Ottoman refugees, 1878-1939: migration in a post-imperial world

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The last century and a half of Ottoman history was marked by forced displacement into the empire on a huge scale. Between the Russian conquest of the Crimea in 1783 and the second Balkan war in 1913, five to seven million Muslims entered the Ottoman domains. Some were already subjects of the Sultan, leaving – or expelled from – areas that had broken away from the empire under Christian rule. Others were fleeing the consolidation of Russian rule in the Crimea and the Caucasus. This mass migration is a historical phenomenon of the first importance, and not just for the empire itself and its successor states.

Managing the flow of migrants became one of the chief tasks of the imperial state after about 1850, for practical reasons as well as ideological ones: assisting refugees buttressed the state's faltering claim to offer protection to Muslims. The 'migrants commission' (in modern Turkish, *Muhacirin Komisyonu*) was set up in 1860, in the midst of a refugee crisis that followed Russia's official adoption of a policy of forcible expulsion of Crimean Tatars. It developed into one of the key bureaucratic agencies of the modernizing Ottoman state, arranging long-distance resettlement and channelling aid to refugees in the form of land grants, agricultural subsidies (in kind – seeds and tools – more often than in cash), and tax exemptions. Later it developed a more sinister role. Assisting refugees allowed the empire to expand its tax base by advancing the agricultural frontier, especially in the Arab provinces, where the refugees also provided security against nomadic incursions: they were disproportionately recruited into the state's coercive forces.

The influx also affected Ottoman politics, partly because it altered Ottoman demographics. The proportion of Christians in the empire declined sharply with the establishment of each breakaway state in the Balkans; the proportion of Muslims in the remainder increased with the arrival of refugees. This made the Muslim element within the population overwhelmingly preponderant for the first time, leading the state to stress its Islamic identity in new ways – for example, by asserting the Ottoman sultan's religious authority as 'caliph'. It did so to offset the danger of nationalisms emerging in its very diverse Muslim populations as they had done among its Christians, but also to win the loyalty of refugees, the larger part of whom had not been Ottoman subjects before their immigration. Refugees had an even keener sense than most Ottoman Muslims of the empire's position as the last independent Muslim power, and had bitter experience of the fate of Muslims in breakaway Christian nation-states or expanding Christian empires. They would, correspondingly, be disproportionately represented among the ideologues of Ottoman self-strengthening

(and later among the leading proponents of Turkish nationalism). Of course, the increasingly Islamic tenor of Ottoman 'imperial nationalism' only sharpened the unease of its remaining Christian populations. And where refugees who had been expelled by Christian powers went, tensions with local Christians rose.

It is hardly possible, then, to understand late Ottoman (and modern Turkish) history without taking account of the impact of mass immigration of Crimean, Balkan, and Caucasian Muslims. But the effects of this population displacement were not only felt within the shrinking borders of the empire. The process of ethnic homogenization of nation-states in post-dynastic Europe, which culminated in the extermination of Jews under Nazi occupation and the expulsion of ethnic Germans in 1945–9, was already well under way by 1914: the expulsion of Muslims, often from states whose Jews and/or Germans would later be eliminated (Greece, for example, or Romania) was an earlier stage. This is one of many reasons why these forced migrations of Muslims deserve close attention not just as an issue in regional history, but as an issue in global history.

They were also a key part of the Ottoman-Russian imperial contestation whose vastly destructive culmination was the First World War in the Balkans, the Black Sea, the Caucasus and eastern Anatolia: in these regions, August 1914 does not represent the sudden rupture or explosion that was experienced in Western Europe, where a general war had been avoided since 1815. There are many reasons for seeing the displacements generated by this longer-term contest not as the outcome of state-building and nationalism but rather as one of their main causes (a point well made by Peter Gatrell and others for the Russian empire and its western borderlands), setting the terms for 20th-century history. These displacements, forced and voluntary, also continued long after the end of the Ottoman empire: examples include the departure of perhaps 50,000 Romanian Muslims for Turkey in the 1930s, the deportation of Tatars from the Crimea by Stalin, and the expulsion of Bulgarian Muslims in the dying days of the Cold War. Russia's recent annexation of the Crimea stoked well-justified fears among Tatars still living there today.

Within the field of refugee history, the late Ottoman state's responses to mass refugee crises prefigure many aspects of the management of the 'refugee problem' after the First World War, by nation-states, colonial empires, and international organizations. Agricultural resettlement of refugees; offering a haven to refugees as a core part of a state's 'mission'; taking advantage of refugees' vulnerability to make them a privileged object of state-building, whether through soft power (as a channel for state-led economic development) or hard (by incorporating them into the coercive forces): many such responses to the late Ottoman refugee crises would be seen again and again across Europe and the rest of the world after 1914. The vast numbers of people involved certainly belie the widely-held notion that the European population displacements during and after the First World War were unprecedented in scale.

Conceptually, the late Ottoman population displacements destabilize the distinction between migrant and refugee. From at least the 1870s, we can clearly see at work the two-way relationship between state-formation and population displacement that would characterize the refugee crises generated by the First World War. But not all of these migrants were forced from their homes amid massacre and expropriation. Some of those affected chose to migrate – under whatever degree of duress – in order to live under a Muslim state authority, a phenomenon witnessed elsewhere in the 19th century as Muslims came under the power of Christian empires (in Algeria, for example). This form of religiously-sanctioned migration – *hijra* in Arabic, turkicised to *hicret* – has a much longer history in Islam, and the title of the Ottoman state agency charged with assisting those concerned reflects this: it was the Migrants Commission, not the Refugees (*mülteciler*) Commission, though even unforced migrants often travelled in difficult and dangerous conditions. In dealing with the incomers, the empire drew on its long experience of managing long-range migration, nomadism and displacement, beautifully studied by Reşat Kasaba in his *A Moveable Empire*.⁽¹⁾ Seen from this angle, the late Ottoman migrations make for a profoundly important case study, which offers rich possibilities for conceptualizing the history of migration without eurocentrism (or America-centrism, a specific problem in migration studies) and without taking the nation-state as part of the landscape – as transnational histories of migration implicitly do.

But there is still a great deal that we do not know about these migrations. To my (imperfect) knowledge there is, for instance, little existing literature on their environmental history, though the role of Circassian migrants in transforming the agricultural frontier in the Arab provinces is only one case suggesting such an approach might be productive. Nor do I know of any work in gender history, though population displacements and responses to them are almost always highly gendered. Even social history approaches are in their infancy. And if some of the broad outlines of their political history can be drawn, locally specific histories are rare, at least in English. Such histories might also illuminate the great cultural diversity of the Muslim migrants, and account for the place among them of many Catholics and Jews, who often were no more welcome than Muslims in new Orthodox Christian nation-states.

There are many reasons for the comparative neglect of this subject, even in the recent blossoming of historical works on refugees, population displacements, and statelessness. One is simply that historians in Anglophone countries, and much of Western Europe, are not aware of it: they lack the knowledge of the regions concerned and the languages required to study them. That excuse only goes so far, however: there is also a lack of interest, or a willingness to identify Muslims as perpetrators of violence while ignoring them as its victims, which has its roots in this same 19th-century history of displacement and Christian Europeans' profound approval of it. That history is hardly valorized in the nation-states that succeeded the Ottoman Empire, meanwhile. Those that ejected Muslims were keen to pretend that they had never been there. The Turkish Republic, which ended up as the home to a large proportion of the migrants and their descendants, is indisputably the creation of a largely refugee 'haven nationalism', but it has tried to submerge the multi-ethnic origins of the populations that formed it, refugee and local, within a Turkish national identity.

Another reason for an unwillingness to study these migrations in depth is sheer discomfort. I referred earlier to the dark side of the Muhacirin Komisyonu's history: this lay in its involvement in organizing the expropriation of land from Ottoman Christians deported and in many cases murdered during the First World War. Responding to the influx of *muhacirin* led the Ottoman state to develop policies, and indeed to create state agencies, that contributed directly and indirectly to the genocidal violence in eastern Anatolia during the First World War. Among the perpetrators of that violence were many former (and recent) refugees. This adds a dimension of moral complexity to the story which is hard to reconcile with a desire to maintain 'victim' and 'perpetrator' as separate categories. The best general survey of population displacements in the region, Dawn Chatty's *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East* (2), is almost tangibly uneasy with this, and it doesn't help that the main body of historiographical literature on the subject that *does* exist, in Turkish, actively contributes to genocide denial. But the late Ottoman refugee crises were certainly part of what made eastern Anatolia a 'zone of genocide' (in Mark Levene's term), and the fear that contextualizing genocide is tantamount to justifying it is misplaced.

All of this is to say that there is a great need for a general overview of this sprawling subject that might not only promote the further specialized studies it requires, but also make it accessible to scholars in the many fields that would benefit from recognizing its importance. Isa Blumi's book, sadly, does not provide it.

The book covers the period when the Ottoman refugee crises reached their peak, between the Russo-Ottoman war of 1878 and the First World War, and their afterlives through the 1920s and 1930s – or at least, so the title implies: in fact, the periodization is much fuzzier, covering plenty of things that happened before 1878 (and not many after 1923) without a very clear sense of what, if anything, differentiated one period from another.

Equally and unacceptably vague is the definition of the book's central subject: 'refugee'. Blumi uses the term indiscriminately, to describe forced migrants across state boundaries, rural labourers driven off the land by changing property regimes, economic migrants (many of whom actually later returned home), political exiles, Sufi merchant-missionaries, and ultimately, with the disappearance of the Ottoman empire, everyone who had once lived in it.(3) With a startling lack of analytical clarity, the diverse and particular histories of these very different groups are lumped together without clear explanation or justification. At times Blumi

expresses an aspiration to problematize existing analytical categories such as ‘migrant’, ‘diaspora’, and ‘refugee’, but he offers no coherent conceptualization of his own catch-all use of the term. Instead, all that unites these people is his assertion that they were victims of an aggression perpetrated by ‘Euro-American finance capitalism’. This is the sole agent in Blumi’s account, not just of Ottoman ‘refugees’ but of modern world history; it is the subject of chapter one and mentioned again repeatedly in every chapter that follows.

(4) Everyone is its victim, including European subalterns: ‘for crown and country the landless Welsh and Scottish troops purportedly screamed’ when dispatched on imperial missions. (No reference to explain who ‘purports’ this, nor recognition that subalterns can be fully committed to the ideologies used to exploit them, as one or two Marxist scholars have observed.) All European empires from the Spanish to the Russian, and to the neo-Europes of the Americas, are presented as its undifferentiated manifestations; all European merchants or officials are presented as its ‘operatives’, and many Ottoman emigrants to other areas as its hapless tools.(5) But despite the centrality of ‘Euro-American finance capitalism’ to Blumi’s analysis, the book contains almost no specific information about its actual actors or functioning: for example, the means – or individuals – by which governments were turned into tools serving the desires of ‘finance capital’. Nor is there a single primary or secondary reference to support any of his assertions about it. So the rage is undirected, and the book offers no insights into what it most fulsomely deplores.

It is ironic that a book which repeatedly proclaims its hostility to Eurocentric histories presents an historical narrative in which all causality is attributed to ‘Euro-American finance capital’. This irony also touches the occasional references to the world before it was ruined by ‘Euro-America’ (the early modern Ottoman empire, and various Indian Ocean or pre-colonial American societies), depicted in racist kum-ba-ya stereotype as ‘heterogeneous societies that thrived for centuries’ (p. 39), rather like the Aztecs in Neil Young’s *Cortez the Killer* – ‘his people gathered round him like the leaves around a tree’. But it is profoundly Eurocentric to reduce the actual complex histories of past societies to a cheerful caricature to serve the rhetorical ends of a post-industrial Euro-American academic. Finally, there is another irony in telling other people not to consider ‘Islam’ as a historical actor or a monolith, while basing one’s whole account of modern history around a ‘Euro-America’ that is treated as a single undifferentiated historical actor, and further reduced to ‘finance capital’, throughout.(6)

Some of the above comments might imply that the book lacks a scholarly apparatus. Quite the opposite: the text runs to barely 150 pages but the endnotes run to 80, more than half the length of the main text. They display phenomenally wide reading, in many languages, many archives, and many countries. But they display an equally phenomenal disregard for communicating any of that wealth of material to the reader. There is, so far as I can tell, not one quotation from a primary or secondary source in the main text of the book: no risk of letting refugees, let alone anyone else, speak for themselves. (It’s hard to be sure, though, because the text is disfigured by the most virulent outbreak of ‘scare quotes’ I’ve ever witnessed, so any actual quotes are well camouflaged.(7)) The main text repeatedly makes grand, generalized historical claims, some of which are even extremely pertinent, and potentially very useful in identifying future lines of inquiry. But in many instances it does so without giving any specific details of names or dates, let alone whole cases, that might help both to support those larger claims and to provide a coherent account for the reader to follow. Plenty of this material is there, buried in the notes, where many important points of argument that should have been brought into the main text are also to be found.(8) At other times, the book does suddenly start giving detailed information, from local case studies ranging from the Ottoman Balkans to East Africa, but it is often divided between main text and endnotes, and rarely contextualized in a way that would make it accessible to anyone unfamiliar with this vast range.(9)

Little effort, in other words, has been expended on shaping this prodigious reading into a historical narrative that might make sense to a reader, whether already familiar with the subject or not: for example, the very useful material on the destabilizing effect of ‘refugee constituencies’ on local politics in the Ottoman (and post-Ottoman) Balkans on pp. 49–54: exactly the sort of fine-grained, empirically-informed, comparatively-minded analysis the subject needs, but hard to take in without more context. Too often, information of this sort is relegated to the endnotes. The notes are also colonized by bijou rants, against other scholars or various historical injustices (10), while the chapter divisions are no more coherent or analytically helpful

than the periodization or the division between main text and endnote.

Meanwhile, as I said, no references are provided to support the repeated assertions about 'Euro-American finance capital'. Nor are they present – not a single one – to support the many swipes at 'the scholarship' in the main text, which appear several times in each chapter: a baseball-bat approach to colleagues and predecessors that goes badly wrong.⁽¹¹⁾ This is partly because, in the absence of any specific information about whose scholarship is at fault, and how, the bat swings wildly but doesn't connect. It is partly because by adopting a sneeringly dismissive tone towards the work of other scholars in general throughout the main text (though sometimes quite generous in crediting other people's work in the footnotes), Blumi invites a close critical scrutiny of his own work which it is far from being able to withstand. Its sloppy conceptual framework, crassly monocausal analysis, and lazily underdeveloped literary construction – not to mention the undergraduate sententiousness, careless editing, and scare quotes – add up to a glass house that is very vulnerable to an author this keen on stone-throwing.

Usually, when reviewing a book about which there is little good to be said, I quietly ask the journal editor to let me off the task. That might have been the better option here, but it seemed important to highlight this seriously understudied subject. Most frustrating is the fact that this author was better qualified than almost anyone else to write a *good* book about it.

Notes

1. Re?at Kasaba, *A Moveable Empire: Ottoman Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees* (Seattle, WA, 2009). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Dawn Chatty's *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, 2010) [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Here are some examples (of many) of the undifferentiated use of the term. Rural migrants: p. 56 for southern Iraq (followed, incidentally, by a reference to an endnote (n. 64) on an unrelated topic—one of several such), or p. 75 in Romania. Economic migrants to the Americas: pp. 5–6. Political exiles: pp. 67–8. Sufis: throughout pp. 118–40. Everyone: p. 146. The problem of lumping together such disparate groups is dimly recognized at times, but fudged, as in the reference on p. 95 to shared characteristics 'such as their likely involuntary need to leave their homelands', or p. 144, 'these many Ottoman migrant, often refugee lives'. The words 'likely' and 'often' hardly convince. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Outside chapter one, some representative examples from the introduction, chapters two to five, and the conclusion can be found on, respectively, pp. 5, 60, 87, 95–7, 121, and 147. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For European states (and Europe's American offshoots) as manifestations of 'Euro-American finance capitalism', see all references to western European states (including Britain, Spain, France, and Belgium), the United States, Latin American states, and Russia, regardless of period. For individual Europeans, or European enterprises, as agents or operatives of 'Euro-American finance capitalism', see all references to European individuals or enterprises anywhere in the world outside Western Europe, for example p. 9, p. 58, or the sinister reference on p. 140. On Ottoman 'migrants/refugees' as tools of empire see especially chapter 4. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See pp. 115–7 for representative – and, of course, legitimate – warnings against essentializing 'Islam'. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Scare quotes appear on almost every page, to the point where it becomes impossible to tell what function they are meant to serve. On pp. 146–7 alone, for example, they are used around the terms 'kibbutz', 'humane ways', 'outside', 'ethnic', 'sectarian', 'tribes', 'collateral', 'Arab', 'bedouin', 'international community', 'progress', 'interwar', 'population exchanges', 'divide and rule', 'nation', 'development', 'untapped'. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. For an example, read the last two paragraphs on p. 45 (on the Ottoman state's response to the successive refugee influxes of 1878–1913) and the endnotes (n. 6–9), which go with them. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Examples are the sections of chapter three on pp. 71–5 and 80–7. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. One such mini-rant against other scholars, chapter five, n. 5, suggests that 'Perhaps Ottoman historians ... can take time from their deciphering documents and read what anthropologists have been arguing

about for decades now'. Against historical injustices, see for example the introduction, n. 22, which gathers together 'America's rape of the Philippines, the mining industry's pillage of Southern Africa, France's scorched policies [*sic*] in North Africa, Britain's starving India into submission' into an undifferentiated list that must have been satisfying to compile but provides no insight into any of these things. The most bijou of all is the first note to chapter four, where the epigram, Emma Lazarus's famous lines 'Give me your tired, your poor / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free', has an endnote reading simply '... For I need them to colonize Alaska, the Philippines, Cuba, and Hawai'i'.

[Back to \(10\)](#)

11. Again, examples are all too numerous, but see for instance p. 36 for 'sectarian or ethno-national criteria that scholars often assume existed', p. 50 for matters that are 'ignored' or even 'abused in the scholarship', p. 138 for the way 'much of the scholarship' is framed, where 'even the latest revisionist approaches ... prove disappointing' (citing an article critiquing 'the scholarship', but not the sinners themselves), and, in the conclusion, p. 143 on the 'many pathologies infesting the scholarship'. [Back to \(11\)](#)

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