,00 Kurds in Azerbaijan returned their Azeri identity papers to Moscow with the explicit request that their identity be changed from Azeri to Kurd.¹⁹

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Armenian government and some Armenian scholars try to reinforce the dividing line between the Yezidi and Muslim Kurds. They treat them differently and write the pseudoscientific articles, where they try to prove the difference of Yezidi Kurds from Muslim Kurds, even referring to their language as to the Yezidi language (Kurdish: *Êzdiki*). There is a new ideology shared by some Armenia's Yezidi Kurds and allegedly sponsored by certain local circles, which claim that the Yezidis constitute a separate, non-Kurdish ethnic group. In this way, they try to solve the possible so called Kurdish question in their country.

In a lot of identity papers of the Kurds of Azerbaijan it was written "Azeri" instead of "Kurd", while in the passports of the Yezidi Kurds in Armenia and Georgia, in the column of nationality "Yezidi" instead of "Kurd" was written.

In Armenia, following the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the loss of automatic minority representation and the revival of strong ethnic identity, politically-minded Yazidis have become divided. Some affirm loyalty to the Armenian republic and tend to play down their Kurdish identity while others assert their Yazidi Kurdish identity and complain of Armenian discrimination.²⁰

The Yezidi Kurds in Armenia and Georgia (as well as a part in Shingal area in Iraq) today are one of the rare peoples whose religion – Yezidism – plays an ethnically forming role. Although the majority of Yezidis outside of Armenia consider themselves Kurds, in the republic, most of them deny it.

The wave of nationalist sentiments in the post-Soviet countries and the mounting fear of being assimilated forced the ethnic minorities of the former Soviet republics to concentrate on preserving their ethnic identities. In Soviet times, the division into Muslim and Yezidi Kurds was caused by political expediency; the Soviet political leaders were guided by the foreign and domestic situation.²¹ Not until the late 1980s did the mounting ethnic tension cause ethnic conflicts. The Kurds of Azerbaijan and Armenia were affected by the Nagorny Karabakh

¹⁹ D. McDowall, *op.cit.*, p. 493.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 494.

²¹ M. Komakhia, *Yezidi Kurds in Georgia: Ethnic Self-awareness and Consolidation*, CA&CC Press, Sweden, p. 3ff.

conflict, into which they were directly or indirectly drawn. Baku exploited the religious factor to draw the Muslim Kurds into its side; Yerevan used the same tactics to enlist support of the local Yezidi Kurds. As a result, the Muslims and Yezidis found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict. This gave rise to the so-called Yezidi question in Armenia: supported by some nationalist groups, certain religious circles tried to present the Yezidis as a separate ethnic group which had nothing to do with the Kurds in general. This division was even officially registered in the data of the population censuses carried out in Armenia and Georgia (and now in the Russian Federation as well), where the Kurds and Yezidis were registered as two different ethnic groups.

3.2. Contemporary situation of the Kurds in the post-Soviet States

The total number of the Kurds in the former Soviet Union is unknown. Obviously, now in Armenia there are more than 40,000, in Nakhichevan about 10,000, and in Georgia there are about 25,000 Kurds.

There are still large Kurdish communities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, settled in these Central Asian republics after the Stalinist deportations. In the recent years, because of the ethnic conflicts, there is pressure to the Kurds in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan that caused many of them to leave the countries and move mostly to Transcaucasia. In Krasnodar they form a rather big community.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, at least half of the Kurds from Armenia and Georgia left these countries and moved mostly to Russia, Ukraine, and Europe. The outflow of the Yezidi Kurds from Armenia and Georgia continues till today. The Kurds, who moved to Russia, try to settle near their relatives, moreover, the representatives of the same tribe or confederation of tribes usually settled in one village or district near one other.

Now, a lot of the Kurds in the post Soviet States actively take part in the Kurdish political life and are very interested in it. In the majority of the Kurdish homes one can find the satellite broadcasting and Kurdish television programmes are watched. The Kurdish TVs play a big role in the strengthening of the Kurdish identity and the language development. Showing the programs in different Kurdish dialects provides a better understanding of each other and the Kurds from the former Soviet Union use now some vocabulary from other dialects and sub-dialects of the Kurdish language.

In Moscow there is now hour long broadcasting in the Kurdish language in the Radio "Voice of Russia" (Russian: *Голос России*). Last years, in Internet a lot of Kurdish websites in the Russian language appeared.

Academic Shakro Khudoyevich Mhoyi says in one of his interviews:

However, many talk about the negative phenomena of the Soviet period, but with the disappearance of the USSR, the position of national minorities, especially ethnoses without statehood, has radically gone down: support from the state structures has come to naught, did not become even possible to publish books on the native language.²²

The majority of the Kurds who moved to Russian Federation from Armenia and Georgia do not face the problem of the language that, for example, becomes a big problem for the Kurdish communities in Europe. The knowledge of the Russian language helps to the majority of the Kurds better integrate into society. Moved to the Russian Federation, the Kurds faced some other problems, the main of which for the Kurdish community in big cities is the loss of the Kurdish language. There are no schools where pupils can study Kurdish, and no books in the Kurdish language are published.

A mother's tongue and culture are perceived now as the major ethno-differentiating signs. It is also possible to consider the religious belonging as one of such signs. The less such ethno-differentiating signs as the knowledge of a native language or knowledge of customs are, the more other signs of ethnic identity appear, for example, for the Kurds as one of the major ethno-differentiating signs the common historical destiny acts as symbol of unity of the people.²³ However, as the language is one of the primary sign of the ethnical belonging, the loss of the language causes the weakening of the ethnic identity.

The Kurds never showed intolerance in ethnic interaction: in case they know the language, they easily communicate with representatives of other cultures. Some Kurds who lived in Russia, for example, more than 15–20 years and have received a Russian education, quite often have a bicultural identity. The Kurds having such identity possess psychological features of both groups, i.e. Kurdish and Russian, realise the similarity to them and possess bicultural competence.

²² See S. Kh. Mhoyi, an interview in the Russian language for the Armenian newspaper "Noev Kovcheg" 2006, No. 13, Vol. 108.

²³ See Kh. Omarkhali, *Etničeskaja identičnost' kurdov i samoidentifikacija kurdov-jezidov. Vzaimodejstvie s predstaviteljami drugich kul'tur* [Ethnic Identity of the Kurds and Self-identification of the Kurds Yezidis. Interaction with the Representatives of Other Cultures] [in:] *Put' Vostoka. Kul'turnaja, etničeskaja i religioznaja identičnost'*, Saint-Petersburg 2004, pp. 100–105.

In Russia, especially in the capital cities Moscow and St Petersburg, with their polyethnic society, the Kurds easily perceive and combine different foreshortenings of the world perception, usually without damage to the values of their own.

Several years ago, the State Duma of the Russian Federation decided to create the national-cultural autonomies. However, there is only right to create the cultural organisations, Sunday schools, to hold concerts, cultural events, etc. The Kurds use these possibilities, but the teaching of the Kurdish language and publication of the books remain practically on the beginning stage in Russia. Now there is a big number of the Kurdish public organisations, and after acceptance in 1996 of the law on national-cultural autonomies one of the first registered autonomy was a Kurdish one.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union a lot of the Kurds began to move to Russia, for example, some Kurds from Kyrgyzstan moved to the Saratov oblast. They began to settle in the villages left by the inhabitants of the region. Because of the abandoned villages, a lot of schools were closed and the Kurds who settled there have no possibility to study at schools in their villages.

I managed to visit different cities, settlements, and villages in Russia, Ukraine and Crimea with the Kurdish inhabitants from Armenia and Georgia, moved there after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In many villages there were just elementary schools or no schools at all and Kurdish children, especially girls, did not attend school. Some boys are taken into the larger villages and because of a big distance they stay in the school boarding houses to have a possibility to study at school. Even this, however, is the privilege of the Kurdish boys and usually no Kurdish girls stay into the school boarding houses. The situation in the cities is better and children get education.

All Armenians, Georgians, Azerbaijanis, and Chechens, as well as Kurds are perceived by some Russian people, who have the negative attitude to immigrants, as “people of the Caucasus nationality” (Russian: *Лица кавказской национальности*). Because of the Armenian endings *-yan* (Russian: *-ян*) of the Kurdish surnames in Armenia, all Kurds from Armenia are identified with Armenians in Russia. Last years, a lot of Kurds in Russian Federation changed their surnames to, for instance, their Kurdish tribal names, or they just changed the Armenian ending *-yan* to the ending *-î*.

The main obstacle for better integration and adaptation for the Kurds from the former Soviet Union both in small and in big cities is the question of permanent residence and admitting to the citizenship. While in the majority of the European countries, immigrants receive a roof over the head, means of

subsistence, and medical insurance, in Russia conditions are not so even towards the people who were the citizens of the former Soviet Union. The Kurds in Russian Federation ask for the admitting to the citizenship to have the possibility of official employment, to have medical insurance, and to get education.

The Kurds who moved to the Russian Federation are still not completely adapted, and they still have many problems connected with the citizenship, place to live, and others.

4. Conclusion

In a word, the 19th and 20th centuries made a part of the Kurds live in all over the Caucasus and have a contact with dozens of local nationalities.

The history of the Kurds in the former Soviet Union is characterised not only by “exiles, deportations and nostalgia”, but also, and which is the most significant, by the incredible cultural development, which influenced not only the culture and self-identity of the Kurds in all parts of Kurdish speaking area, but also the Kurds, working in the countries where they live, contributed to the culture of Armenians, Georgians and others.