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*IMMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT OF
ABHASIANS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE
ON BRITISH DOCUMENTS, 1864-67*

Doç. Dr. Musa ŞAŞMAZ

Abhasian families at Kelasur near Sukumkale who had provided a shelter to the British consul, Palgrave, were sent to prison¹³.

The Abhasian immigrants were usually conveyed by the steamers provided by the Ottoman government. The letters from the British Vice-consul, Wilkinson, who visited Sukumkale on 20 May 1867, reported that several small ships had already been chartered at the port for conveyance of about 8000 more, still waiting on the coast of Sukumkale and a very few of whom, however, were transported by the Russian steamers. As confirmed by all accounts the Abhasians were stripped by violence and driven forcibly out of their country. The exiles stated that several of their countrymen, after having been forced into the Russian ships under the pretext of embarking them for Turkey, were instead conveyed to Kertch or Novorupiska and thence to inner Russia. Past analogy rendered these statements very probable. No disease, crime, or disorder of any kind comparable with those of the previous exodus occurred either on board the Ottoman ships which conveyed the exiles hither or among the Abhasians during their stay at Trabzon. Only some overcrowding on the ships took place on the re-embarkment for Varna, but not to any serious degree. On the other hand a Russian bark which arrived at Trabzon laden with exiles on 26 May 1867 presented a horrified spectacle, not only from excessive overcrowding but also from the total lack of water and other supplies wantonly omitted by the captain, a Greek by race. On the admission of these immigrants, already half dead, into the port of Trabzon, the local government provided means for their immediate relief while the captain fearing the consequences of his actions, ran away and took cover under the Russian protection¹⁴.

In 1867, the first bands of the Abhasians began to arrive at various Ottoman ports in April. Palgrave reported on 26 April 1867 that several hundreds of the Abhasian exiles had already arrived in Ottoman port at Batum, and the remainders were expected within the next fortnight. He guessed that 12000 immigrants, comprising

13. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 13, 16 May 1867, FO 97/424.

14. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 18, 28 May 1867, FO 97/424.

one third of the Muslim Abhasian population, could take refuge in the Ottoman dominions, the remaining two third were able to delay their immigration till a time when there would be proper settlement possibilities following the first body of exiles¹⁵.

The number of Abhasian immigrants mainly comprising the principal chiefs of their respective provinces with their more immediate dependents who arrived at the port of Trabzon, reached 5600 by the middle of May 1867, and more were coming in by the hour¹⁶. It was reported by the end of May that about 10000 Abhasians arrived at Trabzon while about one thousand more dispersed along the coast between Trabzon and Batum. Roughly 2000 additional people disembarked at Sinop. Some shiploads of exiles also landed at Samsun but the Consul Palgrave did not know the number of those who landed at Samsun. He, however, estimated the total sum of exiles who already reached the Ottoman lands were about 14000 which were far more than the number previously expected to come to the Ottoman dominions¹⁷. The exodus of the Abhasians continued until the middle of June 1867 at which time their numbers amounted to about more than 16000 and the remaining Abhasians were estimated to be 30-35 thousand, but this number was found to be too exaggerated by the British Consul Palgrave, and his estimation was somewhat around under twenty thousand¹⁸.

No contagious disease broke out among the immigrants thanks to the attention given by the Ottoman government to their food, lodging, ventilation and other particulars¹⁹. However, as time went by, probably because of hot-weather, the immigrants became ill. Cases of typhus were seen within Trabzon, but neither this nor any other contagious disease was able to find its way into the camps to threaten them seriously because of the vigilance of the local

15. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 9, 26 April 1867, FO 97/424.

16. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 13, 16 May 1867, FO 97/424.

17. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 18, 28 May 1867, FO 97/424.

18. Palgrave to Lord Lyons, no 32 Confidential, 14 July 1867, FO 97/424.

19. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 13, 16 May 1867, FO 97/424.

administration which, as reported by Palgrave, did its duty well from first to the last moment²⁰. The local people moreover showed great gratitude and respect for their new hosts. In return for this kind reception, the conduct of the exiles was uniformly calm and orderly²¹. During the first arrivals, the Ottoman authorities thought of settling these Abhasians in Western Anatolia and Rumelia. So the authorities began to wait until the arrival of sufficient numbers before they were destined to their final settlements²². In late May, when it was considered that a sufficient number had arrived, the authorities brought steamers to the ports to take them to the locations of their ultimate settlements²³. These locations were Varna and Izmit not Western Anatolia and Rumelia as it was originally planned by the Ottoman government. However these locations were also changed in June in favor of those on the Ottoman-Greek frontier²⁴. But it was finally decided that they would be settled at Varna and Izmit. So the Ottoman steamers, namely "Zaif" and "Malakoff", arrived at Trabzon on 28 May 1867 and took on board about 7000 of the exiles temporarily stationed at Trabzon to be conveyed to Varna²⁵. It was observed, on 14 July 1867, that the remaining number of Abhasians encamped in Trabzon was about 4000²⁶. Of them 3100 Abhasians were embarked on board steamers and ships provided by the Ottoman government and left for Izmit on 31 July 1867 which left only 500-600 Abhasians in Trabzon. It appears that the remaining immigrants, other than those 500-600 Abhasians, had been conveyed, sometime between May and July, either to Izmit or Varna or somewhere else in the Ottoman lands. Those remaining 500-600 immigrants were carried to Varna within the first week of August 1867²⁷.

20. Palgrave to Lord Lyons, no 32 Confidential, 14 July 1867, FO 97/424.

21. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 13, 16 May 1867, FO 97/424.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 18, 28 May 1867, FO 97/424.

24. Palgrave to Lord Lyons, no 21, 19 June 1867, FO 97/424.

25. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 18, 28 May 1867, FO 97/424.

26. Palgrave to Lord Lyons, no 32 Confidential, 14 July 1867, FO 97/424.

27. Palgrave to Lord Lyons, no 39, 1 August 1867, FO 97/424.

As indicated earlier, the Abhasian families who were allowed to immigrate to Turkey consisted mainly of the ruling class or the chiefs of tribes inhabiting Abhasia. On 10 July 1867, in the name of 23 chiefs of Abhasia encamped at Trabzon, Shirim Beg Marshian, one of the chiefs presented to Muhlis Pasha, the governor-general of Trabzon, a petition alluding to the execution of the convention made between the Porte and the Russian government according to which 4500 Abhasian families were to be sent to the Ottoman territories. Shirim Beg stated, however, that only 1500 families were allowed and the remainder were hindered by the Russian government, that this conduct occasioned intolerable misery because of the splitting up of families and the retention of so many in Abhasia, that wives in many instances were shipped off for Turkey while their husbands were detained in Russia, that mothers were sent hither without their children, and children without mothers and the like. He appealed to the Sultan that his concern was not for the loss of their lands and of their goods, only for this division and ruin of the families and for the fact that this forced separation from their family units was more than they could bear. So he demanded from the Sultan that families and individuals kept behind might be liberated and allowed to follow and rejoin their countrymen and relatives²⁸.

The British Consul Palgrave acquainted with the Russian policy applied in the Caucasus supported the complaints raised in the petition. He found the statements to be perfectly true that families were wantonly disunited, and children separated from their parents. He observed that the main proportion of those shipped hither, and who formed the Abhasian camp, at one time 13000 in number, were old men, women and very young children, and that the youth and able bodied with very few exceptions having been detained behind. This fact was one of the public notoriety, being evident at a first glance to every visitor at the camp, and he himself

28. For the petition, see inclosure I in Palgrave to Lord Lyons, no 32 Confidential, 14 July 1867, FO 97/424.

noticed it in detail in the case of several families with which he had been personally acquainted in Abhasia²⁹. This also offered a curious corroboration of the statements sometimes made by Poles regarding the system pursued by the Russian government in the Polish provinces.

Those Abhasians who remained behind in Russian territory most certainly did so not by their own will but under compulsion. Their land and cattle were taken away, partly by open force, partly by nominal sales made to profit the Russian purchasers. This was also a fact of absolute notoriety which Palgrave witnessed both in Sukumkale in April 1867 and Gogdidi in Mingrelia on the Abhasian frontier in May 1867 where the remnants of the population detained in these provinces were utterly destroyed. In conclusion, these explanations may demonstrate that the complaints of the Abhasian chief were not based merely on accusations but on facts. As for the possibility about the compliance with these just demands, even if the Sultan made a presentation to the Russian Emperor to persuade him to let them embark and join their families in Turkey, it appeared to be unlikely that the Russians would allow it to take place, because they were in need of these Abhasians for labor on the roads and in the fields. This matter became more important especially owing to the failure of the attempt recently made by the Russo-Caucasian governments to procure laborers from Turkey by flattering invitations that had been circulated by the Russian agents in Trabzon and in the neighboring provinces amongst the Greeks and Armenians who had however declined to accept this offer. The Russo-Caucasian governments therefore had to close the gap by the detained Abhasian population. They could make use of those with little risk to themselves since the Abhasian nobles and chiefs had been carefully shipped off, so that the moral and physical indigence might render those kept behind submissive to their present taskmasters.

No fresh arrivals took place in July 1867 onward as the Russians allowed no further the immigration of Abhasians, but it

29. Palgrave to Lord Lyons, no 32 Confidential, 14 July 1867, FO 97/424.

was thought to be probable from the ordinary course of events that Abhasians detained behind would ultimately find the means to break through the "o" cordon drawn round them and to rejoin their relatives in Turkey. Indeed not more than two months elapsed when a large number of detained Abhasians escaped from their native country and presented a petition³⁰ which described the situation the remaining Abhasians were faced with. It was pointed out in the petition that 800 Muslim Abhasian families after having been compelled to abandon their houses in the hills, or to sell at a nominal price were deprived of their cattle, their main subsistence were still forcibly detained under the Cossack guard in the plains adjoining the coast where they were in a state of great misery and servitude. Those Abhasians who insisted on their desire to immigrate were beaten, imprisoned, and 23 of the remaining notables were sent to Siberia without a form of trial and under circumstances of gross brutality. A large number of Abhasian families were also forced into apostasy from Islam by open threats and violence. The Cossacks especially were the instrument in this matter, menacing the Abhasians with threats of instant exile to Siberia if they did not accept the Russian Orthodox faith; and the entire Ottoman merchant colony established at Gudavda, Sukumkale, Kelasur, Drana and other points along the coast were driven away.

Several times, the Circassians and Abhasians who immigrated to the Ottoman territories tried to return to their own country sometimes with success, but mostly with failure. In these endeavors their intention was either to recover the property left behind or to resettle in their native country. These attempts continued for some time but they finally gave up their hopes and dreams of going back to the Caucasus because of the strict Russian hold on the border. The immigrants, then finding no choice, were inclined to adapt to the new environments and accordingly make preparations and settle in order to survive.

30. For the petition, see Palgrave to Barron, no 49, 26 September 1867, FO 97/424.

IMMIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT OF ABHASIANS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE ON BRITISH DOCUMENTS, 1864-67

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While the Circassian struggle against the Russians was continuing in late 1863 and early 1864 the Russians widely believed that the Prince of Abhasia was secretly supplying some ammunition to the fighting mountaineers¹. The Russians had restricted their military operations only against the certain tribes in the Caucasus mainly those of the Circassians in the years of 1863 and 1864. No military operation was directed against the Abhasians, and the Russians with all their power were concentrating only on the defeat and expulsion of the Circassians from their country. Following the absolute defeat, the Circassian tribes were forced to assemble on the shores one after another². The Russians thereafter began to disturb the Abhasians. By this policy, the former did not fight against the Circassians and Abhasians at the same time, because to Russia fighting against these two groups did not seem more advantageous in terms of Russian interests. The number of Abhasians, in addition to that of Circassians roughly 300-400 thousand was considerable computed at 60 thousand including these in the principally Muslim districts of Cebelda and Samurzakhan³. In April 1864, the Russians sent the Prince of Abhasia, Shervashidze, an invitation of the Russian government to retire from his stronghold on Turkey as in the case of Circassians. They blackmailed the Prince by a threat that

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1. Dickson to Earl Russell, no 5 Confidential, 24 May 1864, FO 97/424.

2. Dickson to Earl Russell, no 6 Confidential, 29 June 1864, FO 97/424.

3. Dickson to Earl Russell, no 8 Confidential, 12 August 1864, FO 97/424.

if this offer was rejected they planned to organize a military expedition to compel him to do so as he was considered to be the real cause of the war lasting so long as it did⁴. The Russians having defeated strong Circassian tribes, started to more seriously disturb the people of Abhasia by issuing a decree in the summer of 1864 to the effect that the natives of the Caucasus were required to renounce all their allegiance to their feudatory princes. Both this decree and the commitment of unspeakable excesses were exercised in order to force the Prince of Abhasia to follow the fate of the Circassians. This decree meant that the Prince of Abhasia should submit without resistance to such measures that were in direct violation of his own undisputed rights on the one hand and of solemn engagements on the other⁵.

Dickson, the British Consul at Sukumkale reported in August 1864 that the population of Abhasia up to the present moment at least was not ordered to quit the country. Although the reigning prince was deprived of his authority and feudal rights, and the natives were required to acknowledge the Russian Emperor as their sovereign, the Abhasians at that time appeared disposed and willing to be loyal subjects. This indeed accounted on the honest and judicious acts of the officials appointed by the Russians to rule over them. Prince Suntutapalk Mirsky, the existing governor-general, was personally concerned about the future of the Abhasians and was him self desirous that they should not emigrate. Abhasia, including the districts of Cebelda and Samurzakhan was roughly computed at sixty thousands, principally Muslims⁶. Any governor sensible and responsible could not bear the loss of such a large number after the depopulation of Circassia.

The Grand Duke Michael, in the summer of 1864 and subsequent to the general exodus of the Circassian tribes, informed Prince Michael Shervashidze that by his disloyal conduct in the past years, he had forfeited all claim to the further possession and the

4. Clipperton to Earl Russell, no 19 Confidential, 10 May 1864, FO 97/424.

5. Dickson to Earl Russell, no 6 Confidential, 29 June 1864, FO 97/424.

6. Dickson to Earl Russell, no 8 Confidential, 12 August 1864, FO 97/424.

government of Abhasia. The Grand Duke therefore ordered him to retire to Tiflis. Officers were indeed dispatched from time to time to persuade the Prince Shervashidze to accede to the Imperial summons. Meanwhile Prince Shervashidze who had resigned his rank in the Russian army invariably pleaded either infirmity or ill-health (over seventy years of age) or solicited permission to proceed to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage. Shervashidze, having at last given up all that was required of him, hoped that he might be allowed to spend his last days in peace. Shervashidze, being of the Greek Orthodox faith, despite the pressure of Russia on him and his people just over, at a cost of 30 thousands roubles, started the construction of a handsome church at Mokva near Achemchiri modeled after the Byzantine and Episcopal churches of Abhasia.

The Russian authorities had been warning that Prince Shervashidze was preparing to emigrate the country and that he had also applied to the Ottoman Sultan for a steamer to take him to Istanbul. Fearing that Prince Shervashidze, if allowed to go abroad, would possibly lay his grievances before the Foreign Powers, an aide-de-camp of the Grand Duke was at once dispatched to Sukumkale with secret instructions for the Prince of Abhasia's arrest. As the expeditionary troops of the Caucasus grenadier division were withdrawn in early November 1864 to their quarters in Georgia, Major General Shatiloff came to Poti and Tiflis with two battalions of the Erivan regiment on 15 November. The secrecy was observed and strong pickets were pasted in different parts of the country to avert any sudden outbreak amongst the Abhasians. Late at a night in November General Shatiloff with his troops landed at Achemchiri which is half way to Poti and found that the Prince had already retired to Quasse. General Shatiloff apprehending that a number of natives might assemble to defend their chief, dispatched a strong body of Cossacks to summon Prince Shervashidze of the Grand Duke at once to surrender. Prince Shervashidze replied that the presence of so large a force was absolutely unnecessary, since he never intended to disobey the Grand Duke's orders and having subsequently inquired as to his

destination he was distinctly told Poti or Tiflis. The Prince having enjoined the natives to remain calm and orderly, and after making a few preparations, proceeded to embark amid tears and shrieks of a large multitude who followed him to the beach. His final departure took place on the night of 10 November, 1864, and it was not till the following morning that he perceived that the ship was steering in the opposite direction to Poti and that his real destination was Russia.

It thus ended the career of one who played a rather important part in the long years of the Circassian struggle for independence. The Russian policy in the Caucasus in general had led the Prince of Abhasia like others to baffle. Many insidious designs were directed against him so that his rule or administration would be weakened and it would then be easy for Russia to wipe it out. It may also be said that his vexatious exaction and duplicity made him many enemies in his country, especially the peasants were amongst those who harbored feelings of hatred against him. The Grand Duke, during one of his visit to Sukumkale, suppressed all direct taxes on local produce hitherto appropriated by the reigning prince. The aim was to make the Prince Shervashidze unpopular amongst his people and to strengthen the opposition at his expense. Despite these attempts he held a great influence on a large portion of the mountaineers. The arrest of the Prince of Abhasia by the Russian forces impelled the Abhasians to make a choice between immigrating to Turkey and being banished in Russia. Most Abhasians in principle, however, opted for immigrating to Turkey rather than for being banished in Russia. The symptoms of such an inclination became more visible amongst several families not because of a spirit of Islam but because of the distrust of the new rulers⁷.

It was not only the Prince of Abhasia but also his relative, Prince Dadian of Mingrelia who along with her son were forced to live in exile. The Princedom of Abhasia was then ruled by the staff

7. Dickson to Earl Russell, no 10 Confidential, 22 November 1864, FO 97/424.

of the Grand Duke Michael. It was rumored, although denied by the Russian consul in Trabzon, that thousands of Abhasians were preparing to pass over to Turkey. But the Abhasians did not immigrate in the summer of 1864 and they had to wait until 1867 when their immigration started.

The Russian government successfully and cleverly achieved the deportation of Circassian tribes from their motherland to Turkey in 1863-64 without even receiving any protest from the European countries. By this achievement, the Russian government then felt itself powerful enough to finish the work it had started after the war of forcing the remaining particularly Muslim elements out of the Caucasia. After the Circassians the main object of the Russians was to force the Abhasians to follow the way the Circassians had chosen in 1863 and 1864. The blind eye which the Europeans had turned to this matter in a way meant that the actions of the Russians were approved. The indifference to the Circassian cause led the Russians to complete the de-Muslimisation of the Caucasus. So the Russians, almost two years after the Circassian exodus, sent fresh troops in March 1867 amounting to 1500 in number and mainly consisting of the Chapeurs and Cossacks. Following their arrival at Sukumkale, General Tolstoy proclaimed the emancipation of serfs throughout Abhasia and Samurzakhan and the permission given by the Russian government to such inhabitants of the said provinces to leave their country and immigrate into the Ottoman dominions. This proclamation led them to great excitement. Entire Muslim population that was three fourths of the total number in Abhasia and Samurzakhan then represented at Sukumkale by their chieflets, declared their intention to immigrate.

These chieflets were then treated separately, and informed that whoever would embrace Christianity might remain, whoever would not, must leave the country forthwith. Additional orders were issued, strictly prohibiting the sale of cattle, horses, grain, or any other article of similar character within these provinces. The following day in early April 1867 eleven of these Muslim chieflets

were suddenly arrested and without delay or form of trial, sent off to exile in the interior of Russia.

The aims of this measure was firstly to acquire, if possible, a certain number of peasants for work, it being calculated that once deprived of their chiefs, want would compel a fair portion of the villagers to come into Christianity; secondly to embarrass the Ottoman government on whose coasts a still larger number of starving and penniless co-religionists would thus be thrown; thirdly to profit by the wholesale confiscation effected, not of the lands only, but also of the emigrants; and fourthly to get rid of the entire Muslim native population in that part of the Caucasus.

Thus, the Abhasians were, of course, thrown into wild confusion and terror. But for the great number of Russian troops, about 5000 in all, stationed only at Sukumkale, an outbreak of disease even more desperate than that which took place in August 1866. Even a Russian general fell ill of fright. Whatever the effects of the disease amongst the Russian army in Abhasia might have been, the ultimate result of the Russian policy was certainly that all native Muslim population would be expelled from the coast-line of the Caucasus.

In early April 1867, when it was certain that the Abhasians would be exiled to Turkey, Palgrave, the British consul at Trabzon, asked Muhlis Pasha, the governor-general of Trabzon, whether any preparation had yet been made by himself or others towards providing facilities for the large number of immigrants soon likely to be thrown on the Ottoman coasts especially at Batum and Trabzon. The governor-general replied that he was fully aware of the impending Abhasian immigration and of its consequences, that he was extremely anxious to obviate the great inconveniences likely to follow, but that he was as yet unable to take suitable measures, not having received any clear direction on the situation from Istanbul⁸.

8. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 6 Confidential, 17 April 1867, FO 97/424.

Probably as a result of the instruction of the Porte, the governor-general stated on 26 April 1867 that preparations began to be made actively in Trabzon for the reception of the immigrants, that boats were provided by the local authorities for the transport of those among the exiles who might not find place in the Russian steamers, and that tents and barracks for their habitation were prepared at Batum, Trabzon, Samsun and Sinop. Every endeavor was made by the Ottoman authorities to diminish the unavoidable misery of the exiles as much as possible. The Ottoman authorities anticipated the number of Abhasians likely to arrive at the Ottoman coasts to be approximately 12000, constituting some portion of the whole Abhasian population. Thus, it was planned that the exiles would on their arrival be divided into four bands of equal number, that is 3000 each, and distributed respectively at these four ports⁹.

Following the arrivals of the first groups in May 1867, temporary barracks provided earlier were erected and tents were pitched for their reception in the neighborhood of Trabzon. Every care was taken by the Ottoman authorities, especially by those sent from Istanbul, to supervise the immigration with the aim of alleviating the misery of the exiles. To deter the occurrence of deaths from overcrowding in the ships, the Russian and the Ottoman authorities promised that both governments would provide sufficient ships to transport the Abhasians, but in practice it was observed that the promises of the Russian government to convey the exiles to the Ottoman coasts in Russian steamers proved to be illusory. Fortunately, the Ottoman boats, sent out from the port of Trabzon and Batum were sufficient for the transport¹⁰.

The Russian policy about the forced immigration of the Abhasians in 1867 was different in nature from that which followed the immigration of the Circassians in 1863-64. The Russians in 1867 did not force the whole Abhasian population, but forced only those who were the chiefs over the Abhasian tribes to leave their

9. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 9, 26 April 1867, FO 97/424.

10. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 13, 16 May 1867, FO 97/424.

country for Turkey. While the chiefs were expelled, a large number of peasants was forcibly retained against their will, even at the very moment of embarkation. Thus brothers separated from brothers, and children from parents, and in general, while the elder and weaker were driven into the boats, the younger and more vigorous were compelled to remain as helpless slaves of the Russian government. This special barbarity occasioned such an outcry that orders were subsequently issued from Tiflis to send these off later following their exiled countrymen and relatives, but these orders were not executed.

Most of the Abhasians were plundered of everything by the Russians before embarkation and were barely allowed to bring with them the basic necessities of life to sustain for a short period of time. In many villages and especially in the districts of Cebelda, their houses were wantonly burnt by the Cossack soldiers and their cattle and other property were forcibly taken away or sold under compulsion to Russian traders at a nominal price¹¹.

The barbarous and illegal policy of the Russians was directed not only against the Abhasian population, but also against the Ottoman tradesmen and merchants dwelling along the coast at Gudavda, Sukumkale, the Grand Gudavda and Achemchiri. A heavy and totally illegal fine was issued to them. The main Russian intention with this measure was to cause them to leave these coastal towns by which the traces and remnants of the Ottomans along the coast would be wiped out and by which the local people would lose all their hopes of the Ottomans coming back and saving them from the Russian tyranny in the future. The Ottoman tradesmen protested against this decision through the recently stationed Ottoman consul at Sukumkale, but the protest received no attention at all¹². Eventually, they had to leave these coastal towns. The Russians could not even stand those local people who served the foreigners in peace times, for instance two quiet and peaceful

11. *Ibid.*

12. Palgrave to Lord Stanley, no 6 Confidential, 17 April 1867, FO 97/424.