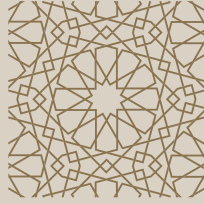


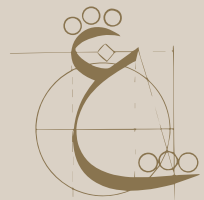
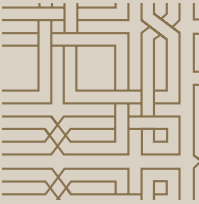


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09



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Kadim is that no one knows what came before.

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Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State.

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CANER YELBAŞI*

ABSTRACT

The exile and settlement of North Caucasians in the Ottoman Empire is not well-studied in English academic literature. Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky's book is a well-researched work that helps fill this gap in the literature. It explores various aspects of North Caucasian exile and settlement, analysing both state perspectives—through a wide range of archival sources—and the experiences of the displaced people. Particularly significant is its use of letters written by the refugees (muhacirs), which amplify their voices and integrate them into academic discourse for the first time.

Keywords: North Caucasians, Circassians, Ottoman Empire, Settlement, Refugees.

ÖZ

Kuzey Kafkasyalıların Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'na sürgünü ve yerleşimi, İngilizce literatürde yeterince çalışılmış bir konu değildir. Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky'nin kitabı, literatürdeki bu boşluğu doldurmaya yardımcı olan iyi araştırılmış bir çalışma olarak kabul edilebilir. Kuzey Kafkasyalıların sürgünü ve yerleşimlerinin çeşitli yönlerini incelerken, hem devlet perspektiflerini (geniş bir arşiv kaynağı yelpazesi aracılığıyla) hem de yerinden edilmiş insanların deneyimlerini analiz eder. Kitabı özellikle önemli kılan şey, muhacirler tarafından yazılan mektupları kullanmasıdır. Böylece, muhacirlerin seslerini duyulur hale getirir ve onların akademik bir çalışmada duyulmalarını sağlar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kuzey Kafkasyalılar, Çerkesler, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, İskân, Muhacirler.



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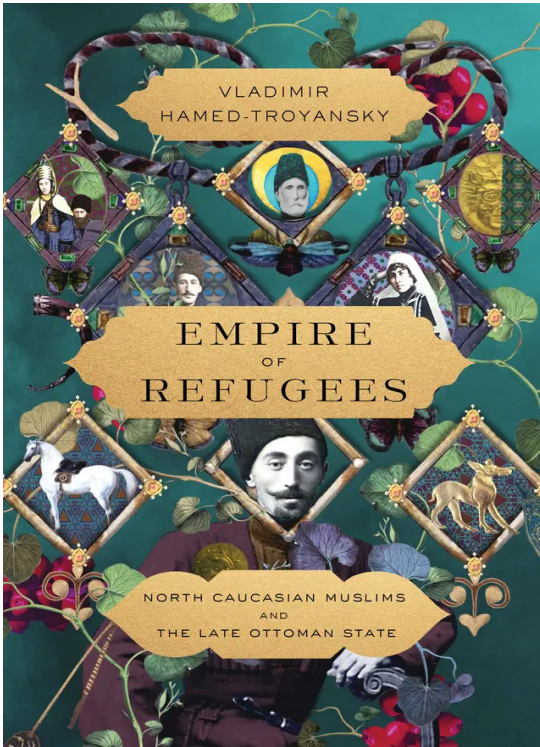
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The exile and settlement of North Caucasians in the Ottoman Empire is an understudied topic in the English academic literature. Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky's book can be regarded as a well-researched work that helps bridge this gap in the literature. It explores various aspects of North Caucasian exile and settlement, analysing both state perspectives and the experiences of the displaced people themselves. A particularly significant aspect of this book is its incorporation of letters written by refugees (*muhacirs*). By including these letters, the book amplifies the voices of the *muhacirs*, making them part of the academic discourse for the first time. The study examines the forced exile and migration of North Caucasians from the North Caucasus, their settlement in the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman Refugee Regime, their role in expand-

ing trade between Transjordan and the Levant, and the limited return of small groups to the North Caucasus. The author draws on a numerous archival sources from Russian, Ottoman, British, Bulgarian, Georgian, and Jordanian archives. However, this does not mean that the book solely reflects state perspectives; it also highlights the experiences and agency of the North Caucasians themselves.

The book is structured into seven chapters, each addressing a specific aspect of North Caucasian migration and settlement in the Ottoman Empire. The first chapter examines their migration from the North Caucasus as a consequence of Russian atrocities and colonization policies. The second chapter discusses establishing the Ottoman Refugee Regime in response to the influx of North Caucasians. The Ottoman Empire lacked a comprehensive settlement policy for the *muhacirs*. To mitigate casualties, the Ottomans implemented specific measures, including the establishment of the *Muhacirin Komisyonu*; however, these efforts proved largely ineffective in alleviating the severe hardships faced by the *muhacirs*.

Chapter three focuses on the settlement of North Caucasians in the Balkans as part of a strategy to increase the Muslim population and prevent territorial losses. However, this policy ultimately failed due to the Ottoman defeat in the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877–1878. A significant number of North Caucasians were subsequently forced to relocate to Anatolia and the Syria-Lebanon region. Chapter four examines their relocation to Jordan, Syria, and the Levant, to stimulate economic growth and agricultural production. This policy yielded only limited success in certain areas.

Chapter five discusses the resettlement of North Caucasians in Central Anatolia, mainly in Kayseri. The incorporation of personal letters from a North Caucasian family significantly enhances the value of this section, as such primary sources are rarely utilized in academic studies. Chapter six explores the diasporic activities of North Caucasians within the Ottoman Empire, focusing on their engagement with the Ottoman state and society. The final chapter addresses the minimal return of North Caucasians to the North Caucasus between 1860 and 1914.

The Russian occupation of the North Caucasus began in the mid-18th century. To ensure the long-term success of its colonization efforts, the Russian Empire implemented a permanent settlement policy, fully integrating the North Caucasus into the Tsarist Empire over a century, culminating in 1864. During the war and its aftermath, North Caucasians were subjected to mass killings, dispossession, and forced displacement as part of the Tsarist Empire's ethnic cleansing policy. Between the late 1850s and late 1870s, more than a million people were killed, exiled, or forcibly displaced. After enduring these hardships, most North Caucasians—primarily the Circassians—were either exiled, forcibly removed from their homeland, or voluntarily migrated to the Ottoman Empire. Their settlement in the Ottoman Empire constitutes the central focus of this book.

The Ottoman Empire was unprepared for the resettlement of many refugees from the North Caucasus. This lack of preparedness led to a massive humanitarian crisis. Trabzon, Sinop, Samsun, Istanbul, Varna, Köstence, and many other ports along the Black Sea effectively became refugee camps. From the early 1860s to late 1864, thousands perished due to epidemics and inhumane living conditions. On some days, the death toll reached 400, and this tragic situation persisted for weeks. Although the Ottoman Empire sought to resettle the refugees across its territories to “stem the demographic decline, revitalize the economy, and solidify the imperial hold” (p. 2), this was an arduous task. The state's limited resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and financial struggles made large-scale resettlement nearly impossible. Consequently, an overwhelming number of Circassians perished, marking an unprecedented humanitarian disaster.

On one hand, the Ottoman Empire considered itself responsible for providing food, accommodation, and agricultural work for the refugees. On the other hand, it established a refugee regime based on a “set of principles, norms, and procedures” (p. 57) to stabilize the demographic balance, increase agricultural production, and strengthen the state's economy “in response to European imperialism.” The book explains in detail that refugee resettlement follows three different models. The first model involved direct settlement by the Refugee Commission, which coordinated the process with local bureaucracies. In the second model, refugees were granted the right to choose their exact settlement location within a designated region. The third model was based on negotiations, where both refugees and the government discussed and agreed upon the location of resettlement (p. 74–75). The resettlement process significantly impacted the Ottoman economy, as they allocated substantial financial resources to the process. Consequently, the government implemented policies aimed to foster economic growth while executing its resettlement strategy.

With the settlement of the *muhacirs* in the Balkans, the Ottoman administration sought to increase the Muslim population, prevent nationalist uprisings among the Christian popu-

lation, and use the North Caucasians as an armed force representing Ottoman rule (p. 91–93). However, their militarization became inevitable due to economic difficulties and insufficient agricultural income (p. 109). Many *muhacirs* joined local gendarmerie forces or resorted to banditry. Initially agricultural refugees or farmers, they gradually became *başbozüks* (irregular soldiers) and imperial troops. The hardships they endured played a significant role in shaping Circassian identity to an extent. North Caucasian *muhacirs* became a dominant force among local bandits and *başbozüks*, later being deployed to suppress the Bulgarian uprising violently. Consequently, public perception of the refugees shifted—from being seen as victims in need of protection to being perceived as aggressors (p. 109–112).

Following losing territories in the Balkans due to the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877–78, North Caucasians were resettled in Anatolia, Syria, Jordan, and the Levant. The Ottoman bureaucracy sought to increase the Muslim population in these regions, stimulate trade and economic growth, and reinforce security against anti-state or nationalist uprisings (p. 121–122). In Transjordan, North Caucasians served as guards of the Hejaz Railway, whereas in the *Uzunyayla* region, they gained renown as horse breeders, supplying Kabardian horses to the Ottoman Army (p. 143, 144, 168).

One of the distinctive aspects explored in the book is the return of the *muhacirs* to the North Caucasus. Notably, those from Chechnya, Dagestan, and Kabarda were rarely permitted to return, whereas Circassians from the northwestern Caucasus were entirely barred from doing so. Despite opposition from the Ottoman and Russian Empires, a small minority, discontented with conditions in the Ottoman Empire, managed to return and resettle in their homeland.

Chapter Six studies the contribution of the *muhacirs* to Ottoman society. Several topics related to North Caucasian settlement, such as the issue of slavery and the increasing presence of Circassians in the Ottoman bureaucracy and military, have not been explored in detail. This situation is likely due to the book's scope limitations, which did not allow the author to address these subjects—each of which could serve as the focus of an entire book. The book highlights the active participation of North Caucasians in the National Movement (*Kuvayi Milliye*) during the post-WWI period. It also notes that Circassians in the Marmara region collaborated with Greek and British occupying forces. However, not all Circassians in the Marmara region can be classified as collaborators (p. 245, 246). As highlighted in several works on the topic, while a group of anti-Kemalist Circassians did cooperate with the occupying forces, the majority remained 'loyal' to the Sultanate rather than aligning with any particular power center.

The author's terminology could be more precise in certain instances. For instance, while thousands of North Caucasians migrated to the Ottoman Empire, the excessive use of terms such as migration, emigration, and immigrant may obscure the role of Russian state policy and military actions in forcibly displacing the local population. The Russian state's strategy of intimidation, expulsion, colonization, and resettlement played a crucial role in this process. As the author has already noted in several parts of the book, North Caucasians were forcibly displaced due to the excessive use of Russian military force, which at times reached the level of genocidal violence and ethnic cleansing, leading to the dispossession of local populations.

Overall, the book is exceptionally well-written and meticulously researched, drawing on extensive sources from over 20 archives and local records. It employs top-down and bottom-up approaches and is one of the first works in its field to examine the resettlement of North Caucasians in three different regions—the Balkans, Anatolia, and the Ottoman Middle East—within a single study. By comparing these regional narratives, the book provides readers with a broad perspective on the different resettlement experiences across the empire. The book's academic rigor is exceptionally high, making it a valuable resource for scholars and general readers.