

HEMESHIN, HOMSHETSI, OR HEMESHINLI?

ARMENIAN SPEAKING MUSLIM PEOPLE OF THE BLACK SEA REGION

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 53

Nona Shahnazaryan

*Kuban Social and Economic Institute, Center for Caucasian and Pontic Studies (Krasnodar)
December 2008*

This memo is based primarily on field research material gathered in the areas of Hemshil settlements, including the villages of Vpered, Erik, Kim, Kalinin, and Kubanskaya, all of which are in the Apsheronsk district, Krasnodar Territory, Russian Federation, and the villages of Sarpi, Akhalsopeli, Kakhaberi, Gonio, Dzharnali, Feriya, and Urekhi in the Khelvachauri district, Adjara, Georgia. The memo is about identity transformation affected by social context and political background/pressure.

Hemshils (they call themselves *Homshetsi*) are normally considered to be Armenian-speaking Turks possessing what has been referred to as an “imprecise” or “migrating” ethnic identity. The majority of researchers believe that Hemshils are the descendants of Armenians from the Hamshen region on the Eastern Anatolian coast of the Black Sea who were subjected to forced Islamization.

Factors that Promote Marginalisation of the Hemshils

The Hemshils simultaneously bear more than one identity. Which factors can be considered to have influenced this process? Ethnic identity has frequently (one might say, cyclically) played a fateful role in the history of the Hemshils. National concepts, both among modern-day Hemshils and their forebearers, emerged from difficult personal experiences in contemporary cultures, in which national identities have led to disastrous situations that constitute a threat to physical existence. Complex turning points in the history of the Hemshils appear to have a direct correlation to the fact that

they resided in frontier areas (Turkey, Georgia, the border with the USSR). That is, they were marginal by definition. In fact, it is the Hemshils' location on the border and their close personal ties to Turkey that provided, as Alexander Nekrich pointed out, the ostensible reasons for their internal deportation in 1944, under the so-called "preventive measure during wartime that rendered essential the 'desirability' and 'loyalty' of the border populations."

Having been left within the borders of the USSR, the Hemshils theoretically could have counted on relative stability, insofar as "ethnic identity was, in practice, of little significance." Under the "leveling" Soviet model of socialization, nationality formed part of the background of general daily Soviet culture. However, this concerned everyone except the Hemshils and other "undesirable" peoples (including Germans, Greeks, Kurds, Georgian Muslims, Turks, Chechens, Ingush, Karachai, and Crimean Tatars) who were exiled by Soviet authorities during World War II. In this instance, the Hemshils' Turkish identity played a critical role (in contrast with the reality of the Pontic-Anatolian context) because of the threat posed by poor political relations with Turkey during the war.

To this, one can add the political and economic interests of the higher administration and ordinary inhabitants of Adjara (in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic) at the time. These factors were not decisive, but they did dictate strategies that ultimately had a negative effect upon the Hemshils' return to their former residences and their receipt of compensation for loss of property. Of particular interest is the local population (Georgians, Laz) who secretly had an interest both in ethnic "cleansing" (the Georgian administration), and in acquiring the property of the hardworking and usually prosperous Hemshils (some ordinary citizens). According to informant testimony, however, the process of settling direct neighbors in the Hemshils' homes was not an easy one. The local inhabitants, bound to the newly-exiled Hemshils by ties of friendship and neighborliness, often refused to move into the Hemshils' empty houses. The Georgian government was forced to disseminate propaganda and invite young families from the mountainous village of Khulo, though they too were not completely willing to be taken from their large patriarchal families. On November 25, 1944, in accordance with decree No. 6279 of the Committee of State Security (KGB) of the USSR, several hundred families of Hemshils were deported to Central Asia as an ethnic group.

Having lived through the "Special Settlement" regime, the Hemshils began to recover after the 1956 rehabilitation that granted them equal rights and removed the stigma of "traitors to the homeland." However, they faced new destructive problems linked with the so-called "parade of sovereignty," such as the disintegration of the USSR and ethnic conflicts in the independent states on the periphery of Russia. Under pressure from nationalist bandit groups in Kyrgyzstan, the Hemshils were again forced to abandon their homes and move to Krasnodar Territory.

Paradigms of Hemshil Identity

Since the beginning ("as far as we ourselves can remember"), the Hemshils have been carriers of a dual identity -- Turkish (based on religion) and Hemshil (based on language). Hemshils speak two domestic languages, Turkish and Hemshil, although,

thanks to their knowledge of Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Russian, the group is multilingual. Also noteworthy is the hypertrophied (Sunni) Muslim identity of many Hemshils, especially among older people. The reinforcement of their faith can most likely be attributed to contact with the Muslim cultures of Central Asia during the period of exile from 1944 to 1989. During that the same time, unsuccessful attempts were made to establish contact with Armenia to facilitate the removal of several groups of Hemshil intellectuals from Kyrgyzstan. Turkish identity is fairly robust and tends to be in the foreground, especially in social situations. In field research conducted by V. Kurylev, two young Hemshils (both born in 1960) introduced themselves as Turks, and only later added that according to their passports they were Hemshils.

With regard to the 1980s migration to Krasnodar Territory, this group's sense of identity is even more complex, revealing nomadic forms of identification. This is primarily linked to the fact that after many centuries the Hemshils again found themselves intertwined with their original historic context. To the great surprise of Hemshils themselves, they discovered that their "original" language, which they called Hemshin (*homshesma*), was completely comprehensible and used by the neighboring "hamshen" Armenians. However, as confessional identity among the Hemshils is strong, there is a tendency among ordinary Hemshils to strengthen a robust Turkish (Muslim) identity and to distance themselves from their Armenian neighbors. It is likely that the Hemshils experience all the paradoxicality of the phenomenon of an "Armenian Muslim," given the connotations of Armenian history relayed by their neighbors in the course of everyday life. Nevertheless, sources also expressed themselves as follows: "Our native tongue is *homshesma*, we were Armenians but became Muslims, but I have no idea how that came about," and, "Our native tongue is Hemshil, it's like Armenian." Turkish identity and the degree to which it is fixed depend, according to interview data, upon profession and upon the intensity of people's links to the Turkish economy and other Turks. However, several issues arise: "In Turkey, people often say we are not real Turks and ask who we are. I usually answer: by nationality, I am a Turk, my people are the Hemshils. I am a Muslim and so is everyone there, and that's that!" "I do business with Turkey. My colleague [in Turkey] says 'you aren't a Turk.' I answer that I am an Ottoman, so there!"

Muslim spirituality and religious practices fill the daily life of the older generation in many families - prayer five times a day (*namaz*), frequent washing (*abdest*), and annual observance of the month-long fast (*ramazan*). These rituals imbue every sphere of daily life, and in particular the wedding cycle, including the wedding itself (the compulsory *nikah* or *nikoh* ritual that is the Muslim equivalent of the Christian wedding ceremony) and sexual practices (the compulsory *ghusur*, ablutions "from the ends of the hair to the heel" immediately after intercourse). Young Hemshils are either completely indifferent to religion or observe the laws of Islam as a formality. Greater adherence to the "rules" of identity, however, arises under beneficial circumstances. For example, a Hemshil woman who wishes to protect her son from the dangers of service in the Russian army invests the maximum effort to send him to Turkey to study to become a mullah. Some Hemshils react negatively to the least allusion to their former Christian or Armenian origins. As a rule, these are usually those who derive some advantage from articulating

one identity rather than another.

A degree of marginalization is often reflected by informants. A Hemshil woman from Batumi complained that a jealous Muslim Hemshil in Kemal-Pasha was still called Ziya Gyavur (*gyavour* means faithless, an infidel). "We belong nowhere, that's what is so awful. In Russia we are Muslims, in Turkey *gyavurs*." Often it is precisely these spontaneous reflexes, thinking aloud, that reveal the direct process of constructing ethnic identity:

"What is a homeland? Where you are born and grow up. But we don't have that. In this century we are migrants, from Turkey to Batumi, from Batumi to Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, and here. A homeland is somewhere where people accept you, where they know you, respect you, value you. We don't have that here. [...] Already we can't seek our past because our past is in different places. Some say that our homeland is where we were born, let's go there. Fine, but what about our children? They already speak a different language, they have been brought up differently."

Thus, the formulation of Hemshil identity, the Hemshil ethnic code, is based on an all-embracing marginalization, the community's exclusion from social networks in the host culture. These divisions have a huge social significance at the micro-level. People need to be able to present themselves in society, and this influences what sort of niche they can occupy in that society or whether they can occupy one at all. Formulating this code has a direct relation to real history, which is specifically constructed on "fate," mobilizing collective identity on the principle that "if they don't accept us in the new society we will create our own internal solidarity." The result is a closed community. In this sense, the choice is predetermined. Social development in the host society is made exceedingly difficult, while social life outside of one's own community is almost non-existent.

Marking of a New Marginalization

The ambiguous situation of the Hemshils of Krasnodar has driven the Hemshils to confusion and misunderstandings with the local population and, especially, with local official structures that cannot distinguish who is who. In this multi-ethnic context, in which there is a multiplicity of self-identities, people find that they no longer understand who they are. The Hemshil leaders appear impotent and unable to make a choice that would bring their community, in the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's words, "the optimal economic, symbolic, and cultural capital." They vacillate tortuously over their final choice and the legitimization of their ethnic status, which would provide their community with stability and prosperity. Consequently, there has still been no indication of unified opinion among rank-and-file Hemshils. The scales tilt one moment toward strengthening Turkish identity and uniting forces with the similarly "punished" Meskhetian Turks with the aim of survival, the next moment toward insistence upon the unique nature of Hemshil cultural roots, and the next moment toward the reconstruction and the renaissance of a "lost" Armenian identity. However, they are

extremely careful about adopting, much less institutionalizing, an Armenian identity. It is possible that this is because, were they to adopt this identity, the Hemshil guilt complex of being potential traitors to the faith would increase. The stamp of confessional inconsistency and “disloyalty” would be added to the experience of deportation as “undesirables” and “enemies of the people.” Recognizing oneself as Armenian would mean accepting that one’s ancestors “betrayed” Christianity and, later, Soviet ideals. Moreover, a Christian past is hard to reconcile with the Islamic discourse that dominates their daily lives.

Public Discourse and Phobias

The Hemshils, as well as Meskhetian Turks, Kurds, and other ethnic groups in Krasnodar, are among the most disenfranchised population groups. They are excluded from refugee status and from the social protection mechanisms that derive from this status, and they are also deprived of residency registration. The issue of residency registration and citizenship is pivotal. Resolving this issue would inevitably resolve many of their other problems. However, Krasnodar authorities, true to an essentialist paradigm, unambiguously refuse to legalize deprived groups (including the Hemshils). Hemshils, like Meskhetian Turks and other ethnic groups, are considered by regional officials as a “destabilizing factor” based on ideological myths and spy-mania. The regional governor and his supporters even threaten deportation camps that will be the basis for “expelling migrants.”

An infamous racist speech by the governor of Krasnodar, Alexander Tkachev, agitated local ethnic minorities, in particular Hemshils and Meskhetian Turks, because they bear the family names that end with the syllables pronounced as “outside the law.” Family names, in the context of contemporary public discourse, create a particularly blatant marker of formal “ethnic” status. The spiritual leader of the Hemshils stated, “I am changing my family name and dropping the ‘-ogly’. I went to the public records office and made an application to Kyrgyzstan on behalf of my children, I have already received the response...” In daily interaction, one’s family name, external appearance, accent, and other markers give rise to and reinforce inequality. Changing one’s family name means ridding oneself of the stigma, at least for locally-born children, who are already impossible to identify based on differences in intonation and turns of phrase borrowed from a “household” language. Marginalization and a rich experience of social inequality create a need to artificially correct one’s identity.

Xenophobia and explosions of racism in public discourse have made the problem of Hemshil identity a contemporary one, forcing them to more clearly define their self-identity. In 2002, the Hemshil leaders initiated a written request to the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology for a historical certificate defining the status of their ethnic group:

“We, the representatives of the Hemshil people (who call themselves [K]homshetsi) are requesting that you assist us in obtaining a historical certificate which will confirm our ethnic origin as a separate Hemshil nation. At the moment, for various subjective and objective reasons, our people are designated in a

range of official documents Hemshils, Turks, Georgians, and so on. The same situation exists with our family names. Some have Turkish endings -ogly, some Georgian -dze, some Russian -ov, -ev, and so on. The historical certificate is essential to protect our ethnic identity and for submitting, when required, to various state bodies.”

Of course, the very appeal itself, to an authoritative academic society, is proof of the current social reality in Krasnodar Territory. The response, signed by S.A. Arutiunov from the Caucasus Department of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology was as follows:

“The Hemshils, who originated in the Black Sea districts of Asia Minor, in particular Trebizond, must be seen as a distinct people, ethnically close to the Armenians, who converted to Islam in the Middle Ages. They speak their own form of the Hamshen dialect of the Armenian language.... According to international legal norms the Russian Federation is obliged to recognize the right of the Hemshils to Russian citizenship, to live in any part of Russia, and to receive legal and social protection from the Russian federal authorities. ...Hemshil family names may have a range of suffixes (-ogly, -dze, -ev, -ian and so on) depending on the traditions and history of each concrete family.”

In the political situation that prevails in Krasnodar Territory, being an Armenian (or for that matter, a Meskhetian Turk) is “unprofitable” and dangerous, as evidenced by the destruction of Armenian tombstones throughout Krasnodar and the unpunished destruction of commercial buildings belonging mainly to ethnic Armenians in Slaviansk-na-Kubani. In an attempt to resolve their ethnic identity, the Hemshil leaders originally chose a strategy of “independence.” It is very likely that continuing political practices have laid the groundwork for, or perhaps created, a new fully-fledged Ethnos.

However, subsequent developments have revealed a powerful thrust toward Turkish identity. This is linked with the U.S. Department of State’s development of a program under which the Meskhetian Turks of Krasnodar Territory could be received as refugees. Confronted by this situation, the Hemshils have again designated themselves as a sub-group of the Meskhetian Turks, “Hemshil-Turks.” This tactic could result in the keen interest of international human rights organizations that have taken up the Meskhetian Turk question. Hemshils have clearly taken this initiative in the hope of quickly receiving refugee status within or outside the Russian Federation, based on the calculation that it will have maximum resonance in the international community. This situation clearly demonstrates how the discriminatory discourse and policies of the Krasnodar authorities, by setting the interests of different ethnic groups against each other, becomes a significant factor in forming an ethnic identity, including the Hemshil identity, that is “unstable” or “nomadic.”

The metamorphoses in Hemshil identity appear to have peaked, but the process is

not yet at an end. This research vividly demonstrates the extreme flexibility of ethnic identity, continually reacting to social change and particularly to social disruption that threatens disaster for the ethnic community. The research supports the theses of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann that “identity changes when for some reason it becomes a problem. ...Radical changes in the social structure can be a factor when accompanied by changes in the prevailing psychological reality.” It is precisely these processes that have been at play and that continue to prevail in the case of the Hemshils.

PONARS Eurasia publications are funded through the International Program of Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed in these publications are those of the author alone; publication does not imply endorsement by PONARS Eurasia, Georgetown University, or the Carnegie Corporation.

© PONARS Eurasia 2008