

Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky
**“Empire Of Refugees:
North Caucasian Muslims and
The Late Ottoman State”**
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Reviewer: Günay Kayarlar

Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky's book, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State*, is a history of North Caucasian (largely, but not exclusively, Circassian) migration between the Russian and Ottoman empires in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More specifically, it looks at how the expulsion of Muslim North Caucasians from their homeland and their subsequent resettlement in the Ottoman lands shaped the policies of both the Ottoman and Russian empires, as well as serving as a precedent for later refugee and citizenship regimes and subsequent expulsions and population transfers across the Old World.

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✉ PhD Candidate, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA, gunayk@umich.edu

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4673-5808>

ROR <https://ror.org/00jmfr291>

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Empire of Refugees makes three key contributions to the literature. First, and related to the field of Balkan studies, it brings to the fore the history of more than three hundred thousand North Caucasian refugees who were settled in the Balkans during the 1860s, and were exiled from their lands and homes for a second time in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. It makes the claim that the failure of the Ottoman Empire to provide sufficient economic resources for these North Caucasian refugees inflamed tensions in the Balkans, and hastened the breakdown of Ottoman rule in the region. Secondly, it argues that the Ottomans created a systematic refugee regime in response to Muslim migration, one that preceded the refugee regimes of the League of Nations and the United Nations. It also traces how the migration policy of the Ottoman Empire changed throughout the nineteenth century, from a quasi-open-door policy to one that was tailored specifically to accept and resettle Muslims only, with parallel developments in the Russian Empire equating religion to subjecthood and perceived loyalty as well. Finally, the author makes the point that the Ottoman and Russian policies in the 1860s were understood as a population exchange by many contemporary observers. Thus, this event paved the way for later population exchanges and mass expulsions. These include the Ottoman-Bulgarian population exchange of 1913, the Greek-Bulgarian population exchange of 1919, the Turkish-Greek population exchange of 1923, the Palestine partition plans of 1937 and 1947, the expulsion of Germans from Central and Eastern Europe after World War II, and the population transfers between India and Pakistan after partition in 1947.

Empire of Refugees is structured in three main parts, each meant to represent a specific stage in the journey of the refugees and divided into several chapters. Part I, "Refugee Migration", is a largely narrative history of the North Caucasians' displacement from their homelands. Chapter 1, "Muslim Migrations from the North Caucasus", looks at the political history of the Caucasus and how the ethnic cleansing of Circassians in the 1860s unfolded, whereas Chapter 2, "Ottoman Refugee Regime", traces how the North Caucasians were resettled in Ottoman lands upon being expelled from their homelands, and how the Ottoman refugee regime developed in response to this unprecedented crisis and suffering. Part II, "Refugee Resettlement", looks at how the economic and social history of the refugees transpired

after the initial settlement. It is a comparative chapter, comparing refugee settlement in the Balkans (Chapter 3, focusing on the Dobruja region, today in Romania and Bulgaria), the Levant (Chapter 4, looking at the oasis towns of Jordan) and Anatolia (Chapter 5, examining the Uzunyayla plateau, in the vicinity of Kayseri). Every chapter begins with a story from the archives or from private correspondence, thus constantly shifting the focus between microhistories and larger scale analysis. The persistence of slavery among the North Caucasians in Anatolia is an important contribution and is a topic that surely deserves more attention from future researchers. Part III, "Diaspora and Return", is split into two chapters: Chapter 6, "Making the North Caucasian Diaspora" focuses on village and religious networks as well as modern diasporic organizations and newspapers in the making of a Circassian identity, whereas Chapter 7, "Return Migration to Russia", looks at the hitherto little explored attempts of North Caucasians to return to their homelands, and the responses of Ottoman and Russian authorities to such attempts. The Kurdish-Chechen battles of Erzurum and the Chechen siege of Muş in 1865 sound fictional, but Hamed-Troyansky shows us that it really happened.

The book has several strengths. To begin with, it uses a wide variety of sources in different languages. In terms of archival sources, it utilizes sources from Turkish, Russian, Georgian, British, Bulgarian, Romanian and Jordanian state archives, among several others. These archival sources vary from economic data to petitions, and from consular reports to correspondence between different state functionaries and offices. In addition to these archival sources, it draws from newspapers and private letters from descendants of North Caucasians that the author was able to find and access.

The greatest strength of the book lies in how it expertly weaves these different sources, and different methodologies, together. One finds smooth transitions from a narrative political history of the Caucasus to the economic history of the Ottoman Balkans, and from the microhistory of families or small localities across the Balkans, Levant and Anatolia to macro-scale questions about nation-building, citizenship, and refugee regimes. The microhistory of one family serves as the thread that ties two chapters together, with an unexpected plot twist. As a result of its va-

ried sources and what one could call an eclectic writing style, it makes for entertaining reading, which is not very common for academic history writing. Thanks to its writing style, it appeals to interested laymen and academics alike, making key academic interventions and contributions without being tedious or dry to read.

One controversial point about the book could be its use of the “g-word”, or the lack of it. Whereas describing an Ottoman genocide of “Christians” (not even just Armenians!) during World War I in the introduction (p. 16), the author is very reluctant to use the same word when it comes to the Circassians, or to argue one way or another. In the introduction and in the conclusion, the author states that the Circassian diaspora uses the word genocide, and Circassian organizations call for the recognition of the massacres and expulsion as genocide (pp. 30- 248) in similar turns of phrase. However, the author essentially distances himself from the “g-word” for the pivotal event his book describes. The author does define the Russian targeting of Circassians *qua* Circassians for “near total expulsion” as “ethnic cleansing” (p. 32), and uses phrases such as “emigration”, “expulsion”, “flight” and “forced relocation” for the population movements of the Circassians. One could say that the emphasis on the agency of the North Caucasians occasionally overshadows the immense amount suffering, death and disease that communities deported and extirpated from their homeland must have gone through. If the development of an Ottoman refugee regime in answer to North Caucasian immigration can be seen as a precursor to the later refugee regimes of the League of Nations and the United Nations, perhaps more daring studies can follow on whether genocidal violence committed towards Caucasian (and Balkan) Muslims during Ottoman disintegration can be seen as a precursor to anything, without falling into parochialism and fanaticism one way or another. More than a century and a half later from the Circassian genocide, it is probably time to tie the histories of the Balkans and the Caucasus together in such a manner as well.