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Forced Migration, Exile and an Imaginary Land-heaven. The case of Greek-Pontians in the Caucasus*

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The dissolution of the once mighty Soviet Union in 1991 revealed an old, and largely forgotten by the international community, national linguistic "map". This "map" includes the *Greek element*, a population of Greek origin which for centuries lived in the Black Sea area and later, during the mid twentieth century -for reasons that will be analyzed below- in the vast Central Asian Soviet republics. The Russian and Soviet literature concerning the fate of the Greeks of Russia and the Soviet Union is quite limited, and it usually refers to pre-revolutionary Russia (late ninetieth to early twentieth century), or it uses uncritically the pre-existing literature and oral tradition, thus presenting serious problems in methodology and objectivity (Hassiotis 1997, 28-31).[1] With few exceptions and unlike other indigenous ethnic groups in the Russian and Soviet territories like Circassians, Abkhazians, etc., or the "hosted" ethnicities, such as Koreans, Jews and Volga Germans, the western literature has widely ignored the Greek element (Hassiotis 1997, 55).[2] The Jewish and German communities were both larger and with greater political influence than the corresponding Greek community, and received attention from coreligionists and "expatriate" European and American historians (Hassiotis 1997, 31-32).

The present article addresses the case of the Greek community in the Caucasus area, a region characterized by its extremely rich multi-ethnic and multicultural backgrounds. The article is based on the relevant literature, which made its appearance in the 1980s, right after the collapse of the USSR. The studies carried out since the early 1990s, when the interest of Greece gradually became apparent, compensated for the delay, which was mainly due to the various difficulties and restrictions in accessing the Soviet Union sources, as well to the communication with the Greek element in the Caucasus region.[3] These general and specific studies are excellent examples of the scientific approach. They were carried out combining research in accessible local government archives and private collections in the former Soviet republics, with on-site research, an approach that was impossible during the time of the former USSR, and in particular throughout Georgia.

Greek researchers from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, carried out research missions, even during the early years, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou, professor of Contemporary

* Many sincere thanks to Prof. Artemis-Niki Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou and Iraklis Papounidis for their kind concession of valuable Oral History audiovisual material for the purposes of this article.

and Modern Greek History at the Aristotle University, was the leading researcher during the 1991 and 1996 missions in the Greek communities of Georgia, in particular in the Tbilisi area. Other field-research studies were also conducted in Odessa and Mariupol in Crimea. The first research mission, organized in August of 1991, and it was carried out in the hinterland of Georgia, in Tbilisi and Atzaria.[4] The second on-site research took place in October of 1996, in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi and in the hinterland, especially in the villages populated by a Turkish-speaking Greek community at the plateau of Tsalka, and in the Greek villages at the Armenian-Georgian borders.[5]

Aside from collecting archived and published materials from both public and private archives and libraries, these small research groups also attempted to collect from Greeks living in the Transcaucasus, mainly in the Georgia region, oral testimonies concerning issues of their original settlement in the area, travel and emigration, and the displacement they suffered in the mid twentieth century. Thus, this article intends to substantially utilize for the first time, the content of these still unpublished testimonies.

The Greeks in the Caucasus area originate from the provinces of Pontus, namely the southern shores of the Black Sea. Their presence in the Pontus goes back to the eighth century BC, when the Ionians of Miletus built their colonies there, like Sinop, Trebizond, etc. However, the Greek-Pontians' migration towards the Caucasus area dates back to the early Ottoman rule. These population movements were scarce and involved specific isolated cases such as metal workers and experienced miners from areas of Gümuşhane and Erzerum of Pontus. In the late eightieth and early ninetieth century these movements became more organized yet not permanent. The Christian settlements in the Transcaucasus area seemed to have been encouraged by Russia which, in this way, attempted to secure its rule during the first two decades of the ninetieth century. The Russo-Turkish war (1828-1829) was yet another good reason for the Greek-Pontians to move to Georgia and in particular to the mountainous region of Tsalka.

Mass settlements occurred after the mid ninetieth century and throughout the First World War. This was a direct consequence of the conditions created by the Russian Christian colonist attraction policy of the Czars and the corresponding ones formed into the Ottoman Empire by the Christian population displacements. Armenians and Greeks were displaced from the coastal and inland areas of Pontus because of the massive entry of thousands of Muslims from the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire, or the violence perpetrated against them during and after the end of the Russo-Turkish war in 1877-1878. Consequently, Greeks from the regions of Trebizond, Rodopolis, Chaldia, Theodosiopolis, Koloneia, Neokaisareia and Amasya, took refuge in the areas of Georgia where they settled (Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou 1993-1994, 91-132).[6]

During the second decade of the twentieth century two important incidents occurred involving the Greek-Pontians fleeing to Russian territory. The first was triggered by the expulsions of the Young Turks' revolutionary committee in 1913/4-1918, while the second took place right after the October Bolshevik Revolution and the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Eastern Pontus at the end of 1917. Maria Koimitsidou-Lambrianidou, born in Santa of Pontus in 1912, described her forced resettlement from her birthplace to Georgia together with fellow villagers in 1918. They all relocated to an area where other compatriots had already settled. She remembered the event as follows:

> We lived very well in Santa, even though I had lost my father and my grandparents had already settled in Georgia. But there were bad times ahead... We were exiled in 1918. My mother took me by the hand and walked out the door of our house… We were too many, we walked continuously. The old men and old women were dying in the streets ... (Video Recordings, Xanthopoulou 1991).

The exodus of the Greeks continued after the collapse of the czarist regime, due to the rivalries between the people of the region (Georgians, Azeris, Armenians etc.), the conflict between the

Bolsheviks and the "white" counter-revolutionaries and the attacks of Kemalist troops. Facing the imminent threat, the Greek population sought an outlet to Batumi. Others managed to board a Greek ship with destination to Greece (Hassiotis 1993, 113-114). Most of them survived in the Caucasus.

The two research teams from Thessaloniki met with descendants of these "forgotten" Greeks at their communities. Dimitrios Koimitsidis, Kyriakos Chatziev and Dimitrios Eleftheriadis, villagers of Greek-speaking and Turkish-speaking communities, like Gora, Sakire-Dmanisi, Iraga, Dagva, Santa and Avranlo of Tsalka etc., placed their ancestors' arrival during the second half of the ninetieth century -mostly, as mentioned in the narratives, during the decades of 1860, 1870 and 1880. They also confirmed the causes of fleeing from Pontus and pointed out the areas of Trebizond as their origins (Video Recordings, Xanthopoulou 1991; Recordings, Papounidis 1991).[7] The cemeteries of those communities, with their numerous Greek tomb inscriptions, bear silent witness of the communal life in the past.[8] This is also applicable to Greek churches built in the early years of settlement, by excellent builders of Santa, in Pontus, as well as to their homes and communal fountains in the squares and the streets of the settlements. Typical examples are the temples of Holy Spirit in Santa of Tsalka (1874) and St. George in Megali Iraga (1894). In the above mentioned village one can also see water springs bearing the inscription of the year of construction (i.e., 1866).

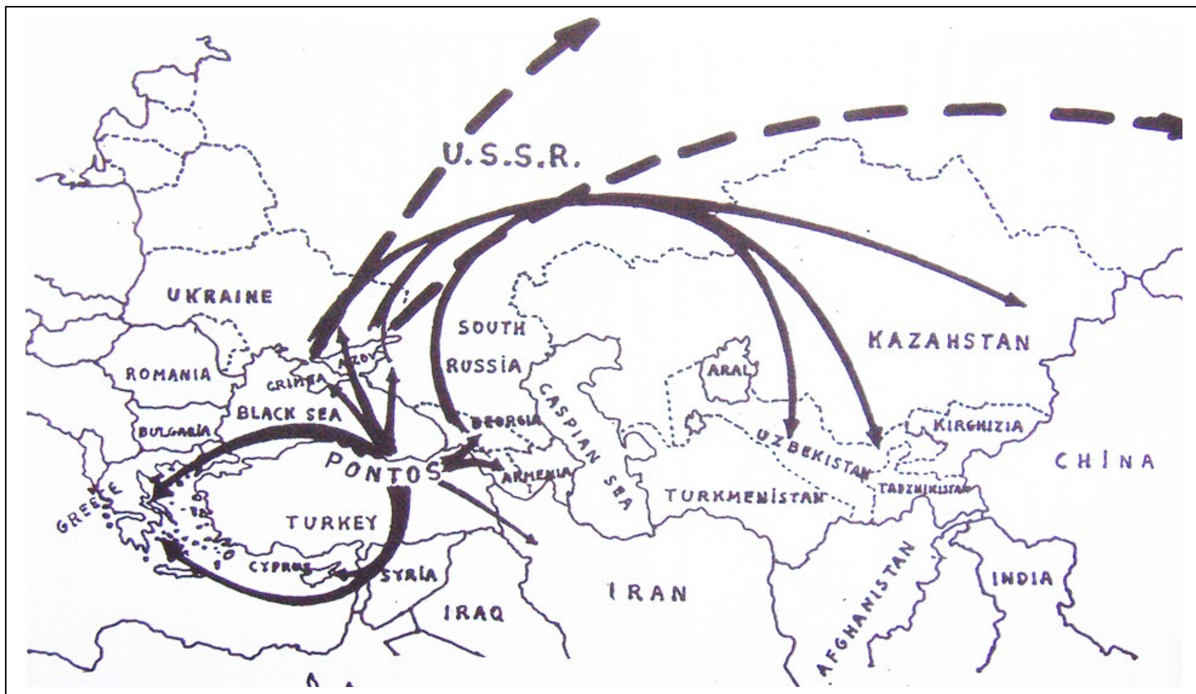

Fig.1. *The arrows pointing to Greece and USSR show the refugee wave [in]* ***of*** *1922. The dashed arrows represent the paths to the concentration camps of Siberia, while the arrows to the east show the massive stalinistic displacements of Greek-Pontians to Central Asia* ***from 1941 to 1944 and from 1947 to 1949****. (Agtzidis 1993, 162).*

The resemblance that researchers noticed in facial features between the majority of Greek villagers farmers of the Transcaucasus area and those of their Greek-Pontians brothers, was impressive.

The latter, after the Young Turks' and Kemalists' expulsions, during 1916-1922 and the "catastrophe" of 1922,[9] sought refuge in Greece, following thus the opposite path to the former ones a few years before. The research teams were pleasantly surprised to discover that the elderly people, middle-aged and the young children they encountered could speak the immutable Pontian dialect even to this day; this is probably the only Greek local dialect that has retained, until modern times, so many linguistic elements from the ancient Greek Language.

The odyssey of the Greek-Pontians of the Transcaucasian region continued after the victory of the Soviet regime. At the beginning of this period they were forced to fight for survival. New pressures were placed upon them by the period of collectivization from 1928 to 1933, and the notorious *kolkhoz.*[10] These events affected mainly the Greek farmers in the southern Soviet regions, including Georgia. Thus, between 1922 and 1933, the Greeks found themselves once again facing difficult conditions similar to the immigrant transfers of Germans from the USSR (Hassiotis 1997, 591). Approximately 65,500 Greek-Pontians chose to "repatriate" to Greece and this despite the reluctance of the Greek state (Hassiotis 1993, 117). The researchers discovered that the difficult "kolkhoz days" are still strong in the memory of the elderly as is the return of their compatriots to Greece at that time.

Fig. 2. *Students of Greek primary school in the city Sochi, with their teacher Achilles Siamanidis, 1932 (The Committee for Pontian Studies, Museum of Pontian Hellenism - Photo Gallery).*

By mid 1930s the Greeks of Caucasus region had succeeded in their resistance to Slavic homogenization. They formed a thriving Greek community and maintained both 'their national identity and links with Pontus' homelands. They were also able to maintain an ideological contact with Greece, their distant and idealized homeland (Xanthopoulou 1993-1994, 135). This was an impressive show of strength towards the Soviet regime: Greeks preserved a strong religious identity and developed significant cultural and educational activities, such as Greek-speaking theater, newspapers and literature in the Pontian dialect and school education.

It is worth noting that they invited teachers and priests from Pontus and other regions of Asia Minor, for the operation of their schools and churches. Alternatively, they used the services of compatriots established in the Caucasus. Specifically, Ioannis Lambrianidis, a teacher himself, mentioned that his father graduated from the main educational Institute of Pontus named "Frontistirion of Trebizond" and was immediately assigned to the Caucasus (Video Recordings, Xanthopoulou 1991). Another interesting informant was an old woman named Sygklitiki, a former teacher of the village of Sakire. With stunning clarity of thought, she recited poems, sang traditional Greek songs, talked in perfect Pontian dialect and referred to the Fall of Constantinople, the Greek Revolution (1821) and the Greek mythology.

By 1937 the Soviet policy towards small nations began full enforcement. This policy imposed the "amputation" of the *Greek element*, towards the construction of the "homo sovieticus" (Hassiotis 1997, 589-590). The circulation of Greek newspapers, and the operation of printing houses and schools were disrupted under the pretext that all these venues were used as weapons of anti-Soviet and anti-socialist propaganda. The Greek language at school was abolished and the Russian language took its place. By the early 1930s churches began to close due to the anti-religious policy enforced by the regime, based on the Stalinist law prohibiting religious "propaganda" (Hassiotis 1997, 390). The Greek expatriates Kyriakos Fotiadis from the town of Tsalka and Kyriakos Chatzief from the village Dmanisi mentioned that Greek people resisted the hard anti-religious Stalinist measures by secretly baptizing their children (Video Recordings, Xanthopoulou 1991).

The Greeks of Caucasus experienced all such restrictions as well as expulsions, arrests, imprisonment and exiles, leading yet to another exodus of families to Greece. Dimitrios Koimitsidis, for instance, narrated his arrest in the village Dagva along with 27 other fellow villagers (1937) on the charges of anti-soviet propaganda. He recounted with vividness:

> I worked in kolkhoz from 1932 to 1937. That year the Stalinist regime put me in jail allegedly for propaganda… For God's sake! We worked day and night. We had no time for such thoughts and actions! I also remember others who were with me in prison… Alexis Pompouridis, Alexandros Konstantinidis, Angelos Seitidis, Charalampos Yamakidis, Theodoros Stylidis, Nikolaos Kassiteridis ... We experienced inhumane conditions in prisons in Batumi, Tbilisi and Vladivostok … They treated us like dogs… (Video Recordings, Xanthopoulou 1991).

Being the only surviver, Koimitsidis was released from prison in November 1942 and went to Kazakhstan to meet his exiled relatives.

According to the informant Olga Roumanova-Poniridou, in the region of Georgia churches were closed and damaged, crosses and church-towers were destroyed (Video Recordings, Xanthopoulou 1991), while Greek expatriates, unable to react, witnessed the tragic developments. However, some of the churches avoided complete destruction, thanks to Greeks that despite being officers of the communist party, did not fully comply with the party's orders. A typical example was the church of the Metamorphosis of the Savior in Dagva, which was initially converted into a warehouse for chemical fertilizers and then into school premises, but keeping its central cross and frescoes well preserved. In other cases, crosses were cut and left lying beside the deserted churches, as in the village Barmaksiz. The research team came across these crosses in 1991, due to an issue ordered by the Patriarch of Georgia, Ilia, for the preservation of these monuments, as a reminder of the days of Stalinist expulsions. The information was anonymously provided in Barmaksiz by a monk born in 1917 in Sochoum, native of Caesarea and Trebizond (Video Recordings, Xanthopoulou 1991).

At the onset of World War II small nationalities of the USSR became once again Stalin's target. Fear of their possible cooperation with Germany resulted in the extensive displacement of different populations, beginning with settlements from the regions of Crimea, Ukraine and North Cau-

casus. The *Greek element* did not maintain Nazi-friendly attitude. Quite the opposite, they fought hard alongside the Soviet Army against the Axis. Yet, they did not escape persecution. Monuments for those fallen in action dominate the squares of many Greek villages in Georgia and Atzaria, as well as in Dagva and Opreti, and remind visitors of the strong and brave resistance of the *Greek element* against Nazism. On these imposing monuments, which were installed later on, one can see photos of the fallen. At the monument of Opreti, for instance, sixty six photos of Greek soldiers and officers were placed. The writer saw the monument at the Greek village Dagva for the first time in October 1990, during one of the first trips made to Georgia just before the collapse of the USSR.

Despite their contribution, Greeks were "rewarded" by the Stalinist regime with acts of discrimination such as decoration refusal. One of the many cases, as reported by Hercules Papounidis, was that of Anastasios Lavrentief (Lavrentidis) from Opreti village, who did not receive any medals, not even after his death, despite the fact that he was World War II hero (Video Recordings, Xanthopoulou 1991). Greeks suffered also pressures, expulsions and extensive displacements before and after the end of the War (1941-1944 and 1947 - 1949 respectively), affecting particularly the Greek population in the Transcaucasus (Agtzidis 1990, 152-200, 226-241). Stalin's goal was to free the Soviet Union from any ethnic problems. To do so, he systematically mixed small nations with Muslim and Turkish majorities in the areas of Central Asia (Hassiotis 1993, 130). The compulsory transfer of thousands of Greeks from Georgia mainly to the Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan republics, lasted until Stalin's death (1953). The teacher Ioannis Lambrianidis from Iraga, with great commotion recounted:

> The exile took place on June 14, 1949. It only took a couple of hours, without any notice. We were forced to board wagons for baggage and animals, 40-45 families in each locked wagon ... 70 wagons in total and one for the sick. Many suffered from dysentery, my mother being one of them. We were on the move for 14 days. We arrived in Kentau, Kazakhstan ... We were Greeks from Batumi, Tbilisi, Sochoum, Baku ... Every week, we had to sign to prove our presence there. Barren land, no houses. The place was called 'Hungry plain': sand, air and water all poisoned by lead mining. 18 deaths per day ... (Video Recordings, Xanthopoulou 1991)

The adventure of the Greeks of the Caucasus in Central Asia, left them with many open wounds that festered even after the destalinization (1956). In their desire to go back home, they began to return in groups to their areas of origin, while some others chose to "repatriate" to Greece in the 1960s. But perhaps the biggest blow to everyone, with the exception of elderly people, was the loss of the Greek language. Informant O.P., who wanted to remain anonymous, said that many still live with the old fear of Stalinism and expulsions. This fear was indeed noticed by the researchers as they confronted reluctance or refusal from some Greek emigrants to talk about the past. This same informant, although started talking about the history of his family, he suddenly stopped and admitted: "I'm afraid to keep talking… I'm afraid I'll get in trouble with the authorities" (Video Recordings, Xanthopoulou 1991).

The situation gradually improved, especially after the Perestroika during the 1980s and the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991. Schools and damaged churches gradually began to operate again; Greek newspapers re-circulated and associations were re-formed. Nevertheless, the disappointment on people's words was obvious, as the first families had already begun to leave their villages in 1991. The elderly people of Iraga, Dagva and other Greek villages spoke and sent greetings to their children and grandchildren who had gone to Greece, and many were keen to following them.

Many of those who had hopes for a better future were quickly disappointed, as ethno-racial and religious differences both in the Caucasus, mainly in Georgia, and in Central Asia created a new condition of emergency for the local Greek

element. The recent events of the war in Georgia led Greeks to seek in mass a new home again, this time in Greece, the "Ithaca of their odyssey". This explains the fact that the second research team came across deserted villages in the hinterland of Georgia in 1996, as shown in the audiovisual material, with few people, mostly elderly; these same villages, a few years ago, were full of life and promised the continuity of the long Greek presence in the Caucasus. The same research team also spoke to the last Greek residents of the once thriving Greek neighborhoods of Tbilisi (Video Recordings, Xanthopoulou 1996). The vast majority had resettled back to Greece.

The arrival of the former Soviet Union Greeks in Greece generated serious problems to them and to the indigenous alike. The former had idealized anything concerning the national center, while the latter were not ready to accept them and their many peculiarities. A couplet of a well-known song eloquently and succinctly expresses the frustration of "repatriate refugees": 'Abroad I am Greek and in Greece I am a foreigner'. In addition, the official version of Greek history was not devoid of responsibilities for it had completely ignored this Hellenic group for decades. The outcome of these factors was to render the process of social integration, of tens of thousands of "repatriated refugees" very difficult and complicated[11] for the past two decades, a process that still troubles to some extent the Greek society and the State.

The facts examined in this article, together with the literature and especially the unpublished oral testimonies, lead to the conclusion that the movements of Greek-Pontians to Caucasus were the result of certain socio-economic and political conditions prevailing in both regions of Pontus and the territories of Russia in the late ninetieth and early twentieth century. The pressure on the Greek element was also aggravated by the conflicts between Russia and the Ottoman Empire during the same period. The sufferings of the Greeks of Pontus continued even at their new settlements, where they established and organized new communities. The collectivization, the Stalinist persecutions and exiles to Siberia and Central Asia in the decades 1930 and 1940, opened up wounds that could not heal even after the return of the Greek element in homes after 1956.

The history of the Greeks of Pontus in the Soviet republics, in this case in Georgia, came to light only after the dissolution of the USSR. The first research team documented how this population was faced with multiple challenges. These Greeks in exile expressed not only their bitterness about what they had suffered in the past but also the uncertainty and insecurity about their future. However, facing the dilemma of staying in their homes or "returning" to Greece, most of them chose the latter. The weakness of Greece to host the influx of returnees and support those who remained in Georgia, strongly disappointed them. Those who went to Greece, faced the negative attitude of almost the whole of Greek society; the imaginary land-heaven proved to be an inhospitable place. The second research team documented the rapid decline of the once flourishing Greek communities of Georgia. One can justifiably argue that the uncontrolled population shrinkage during the past twenty years, now threatens the very existence of the Greek element there.

Finally, it can be stressed that the current situation is a battle against time even for the researchers, who face the tasks of saving the written sources and if possible, completing the audiovisual archive of the Greek-Pontians of Georgia and their "dying" communities.

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[1] The authors of this specific book exploited not only the available Greek and foreign, older and newer bibliography, but also oral testimonies collected in Ukraine, Southern Russia and Georgia.

[2] The Russians integrally included in the "German" people who emigrated from Russia already from the recent years of the reign of Peter the Great, not only the German-speaking but also some Protestants, such as the Dutch, Danes, etc.

[3] The following studies are given indicatively in chronological order: Agtzidis, Vlassis. 1990. *Ποντιακός Ελληνισμός. Από τη Γενοκτονία και το Σταλινισμό στην Περεστρόϊκα* (*Pontian Hellenism: From Genocide and Stalinism to Perestroika*). Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis Brothers, Fotiadis, Kostas. 1991. «Ο Ελληνισμός της Σοβιετικής Ένωσης τον 20ό αιώνα» ("Hellenism of the Soviet Union in the 20th century"). In *Pontian Hellenism in the former Soviet Union*, edited by Kostas Fotiadis, 20-66. Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis Brothers, Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou, Artemis. 1993-1994. «Μεταναστεύσεις Ελλήνων στον Καύκασο κατά τον 19ο αιώνα» ("Greek Migration to Caucasus in the 19th century»"), *Centre for Asia Minor Bulletin* 10: 91-172.

[4] The first research mission, in the context of a special research program with the encouragement and financial support of the General Secretariat for Hellenism Abroad, was organized in summer of 1991 and the only participants were Prof. Artemis Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou and her husband Nikolaos Kyriakou, who had the undivided support of Hercules and his son George Papounidis.

[5] The five-member mission formed, apart from Artemis Xanthopoulou-Kyriakou, Nikolaos Kyriakou, the writer, the other post graduate at the time student George Antoniou, and Margarita Anatol'evna Aradzhioni, scientific assistant at the Oriental Studies Institute of the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences.

[6] The article is basically the major work regarding the transfers of Pontian Greeks to Caucasus, as it exploits both the most important studies of western literature and those of the Russian and Georgian literature in particular.

[7] More specifically, informants reported as originating from the settlements of Santa, Imera, Larahani, Sürmene, Rize, Gümuşhane. Sometimes even these new settlements bore the name of the village of origin of their inhabitants, as was Santa of Tsalka.

[8] The visits and meticulous filming of cemeteries prove the time and number of Greek settlements. Examples include the tomb of Anastasia Chatzieva (Chatzidou) having inscribed that the deceased was born in Larahani, Trebizond in 1808, had settled in Iraga in 1870 and died in 1909.

[9] *"Catastrophe" of 1922* in Asia Minor: Following the Greco-Turkish war (1919-1922) in Asia Minor, Mustafa Kemal's forces pushed the Greek population out of Anatolia and burned Smyrna on September 14, 1922. These tragic events led to the compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in 1923.

[10] *Kolkhoz*: was a form of collective farming (collectivization) in the Soviet Union, namely the change from private ownership to ownership by the State. This peaceful and gradual shift to collective farming in the first 15 years after the October Revolution turned into a violent stampede during the forced collectivization campaign that began in 1928.

[11] The following studies are given indicatively, as reference to the social and economic integration, education and legal status of expatriates from the former Soviet Union in Greece: Kassimati, et al. 1992. *Πόντιοι μετανάστες από την πρώην Σοβιετική Ένωση: κοινωνική και οικονομική τους ένταξη* (*Pontian Immigrants from the Former USSR: Their Social and Economic Integration*). Athens: General Secretariat for Hellenism Abroad, Vergeti, Maria. edit. 1998. *Ομογενείς από την πρώην Σοβιετική Ένωση, 1985-1995* (*Expatriates from the former Soviet Union, 1985-1995*). Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis Brothers, Fotiadis, Kostas. edit. 1995. *Οι Έλληνες στις χώρες της πρώην ΕΣΣΔ* (*The Greeks in the countries of the former USSR (History-Education)*). Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis Brothers.