Imperial Refuge: Resettlement of Muslims from Russia in the Ottoman Empire, 1860-1914

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Dr. Hamed-Troyansky is preparing a book manuscript about North Caucasian refugees in the Ottoman Empire, based on his dissertation.

In the half-century before World War I, about a million Muslims from Russia arrived in the Ottoman domains. Most of them arrived as refugees from the North Caucasus, fleeing war or life under tsarist rule. The North Caucasians founded over a thousand new villages in modern-day Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Israel, Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, and Greece. My dissertation, based on sources in Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, Russian, and Bulgarian, examines the resettlement of North Caucasian Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. This project revisits late Ottoman history through the lens of migration, holding the resettlement of Muslim refugees as critical to the making of modern Turkey, the Levant, and the Balkans.

North Caucasian refugees arrived in the Ottoman Empire in a series of migrations. The Russian state annexed the mountainous North Caucasus region during the protracted Caucasus War (1817-64). In the final stage of the war, the Russian military expelled, or prompted the emigration to the Ottoman Empire of, over a half-million western Circassians from the Northwest Caucasus. In the following decades, several hundred thousand Abkhazians, Kabardians (eastern Circassians), Chechens, Ingush, Ossetians, Karachays, Balkars, and Daghestanis also emigrated to the Ottoman state. Some of them left after the failed uprisings against Russian rule in Chechnya, Abkhazia, and Daghestan in the 1860s and 1870s. Others were dispossessed in the course of tsarist land reforms, forcible relocations, and Slavic colonization, or left in fear of Russification or abrogation of their religious freedoms. North Caucasian refugees from different ethnic groups spoke mutually unintelligible languages that were unique to the Caucasus. The mass migration cut through social divides, with refugees having come from nobility, free peasantry, and enslaved communities.

This dissertation contributes to late Ottoman and modern Middle Eastern history through its study of the political economy of refugee resettlement. I argue that the ability of refugees to tap into local economies underpinned Ottoman regional and imperial stability. Refugee resettlement held the potential to reinvigorate regional economies. State support, whether in financial aid, legal infrastructure, or transportation, was paramount to the economic success of refugee villages. Yet refugee resettlement also fostered intercommunal competition over land. I demonstrate that many conflicts in which refugees were involved originated in contested interpretations of Ottoman land tenure and ownership. Throughout the empire, North Caucasians clashed with settled

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Christian, Muslim, and Druze communities and nomadic Turkic, Kurdish, and bedouin groups.

This project focuses on refugee resettlement in the Ottoman provinces of Danube, Sivas, and Damascus, respectively in the Balkans, Anatolia, and the Levant. I demonstrate that resettlement outcomes varied widely in the Ottoman Empire. In the northern Balkans, insufficient state subsidies and scarcity of land generated widespread poverty and led to economic crimes committed by refugees. Refugees' banditry played a part in the outbreak of Muslim-Christian clashes in Bulgaria in 1876 and of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78, which ended Ottoman rule in the region. During the war, North Caucasian refugees evacuated to Anatolia and the Levant and, after the war, were barred from returning to Bulgaria, Serbia, or Romania. In central Anatolia, the geographic isolation and lack of state investment led to the economic stagnation of the region. The absence of roads prevented refugees from exporting their pastoral and agricultural produce. In contrast, in the Levant, Circassian and Chechen refugees took advantage of the state-built Hejaz Railway and favorable legislation to create booming settlements. Their villages attracted Syrian, Transjordanian, and Palestinian merchants and bedouin pastoralists. The refugees founded three of the four largest cities in modern Jordan: the capital city of Amman (1878), and the cities of al-Zarqa' (1902) and Rusayfa (1904).

This dissertation further contributes to global migration history by exploring Muslim genealogies of refugeedom in the Ottoman world, thereby enriching the western-centric narratives of refugee studies. Muslims seeking refuge in the Ottoman Empire were known as *muhajirs* (Ott. Turk. *muhacir*). The term originally referred to the followers of the Prophet Muhammad, who conducted hijra (Ott. Tur. *hicret*), or migration to preserve their faith, from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE. In the nineteenth century, the terms *muhajir* and hijra acquired anti-imperial and anti-colonial sentiments, as many Muslims were expelled from their ancestral territories occupied by European states. The term *muhajir* cannot be easily translated, as it contains the meanings of 'refugee', 'emigrant', and 'immigrant'. It also evokes both the religious legacy of Muslim displacements and the bureaucratic essence of Ottoman resettlement.

In 1860, the Ottoman government created the Refugee Commission (Ott. Tur. *Muhacirin Komisyonu*) to resettle Crimean and North Caucasian Muslims. By World War I, it became one of the world's largest relief organizations, having resettled several million Muslim refugees, including those from the Balkans, Crete, and North Africa. The objectives of the Ottoman government in resettling Muslim refugees evolved over the decades. While humanitarian to an extent, they also reflected the empire's demographic, military, and economic priorities. In the 1860s, the Ottomans generally resettled refugees where they could find available land. Following the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78, the resettlement was more strategic, as the Ottoman government often placed refugees in areas with minority Christian populations to change demographic ratios. The authorities also recruited and armed *muhajir* militias, which contributed to new rounds of displacement, ethnic cleansing, and genocide in the 1910s. The project of Muslim refugee resettlement was intricately tied to the displacement and dispossession of Ottoman Christians, especially in the post-1913 era. The legislation that the

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Refugee Commission had implemented and the infrastructure that it had established survived the Ottoman era and were inherited by independent nation-states throughout the Middle East.

This dissertation also explores the mobility of North Caucasian *muhajir* communities both within the Ottoman domains and between the Ottoman and Russian empires. I argue that North Caucasians preserved their customs through refugee village networks and developed their communal identities through formal diasporic associations, chiefly the Circassian Union and Support Association (1908-23). Many North Caucasians attempted to reimmigrate, despite Russian and Ottoman objections to their return migration. This dissertation breaks new ground in estimating the scope of return migration. Several tens of thousands of Muslim refugees returned to the North Caucasus between 1860 and 1914. Finally, this dissertation shows that communication between *muhajirs* in the Ottoman Empire and their kin in the Caucasus did not cease after the migration. The North Caucasian world, now split between the Russian and Ottoman empires, was sustained through private correspondence, public debates in print media, and a transborder culture of rumors.

My dissertation is based on fieldwork in over twenty public and private archives in Turkey, Jordan, Bulgaria, Georgia, the United Kingdom, and the Russian Federation, including the autonomous republics of Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia-Alania, and Dagestan. I use state-produced evidence, which includes, on the Ottoman side, correspondence between the Ottoman government and provincial (*vilayet*), sub-provincial (*sancak*), and district (*kaza*) authorities, and, on the Russian side, correspondence between the administration of the Caucasus Viceroy in Tiflis (now Tbilisi, Georgia), and North Caucasian provincial (*oblast'*) and district (*okrug*) authorities. My examination of the political economy of refugee resettlement relies on different types of Ottoman administrative registers that recorded the population, tax payments, allowances, and land allotments of *muhajir* communities. In Amman, I received rare access to the land records of late Ottoman Transjordan, collecting a dataset of all property transactions conducted in Amman and surrounding villages between 1889 and 1913. In addition to state evidence, I utilize travel accounts of European and American visitors to the Ottoman Empire; newspapers in Ottoman Turkish, Bulgarian, and Russian; and British and Russian consular records.

This bottom-up history of refugee migration and resettlement also uses rare documents written by refugees themselves. First, I examine communal and individual petitions that refugees sent to the Refugee Commission, preserved in Istanbul, and to district, sub-provincial, and provincial authorities, found in Sofia. In Tbilisi and Nalchik, I gathered petitions to the Russian authorities from both Caucasus-based Muslims asking for emigration and Ottoman-based *muhajirs* requesting repatriation. Second, through outreach in North Caucasian diasporic networks in the Middle East, I located several collections of private letters that Circassian and Chechen muhajirs exchanged within their families in the early twentieth century. Furthermore, I conducted interviews with the descendants of *muhajirs* in Jordan and Turkey to supplement and contextualize historical sources.

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