

Ottoman Refugees, 1878-1939

Migration in a Post-Imperial World

Isa Blumi

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To Bahrain and Syria

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List of Abbreviations

ACS	Archivio Centrale dello Stato
AHR	American Historical Review
AiT	Ambasciata d'Italia in Turchia
AMAE	Archives Diplomatiques de Ministère des Affaires Etrangères
AQSH	Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror
ASMAE	Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari e Esteri, Serie Affari Politici
ASMAI	Italian African Bureau
AUSSME	Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito
BBA	Başbakanlı Osmanlı Arşivi
BEO	Bab-i Ali Evrak Odası
CSSAAME	Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East
CSSH	Comparative Studies in Society and History
CUP	Committee of Union and Progress
DH.ID	Dahiliye Nezâreti Idare Kismi
DH.MUI	Dahiliye Nezâreti Muhâberat-ı Umumiye
DUIT	Dosya Usulu Iradeler Tasinifi
EIC	East India Company
FO	Foreign Office of British Government
HAT	Hatt-ı Hümayun
HHStA	Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv
HR.MKT	Haricye Nezareti Mektubi Kalemî
HR.SYS	Haricye Nezareti Siyasi
IJMES	International Journal of Middle East Studies
IMRO	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization
IOR	India Office Record

LON	League of Nations
MAE	Ministeri Affairs e Estore
MV	Meclis-i Vükelâ Mazbatakları
NAUK	National Archives, United Kingdom
PA	Politisches Archiv
PR	Political Resident
SAP	Serie Affari Politici
TFR.1	Rumeli Müfettişliği Tasnifi
TFR.1.KV	Rumeli Müfettişliği Tasnifi Kosova
TFR.1.ŞKT	Rumeli Müfettişliği Tasnifi Arzuhaller
USNA RG	United States National Archives Record Group
YA.HUS	Yıldız Tasnifi: Sadâret Hususî Mâruzât Evrakı
YA.RES	Sadâret Resmi Mâruzât Evrakı
YEE	Yıldız Esas Evrak
Y.MTV	Yıldız Tasnifi: Mütenevvi Mâruzât Evrakı
Y.PRK.MŞ	Yıldız Perakende Evrakı Meşihat Maruzatı
Y.PRK.MYD	Yıldız Perakende Evrakı Yaveran ve Maiyyet-ı Seniyye Erkan-ı Harbiye Dairesi
Y.PRK.UM	Yıldız Perakende Evrakı, Umum Vilayetler Tahriratı

Preface and Acknowledgments

As of March 2013, the United Nations reported that more than 1 million Syrians were stranded as refugees inside Syria or in neighboring Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Such reports, despite years of experience in dealing with similar situations, continue to keep the abject conditions of the refugee camps out of the mainstream media. The refugee's very existence is predicated on her being a victim, nothing else. As a useful object for pity, the refugee's relationship with the world necessarily requires their abject poverty, a lack of privacy, and long sleepless nights. Without such conditions, the juxtaposition between the worthiness of "Western" support and the apparent evil of the regime that brought them to such a state would be useless. And yet, in spite of the generic anti-Assad narrative that implies a pathetic vulnerability and helplessness occupying these Syrian refugee camps, rather than being enclaves of passivity, they in fact are sites of intense power struggles that contradict every effort to homogenize their agency (or assumed lack thereof).

The battles for ascendancy within these desperate places not only pit heavily armed factions made up of non-Syrian "jihadists" and other kinds of freelance soldiers hoping to infiltrate the lucrative civil war inside Syria. But local "host" communities themselves, forced to accommodate these refugees and their competing armed groups, invariably show signs of political mobilization. In the case of Turkish hosts living along the frontier, patience has long run out. As in many cases in the past, the conflicting needs of refugees and the opportunistic agendas of war profiteers, lurking religious proselytizers hoping to capture one heathen soul, the leering men looking to buy cheap temporary wives from desperate families compelled to sell one daughter to save the rest, or those glorified foreign "fighters"—some with idealistic aims, some criminally mercenary—constitute a volatile mix that has destabilized host countries like Lebanon, Jordan, and especially Turkey.

And, lest we forget, other "humanitarian" crises around the world continue to expediently drop off the mainstream media's radar. There are still millions of peoples displaced by years of violence in Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, East Congo, the Sahel, Burma, and Sudan, let alone the millions of Palestinians scattered throughout the world as a result of century-long depopulation campaigns. As seen in Mali in early 2013 with the conquest of much of the uranium-rich Sahel north, or the dozens of roaming militias in the Eastern Congo unleashed by war in Uganda, Burundi, Sudan, and Rwanda 20 years ago, refugees also have ambitions to forge a meaningful role in the world. As is the way with Euro-America's conflicted relationship with "human rights," these "other" refugee efforts to attract life-saving "Western" patronage often prove futile. Resources and diplomatic cover provided by the likes of US Senator John McCain and/or French "philosopher" Bernard Henri-Levy are apparently the kinds of priceless assets reserved for those able to serve larger geostrategic and economic agendas. This glaring disparity

and the never-ending injustice visited upon these “other” refugees inspire the following study.

This study, however, could not be the simple product of inspired anguish over the injustices of the world. No matter how angry I am, I could not have done this book drawing from fury alone. With all sincerity, I express my appreciation for all those wonderful friends (and necessary foes) in my life who sustained me with love while I festered in rage. In the end, it was love more than hate that helped me through this project.

I start the ubiquitous list of acknowledgments with a deep appreciation for my mother and Dardane Arifaj’s continued support despite the fact we had to again live away from each other during crucial moments of our respective lives. As in the past, my home, in Geneva or elsewhere, may yet be one day set, with a “Zog” and luvs forged with every glace de Gingembre at Café Remor or lasagne at La Cantinella.

Drawn from the same well is always the formidable love I feel for and from Kosova, the incubator of my tormented soul. This is largely the result of my amazing fortune to be so closely attached to my Kosovar family. I reserve a special thanks to Adrian Arifaj, whose dedication as a father and brother is truly unique and inspirational. Ardi, and not the gangsters who have taken over our country, is what we should be celebrating: A true burre. I write this book with Ardi’s lovely ladies, from Naxhije, beautiful Sarah, and sweet Nora in mind; may we never, EVER have to go through the horrors of the 1990s again. Of course a great thanks to Visar (Kryetar Legjendar) for helping with the images and maps, again. And then there is Mom! Shume falemnderit for raising such wonderful children!

Far from being a single “home away from home,” I have little use for maps when I pass through virtually incognito my various offices in Atlanta, Manila, Leipzig, Geneva, and Sharjah. The routine has been numbing as I set off again for another stint, in another town, with only my little laptop at my side and thoughts of Rugac. But one thing that thankfully remains certain is my friends.

First and foremost, when it comes to my work as an historian, the irreplaceable Ebru Sönmez has remained my treasure of learning, guidance, and support. I will forever return to the gifts she has given me through her love of language and most things Persian and Ottoman. Of course there are others. For those of you still in my corner after sometimes years of no correspondence—from John J. Curry, Steven Hyland, Michael Hamson, Bettina Feller, Stacy McGoldrick, Ryan Gingeras, Jens Hanssen, Robert Baker, Carol Woodall, Tarek, François Burgat, Mogens Pelt, Catharina Raudvere, Lale Can, Sharifa al-Badi, Ahmed al-Qassimi, Saad Khan, Norah Salim, Francesco Caccamo, Alex Manevi, and Agon (urime sukses)—your simple presence somewhere in my life is all I apparently need to remain useful. Thank you.

I must shine the brightest light, however, on the sincere friendship built over the years with Joe Perry, who again offered to read portions of this book and is always ready to share a bottle and one more round of Roxy Music in celebration. And dear Joyce DeVries, the trip is always better with you in it. You two, along with Puss, are my anchor in Atlanta: thank you for many a wonderful night in East Point.

To my intellectual fellow travelers, especially Jon Schmitt, whose intelligence and diligent pen once again made for an amazing ally and friend, thank you. Then there is

Casey Cater, continuously giving and reassuringly intelligent, as always, thank you and your family as well. These two stars of Georgia State University provided not entirely uncompensated support in this book's finalization, a collaboration which would be a useful case study in determination and enduring intellectual companionship; a lesson for fine-weather friendships that easily fade in this academic world I increasingly despise.

And here then enters a new, amazing set of friends and no doubt, future colleagues. First and foremost, the amazing, no AMAZING, Joud AlKorani. It was Joud's sharp (dare I say brilliant) eyes and formidable intelligence that helped make my tormented rewrites become gratifying rethinks. Joud, I can only imagine where you are going with that intellect and wonderful choice of music. May there always be plenty for those road trips between the near and far over the next 32 years!;

From the same fortunate conjuncture of time and space I had the chance to meet Maryam "al-Bahraini." To Maryam I also send a deep thanks for making the process of living again civilized and meaningful. Your art initially helped me make a spiritual climb back . . . if only by the thinnest thread of hair.

But my time writing in Sharjah allowed me to meet so many more amazing friends. Perhaps unexpectedly to her, I want to first thank Asma al-Shamsi for her charming bullying tactics. They came at the right time and reminded me why I do all of this fighting, all of the time. I only hope that when we reach the final bell, we are on the same side. Then there are the wonderful companions I met while writing, whose diverse passions all converged at a common point. Indeed, I found myself surrounded by just amazing human beings while in Sharjah: Shamma al-Qassim, Aya al-Oballi, Sarah Zaben, Tamara al-Gunaid-Khamis, Dana Ahmad, Maysa'a Abu Hilal (you promised), Kevin Horbach, Munirah Eskander, Mehrdad Saberi, Aisha Ali, Oliva Jones, and Yara Ramadan. Thank you all for being wonderful friends and companions in this tormented world.

In academic terms, this book would not be possible without the generosity of my colleagues at the Centre for Area Studies and American University of Sharjah, who graciously tolerated my presence on (off) campus as I sought a quiet, relatively secluded place to finish writing this book. For this, I have to thank specifically Antje Zettler, Forrest, Geert, Markus, Martin, Steffi, Elisabetta, Nadine, Kristin, Sarah, and Matthais Middell at Leipzig for their support as I went off to write this book. In Sharjah I owe a special thanks to Stephen Keck for making my stay in the UAE comfortable and ultimately productive. Likewise, many thanks to Pia Anderson, Pernille Arenfeldt, Kevin Grey (and the moot, but certainly not mute, court gang), Ravi Sriramachandran, Angela Maitner, Thomas DeGeorges, and Yuting Wang for their support and occasional coffee/tea in "town." In this respect, I have to leave a special thanks to my friends I made while writing at the Caribou in Matajir. In particular I wish to extend a warm appreciation for the friendship and constant concern for my progress to Moses "Boss" Ubong Etim.

At the same time, my "home institution" at Georgia State University, while going through some painful transformations, has at least toward me, been very generous. It is not a comfortable position to be in as I watch from afar the poor treatment of people who are not only my friends but vital to the relative success of my departments. For

their contributions to making my life manageable while on leave, I need to thank from the bottom of my heart Alta Schwartz and Michelle Lacoss. They deserved promotions and raises.

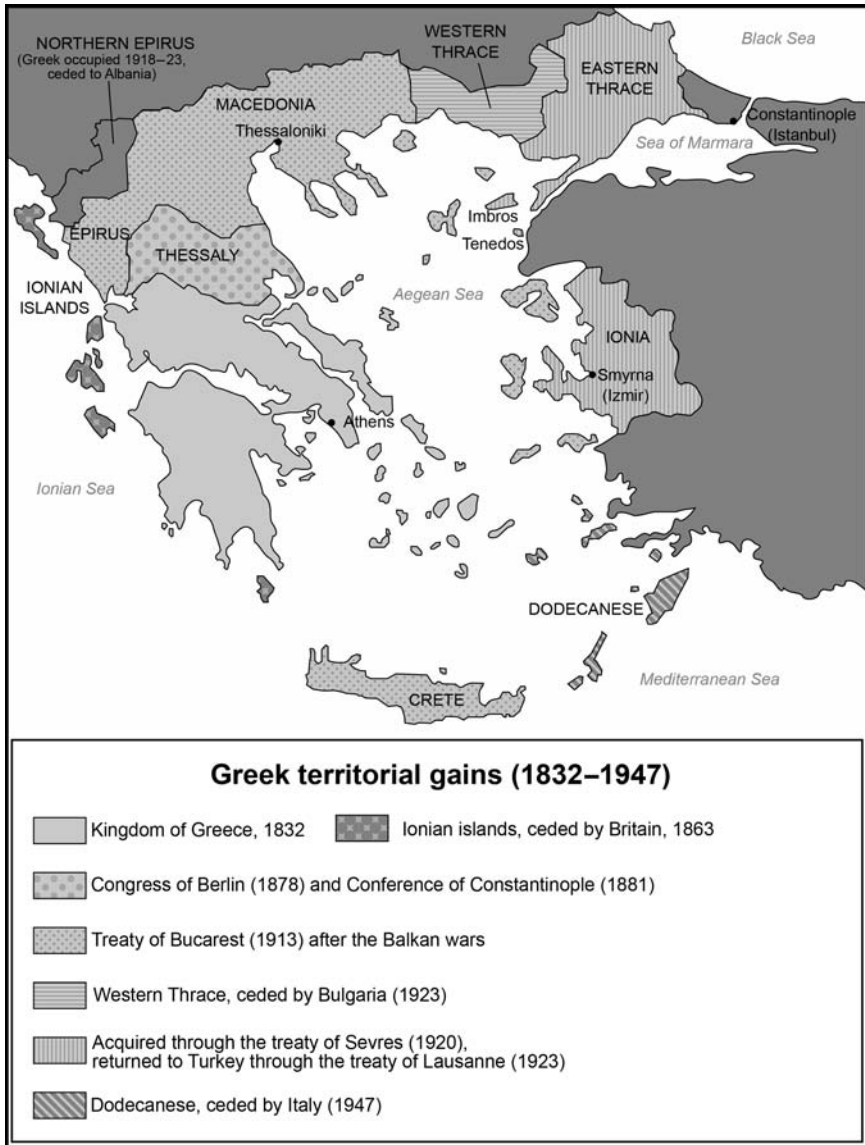
In addition, I have some especially supportive colleagues, among whom I single out Ghulam Nadri, Michelle Brattain, Larry Grubbs, Jared Poley, Christine Skwiot, Michele Reid, Douglas R. Reynolds, Nick Wilding, Hugh Hudson, and Larry Youngs. Thank you for remaining interested.

And then there was Bloomsbury Academic Press. Rhodri Mogford, has been most professional and very pleasant to “work” with during my hectic writing phase while Srikanth was as tireless as accommodating during the production phase. Thank you for your patience.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the professionals who helped facilitate my extensive research throughout Europe/Middle East. In particular I want to thank the staffs at the Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror (Tirana), Haus, Hauf und Staatsarchiv (Vienna), Singapore National Archives, the Philippine National Archives (Manila), the Zanzibar National Archives (Stonetown) and a special thanks to Salim Najaf for introductions, the Politisches Archiv des Auswaertigen Amtes der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (first Bonn then Berlin), Centres des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes/Paris, League of Nations Archives (Geneva), Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (Rome), the Başbakanlık Arşivi (Istanbul), the National Archives, formally known as the Public Records Office (Kew Gardens), the US National Archives (Maryland), and finally the Atatürk Library in Istanbul. Additional acknowledgment must be given to the organizations and institutes that have provided generous funding to help research this book: The Fulbright-Hayes Committee, American Council of Learned Societies, the American Research Institutes in Turkey and Yemen, CAORC, and the Social Science Research Council contributed generously to my research all over the world.

As is my “nature,” I end on a tragic note. As possibly noticed by some, I dedicate this book to Bahrain and Syria, two jewels of our world now brought to ruin by a chauvinism and selfishness that was once reserved for the worst tyrants of the Middle Ages. Their fake piousness, disguising the greed and barbaric emptiness of an illiterate bigot, is now poisoning what was left of a beautiful way of life in my spiritual and cultural heartland. Both Syria and Bahrain, two incubators of humanity, where “different” peoples could unite in love, make beautiful art, and bear beautiful children, are now all but gone. O how we have let the white devil take our dignity, our faith, and finally our humanity away from us.

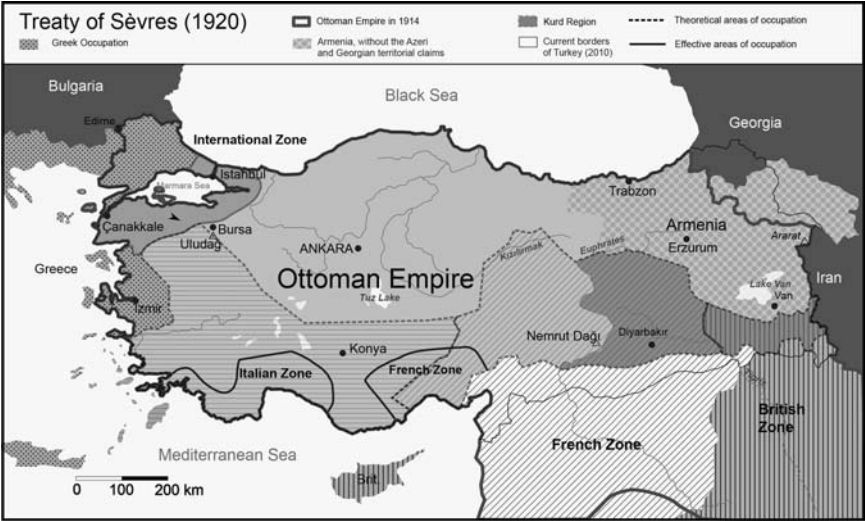
Maps



Prelim map 1 Greek territorial expansion



Prelim map 2 Treaty of Bucharest 1913



Prelim map 3 Map of Treaty of Sèvres, 1920



Prelim map 4 Map of Treaty of Lausanne 1923

Introduction

*Having escaped, lost in exile
Constrained and incarcerated,
I ache with tears unabated
On the Elbe's shores, and Banks of Spree
To Where have I Fled, Leaving all Behind,
Impoverished Homeland, destitute nation
I lay unclean on the seashore
Remaining unseen in the sunlight
Starving at the dining table
Ignorant among the Learned
Naked and anguished
Sullen in body and soul . . .*

Anës lumenjve (On the river's banks) by Fan Noli (1882–1965)

Introduction

It is the precarious existence of exile—whose life is haunted by the unabated beckoning of an ever distant homeland while left wanting in a foreign land—that leaves a collective anxiety in a national polity's memories. As a result of such anxieties lurking in the Balkans, the many Albanian children who memorized Fan Noli's beautiful, if complex dedication to an exiled national hero, may at times miss the irony of the author's own accomplishments as an activist, at times himself in exile.¹ As a teaching tool, the “diasporic” life engrossed in Noli's poem posits exile as a contradiction of human energy that historians, activist Bishops, and middle-school teachers far too often subordinate in favor of the evocative melancholy of the lost homeland. The refugee forced to live in exile, in other words, is a hapless shadow of history until she returns “home.”

This is a book that aims to reverse these appropriations of artistic tropes for the purposes of telling a tragic, and largely subordinate national story. Its goals are as much driven by the wish to arm fellow researchers with new approaches to studying modern history as offering its own comprehensive revision of that recent past. At its core is a methodological drive to complicate through particularization and comparison the “inevitably” tragic experiences of specifically Ottoman refugees

during a 1878–1939 transitional period. As explained throughout, the particular lives of refugees as migrants not only promise to offer a dynamic set of filters through which we can explore world histories in new ways, but it does so by way of challenging previous uses of Ottoman history that sought in their own way to tell different kinds of post-WWI stories.²

At the heart of this corrective study is the enduring question of who contributes to History. The manner in which the refugee in particular is mobilized to produce western “meta-history” proves emblematic of the larger methodological debates consuming the politics of memory.³ As a result of being cut off, perhaps permanently, from the resources and support of his/her homeland, the refugee *appears* marginalized and thus bereft of agency. This vulnerability seems requisite to certain kinds of composite nationalist mythologies.

To the contrary, I will make the case below that refugees can become part of dynamic constituencies in a large range of settings and as a result, *do* influence history. In fact, these refugees contribute to History to such an extent that they may be at crucial moments considered a generative force behind, for example, forms of modern state bureaucracy, the emergence of institutions of violence, and even the ascendancy of Western finance capitalism. As involuntary migration affects the world in many ways, dependent on context, the historian thus may need to avoid trying to define a monolithic migratory condition. Instead, refugees/expellees/poor migrants may in fact consist of individual and small clusters of groups that collectively act to, for instance, advocate for a common cause, often in the form of rioting over a lack of food and shelter. They also could organize, often with non-refugees, to lobby for their political integration into the new societies they settle. More interestingly still, it is suggested throughout that refugees can become an outright force of destabilization in those same host communities. This is to say, even if the generic refugee is forgotten in the wake of blinkered international aid, or through calculations of *realpolitik* is effectively “cleansed” from his/her homeland, he/she becomes a historical agent elsewhere in the world.⁴

To attempt this restoration, I will highlight the contributive force of refugees in a late Ottoman and then immediate post-Ottoman context (1878–1939) as it spread across the empire’s entire geographic reach from the western Balkans, Eastern Anatolia, to Southern Arabia. This trans-regional scope will help make the argument that these historic peoples and the rapidly changing communities they regularly created (and broke apart), played a more significant role in the shaping of the larger modern world than is granted them by traditional scholarship.

To the observant reader, such an intervention may seem redundant. Considering the plethora of scholarship on the plight of many of the Ottoman Empire’s refugees who were dispersed throughout the last 50 years of empire—from Jews, Armenians, Balkan and Russian Muslims, Albanians, Arabs, Greeks, and Bulgarians—it would seem this topic has been covered already.⁵ As much as this appears true on the surface, however, the very manner in which the theme of “refugee” is mobilized in the scholarship needs closer scrutiny.⁶ I believe that we need to question how the Ottoman refugee is referenced in transitional stories about the birth of post-Ottoman nations, and indeed

about the role of the Ottoman Empire's collapse on the development of the "modern world."

Unfortunately, within the confines of Ottoman studies as they stand today, the refugee becomes an almost empty category of analysis with very little differentiation across temporal and geographic contexts. The refugee is, in other words, a monolith, a categorical point of reference made subordinate to a larger narrative about the trajectory of the empire and its successor ethno-national states.⁷ When done properly, such studies largely succeed in complicating otherwise generic histories that focus on relations between states, the acts of political elites, and listing wars and the treaties that ended them.

The heavy focus on treaties and political elite is fully understandable in complex countries like Turkey, which is in fact one of the dozen or so post-Ottoman polities whose members were made up of refugees and internally displaced peoples (IDP).⁸ Indeed, Armenia, Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Bosnia, Serbia, Chechnya, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, and Albania (Kosovo) all tell some version of the refugee story in their national histories. Unhelpfully, scholars tend to evoke the refugees in order to fit narrative conventions expected to reinforce the myths of the modern state's inevitability rather than providing a means to understand the complexity of social and economic change surrounding their experiences. In other words, the refugee story in the hands of the nationalist historian is a retrospective device by which individual and collective suffering are made to serve the ascendant nation.⁹

Extending this apparent nation-building role of specific national refugees even further, it is the horrors of "ethnic cleansing" that attract the most emphasis in the existing literature. In this regard, the collective suffering of "our ancestors" initiates an historic "process" deemed necessary to productively "break" from a premodern past.¹⁰ That is to say, the "historically inevitable" violent collapse of the premodern multiethnic empire helps the nation shed its "backward," "Oriental" past and in turn permits it to become part of the modern world.¹¹ As such, being victimized castaways of the Ottoman "Islamic" Sultanate serves to "restart" a process that had been arrested by so many hundreds of years of "Turkish" (or Habsburg/European) imperial occupation.¹²

While this may in fact be the prevailing meta-narrative of "the nation," one that varies only slightly in each post-Ottoman society, it often completely distorts the complexity of historical events, and is especially prone to depict the protagonists (and antagonists) in ways that border essentialist racism. The central complaint lodged by this study is that it is impossible for such rigidly defined parameters to accurately reflect the dynamics around those peoples living in an Ottoman past. To redress this, we will position the refugee (loosely defined to the extent that I include immigrants coming from outside the empire, as well as economic migrants, and IDP) and her/his various experiences in indeterminate and complicated ways, allowing for a more intricate and perhaps more dynamic historic image to emerge.¹³

One way of accomplishing this is to look specifically at—and thus question—both the physical and apparent spiritual migration of various peoples toward the possibility of an Ottoman (at times Muslim) "universal" safe-haven. This angle has come relatively late in the process of writing this book and is inspired by recent breakthroughs in the scholarship. In particular, it was after reading the excellent new book on conversion

(and apostasy) by Selim Deringil that it became clear the documents the historian uses to decipher the chaotic events of Ottoman collapse offer both barriers to “explaining” the violence of the empire’s final years, as well as invaluable insights into what was possible for so many in these defining moments of survival.¹⁴

In contrast to any number of studies that necessarily “expose” the violence toward “Armenians” as Christians by way of “Muslim” or “Turkish” state (and thus entire society) policies of murder, dispossession, and ethnic cleansing, Deringil’s approach to the study of religious conversion adds several layers of analysis to the dynamics at work in cases of wide-spread human suffering during imperial collapse. Following Deringil’s welcome discussion on what is at stake when debating conversion, I am questioning further how religious and/or ethno-national “confession” operates as a categorical determinant of historical action. I will demonstrate throughout that if not placed into a number of contexts through which, in particular, the violence of imperial collapse takes place, the utility of categories of analysis like confession, ethno-national identity, and thus religious conversion proves misleading.

Paradoxically, Deringil’s study demonstrates perfectly the need to carefully steer the analysis of any interface between competing empires and individual (or community) acts of desperation, cunning, deception, or love away from concepts derived solely from Western knowledge. As Deringil points out, too many scholars have left the story of “Christian” conversion to “Islam” trapped in the larger framework of variations of the “clash of civilizations” theme. In this regard, Deringil seems careful enough not to assert uniform conclusions to a “theme” of conversion in order to fit it into a normative “Great Game” or worse still “Pan-Islamism.”

As Deringil partially points out himself, much of the reading of the tragedies that produced multitudes of Ottoman refugees misses several points. The fact is that these transitional peoples were not only physically uprooted, constantly mobile refugees; but they were also ideologically, culturally, and economically resilient in their transience. In other words, those deemed in the scholarship as the most vulnerable “victims” of imperial extension and/or collapse were also those displaced refugees who proved capable of adapting to rapidly changing events. Far from being helpless, the refugees flooding the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were very much itinerate agents of history.

Moreover, in their mobile state refugees constantly reorganized previously displaced communities. Often, out of their newly created publics, refugee collectives took the form of armed militias or social clubs, viable constituencies demanding institutional attention. In turn, their potentially disruptive activism led to new regional instabilities. Some good examples of the opportunities created by refugee activism are found throughout Anatolia and the Balkans in the mid-1870s—activism that proved the key window of opportunity for both Russia and the Habsburgs to enter these region’s domestic affairs.¹⁵

The resulting 1877–8 Russo-Ottoman war actually instigated yet a new wave of refugees whose flight into Ottoman territories simply restarted the many different processes of adaptation, violent competition over resources, and political alliance-making. These new refugee constituencies had long-term consequences for the way the Ottoman state developed vis-à-vis its subjects and the larger world. What I bring

new to those works that characterize the result of the post-1878 refugee wave as a “resurrection” of peoples whose violent revolts would serve the modern nation-state is that I find that these constantly adapting communities proved far more ideologically elusive.¹⁶

Instead of being unquestioning surrogates for ethnic hatred, persecuting others as they were once themselves persecuted, refugees emerging in the 1870s often proved to be the most stubborn Ottomans. In face of violence, often perpetrated by de-facto mercenary armies of “foreign” men who claimed to be “liberating” them, these stubborn Ottomans grasped at reformulating—and often successfully mobilizing—seemingly “outdated Oriental” sensibilities. Such gestures often amounted to protecting “Muslim” or “Armenian” or “Bulgarian” neighbors from the merchants of war who co-opted the useful lie about human incompatibility to help expand what I will characterize throughout as the potentiality of Euro-American economic hegemony. Indeed, it is this important face-off between resistant Ottoman-era values of cohabitation and the “ethnic entrepreneurs” of a new era of possibilities that animated much of the 1878–1939 period.¹⁷

A sensitive reading of the different, constantly shifting lives of refugees helps us expand on the entire, very violent, later stages of Ottoman rule in areas as diverse as the western Balkans, Arabia, and Mesopotamia/Eastern Anatolia. Moreover, what studying Ottoman refugees does to redefine the parameters of power relative to individuals and the institutions built around them can lend new urgency to the ethical engagement with the inherent complexity of present-day refugee catastrophes. To start this however, we must consider some of the conflicting agendas at play among those clusters of peoples straddling the political and commercial frontiers of the Balkan, Eastern Anatolian, and Arabian/Middle Eastern provinces of the late Ottoman Empire.

In these conflict-ridden spaces, purportedly separating ancient peoples and clashing civilizations, I maintain that the violence characterizing those events long associated with the causal sources of imperial collapse may more usefully be understood as a transitional phenomenon. In other words, conflict emerged from a historically contingent set of conditions reminiscent of other, equally vexed locales facing systemic violence.¹⁸ We need to stop assuming the violence shaping the contours of refugee life (let alone the larger population) is endemic to these “non-Western” regions and their inhabitants. Instead, it is necessary to believe that the refugee experiences as linked to the Ottoman Empire is a living product of specific conditions introduced by, among other things, the transformative factors related to expanding finance capitalism and its associated methods of state rule.

Outline of book

The emergence of finance capitalism created a particular kind of refugee exposed to a form of exploitation that increasingly scoured the earth for cheap labor. With Greek, Armenian, Albanian, Montenegrin, and Syrian landless peasants loaded onto the increasing numbers of ships docking at Ottoman ports, merchants of human toil offered developers in the rapidly industrializing North America and the vast untapped

agricultural wealth of Latin America cheap labor to join still virgin economies.¹⁹ Many others joined these economic refugees, including peasants specifically targeted for forced expulsion, first by invading armies and then, through negotiation promoted by the ascendant Euro-American powers, in diplomatically sanctioned “population exchanges.” By 1912, it became part of an operating logic that certain social associations characterized by creed or race were “naturally” incompatible with different neighbors and were thus necessary victims to service a larger international order seeking to both oversee how human labor, and other natural resources, would be “developed” and assure such exploitative practices remained fully regulated.

In the case of the human being as commodity, the negotiated process of forcefully separating now ontologically different “races” of potential laborers became the precursor to ethnic cleansing, mass murder, and ultimately genocide in the quickly conquered Ottoman lands from 1912 onwards.²⁰ Increasingly historians are beginning to link these disruptions in human communal life as the lucrative source of all kinds of new means to “securitize” human beings’ labor.²¹ What is not entirely clear to most who elect to focus on the savagery of this sordid period in Middle Eastern and Balkan history is that the same Euro-American powers, via diplomatic meetings or the League of Nations, imposing programs of forced population exchanges resulting in millions of Ottoman refugees by 1918, were in their own right the perpetrators of the worst kind of mass murder, forced migrations, and starvation elsewhere.²²

What arose from those peoples being institutionally coerced to flee from zones of conflict were often fly-by-night operations erected to rationalize these now refugees’ (re)settlement. Where our story about the Ottoman refugee diverges from this often well-told one is that these refugees did not *necessarily* contribute positively to the creation of our current, narrowly defined modern state. In this respect, it may be wise not to assume that the “natural” destiny of these temporarily dislocated peoples was to form homogenous, modern ethno-national, exclusivist communities. Instead, there may be evidence during these periods of violent transition to suggest that these former Ottoman subjects persisted in acting in decidedly “Ottoman ways” as much as the embittered founders of chauvinistic, exclusionary nation-states.

This itinerate sensibility that pervaded the refugee experiences is identifiable in, for example, Theodora Dragostinova’s crucial revisionist work. Dragostinova explores tensions arising within targeted communities facing intermediate choices between exile/resettlement and living a “minority” existence in what became Bulgaria. To many, these options eventually materialized into ambiguous political niches inhabited by “political acceptable amphibians [who] navigated official expectations” and left state-building operations in flux as a result.²³

Indeed, Ottoman refugees during the 1878–1939 period often forged alliances that cut across otherwise neatly delineated ethno-national, sectarian, and class lines outside forces constantly sought to impose. In these alliances, refugee communities resembled more a capacious Ottoman revival than the enforced ethnic homogeneity of the nation-state. Consider, for instance, Syria and Iraq under French and British occupation from 1917 until at least the 1930s (see Maps 1, 2, 3, 4). The otherwise “mixed” communities proved as much able to defy the international order as vulnerable to manipulation by the “divide and rule” tactics of “civilizing” missions sanctioned by the newly minted

League of Nations. In this respect, peoples throughout the former Ottoman Empire acted in ways that contradicted the pseudo-imperialist taxonomies that international interests eagerly sought to use in order to distinguish Shiite, Sunni, Kurds, tribes, Armenians, Assyrians, Druze, and Maronite from each other.²⁴ The same held true in the violent period of state-formation in Albania, Yugoslavia, and Turkey after World War I, a period when strident policies that criminalized “difference” often faced collective responses that revealed an ecumenical spirit that occasionally compelled the stream-roller of modernity to redirect.²⁵

This rejoinder to an otherwise programmatic narrative of post-Ottoman nation-building is especially important in the context of the Balkans, Eastern Anatolia, and present-day Syria and Iraq. These are all regions which experienced well into the twenty-first century forms of state and extra-state funded violence aimed to (de)mobilize some form of population politics. This is modernity in its most negative sense, a by-product of struggles between Ottoman refugees in transitional settings—both physically displaced and ideologically marginalized—that ushered in a new world order by way of local ethnic and/or sectarian entrepreneurial intermediaries. To ultimately deepen our understanding of how this struggle takes place depends on our willingness to revisit a multifaceted intersection of forces during the 1878–1939 period. More importantly, this elaboration needs to take place outside the confines of the standard analytical categories that rule contemporary scholarship.²⁶

For this reason I am steering this book on refugees away from merely repeating the recent scholarship that proves Muslim/Christian or Turkish/Arab hostilities did not always set the tone in post-Ottoman societies in the Balkans and Middle East, let alone during the empire’s last years. These corrective narratives offer an abundance of examples of how productive relations cut across simplistic lines of distinction. These studies, however, tend to focus only on one set of cases, usually located geographically in a relatively small corner of the (former) Ottoman Empire. So while this book builds on the excellent work of colleagues, it expands the study to cover *comparatively* these hitherto singularly observed cases of a lingering cosmopolitanism and tolerance for the religious and cultural diversity. I look intermittently at how such processes compare and contrast in Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia, Albania, Anatolia, and Mandate Iraq and Syria, as well as within several Ottoman diaspora settings around the world.

To contextualize these transitional processes, Chapter 1 studies the political economy of the late empire. A close reading of the role of international finance as increasingly dominated by a small group of banks, debt, and the evolving relationship with land as a commodity, for example, can initiate new ways of linking the politics of imperial collapse to a new found utility for dispersed, landless peoples as laborers. Perhaps ironically, these processes did not all automatically service the emergence of some form of ethno-national state throughout the former Ottoman territories, an emergence that was contingent and highly variable across post-Ottoman geographies. As such, the very dynamics of settling the refugee within a rapidly changing land regime and industrialization of finance must be compared across very different settings. I do this by first exploring how land ownership and the politics behind land use transformed during the course of the Ottoman Empire’s last 50 years.

Tied to these processes are the structural changes transforming the way states interacted in the global economy. Throughout the first three chapters of this book I consider the Ottoman state as a mechanism that tried to productively settle these refugees (by and large displaced from newly lost lands in Crimea, Caucasus, and the Balkans) in order to further emphasize that land management issues directly linked with refugee agency in such times of turmoil. That being said, it is important to remember that the entire period of Ottoman reforms (conventionally understood to span the years 1839 to 1876) underwrote the post-1878 era of this refugee resettlement. By 1912 an *intact* Ottoman Empire was no longer as attractive to the strategic calculations of various financial interests as it had been during the nineteenth century.

This waning interest in a unified Ottoman Empire is crucial to start the larger argument of this book. A necessary precursor to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire over the nineteenth century, therefore, was the *Tanzimat*, a period of reforms that introduced the kinds of transformations to Ottoman society that blurred the intentions of these reforms and left many at the time to wonder whom were they supposed to serve.²⁷ By taking into consideration that these proto neoliberal reforms reflect very much the kind of social disasters ushered in today by such massive, foreign imposed programs that prioritize exposing local economies to “global” markets, we can begin to rethink the terminology used to explain this crucial era. The Ottoman Empire, and crucially, large numbers of its subjects, many who either became IDPs or care-givers of refugees, were exposed to the exploitative forces of global capital.

The reasons for the growing political turmoil starting in the 1870s become obvious when adopting a political economic approach. The rewards for those who ruled—or influenced the latter—were great. There were personal emoluments for being pliable, incentives that included joint ventures in lucrative trading deals, and even potential for celebrity in European media. Similarly, those who wanted to stem the pillaging of their homeland out of patriotism (what has been called Ottomanism or unionism), needed to gain access to the decision-making offices of the imperial government and then securing them by legal or extra-legal means.²⁸ This too had political economy implications.

As these reforms launched socioeconomic reorientations, the consequences for displaced peoples were varied and profound. At times, and depending on the given context, those invested in the spirit of reform completely transformed the manner in which they interacted with their putatively destitute refugee brethren. Taking this into account allows us to challenge how we understand the effects a set of demographic transformations had on the primary stakeholders—the bureaucrats and reformers whose Balkan and Transcaucasian homelands were to be lost forever—and thus begin the task of inserting refugees into the modern history of the region.²⁹

This can be done further in Chapter 2 by including questions about how the Ottoman state may have evolved into something far more akin to a modern one *because* of its attempts to care for millions of uprooted peoples. I suggest that part of the way in which reforms, resistance, and further transformations associated with the last century of Ottoman history can be studied is by investigating how the demands of provisioning for refugees were met. The need to feed uprooted refugees in times of

political and economic collapse gradually clashed with a new calculus among a number of stakeholders aiming to profit from this “demand” to eat.

As such, provisioning for refugees constituted a moral threshold that marked the contentious fault lines refugee/internally displaced (post) Ottomans straddled. Moreover, refugees’ productive, necessarily “fractious” interface with the agents of Euro-American capital created the conflict between the moral necessity to feed refugees and those “market forces” seeing value in high demand for resources. It is this conflict, I argue, that marked the ultimate point of origin for the modern world.

Struggles over the control and use of resources are the crucial points of reference to understanding when and where Euro-American hegemony begins and ends.³⁰ In other words, how the “provisional” agendas of the Ottoman state fluctuate in this context proves of elementary importance to understanding the dialectical relationship between being Ottoman and the new world order. To compliment (if not further complicate) these insights I offer in Chapter 3 a detailed analysis of how Ottoman subjects end up in neighboring states and principalities during the 1900–18 period. I do this in order to raise new questions about how we can actually understand the exiled refugee (in the form of “diaspora”) experience in the larger context of the global transformations that destroyed the period’s heterogeneous empires. Be they Albanian intellectuals in Romania or Egypt, Armenian radicals in Bulgaria, or Russian-born Ottoman “patriots” organizing in Paris and Cairo to “reunite” the Empire by way of reinstating the annulled constitution of 1876, these quasi-refugees living in neighboring safe-havens offer a valuable angle to this story.

In these translucent settings we find numerous Ottoman actors enjoying a unique set of conditions, conditions I frame as a “*proximate*” dynamic. By being proximal, in some cases literally contiguous to the Ottoman political space, these de-facto refugees straddle roles otherwise omitted in the post-Ottoman historiography. For scholarship that retrospectively fixates on a hero’s rebellion or a political agency focused entirely on shaping a post-Ottoman world, the Ottoman refugee inhabiting this transitional space complicates the story. Indeed, this contribution by refugees on the immediate “fringes” of the Ottoman governed space problematizes the story by fluctuating from an intimacy with “domestic” Ottoman concerns to an ability to function outside the formal capacity of the state to dictate the parameters of action. This *proximate* dynamic, in other words, mediates between the political agent’s exile and the relevance of these agents in a variety of settings, both inside the Ottoman Empire and these neighboring polities.

This migrant Ottoman story must at all costs be freed from the political intrigues of the era in which the foundational narratives to the present-day nation-state were forged. The fact that many of today’s political parties claim legitimacy by associating themselves to “founding fathers” has required that historians focus on the political intrigues of individual men in Bucharest, Paris, Geneva, and Cairo. The problem is these men and the plots they schemed were hardly representative of the larger dynamism in the world around them. Considering how secretive these cells in Bucharest, Salonika, Geneva, and Paris were (all monitored by either the Ottoman secret police, with the occasional assassin at their call, or host governments actively persecuting these early forms of “terrorist” cells) they could not productively interact with their fellow Ottomans.³¹

Yes, their publications have become useful tools to analyze these early developments of anti-regime, and even anti-Ottoman, activism. But then again, how representative are they of the world in which members of such secret organizations operated within the *Ottoman proximate*? Exploiting these sources can lead to conclusions that are speculative at best. In this regard, Chapter 3 is careful to not fall into the trap of allowing overly secretive, and in many cases, violently paranoid, political activist groups to dictate how we should characterize the diasporic spaces of the Ottoman *proximate* refugee.³²

The fact that so many of these groups operated in such self-isolating cells can help us speculate as to the kind of political culture these men carried with them after “victory” in the summer of 1908. As this “Young Turk” revolution brought temporarily into power many from the Ottoman *proximate* spaces, their subsequent descent into factionalism after taking power was predictable; rivalries were already evident while in exile as they often played out in the European press. Such earlier tensions were only exasperated by the intrigues introduced when they attained power, which in turn means their earlier exilic context is crucial to understanding the development of ideological orientations that transformed the empire after 1908.³³

That many among these oppositional exiles demonstrated a tendency to keep meetings secret and they infuse their publications with abstract symbolism accessible only to members left many future “heroes” of the nation operating in circles beyond the specific concerns of individual Ottoman citizens. For the Free-Masons, whose influential role in the CUP is now beyond a doubt, the dynamics of Ottoman transformation bears consideration in the larger context of power circles throughout the Euro-American world.³⁴ Likewise, the introduction of Anarchism and Bolshevism animated internal oppositional politics in the Ottoman world, with the Ottoman refugee/diaspora most deeply affected by the rising tide of certain forms of polemic.³⁵

To develop this story further, Chapters 4 and 5 offer a global perspective of refugee agency that can serve as a further layer of complexity to the story of Ottoman sensibilities which I believe persisted even when Syrians, Arabs, Greeks, Albanians, and Armenians lived thousands of miles away. By offering a preliminary survey of Ottoman activities as both settlers hoping to find meaningful employment in the Americas or Southeast Asia, and Sufi missionaries seeking to transmit a spiritual message to places as distinct as Zanzibar and Mindanao, I am offering yet another medium through which we can understand evolving Ottoman sensibilities, those composed and often vociferously articulated on entirely different continents.

It is in these Ottoman refugee diasporas, many of which outlive the actual empire, that a vision of the world, seemingly outdated by the violence of interethnic/sectarian wars and genocides that would ravage the Ottoman homeland by 1912, still proved stubbornly relevant. What comes out of these two chapters should be an appreciation for how different constituencies emerge with far different immediate and medium-term experiences within the process of global transformation that inflicted much suffering (and new possibilities) on these itinerant Ottomans. It should also become clear that these refugees of a transforming “land-based” empire had, just like their counterparts in the *Ottoman proximate*, a considerable impact on their host societies. In this respect,

it bears remembering that most of these Ottoman refugees moved to important points of exchange, where the juxtaposition of vastly different political, economic, and social forces intersecting at crucial moments (as in Eastern Africa, the Americas, and the South China Sea) often turned to exploitation and even depredation. In this regard, not only must we begin to tell many different kinds of migrant stories through an Ottoman refugee filter, but in equal measure mediate the common story of European imperialist violence through the stories of Ottoman refugees serving as middlemen or collaborators.

My main characters are presented as far more varied than the conventional laborers seeking new sources of income in an increasingly cash-based global economy. At once spiritual as much as economic opportunists, political exiles and uprooted peasants, it is both their diversity and their distinctive associations with their new environments that make it impossible to fit refugees into a more general narrative. For our purposes here, narratives about those whom I see as diverse surrogates for an inarticulate, initial gesture of Ottoman spiritual colonialism, are drawn from within Ottoman refugee communities often consisting of no more than a handful of Sufi missionaries in tropical Central Africa or shop owners in a Mexican village. Many of these itinerate men of faith (and their requisite links to commercial interests exploiting the “New World”) will prove useful in that they offer a much different perspective on how the “modern” world was made.

By opening up in Chapter 5 a tension within imperial state/administration theory and practices I suggest yet another role for the migrant/refugee to play in the modern world. After my brief history of how purportedly Ottoman state-led efforts at the (partial) institutionalization of religion in the nineteenth century unfolded, it will then be possible to offer a detailed rethinking of the causal factors behind *both* imperial policies dedicated to “Islam” and by revealing the internal dynamics behind “Muslim” missionary work in the Indian Ocean. As argued, the factors instigating the missionary work of a small group of itinerate, nominal Ottoman Sufis, stems not from state policy but an indigenous network of constituencies operating at the fringes of the Ottoman world.

While rethinking what possible role the Ottoman Empire played in the larger world it will be useful to study these small enclaves of Muslims, many originating from non-Ottoman lands and only having tangential, theological/spiritual/ideological associations with the empire. I demonstrate that it is the independent work of small groups of concerned merchants and Sufi scholars whose activism actually helped to redefine the “borderlands” of Islamic “modernism,” inter-imperial rivalry, and even the future methods of Euro-American colonialism. From within this doctrinal diversity hundreds of itinerate Sufis would engage European power in ways that allow us to appreciate the possible integration of missionary-like operations into a larger discussion of the politics of empire and religion. To this reorientation of causality, we must insist that the context of these global processes remains along the contested frontiers of finance capitalism, not in the formal halls of government in London, Bombay, Singapore, or Istanbul. It is, in other words, out in Eastern Africa (and by extension Southeast Asia), where we begin to appreciate just how dispersed spiritually the so-called Muslim world was in the 1860–1900 period.³⁶