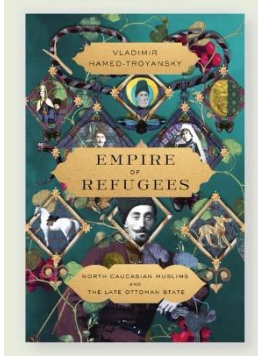


Review of *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State* by Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky

Sergey Salushchev*



Empire of Refugees. North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State
Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky
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Rarely do scholars and students of the Caucasus region await publication of a monograph with such palpable anticipation and eagerness to study the archival discoveries of a historian whose research achieves a feat that until recently seemed nearly impossible. In his seminal work, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State*, Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky utilizes his formidable linguistic, historiographic, and research skills to bring into focus an exceptionally complex puzzle of transimperial movement of refugees from the North Caucasus into the lands of the Ottoman Empire. Through meticulous interpretation and deft analysis of primary source materials written in the mutually unintelligible languages of the great imperial triad:

* Sergey Salushchev, PhD, Department of History. Humanities & Social Sciences Building Santa Barbara, CA ORCID: 0009-0002-5102-008X. Website: <https://www.sergeysalushchev.com/home>. E-mail: sergey_salushchev@ucsb.edu

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the Caucasus, tsarist Russia, and the Ottoman Empire, this monograph emerges as a striking example of groundbreaking scholarship, which has already prompted shifts in our understanding of the entangled history of migration and displacement in the Caucasus region during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Empire of Refugees is organized into three narrative parts, further divided by seven chapters. Part one of the monograph traces the Muslim migration from the North Caucasus and examines the creation of the Ottoman refugee regime. Part two investigates the process of resettlement of the Muslim refugees in the Ottoman domains, providing great attention to detail. It offers a nuanced analysis of the challenges and conflicts that accompanied what the author described as the largest refugee crisis the Ottomans had experienced in the mid-nineteenth century. Finally, part three uncovers how the refugees established the robust foundation of their respective diasporic communities and follows the journey of those refugees who sought ways to return to their homeland under Russian imperial control.

The story of the forced displacement and migration of the Muslim refugees from the North Caucasus comes to life in each chapter of the monograph through the use of poignant vignettes that Hamed-Troyansky carefully selected from his sources. These vignettes paint a vivid picture of the pain and yearning for the homeland as well as hope for a better future experienced by many displaced Muslims in the North Caucasus, who considered their immigration to the Ottoman Empire as *hijra* - “a distinct type of international migration that was specific to the Muslim world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” Drawing on this concept, people who embarked on *hijra*, a term that provided familiar and religiously meaningful vocabulary to describe their experience, adopted the title of *muhajirs*. However, it's important to note that not all *muhajirs* thought of their migration to the Ottoman Empire solely in religious terms. The reasons that compelled the Muslim communities of the North Caucasus to leave their homeland were multifaceted, but all of them revolved around the expansion of Russian imperial presence and tsarist colonial projects in the region.

The meticulously collected statistics that the author cites in the opening chapters of the monograph put into perspective the colossal scale of the migration: likely over a million Muslims left the North Caucasus between 1854 and 1914.

The Sublime Porte took proactive steps to mitigate at times the overwhelming impact of the influx of Muslim refugees from the North Caucasus into its territories. In the 1850s, the Ottomans succeeded in creating a refugee regime, which the author defines as “a set of principles, norms, and procedures governing the acceptance and resettlement of refugees.” The Ottoman Refugee Commission, itself created in 1860, became one of the world’s largest refugee resettlement agencies and served as the main tool of the state for implementing the refugee regime. Although the efficacy of the Ottoman refugee regime could (and truly should) be debated, Hamed-Troyansky leaves no doubt in his assertion that the early frameworks of international refugee law emerged much earlier than the aftermath of the Second World War. Thus, using the lens of the Ottoman refugee resettlement policies, *Empire of Refugees* challenges the Eurocentric pedigree of the contemporary global refugee regime and points to the indelible legacy of the Ottoman refugee resettlement policies in the modern Middle East.

Many of the muhajirs from the North Caucasus believed they would receive a cordial welcome, if not warm hospitality, and prompt government assistance from the Ottoman authorities. This was not to be. The government’s promises of subsidies, provisions, and generous allotment of land failed to materialize due to the scarcity of arable land in different provinces of the empire. At the same time, supporting hundreds of thousands of refugees with food and other essentials proved prohibitively expensive. While the Ottoman Land Code of 1858 provided clear guidelines for distribution of land grants for muhajirs, the reality of fertile land scarcity meant that many of the North Caucasian refugees entered into stiff competition for already dwindling resources with local communities. When these local communities protested distribution of land grants to muhajirs, conflicts ensued and violence proliferated. In the Balkans, for example, the resettlement of the Muslim refugees in the region galvanized the political aspirations for

independence among the Orthodox Slavs and precipitated the collapse of Ottoman rule.

The resurgence of slavery in the wake of the resettlement of the Muslim refugees from the North Caucasus in the Ottoman Empire is an often forgotten consequence of the refugee crisis. Hamed-Troyansky brings to the fore the lived experiences of the people who generally appear on the thin margins of history. The author explores the entrenchment of the institution of slavery, which stunted abolitionist efforts in the Ottoman provinces, in part two of the monograph. Slavery was a deeply ingrained social institution in the North Caucasus. So, when hundreds of thousands muhajirs settled into the domains of the Ottoman Empire many of them brought their slaves who had no option but to follow their owners. The dire economic conditions of many slave-owning muhajirs exacerbated exploitation and encouraged trafficking of the enslaved people. Although the enslaved people often resisted the abuse and exploitation, and even rebelled against their owners, the Ottoman authorities provided little relief and were certainly not interested in emancipating the enslaved people outright. As Hamed-Troyansky poignantly concludes “for many Circassians, Ottoman resettlement meant the continuation of their bondage, merely on the other side of the Black Sea.”

Driven by great hardships, hopeless destitution, or disillusionment with their supposed promised land, thousands of Muhajirs abandoned it and returned to the familiar surroundings of the Caucasus. The return migration of muhajirs constitutes an important though far less studied dimension of the experiences of the Muslim refugees in the Ottoman Empire. Hamed-Troyansky dedicates an entire chapter to analyzing the reasons why these refugees, having recently arrived in a new home, would choose to return to their ancestral lands, even if it meant becoming subjects of Russian tsars. The author suggests that between 1860 and the onset of the First World War, approximately 40,000 Muslims returned to the Russian controlled Caucasus. Of course, these statistics do not account for the unknown but certainly significant number of returning refugees who crossed the porous Russo-Ottoman borders clandestinely. The Ottoman authorities were less

than thrilled to allow the return of the Muslim refugees to their homeland and tried to dissuade them from leaving through negotiation and, when necessary, coercion. Although officially the Russians had put a ban on the return of muhajirs in 1861, the practices of the imperial rights regime, to quote historian Jane Burbank, allowed for a degree of flexibility and accommodation on the local level of Russian imperial rule in the region. This allowed some returnees to negotiate their way back to their ancestral villages. The return migration of muhajirs to their homeland continued in waves up until 1914 when the violence and chaos of World War One upended the geopolitical status quo in the region. Whether the Muslim refugees succeeded in building thriving communities in the Ottoman domains or fell victim to poverty and neglect of the state, “dreaming of, planning, executing, or deciding against the return to the Caucasus were an integral part of the experience of being a North Caucasian muhajirs in the Ottoman Empire.”

In the opinion of this reviewer, *Empire of Refugees* is one of the most important books to enter the field of Caucasus studies this decade. This is a story of how the Muslim refugees from the North Caucasus shaped the history of the late Ottoman state, influenced the demographics of the contemporary Middle East, and set the foundation for the future frameworks of the international refugee regime. The monograph is certain to become a required reading for anyone interested in the history of the Caucasus, the late Ottoman state, the Russian Empire, and international refugee law. In short, Hamed-Troyansky’s monograph is without doubt a groundbreaking work that provides an exceptionally well-researched perspective on a critical chapter in Ottoman and global history.

