

ABANDONED LAND: MUSLIM REFUGEES' PROPERTY IN THE POST-OTTOMAN BALKANS*

In 1882, Bulgarian farmers from the Lom district, in the northwestern corner of Bulgaria, sent a petition to the government in Sofia. The Bulgarian petitioners asked the authorities to grant them full rights to the land of Muslim refugees. Circassians, Muslims from Russia whom the Ottoman government had settled there in the 1860s, fled the area during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–8 leaving their fields behind. The local authorities in charge of this Danubian region in the Bulgarian-Romanian-Serbian borderlands had promised to give the Circassian refugees' abandoned land to Bulgarian villagers living in the nearby mountains. When the mountaineers arrived to take up the Circassians' fields, the Bulgarian government announced that the Muslim refugees' land belonged to the state and would only be leased to new farmers. The Bulgarian petitioners, however, demanded that the government issue them title deeds and confirm

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their ownership over the land and fifty abandoned Circassian houses that still stood on that land. ‘Otherwise, our situation is abysmal’, pleaded destitute Bulgarians.¹ The petition was one of many by dissatisfied farmers from around the northern Balkans. National authorities and local communities across the region grappled with a critical question: who owns the land that used to belong to Ottoman Muslims? The abandoned Muslim land became a desirable asset, central to the very identity of the post-Ottoman Balkans.

This article examines what happened to the land left behind by Muslim refugees, chiefly Circassians and Crimean Tatars, in Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania after the end of Ottoman rule in 1878. The question of land ownership struck at the heart of state-building and nation-making after Romania and Serbia secured independence from, and Bulgaria was granted autonomy within, the Ottoman state. The new Balkan governments strove to reform land tenure and reallocate properties confiscated during Ottoman rule to local and immigrant Christian populations, entrenching their post-1878 land regimes. How the ownership of abandoned Muslim lands would be determined had a direct effect on the economy and demographics of entire regions, often frontier territories, of the new Balkan states.

This article advances three arguments about land appropriation and redistribution as part of state-building in the modern Balkans. First, the post-Ottoman states of Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania built their new land ownership policies upon the Ottoman land regime, asserting the state’s ownership over large swathes of agricultural land. In Balkan historiography, the post-1878 era typically appears as a significant break from the Ottoman past, as national governments embarked on ambitious reforms to remake their societies and economies.² In contrast, I demonstrate that,

¹ Central State Archive of Bulgaria (Tsentrālen dŭrzhaven arkhiv), Sofia (hereafter TsDA), fond (f.) [collection] 159K, opis (op.) [inventory] 1, arkhivna edinitsa (a.e.) [archival unit] 57, list (l. or ll.) [page] ll. 110–110b (15 Feb. 1882), ll. 112–112b (20 Feb. 1882), quote on 112b.

² On nation-making in Bulgaria, see Richard J. Crampton, *Bulgaria: A History, 1878–1918* (New York, 1983); in Romania, see Constantin Iordachi, *Liberalism, Constitutional Nationalism, and Minorities: The Making of Romanian Citizenship, c.1750–1918* (Leiden, 2019); and in Serbia, see Miloš Jagodić, *Naseljavanje Kneževine Srbije, 1861–1880* [Settlement of the Principality of Serbia, 1861–1880] (Belgrade, 2004); and on state-building in the Balkans, see Charles Jelavich and Barbara Jelavich, *The Establishment of the Balkan National States, 1804–1920*

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with regard to single household-tilled agricultural land, the three governments largely upheld the tenets of the Ottoman Land Code of 1858, which had been a source of grievances for many Balkan farmers in the 1860s and 1870s. The governments in Sofia, Belgrade, and Bucharest sought to consolidate state sovereignty by reasserting the state as the largest landowner and arbiter of all disputes over property ownership. This article contributes to the new scholarship on post-Ottoman transition and state-building, which largely focused on the Arab world.³ Unlike inter-war Middle Eastern states, the post-1878 Balkan states were creating new legislation with the intent to dismantle Ottoman legacy, including Muslim presence, while the Ottoman Empire still existed.

Second, I argue that Muslim refugees' lands became a site — both physical and legal — of contestation between the Balkan governments, local Christian communities, and Muslim refugees, who presented competing claims to the land. This contestation over refugees' land was a critical part of state-building, as it strengthened the state's claim to agricultural land, fine-tuned mechanisms of dispossession and land redistribution, and articulated the limits of one's eligibility to own property. In all three states, the authorities declared Muslim refugees' land as state property and sought to turn it into private property by gradually selling it to refugees' old neighbours and new immigrants. Meanwhile, local communities often demanded usufruct rights to the land that they claimed had previously belonged to their ancestors. For many Christian peasants, by denying them full ownership, their new governments, while staking their legitimacy on liberation from the 'Ottoman yoke', did not act differently from the Ottoman government. Furthermore, Muslim refugees who used to live in the northern Balkans and who had fled to Ottoman Anatolia and Syria after 1878 requested compensation for their abandoned land from the new Balkan governments. Ottoman diplomats backed their claims.

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(Seattle, 1977). On theorizing Ottoman legacy in the Balkans, see Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford, 1997), 161–83.

³ Adam Mestyan, *Modern Arab Kingship: Remaking the Ottoman Political Order in the Interwar Middle East* (Princeton, 2023); Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, 2017); Aimee Genell, *Empire by Law: The Ottoman Origins of the Mandate System in the Middle East*, Columbia Univ. Press, forthcoming.

Few refugees were eligible for redress under intentionally restrictive guidelines, and almost none received compensation. The scholarship on Muslim refugees in the Ottoman Empire traditionally focuses on refugees' migration and resettlement.⁴ This article instead interrogates post-Ottoman afterlives of refugees' land. By centring the 'abandoned land', it shows that Ottoman refugee policies exerted a long-term impact on Balkan societies and economies even after the Ottoman rule was over and Muslim refugees were gone.

The Balkan governments developed the notion of 'abandoned land' to refer to the fields, pastures, and buildings that Muslims who had fled in 1877–8 left behind. By calling the land abandoned, the new authorities signalled that, first, its former tenants forfeited their right of ownership or usufruct and, second, the government had the right, or even responsibility, to appropriate and redeem the precious agricultural land. The abandoned land of non-native Muslim refugees, such as Circassians and Crimean Tatars, was the first and easy target in the broader project of Muslim dispossession in the post-Ottoman Balkans. In later years, the Bulgarian, Romanian, and Serbian governments would focus on other categories of land that belonged to native Muslim communities, such as Albanians, Bosnians, Turks, and Pomaks (Bulgarian-speaking Muslims). One of them was *vakıf*, or Muslim charitable endowments, comprising valuable agricultural land and urban property and funding mosques and madrasas (Muslim schools) throughout the Balkans.⁵ The other was *çiftlik* and *gospodarlık* land, usually

⁴ On Muslim refugees in the Ottoman Empire, see Fahriye Emgili, *Yeniden Kurulan Hayatlar: Boşnakların Türkiye'ye Göçleri, 1878–1934* [Rebuilt Lives: Migration of Bosnians to Turkey, 1878–1934] (Istanbul, 2012); Nedim İpek, *Rumeli'den Anadolu'ya Türk Göçleri, 1877–1890* [Turkish Migrations from Rumelia to Anatolia, 1877–1890] (Ankara, 1994); Ahmet Halaçoğlu, *Balkan Harbi Sırasında Rumeli'den Türk Göçleri, 1912–1913* [Turkish Migrations from Rumelia during the Balkan War, 1912–1913] (Ankara, 1995); Abdullah Saydam, *Kırım ve Kafkas Göçleri, 1856–1876* [Crimea and Caucasus Migrations, 1856–1876] (Ankara, 1997); Alexandre Toumarkine, *Les Migrations des populations musulmanes balkaniques en Anatolie, 1876–1913* (Istanbul, 1995).

⁵ On the *vakıf* question in Bulgaria, see Milena B. Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation: Muslim Reform in the Balkans* (Stanford, 2021), 65–9; in Eastern Rumelia, see Anna M. Mirkova, *Muslim Land, Christian Labor: Transforming Ottoman Imperial Subjects into Bulgarian National Citizens, 1878–1939* (Budapest, 2017), 78–91; and in Serbia, see Jelena Radovanović, 'Contested Legacy: Property

(cont. on p. 5)

large agricultural farms owned by Muslim landowners and operated by Christian labourers.⁶ The appropriation of North Caucasian refugees' abandoned land commenced the shrinkage of Muslim-owned land in the post-Ottoman Balkans.

The state appropriation of the abandoned land was also a transnational tool of dispossession. During World War I, the Ottoman government would develop its own concept of 'abandoned property' (Ottoman Turkish: *emval-i metruke*), a euphemism that allowed state appropriation of lands and buildings of Ottoman Christians, subjected to a genocide, and their redistribution to new Muslim immigrants.⁷ The notion of 'abandoned' land or property had the same objective in the post-1878 Balkans and post-1914 Anatolia: to transfer wealth from an undesirable population to a favoured group as part of the government's demographic engineering.⁸

Third, this article demonstrates that the Bulgarian, Serbian, and Romanian governments used the appropriated lands of Muslim refugees for internal colonization. The governments changed demographic ratios in districts once heavily populated by Muslim refugees by settling Balkan Christian immigrants, arriving from the Ottoman, Russian, and Habsburg empires in their newly independent or autonomous homelands. The

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in Transition to Nation-State in Post-Ottoman Niš' (Princeton Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 2020), 190–238.

⁶ On *çiftlik* lands, see Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation*, 18, 92–3; Mirkova, *Muslim Land, Christian Labor*, 134–8 (in Bulgaria), 73–8 (in Eastern Rumelia); and on *gospodarluk* lands, see *ibid.*, 67. The Bulgarian legislation is 'Zakon za gospodarskite i chiflichki zemi' [Law on *Çiftlik* and *Gospodarluk* Lands] (5 Feb. 1885), reprinted in *Istoriia na bŭlgariite, 1878–1944 v dokumenti* [Documentary History of the Bulgarians, 1878–1944], ed. Georgiev Velichko and Staiko Trifonov, 3 vols. (Sofia, 1994–6), i, 441–3. On post-1878 land reforms in Bulgaria, see Tseno Petrov, *Agrarnite reformi v Bŭlgariia, 1880–1944* [Agrarian Reforms in Bulgaria, 1880–1944] (Sofia, 1975); and in Eastern Rumelia, see Elena Statelova, *Iztochna Rumeliia, 1879–1885: ikonomika, politika, kultura* [Eastern Rumelia, 1879–1885: Economics, Politics, Culture] (Sofia, 1983).

⁷ On *emval-i metruke*, see Ellinor Morack, *The Dowry of the State? The Politics of Abandoned Property and the Population Exchange in Turkey, 1921–1945* (Bamberg, 2017), 44–8, 78–9, 83–104.

⁸ On demographic engineering in the Balkans and Anatolia, see Nikos Sigalas and Alexandre Toumarkine (eds.), 'Demographic Engineering', thematic issue, *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, pt I, 7 (2008), pt II, 12 (2011), pt III, 16 (2013).

national governments used immigration legislation that was similar to, and sometimes built upon, the Ottoman Immigration Law of 1857. The vacant Muslim land became a primary vehicle for ethno-religious homogenization in the post-Ottoman Balkans. Lands that had once been given to Muslim refugees from Russia became among the most Bulgarianized, Serbianized, and Romanianized territories.

The emigration of Muslims and immigration of Christians after 1878 occupies a critical place in the history of nation-making in the Balkans. It followed the so-called ‘demographic warfare’ between the Ottoman and Russian empires, wherein Christian and Muslim frontier populations in the Balkans and the Caucasus were moving to, respectively, the tsar’s and sultan’s domains in the 1850s and 1860s.⁹ Meanwhile, it preceded and laid groundwork for ethnic cleansing and population exchanges, infamously described by Britain’s foreign secretary Lord Curzon as the ‘unmixing of peoples’, which homogenized many parts of the Balkans and Anatolia in the early twentieth century.¹⁰

This study of Muslim refugees’ land contributes to the growing literature on Muslims in the post-Ottoman Balkans, and by extension Muslim Europe. Historians recently demonstrated that the Balkan nation states were defined, in large part, against their Muslim minorities, who were imagined as a legacy of Ottoman occupation and an aberration from the new ethnonational order.¹¹ This article shows that the new Balkan states were shaped not only by the presence of the remaining Muslims but also by the absence of other Muslims. Those Muslims who had left — whether fleeing wartime violence or emigrating after independence — were written out of national histories, and their lands were reapportioned to new immigrants

⁹ Mark Pinson, ‘Demographic Warfare: An Aspect of Ottoman and Russian Policy, 1854–1866’ (Harvard Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1970), 3, 146–8, 149.

¹⁰ Rogers Brubaker, ‘Aftermaths of Empire and the Unmixing of Peoples: Historical and Comparative Perspectives’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 18 (1995).

¹¹ On Muslims in the post-1878 Balkans, see Leyla Amzi-Erdoğan, *The Afterlife of Ottoman Europe: Muslims in Habsburg Bosnia Herzegovina* (Stanford, 2023); Emily Greble, *Muslims and the Making of Modern Europe* (Oxford, 2021); Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation*; Mirkova, *Muslim Land, Christian Labor*; Mary C. Neuberger, *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria* (Ithaca, NY, 2004).

who better fitted the image of their new nation states. The new governments used the abandoned land of Muslim refugees to redraw demographics, but the ensuing contestation over that land also defined the limits of their authority.

This study is based on archival research in Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, and Turkey. I consulted documents from the national archives of Bulgaria and Serbia, which preserve extensive discussions on post-1878 legislation and its implementation; regional branches of the national archives of Bulgaria and Romania in, respectively, Dobrich and Tulcea, areas with some of the most compact Muslim refugee resettlements in the Balkans; the Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which keeps files about diplomatic haggling over refugees' land; and the Ottoman Archive in Istanbul, which contains Muslim refugees' petitions for compensation for their lost land. This evidence in four languages allows a comparative study of legislation on land and immigration. It demonstrates not only the remarkable similarity of land appropriation and redistribution models across the northern Balkans but also their continuity with Ottoman legislation and practices.

I

MUSLIM REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire experienced the largest refugee crisis in its history. Hundreds of thousands of Muslim refugees fled tsarist occupation of Crimea and ethnic cleansing in the Caucasus for the Ottoman Empire. Following the Crimean War of 1853–6, about 200,000 Crimean Tatars left Russia.¹² They came in the footsteps of about 150,000–200,000 Crimean Tatars who had moved to the Ottoman Empire after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 1783.¹³ Crimea's Muslim communities were dispossessed during tsarist land reforms, which also ushered in the mass colonization of Crimea by Christian settlers, especially Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, and Bulgarians.

¹² On Crimean refugees of 1856–62, see Brian Glyn Williams, 'Hijra and Forced Migration from Nineteenth-Century Russia to the Ottoman Empire: A Critical Analysis of the Great Crimean Tatar Emigration of 1860–1861', *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 41 (2000); Mara Kozelsky, 'Casualties of Conflict: Crimean Tatars during the Crimean War', *Slavic Review*, 67 (2008).

¹³ Alan W. Fisher, 'Emigration of Muslims from the Russian Empire in the Years after the Crimean War', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 35 (1987), 356–7 n. 3.

Then, in the final stages of the Caucasus War of 1817–64, which Russia waged against autonomous Muslim communities of the North Caucasus, up to half a million western Circassians and Nogai Tatars arrived as refugees in the Ottoman Empire. They were survivors of an ethnic cleansing that the Russian army perpetrated to hasten their flight and complete the conquest of the Caucasus. Between 1864 and World War I, several hundred thousand Kabardians (eastern Circassians), Chechens, Ingush, Karachays, Balkars, Ossetians, and Dagestanis left for the Ottoman Empire. They were driven out of the Caucasus by tsarist land reforms, which vastly reduced arable and pasture land assigned to their villages, and by fears of Russification and conscription.¹⁴

The Ottoman government initiated an open-door policy for Muslim refugees in response to mass displacement from Crimea and the Caucasus. The government constructed a Muslim refugee regime, which guaranteed admission, free land, temporary exemptions from taxation and military service, and financial aid to all displaced Muslims. For Ottoman authorities, Muslim refugees offered a solution to the empire's several problems. First, throughout the nineteenth century, the empire was losing territories to the European empires and nation states, and Muslim refugees increased the diminishing population and labour force. Second, the Ottoman government directed many refugees to the more sparsely populated territories in central and eastern Anatolia and the Levant, with an eye to turning unused land into farmland and expanding state control into nomadic regions. Finally, in several frontier regions, the authorities pursued sectarian goals, increasingly more explicit after 1878, to alter demographic ratios and increase the Muslim share of the population.¹⁵

In the 1850s and 1860s, Ottoman territories in Europe were a primary destination for Muslim refugees from Russia. Between 1856 and 1866, 120,000 Crimean Tatars arrived in the Danube province.¹⁶ Most Crimean Tatar refugees settled in Dobruja, a steppe region near the Black Sea. In this northernmost Ottoman territory and one geographically closest to Crimea, Crimean

¹⁴ On North Caucasian refugees, see Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State* (Stanford, 2024), 23–55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 56–86.

¹⁶ Brian Glyn Williams, *The Crimean Tatars: The Diaspora Experience and the Forging of a Nation* (Leiden, 2001), 196–226.

Tatars founded Mecidiye (Medgidia, Romania), the first Ottoman 'model settlement' for refugees and among the empire's few refugee towns. The Ottoman government also settled about half of the Circassian refugee population in the Balkans. The Ottoman provinces of Danube, Edirne, Selanik (Salonica), and Manastır (Bitola) all accepted refugees from the Caucasus, with particularly large settlement areas in the Danubian subprovinces of Rusçuk (in northern Bulgaria), Varna (in northeastern Bulgaria), Tulça (in eastern Romania), and Niş (in southeastern Serbia), the Manastır subprovince of Prizren (in Kosovo), and the subprovince of Selanik within the eponymous province (in northern Greece).¹⁷ Between 1860 and 1867, about 150,000 western Circassians and 8,000 Abkhazians moved to the Danube province.¹⁸ By and large, Muslim refugees from Russia settled in the countryside and took up farming and sheep-breeding. While several settlement areas, like Dobruja and Kosovo, had Muslim majorities, others were predominantly Christian areas. The settlement of Muslim refugees altered the demographics of Ottoman Europe in an era of brewing Balkan national movements for independence and autonomy. For example, in Ottoman Bulgaria, Crimean Tatars and Circassians became, respectively, the third and fourth largest ethnic communities, after Bulgarians and Turks.¹⁹

For most Muslim refugees from Russia, the settlement in the Balkans was short-lived, upended by the violence of 1876–8. In 1876, Bulgarian revolutionaries launched the April Uprising against Ottoman rule. The Ottoman government suppressed the rebellion by using its regular troops and irregular militias (*başıbozuk*). Muslim refugees in the Balkans, especially Circassians, were disproportionately recruited into *başıbozuk* forces. The Russian

¹⁷ Bedri Habiçoğlu, *Kafkasya'dan Anadolu'ya Göçler ve İskanları* [Migrations and Settlements from the Caucasus to Anatolia] (İstanbul, 1993), 159–62; İpek, *Rumeli'den Anadolu'ya Türk Göçleri*, 174–80.

¹⁸ Ventsislav Muchinov, 'Ottoman Policies on Circassian Refugees in the Danube Vilayet in the 1860s and 1870s', *Journal of Caucasian Studies*, 2 (2016), 85. Other estimates put the Circassian population of the Danube province at a quarter of a million; Kemal H. Karpat, *Ottoman Population, 1830–1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics* (Madison, WI, 1985), 68.

¹⁹ Aşkın Koyuncu, 'Tuna Vilâyeti'nde Nüfus ve Demografi, 1864–1877' [Population and Demography in Danube Province, 1864–1877], *Turkish Studies*, 9 (2014); Daniela Angelova, *Demografsko razvitiie na Bŭlgarskoto Chernomorsko kraibrezhie prez XIX vek (do 1878 g.)* [Demographic Development of Bulgaria's Black Sea Coast in the XIX Century (until 1878)] (Sofia, 2013).

government, long sympathetic to the Bulgarian national cause, used Ottoman atrocities during the suppression of the revolt as a pretext to attack the Ottoman Empire on two fronts, in the eastern Balkans and the southwestern Caucasus.²⁰

The Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–8 resulted in a devastating loss for the Ottoman Empire. The invading Russian army stopped in San Stefano (since 1926, Yeşilköy, Turkey), within ten miles of Istanbul. Russia forced the Ottoman Empire to sign the Treaty of San Stefano in March 1878, which was subsequently revised under the pressure of the European Powers — Britain, France, Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy — as the Treaty of Berlin in July 1878. The Ottoman government recognized the independence of Serbia, Romania, and Montenegro and the autonomy of Bulgaria, and ceded Kars, Batum, and Ardahan to Russia. It also lost control over Bosnia and Cyprus, occupied by, respectively, Austria-Hungary and Britain. Serbia received much of the subprovince of Niš (henceforth: Niš).²¹ The Niš region shapes Serbia's southern and eastern borders to this day. The European Powers assigned to Romania the Danubian subprovince of Tulça (Tulcea), or northern Dobruja, which was widely understood as compensation for Russia's seizure of southern Bessarabia (now, in Moldova and Ukraine), part of Moldavia and then Romania between 1856 and 1878. Northern Dobruja remains Romania's only coastal region. The rest of the Danube province became the Principality of Bulgaria, under nominal Ottoman sovereignty but de facto independent. The European Powers also created the autonomous Ottoman province of Eastern Rumelia, which the Principality of Bulgaria annexed in 1885. During the war of 1877–8, over half a million Muslims fled the Balkans, most of them from the Danube province and Eastern Rumelia. Almost all Circassian refugees and many Crimean Tatar refugees fled the Balkans to Ottoman Anatolia and Syria.²² (See [Map](#) for details.)

²⁰ On the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–8, see M. Hakan Yavuz and Peter Sluglett (eds.), *War and Diplomacy: The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 and the Treaty of Berlin* (Salt Lake City, 2011).

²¹ The subprovince of Niš was detached from the Danube province and joined the Prizren province in the late 1860s to the early 1870s, was reintegrated into the Danube province in 1874, and joined the Sofia governorate in 1876 and finally the Kosovo province in 1877.

²² Karpát estimates 1.5 million refugees of the war of 1877–8: *Ottoman Population*, 75. According to İpek, by 1879, the Ottoman Empire hosted 1,230,000

(cont. on p. 11)



MAP:
THE BALKANS AFTER 1878

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Muslim refugees from the Balkans; *Rumeli'den Anadolu'ya Türk Göçleri*, 41. Justin McCarthy calculates that 515,000 Muslims left Bulgaria in 1877–8; *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821–1922* (Princeton, 1995), 90. Miloš Jagodić estimates that 71,000 Muslims, primarily Albanians, emigrated from the new Serbian territories during and after the war of 1877–8; Miloš Jagodić, 'The Emigration of Muslims from the New Serbian Regions, 1877/1878', *Balkanologie*, 2 (1998), 11.

Russia, whose troops were stationed in Bulgaria, set up the administration of the new state. The Provisional Russian Administration of Bulgaria (1877–9) oversaw elections to municipal and village councils and laid groundwork for the Bulgarian constitution, adopted in 1879. One of the pressing issues for the provisional administration was the return of Muslim refugees, including Turks, Pomaks, Crimean Tatars, and Circassians, who had fled the country during the war. In August 1878, Prince Aleksandr Dondukov-Korsakov, a Russian notable and head of the provincial administration, issued an order allowing Bulgarian Muslim refugees to return, with the exception of Circassians. He justified the ban on the return of Circassian refugees by claiming that some of them had committed atrocities during the war as *başbozuk* and that Christian populations would likely exact revenge on Circassians should they return.²³ The ban on the return of Muslim refugees from the Caucasus was a popular move. For example, as early as 1876, the Bulgarian bishop of Filibe (Plovdiv) wrote to the Russian consulate to offer his support for the Russian proposal to move all North Caucasian refugees out of the Balkans to Anatolia. He asked that Bulgarians be delivered from that ‘terrible plague’.²⁴ The provisional administration stated that the Circassians’ abandoned lands would be used to accommodate returning Muslims who were native to Bulgaria.²⁵ This did not happen, as subsequent governments earmarked that land for other priorities.

II

NATIONAL LEGISLATION ON LAND

The three Balkan states based their post-1878 land policies upon the Ottoman legal foundation. The Ottoman government had distributed land to Muslim refugees in accordance with the Immigration Law of 1857 and the Land Code of 1858, which

²³ Prince A. M. Dondukov-Korsakov to D. A. Miliutin (6 Aug. 1878), in *Sbornik materialov po grazhdanskomu upravleniiu i okkupatsii v Bolgarii v 1877–78–79 gg.* [Collection of Materials on Civil Administration and Occupation in Bulgaria in 1877–78–79], ed. Nikolai R. Ovsianyi (Saint Petersburg, 1906), v, pp. 22–6.

²⁴ ‘Pis’mo bolgarskogo Episkopa Filippopolia k vitse-konsulu Gerovu’ [Letter from the Bulgarian Bishop of Philippopolis to Vice-Consul Gerov] (22 Dec. 1876), in *Dokumenti za Bŭlgarskata istoriia*, ed. Todor Panchev (Sofia, 1932), ii, pp. 282–3.

²⁵ Dondukov-Korsakov to Miliutin, in *Sbornik materialov*, ed. Ovsianyi, v, p. 25.

formed the legislative basis of the Ottoman refugee regime. The Ottoman Immigration Law opened the Ottoman domains to prospective immigrants. It guaranteed all immigrants free agricultural land (Art. 4) and exemptions from taxes (Art. 5) and military service (Art. 6) for six years in the Balkans and for twelve years in Anatolia, and provided a pathway to eventual naturalization as Ottoman subjects (Art. 1). Immigrants who received land for free could sell their land or, to be precise, their right of usufruct after having tilled their plots for twenty years (Art. 8).²⁶

The Ottoman Land Code, a key legislative piece of the Tanzimat era of 1839–76, reaffirmed state ownership of most agricultural lands in the empire and prioritized title-holding by individual households over communities. The Ottoman goal was a centralized framework governing land ownership to make land legislation legible to Ottoman and foreign investors, to improve tax management, and to increase the tax base.²⁷ The government used the new land code to settle Muslim refugees throughout the empire. The land code divided all land in the empire into five categories: *miri* (state land), *mülk* (freehold), *vakıf* or *mevkufe* (charitable endowments), *metruke* (land for public use), and *mevat* (dead land) (Art. 1). The state owned all *miri* land, which comprised much of the agricultural land in the empire, while Ottoman farmers were granted the right of usufruct to cultivate and derive profit from that land in exchange for tax payments (Art. 3).²⁸

The Ottoman government categorized Muslim refugees as *muhacir* (from Arabic *muhājir*), which was a term in Islamic history for those who moved from territories under non-Muslim rule to a Muslim territory to escape religious persecution. It can be translated into English as refugee, immigrant, or emigrant, as it incorporated different aspects of one's journey. In the

²⁶ For the text of the Ottoman Immigration Law of 1857, see 'Conditions arrêtées par le Gouvernement Impérial au sujet de la colonisation en Turquie', in *Législation ottomane*, ed. Grégoire Aristarchi Bey (Istanbul, 1873–88), i, pp. 16–19.

²⁷ Huri Islamoğlu, 'Property as a Contested Domain: A Reevaluation of the Ottoman Land Code of 1858', in Roger Owen (ed.), *New Perspectives on Property and Land in the Middle East* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 3–61.

²⁸ For the text of the Ottoman Land Code of 1858, see Stanley Fisher, *Ottoman Land Laws: Containing the Ottoman Land Code and Later Legislation Affecting Land* (London, 1919).

nineteenth century, most *muhacir* were Muslims from the Caucasus, Crimea, and the Balkans, expelled after ethnic cleansing and unable to return home because of legal obstacles or fear of persecution. Their circumstances would satisfy key criteria of the modern definition of ‘refugee’ in the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951.²⁹ *Muhacir* became a legal status in the Ottoman Empire, as it guaranteed admission, free land, and tax and military service exemptions in accordance with the Immigration Law of 1857.³⁰

After 1878, the newly independent Serbia and Romania and autonomous Bulgaria passed their own legislation to govern land ownership. The three governments prioritized land reforms as they helped to affirm national sovereignty, reverse Ottoman land policies that privileged Muslim communities, and, importantly, secure new revenue streams for the treasury.³¹ The flight of many Muslims and the seizure of their properties by local residents made the issue of abandoned land a pressing one.

The Bulgarian government, after taking over from the Russian provisional administration, adopted the Law on Circassian and Tatar Lands in 1880. It categorized the lands that had been given to Muslim refugees from Russia as private, communal, and state property. The law clarified that private lands were of two kinds: ones that the Ottoman government had taken from local populations without reimbursement, and ones for which it had compensated its original owners in cash or in kind (Art. 1). The law declared that former owners, including individuals and communities, could reclaim the land that the Ottoman government had taken from them without compensation, pending permission from the Bulgarian government. However, if the Bulgarian government were to decide that the community did not need that land, it reserved the right to assign the land to private persons and communities, deemed to be in greater need. Meanwhile, the land for which the Ottoman government had

²⁹ United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), Art. 1 (A)(2).

³⁰ On Ottoman meanings of *muhacir*, see Ella Fratanuono, *Governing Migration in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh, 2024).

³¹ For a comparative study of Ottoman and post-Ottoman land ownership, see Pencho Penchev and Hristiyan Atanasov, ‘From an Empire to a Nation State: Land Property and its Guarantee in the Balkans: The Case of Bulgaria’, *Bulgarian Historical Review*, 13 (2022).

compensated its former owners would become the property of the Bulgarian state (Art. 2).³²

In 1883, the Bulgarian government revised the Law on Circassian and Tatar Lands, carving out more exceptions for the land not to revert to its original owners. Thus, Bulgarian villages would not receive their communal land that had been held by Circassians and Crimean Tatars until 1877 if new Bulgarian immigrants or Bulgarian soldiers who had fought the Ottomans during the war of 1877–8 had settled on it (Art. 6, 12). Nor would locals be assigned private land if new immigrants or soldiers were already squatting on that land (Art. 11). The government would instead compensate local communities for the loss of their land with either land elsewhere or cash. The Bulgarian government also created new revenue streams by allowing individuals to buy out state land that had previously belonged to them but for which the Ottoman government had already compensated them (Art. 8) and by selling state land, abandoned by Circassians and Crimean Tatars, at public auctions (Art. 9).³³

The Serbian and Romanian laws were not specific to the Circassian and Crimean Tatar land and covered the abandoned land of all Ottoman Muslims in their new territories. Serbia achieved partial autonomy from the Ottoman Empire after the Serbian uprisings in 1804–13 and 1815–17 and became de facto independent in 1867 and fully independent in 1878. The Serbian government promulgated the Law on the Regulation of Agrarian Relations in the Newly Liberated Territories in 1880. This law for the region of Niš regulated property relations between landowners and land cultivators, seeking to establish ownership rights for the latter and compensation to the former. It defined a *chiflik* (Ottoman Turkish: *çiftlik*), to which a farmer was entitled, as a plot of 70–80 dönüm (16–19 acres) of prime

³² 'Zakon za cherkezkite i tatarskite zemi' [Law on Circassian and Tatar Lands] (14 Dec. 1880), in TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 5, ll. 29–32.

³³ 'Zakon za cherkezkite i tatarskite zemi' (revised 1 Mar. 1883), TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 66, ll. 16–19. On the Bulgarian law of 1880 and its revision in 1883, see Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, 'Imperial Refuge: Resettlement of Muslims from Russia in the Ottoman Empire, 1860–1914' (Stanford Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 2018), 102–3; Krzysztof Popek, 'Cruel Tormentor or Good Neighbour? Stereotype of the Turk and Bulgarian State Policy towards the Muslim Minority in 1878–1912', *Slovanský přehled*, 103 (2017), 269.

arable land, or 100 dönüm (23 acres) of lesser-quality land, or 130 dönüm (30 acres) of poor-quality land (Art. 3). Notably, these figures were based on the Ottoman Land Code of 1858, under which many refugees and immigrants took up farming in the Niš region (Art. 131). The Serbian law reaffirmed the landowners' historical ownership of the land (Art. 4) but also established cultivators' ownership rights, requiring peasants to buy out that land from its pre-1878 owners (Art. 5–6).³⁴ Few peasants could afford to purchase the land they tilled, and, in 1882, the Serbian government took a loan from an Austro-Hungarian bank, which it used to compensate landowners. Consequently, many peasants became heavily indebted to the state and were obliged to repay their new debt to the Serbian government, with interest, within 15 to 20 years to assert their full rights to the land.³⁵

Romania also passed legislation to reorganize its new region of northern Dobruja, south of the Danubian delta, which had a majority Muslim population before the war of 1877–8. Romania came of age in 1859, after the union of the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, both under nominal Ottoman control, first known as the United Principalities, then as the Romanian United Principalities in 1862, and finally as Romania in 1866. Romania reasserted state ownership over much of the land in its new province through the Law on Dobruja's Administrative Organization of 1880.³⁶ Romania used the Ottoman Land Code of 1858 to claim continuity in state ownership over *miri* lands, as Bulgaria did throughout its territory and Russia in its new provinces of Kars and Batum, annexed from the Ottoman

³⁴ 'Zakon o uređenju agrarnih odnošaja u novo-oslobođenii predelima' [Law on the Regulation of Agrarian Relations in the Newly Liberated Territories] (3 Feb. 1880), reprinted in *Leskovački zbornik*, 21 (1981), 9–13 of the appendix. On the Serbian law of 1880, see Radovanović, 'Contested Legacy', 165–8; Miloš Luković, 'Development of the Modern Serbian State and Abolishment of Ottoman Agrarian Relations in the 19th Century', *Český lid*, 98 (2011), 300–301; Miroslav Svirčević, 'The Establishment of Serbian Local Government in the Counties of Niš, Vranje, Toplica, and Pirot after the Congress of Berlin', in Yavuz and Sluglett (eds.), *War and Diplomacy*, 144–64, 155–6.

³⁵ On the Serbian loan of 1882, see Radovanović, 'Contested Legacy', 182–5.

³⁶ 'Lege pentru organizarea Dobrogei' [Law on the Organization of Dobruja] (7 Mar. 1880), reprinted in *Notițe istorice și geografice asupra provinciei Dobrogea*, ed. I. A. Nazarettean (Tulcea, 1882), 41–56.

Empire in 1878.³⁷ In the Law on Immovable Property in Dobruja of 1882, Romania then offered much of that new state land for sale to Romanian citizens (Art. 2), whether currently tilling that land or prospective immigrants. Landowners could establish the rights of full ownership over the land (Art. 11) by paying the government one-third of the cadastral value of the land, which was determined to be the equivalent of the tithe that farmers used to pay to the Ottoman state.³⁸ After 1884, farmers could also receive full ownership over their land plots by giving up one-third of their land to the Romanian state.³⁹

The Serbian and Romanian governments placed their new post-1878 territories under a special legal regime, with separate property legislation, to control the transfer of property and to consolidate the state's economic dominance in the region. That legislation, specific to the Niš region and northern Dobruja, allowed the two states to prevent access to property by Muslim returnees, appropriate arable land and urban properties, and redistribute them quickly to immigrants. Furthermore, residents in the newly acquired regions had limited political rights and lived under distinct judicial and taxation systems. Serbia's general laws were extended to the Niš region in 1881.⁴⁰ Romania kept a special regime for northern Dobruja until 1913.⁴¹

³⁷ On Russia's use of the Ottoman Land Code of 1858, see Ekaterina Pravilova, 'The Property of Empire: Islamic Law and Russian Agrarian Policy in Transcaucasia and Turkestan', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 12 (2011); on similarities between the three countries, see Radovanović, 'Contested Legacy', 157.

³⁸ 'Lege pentru regularea proprietății imobile în Dobrogea' [Law on the Regulation of Real Estate in Dobruja] (31 Mar. 1882), reprinted in *Notițe istorice și geografice asupra provinciei Dobrogea*, ed. Nazarettean, 57–64. On the Romanian laws of 1880 and 1882, see Catalina Hunt, 'Changing Identities at the Fringes of the Late Ottoman Empire: The Muslims of Dobruca, 1839–1914' (Ohio State Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 2015), 181–96; Iordachi, *Making of Romanian Citizenship*, 466–7, 469–71.

³⁹ Iordachi, *Making of Romanian Citizenship*, 467.

⁴⁰ On a special legal regime in Niš, see Radovanović, 'Contested Legacy', esp. 67–104; and for comparison with Romania, see *ibid.*, 84–5.

⁴¹ On a special legal regime in northern Dobruja, see Catalina Hunt, '“Seeing Like a State”: Romanian Policies in Northern Dobruca and the Muslims, 1878–1914', *Studia et Documenta Turcologica*, 1 (2013); Iordachi, *Making of Romanian Citizenship*, 457–521. On the integration process, see Constantin Iordachi,

(cont. on p. 18)

III

CONTESTATION OF MUSLIM LAND AFTER 1878

The former lands of Circassian and Crimean Tatar refugees became hotly contested throughout the northern Balkans. During the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–8, local communities often occupied lands abandoned by refugees. After the war, these communities resisted the governments' appropriation of the land. The Bulgarian government received hundreds of petitions from farmers throughout the country asking for land reclamation.⁴² Bulgarian farmers had two main grievances. First, many communities protested the legal status of abandoned land as state land, which was affirmed in the Bulgarian law of 1880 and its 1883 revision. Instead, villagers regarded those lands as their historical communal land (Bulgarian: *obshchinska zemia*), which the Ottoman government had forcefully transformed into *miri* land through the Land Code of 1858. Many peasants demanded from Bulgaria's National Assembly to restore what they perceived as their ancestral right to the land.⁴³ For example, Bulgarian peasants from the Kula district, where the Balkan Mountains come closest to the Danube River, in northwestern Bulgaria, wrote the following petition in 1880:

Sixteen years ago, Circassians arrived in our district. The Turkish government, by force, took the most beautiful and fertile lands from us and gave them to Circassians, who had worked that land until they left Bulgaria. During that time, those peasants whose land had been taken from them had to go to Serbia, Wallachia, and other places to earn their daily bread. Upon the Circassians' departure, we returned from abroad and started tilling the land that had been taken from us. However, the government prohibits us from working that land. We are all farmers and have no other land that we could farm to feed our children. We are begging the government to entrust this land to us. Otherwise, we will be forced to [again] scatter around.⁴⁴

(n. 41 cont.)

'Citizenship, Nation- and State-Building: The Integration of Northern Dobrogea into Romania, 1878–1913', *Carl Beck Papers*, no. 1607 (2002).

⁴² Petitions are held in TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 26 (1880), a.e. 95 (1881–85), a.e. 107 (1886), a.e. 180 (1885–91).

⁴³ TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 26, l. 78 (25 Nov. 1880).

⁴⁴ TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 26, ll. 12–12b (17 May 1880); for similar sentiments of disappointment and threats to re-emigrate, around Varna, see f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 57, l. 365 (20 Oct. 1882).

The farmers argued that they had emigrated because of Ottoman dispossession and warned that they, recent returnees, might have to emigrate again but this time because of the injury caused by the Bulgarian government. In the Ottoman Balkans, emigration was intricately tied to land ownership and labour markets. By 1812, approximately 82,000 Bulgarians had emigrated to the Danubian Principalities, and, during 1828 to 1834, over 100,000 Bulgarians had moved to the Danubian Principalities and tsarist Bessarabia, primarily in search of work and better agricultural land.⁴⁵ Many other Balkan Christians, whether artisans, farmers, or shepherds, dispersed throughout the Ottoman domains, moving primarily to cities in the Balkan hinterland and Istanbul but also as far as Syria and Egypt.⁴⁶

The second grievance of Bulgarian communities was over Ottoman compensation for the land. Some farmers claimed that they had not received any compensation from Istanbul, contrary to what Ottoman ledgers might have indicated, and demanded restitution of their land from the Sofia government.⁴⁷ Thus, in 1884, Lazar Angelov, headman of Dolna-Malina, a picturesque village near Sofia, petitioned authorities to return the village's meadows that the Ottoman government had given to Circassian refugees. His fellow villagers sent their own pleas for specific plots, and so did their neighbours in the village of Gorna-Malina, asking for their old land in the hills.⁴⁸

Many took it upon themselves to redress the injustice and occupied the land shortly after the flight of their Muslim neighbours. For example, in Tsaribrod, in western Bulgaria (in Serbia since 1919; renamed Dimitrovgrad in 1950), many Bulgarian immigrants swiftly moved into abandoned Circassian houses.⁴⁹ Local residents took up Circassian lands and resold them to others for profit. Even the mayor of this town, lying in

⁴⁵ Andrew Robarts, *Migration and Disease in the Black Sea Region: Ottoman-Russian Relations in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (London, 2017), 45.

⁴⁶ Akin Sefer, Aysel Yıldız, and Mustafa Erdem Kabadayı, 'Labor Migration from Kruševo: Mobility, Ottoman Transformation, and the Balkan Highlands in the 19th Century', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 53 (2021), esp. 79–80.

⁴⁷ TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 5, ll. 46–9 (23 Mar. 1881); a.e. 95, ll. 36–46 (30 Oct. 1884), 103–4 (14 Sept. 1883).

⁴⁸ TsDA, 159K, op. 1, a.e. 95, l. 38a, #13–16 (30 Oct. 1884).

⁴⁹ TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 95, l. 134 (25 Aug. 1881).

the foothills of the western range of the Balkan Mountains, had been selling Circassian lands without notifying the authorities in Sofia. Many Tsaribrod residents regarded their seizure of abandoned Muslim property as compensation for the land that the Ottoman government had taken from them and for their labour in building Circassian houses in the 1860s. The Bulgarian government issued orders to district governors prohibiting the illegal private resale of Muslim refugees' land, as it was financially injurious to the state treasury.⁵⁰

Many farmers admitted that the Ottoman government had compensated them in the 1860s, but they challenged that transaction. They claimed that they had little say in the matter when the Ottomans gave away their land to Muslim refugees and accepted the Ottoman compensation as consolation. Now, they wanted the land back. Some farmers, such as those in the Sevlievo district, in north-central Bulgaria, offered to return the Ottoman payment to the Bulgarian government. The Ottoman compensation rate in 1864 was 75 kuruş per dönüm. Curiously, in 1883, the Bulgarian government agreed to sell the land at that same rate. By doing so, not only did the Sofia government honour transactions between the Ottoman state and Bulgarian peasants, who claimed to have been dispossessed in the 1860s, but it served as a guarantor of those transactions. The government further allowed Bulgarian farmers to purchase at the same rate additional land that had never been their property but which they had occupied after the Circassians had fled.⁵¹ Throughout the country, Bulgarian farmers' seizure of refugees' land was a *fait accompli*, and the government often found that the easiest and most lucrative solution was to retroactively approve those land grabs and send the farmers a bill.

The Bulgarian government, strapped for cash, found other ways to derive income from the abandoned land. The authorities sold some of it at public auctions, which contributed to the consolidation of large agricultural estates in northern Bulgaria in the post-1878 period.⁵² The government rented out some land to private individuals.⁵³ In response, Bulgarian communities

⁵⁰ TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 83, ll. 188–9 (29 Feb. 1884),

⁵¹ TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 66, ll. 154–5 (15 Sept. 1883).

⁵² For example, TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 31, ll. 61–76 (2 Apr. 1880).

⁵³ For example, TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 49, ll. 45–6 (1881–2).

challenged the government, arguing that they deserved to benefit from the abandoned property. For example, in the Razgrad district, in northeastern Bulgaria, local villagers persuaded the authorities to let them dismantle ten Circassian houses and use the materials to build a school and a church in their village. They argued that those houses, claimed as state property, had stood unused and attracted vagabonds and Roma families.⁵⁴

In Serbia, local inhabitants and new immigrants to the Niš region also petitioned the government to assign them the abandoned Circassian land.⁵⁵ In some cases, the government acquiesced, distributing the newly available arable land to local land-insecure farmers.⁵⁶ More commonly, the government took possession of abandoned properties and used them for profit. Serbian authorities auctioned off some of the abandoned land.⁵⁷ The government also rented out Circassian, Albanian, and Turkish properties to Serb tenants.⁵⁸ By late 1878, Serbian authorities estimated that 301 properties that used to belong to Muslim emigrants in the Niš region were leased out for profit. The declared market value of these properties was 34,338 Ottoman kuruş, likely a significant underestimate, as the Serbian government was preparing to dispute reimbursement demands from the Ottoman side.⁵⁹ The government continued to rent out abandoned properties in subsequent years.⁶⁰ The Serbian government also collected harvest from the abandoned fields. By the fall of 1878, Muslim emigrants' fields yielded over 11 million pounds of hay, almost 6 million pounds of straw, and 4 million pounds of wheat, and some barley, rye, oats, and spelt, to the total market value of over 1,319,080 kuruş.⁶¹ The government

⁵⁴ TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 95, ll. 207–8 (21 May 1885).

⁵⁵ Documents are preserved in the State Archive of Serbia (Državni Arhiv Srbije), Belgrade (hereafter DAS), MF-E (Ministry of Finance, Economic Department) fascikla [folder] (f.) I, red [row] (r.) 34 (1880); f. VII, r. 33 (1882); f. X, r. 5 (1881); MF-A (Ministry of Finance, Administrative Department) f. XVII, r. 9 (1878); f. VII, r. 8 (1879).

⁵⁶ DAS, MF-E f. IX, r. 2 (1881): Ministry of Finance to the Toplički district administration (9 Dec. 1881).

⁵⁷ DAS, MF-A f. XVI, r. 41 (1878); f. VI, r. 114 (1880).

⁵⁸ DAS, MF-E f. II, r. 54 (1882); MF-A f. XIV, r. 60 (1881).

⁵⁹ DAS, MF-A f. V, r. 222 (1879), no. 352, 456 (Istanbul, 30 Nov. 1878).

⁶⁰ DAS, MF-A f. XIII, r. 102 (1882), no. 867 (Piot, 25 Apr. 1882).

⁶¹ DAS, MF-A f. V, r. 222 (1879), no. 266 (Niš, 15 Oct. 1878).

allowed Serbian officials and army to take up some abandoned houses.⁶²

Muslim refugees also laid claims to their 'abandoned' land. Refugees wrote to the Ottoman government, which then relayed their petitions to the Balkan states. For example, in 1891, Ali, also known as Kurd Molla, a Muslim refugee from Bulgaria, requested restitution for 94 dönüm of land, divided in 17 plots, and a house, which local residents of the village of Emirler, near Varna, had allegedly seized.⁶³ The Ottoman Interior Ministry called Ali a *muhacir*. The Bulgarian Interior Ministry accepted his description as 'refugee' (*ot bezhantsite*) and asked for more details.⁶⁴ Ali, who was likely of means, then sent a second petition, revealing that he owned houses and businesses in a neighbouring village, and upon hearing nothing from Sofia sent a third petition, restating his case.⁶⁵ Like many others, he resorted to petitioning in the absence of a clear process of obtaining compensation for lost land.

The Treaty of Berlin of 1878 mandated the creation of bilateral Ottoman-Bulgarian (Art. 12) and Ottoman-Serbian (Art. 39) commissions to regulate matters of property, including compensating Muslim refugees and absentee landowners. In the following years, the Ottoman government pressed Bulgaria and Serbia to form those committees.⁶⁶ The Bulgarian-Ottoman commission met between 1880 and 1885, working on issues surrounding *miri* and *vakıf* land. Its work came to a standstill, and it did not authorize any compensations.⁶⁷ The Serbian government established its own commissions to study land relations in the Niš region in 1879–80 but did not acquiesce to a bilateral commission.⁶⁸ Finally, at the turn of the century, the Romanian government agreed to an Ottoman-Romanian refugee

⁶² DAS, MF-E f. I, r. 10 (1880).

⁶³ TsDA, f. 321K, op. 1, a.e. 237, l. 40 (17 Aug. 1891).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ TsDA, f. 321K, op. 1, a.e. 237, l. 44 (8 Dec. 1891), 46 (11 May 1892).

⁶⁶ For example, Presidential State Archives of the Republic of Turkey, Ottoman Archives (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı), Istanbul (hereafter BOA), HR.UHM 225/16 (15 Oct. 1881); HR.SYS 1452/1 (1879–82).

⁶⁷ Ömer Turan, *The Turkish Minority in Bulgaria, 1878–1908* (Ankara, 1998), 202–4. The Bulgarian-Ottoman commission documents are partially preserved in BOA, A.MTZ (04), dosya no. 18–19 (*hijri* 1297–1301; 1880–4).

⁶⁸ Luković, 'Development of the Modern Serbian State', 299–300.

commission after the Ottoman side demanded it as a condition for a forthcoming Ottoman-Romanian trade agreement.⁶⁹ The Ottoman Foreign Ministry invited Ottoman subjects who had emigrated from Romania's northern Dobruja in 1878 to send their old title deeds to prepare compensation requests from Romania.⁷⁰ Many Muslims, including Circassian and Crimean Tatar refugees, sent title deeds, to land that their families had held for over a generation, and statements about the exact locations of their lost fields and pastures.⁷¹ The Romanian legation in Istanbul, however, found most claims for property restitution to be 'ill-founded'.⁷² By 1906, the commission recorded 2,611 compensation requests for a total of 504,046 dönüm (183 square miles), valued at 2,363,261 kuruş.⁷³ The Romanian government finally agreed to pay 75 million francs in total compensation in 1908. Yet the Ottoman side never received the payment, and disputes between the two governments over Dobrujan Muslims' property continued over the following decade.⁷⁴

Land reclamation was intricately tied with the issue of Muslim return. In addition to Circassians and Crimean Tatars, many native Balkan Muslims ended up as refugees in the Ottoman Empire. After the war, many of them wished to return home. The Balkan governments, however, sought to prevent the mass return of Muslims, who had fled with the Ottoman army and whom they suspected of disloyalty, which was part of the broader strategy of dispossessing Muslims and redistributing their land.⁷⁵ Thousands of Bulgarian Muslim emigrants petitioned Bulgaria's

⁶⁹ BOA, Y.PRK.NMH 7/112 (30 *zilhicce* 1316; 11 May 1899); HR.SYS 2946/18 (3 June 1900).

⁷⁰ BOA, DH.MKT 789/5 (12 *şaban* 1321; 3 Nov. 1903).

⁷¹ Petitions are preserved in BOA, HR.MHC.02 collection (c. 1903–7).

⁷² Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe, Bucharest) (hereafter AMAE), Fond Constantinopol, vol. 418: Romania's legation in Istanbul to Foreign Minister Lahovary, no. 7950 (31 Dec. 1903), quote on fo. 5; see also Romania's legation in Istanbul, no. 7264 (10 June 1903).

⁷³ Hunt, 'Muslims of Dobruca', 198.

⁷⁴ On the Ottoman-Romanian commission, see Hunt, 'Muslims of Dobruca', 197–9.

⁷⁵ On the redistribution of Muslim refugees' land in other post-Ottoman contexts, see Manos Perakis, 'Muslim Exodus and Land Redistribution in Autonomous Crete, 1898–1913', *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 26 (2011).

agent in Istanbul for permission to return.⁷⁶ The Ottoman government insisted on allowing them to return to their homes, but the Russian provisional administration in Bulgaria was not enthused at the prospect, and border guards routinely turned back Muslim returnees. By some estimates, about 100,000 Muslims had returned to the Principality of Bulgaria and the Ottoman province of Eastern Rumelia by February 1879.⁷⁷ The Bulgarian government officially conceded to readmitting Muslim refugees, with the exception of Circassians, in 1880.⁷⁸ Likewise, after the war, several hundred Muslims from northern Dobruja requested assistance from Romania's representatives in Istanbul to return to their homes, now within Romania. Romania instituted policies to prevent the reimmigration of Muslims, making their return conditional on certificates of origin that could only be issued by the Romanian authorities. Over the following decades, Romania allowed some individuals to return and become Romanian citizens.⁷⁹ Similarly to Bulgaria, Romania made an exception for the Circassians on account of *başıbozuk* atrocities during the war, refusing their petitions to return to northern Dobruja.⁸⁰ Circassian and Crimean Tatar emigrants protested Romania's reimmigration and land appropriation policies, complaining about the injustice to the Ottoman government.⁸¹ Serbia also resisted readmitting Muslim emigrants, specifically Albanians, after 1878. Very few Muslims returned to the Niš region.⁸² The Balkan governments' land reforms and opposition to reimmigration suppressed the return

⁷⁶ Muslims' petitions to return to Bulgaria are preserved in TsDA, f. 321K, op. 1, a.e. 10 (1879–80).

⁷⁷ Krzysztof Popek, '“To Get Rid of Turks”: The South-Slavic States and Muslim Remigration in the Turn of 1870s and 1880s', in Krzysztof Popek *et al.* (eds.), *Crossroads of the Old Continent: Central and Southeastern Europe in the 19th and 20th Century* (Krakow, 2021), 63–85, 80.

⁷⁸ On Muslim return to Bulgaria, see Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation*, 44–6; Popek, 'To Get Rid of Turks', 70–73, and to Eastern Rumelia, see Mirkova, *Muslim Land, Christian Labor*, 57, 77–8; Popek, 'To Get Rid of Turks', 74–7.

⁷⁹ On Muslim return to Romania, see Hunt, 'Muslims of Dobruca', 205–10.

⁸⁰ AMAE, Fond Constantinopol, vol. 419: Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Consul-General in Istanbul, no. 4924 (27 Mar. 1880).

⁸¹ AMAE, Fond Constantinopol, vol. 417: Consul-General in Istanbul to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, no. 329 (19 Feb. 1883); no. 85 (22 Feb. 1883).

⁸² On Muslim return to Serbia, see Jagodić, 'Emigration of Muslims from the New Serbian Regions', 4–5, 12, 15; Popek, 'To Get Rid of Turks', 77–80.

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of Muslim refugees of 1877–8 and instigated further rounds of
Muslim emigration to the Ottoman Empire.⁸³

IV COLONIZATION OF LAND

The Bulgarian, Romanian, and Serbian governments earmarked much of the land of Muslim refugees and emigrants for new Christian immigrants. The displacement of Muslim communities gave the three governments an opportunity to adjust demographic ratios, especially in their frontier regions, in favour of the countries' ethnic majorities and, in the process, lay stronger ethnic — and therefore national — claims to the 'abandoned' land.

The immigration legislation in the three Balkan nation states was similar to, and in the former Danubian territories built on, the Ottoman Immigration Law of 1857. The three governments provided exemptions and subsidies to attract new immigrants to their new and often depopulated territories and instituted limitations on land resale to tie immigrants to the land, similar to Ottoman policies for Muslim refugees in the prior decades. The Bulgarian government passed the Law on Settlement of Uninhabited Lands in Bulgaria in 1880. It required farmers to make tax payments on their government-issued land for ten years before they could sell it (Art. 7).⁸⁴ When Bulgarian legislators drafted the law of 1880, they considered providing

⁸³ A total of 239,335 Muslims emigrated from Bulgaria between 1880 and 1900; Karpát, *Ottoman Population*, 55; and 45,000 Muslims left Bulgaria between 1900 and 1912; Toumarkine, *Migrations des populations musulmanes balkaniques en Anatolie*, 33. On Muslim emigration from Bulgaria, see Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation*, 46–8; and from Eastern Rumelia, see Anna M. Mirkova, '“Population Politics” at the End of Empire: Migration and Sovereignty in Ottoman Eastern Rumelia, 1877–1886', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 55 (2013). Crimean Tatars and Turks had been steadily emigrating from Romania's northern Dobruja after 1878; registers of emigrants are preserved in AMAE, Fond Constantinopol, vol. 419: 'Emigrări ale musulmanilor din Dobrogea' (1880–1909).

⁸⁴ 'Zakon za naseliavane na nenaselenite zemi v Bŭlgariia' [Law on the Settlement of Uninhabited Lands in Bulgaria] (31 May 1880), reprinted in *Istoriia na bŭlgariite*, ed. Velichko and Trifonov, i, pp. 418. On the law, see Krzysztof Popek, 'The Bulgarian Migrations and the End of Ottoman Rule in Bulgaria, 1878–1900', *Historijski zbornik*, 71 (2018), 50–51; Petŭr Todorov, *Agrarnite otnosheniia v Iuzhna Dobrudzha, 1878–1944 g.* [Agrarian Relations in Southern Dobruja, 1878–1944] (Veliko Tarnovo, 1982), 17.

more generous exemptions to immigrants moving to Bulgaria's eastern regions, which had large Muslim communities and plenty of land left by Muslim emigrants. The immigrants moving east would be exempt from taxation for six years and from military service for four years, whereas immigrants in other parts of the country would receive a three-year exemption for both. That proposal, incentivizing the settlement in regions that immigrants deemed less desirable, bore a striking resemblance to the Ottoman Immigration Law of 1857, which provided longer exemptions to immigrants in Anatolia and Syria than to those in the Balkans.⁸⁵ In the final version of the law, all immigrants were granted tax exemptions for only one to three years (Art. 8). Romania's land law of 1882 required fifteen years of payments to take full ownership of agricultural land in northern Dobruja (Art. 28, 30). The term was increased to twenty years after 1884.⁸⁶ To entice immigrants to Romania's newest territory, the authorities offered an exemption from payments for three years and free construction materials to build farms (Art. 29). Serbia passed the Law on Settlement of 1880 for its new regions in the south, which also required fifteen years of tilling the land before a farmer became its owner and could mortgage, rent, or sell the land (Art. 6).⁸⁷ Immigrants were given up to four hectares (9.9 acres) of free land, the right to cut timber to build a house (Art. 5), and exemptions from taxation and national military service for three years and from the standing army for five years (Art. 7).

The Bulgarian government reserved much of Muslim refugees' land for Bulgarian immigrants, who were returning to their newly autonomous homeland from different parts of the Ottoman, Romanov, and Habsburg domains.⁸⁸ For example, in 1886, the Bulgarian government completed a cadastral survey in southern Dobruja, reaffirming state ownership of about 157,147 dönüm (57 square miles) of land, over 96 per cent of which were

⁸⁵ Popek, 'Bulgarian Migrations and the End of Ottoman Rule in Bulgaria', 53.

⁸⁶ Petür Todorov, 'Stopansko razvitie' [Economic Development], in *Istoriia na Dobrudzha* [History of Dobruja], vol. iv, ed. Petür Todorov and Blagovest Niagulov (Veliko Tarnovo, 2007), 69–79.

⁸⁷ 'Zakon o naseljavanju' [Law on Settlement] (3 Jan. 1880); preserved in DAS, MF-E f. I, r. 34 (1880).

⁸⁸ State Archive, Dobrich Branch (Dürzhaven arkhiv, Dobrich), f. 181K, op. 1, a. e. 1, ll. 60–60b, 62–62b (Nov. 1879); TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 26, ll. 12–12b (1880).

agricultural estates, which had once belonged to Muslims and were now available to immigrants.⁸⁹ By 1911, between 143,000 and 171,000 immigrants arrived in Bulgaria, including 60,000–70,000 from Ottoman Macedonia, 50,000–60,000 from Ottoman Thrace, 20,000–25,000 from Romania, 10,000–12,000 from tsarist Bessarabia, and 3,000–4,000 from Habsburg Banat.⁹⁰

The Bulgarian government created a special administrative category of *preselnitsi* (sing. *preselnik* or *preselnitsa*) to describe immigrants. *Preselnitsi* qualified for the allotment of free land from the state. The government distinguished between two types of *preselnitsi*: those returning to Bulgaria from abroad after 1878 and those relocating internally within Bulgaria for better land and opportunities.⁹¹ The Bulgarian government earmarked the bulk of the Circassian and Crimean Tatar lands for Bulgarian *preselnitsi*. This policy bolstered the government's rhetoric of property restitution to, and redress of Ottoman injustices against, Bulgaria's native populations. Only those who took up the abandoned Circassian and Crimean Tatar land after the promulgation of the law of 1880 qualified as *preselnitsi*.⁹² The government regarded those who took up the land before 1880 or without authorization as squatters, despite many of them also being Bulgarian refugees of the recent war. The Bulgarian category of *preselnitsi* was similar to the Russian *pereselentsy* (sing. *pereselenets* or *pereselenka*), which described both immigrants from abroad, including Ottoman Bulgarians and Greeks, and Slavic peasants moving across the tsardom to colonize parts of the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Siberia.⁹³ The Bulgarian administrative usage of the term *preselnitsi* mirrored the Ottoman category of *muhacir*, also explicitly tied to the guarantee of free land from the state.

The Romanian government used immigration to tie its new post-Ottoman territory of northern Dobruja to the rest of the country. In 1880, it conducted an inventory of title deeds in northern Dobruja to determine who had owned the land,

⁸⁹ TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 107, ll. 73–84 (1886).

⁹⁰ Popek, 'Bulgarian Migrations and the End of Ottoman Rule in Bulgaria', 56.

⁹¹ TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 5, ll. 46–47b (23 Mar. 1881).

⁹² TsDA, f. 159K, op. 1, a.e. 66, ll. 64–64b (25 Jan. 1883).

⁹³ Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca, NY, 2004).

including soliciting title deeds through its representatives in Istanbul.⁹⁴ In 1883, it conducted a comprehensive cadastral survey to reapportion the land left behind by Circassians and Abkhazians to new immigrants.⁹⁵ The government allotted 104,550 hectares (404 square miles) of land, once tilled by refugees, to Romanian immigrants from Wallachia, Moldavia, Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Banat.⁹⁶ Before 1885, about 20,000 farmers settled in northern Dobruja.⁹⁷ In the following decades, new immigrants kept arriving in Dobruja, including Aromanians (Romance-speaking communities) from the southern Balkans, while Turks and Crimean Tatars were leaving for the Ottoman Empire. Between 1882 and 1900, the size of Romanian-owned land in northern Dobruja increased more than tenfold from 40,638 hectares (157 square miles), or 23 per cent of arable land, to 429,933 hectares (1,660 square miles), or 71 per cent of arable land.⁹⁸

Serbia likewise used its new land legislation of 1880 to integrate the Niš region. Belgrade issued a call for Orthodox Christian immigrants to take the place of departing Albanian and Circassian populations. For example, in the Toplički district, to the west of Niš, by late 1879, 2,522 Serb households had already claimed and tilled the Albanian emigrants' land, 97 per cent of which the government declared cultivable and of agricultural value. Serbian authorities estimated that 3,935 more immigrant households could settle on the remaining abandoned land in the district.⁹⁹ Tens of thousands of Serb and Montenegrin immigrants from Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire moved to the Niš region.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ AMAE, Fond Constantinopol, vol. 417: Romania's Legation in Istanbul to Minister Plenipotentiary Djuvara, no. 4273 (22 Oct. 1898), annex 1 (12 Jan. 1880), fos. 3–13.

⁹⁵ National Archive of Romania, Tulcea Branch (Direcția Județeană Tulcea a Arhivelor Naționale) 156/28: Survey in Tulcea.

⁹⁶ Todorov, *Agrarnite otnosheniia v Iuzhna Dobrudzha*, 13.

⁹⁷ Hunt, 'Muslims of Dobruca', 205.

⁹⁸ Hunt, 'Seeing Like a State', 80.

⁹⁹ DAS, MF-E f. XI, r. 15 (1879), no. 729 (Prokuplje, 9 Nov. 1879).

¹⁰⁰ Documents on Serb and Montenegrin settlement in the Niš district are preserved in DAS, MF-E f. I, r. 84 (1879). f. III, r. 101 (1879); MF-A f. VII, r. 80 (1880).

The three Balkan governments presided over a profound demographic transformation after 1878. In the Principality of Bulgaria, the ethnic Bulgarian population increased from 58 per cent in 1877 to 67 per cent in 1880, largely because of Muslim emigration and immigration of Bulgarians from abroad (see [Table 1](#)). It went up to 77 per cent in 1900 and 81 per cent in 1910.¹⁰¹ The census categories of 'Muslim' and 'Bulgarian' were unstable over time, with the former defined primarily by faith, and the latter stretched to include most Orthodox Slavic speakers, including Macedonians. Demographic changes were particularly pronounced in regions that used to have a Muslim majority, like Dobruja, split between Bulgaria and Romania. In southern Dobruja, the Bulgarian population increased from 25 per cent in 1877 to 40 per cent in 1880, and to 48 per cent in 1910 (see [Table 2](#)).¹⁰² In northern Dobruja, the Romanian population, defined primarily by language, grew from 21 per cent in 1878 to 30 per cent in 1882, and to 57 per cent in 1912 (see [Table 3](#)). In the Niš region, in southeastern Serbia, the Slavic population increased from 75 per cent in 1877, when Russian authorities described local Slavs as 'Bulgarian', to a staggering 97 per cent in 1884, when the Serbian census inscribed them as 'Serbs' (see [Table 4](#)). The bureaucratic classification of different communities certainly clashed with complex ethno-religious identities on the ground and how many people self-identified, but a demographic overhaul was apparent. In absolute numbers, the Muslim population declined in Bulgaria by 33 per cent, including in southern Dobruja by 35 per cent, between 1877 and 1880; in Romania's northern Dobruja by 56 per cent between 1878 and 1882; and in Serbia's Niš region by 97 per cent between 1877 and 1884.¹⁰³

The end of Ottoman rule in the northern Balkans heralded robust national campaigns to reform the state and transform the nation. Nowhere was the transformation of the Balkans more apparent than on the land once settled by Muslim refugees from Russia. The Bulgarian, Serbian, and Romanian governments appropriated much of the abandoned Circassian and Crimean

¹⁰¹ R. J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2006), 424–5.

¹⁰² Georgi P. Genov, *Bulgaria and the Treaty of Neuilly* (Sofia, 1935), 161.

¹⁰³ Data from [Tables 1–4](#).

TABLE 1.
DEMOGRAPHICS IN BULGARIA

1877			1880		
	Population	%		Population	%
Bulgarians	1,186,532	58.0	Bulgarians	1,345,507	67.0
Muslims	810,542	39.6	Turks	527,284	26.3
Others	50,010	2.4	Tatars	12,376	0.6
Total:	2,047,084		Others	122,752	6.1
			Total:	2,007,919	

Sources: 1877 data: estimated by Russian authorities, based on the 1875 Ottoman provincial data, for the subprovinces of Rusçuk, Vidin, Tırnova, Varna, and Sofya. Koyuncu, 'Tuna Vilâyeti'nde Nüfus ve Demografi, 1864–1877', 725.

1880 data: the Bulgarian census. *Okonchatelni rezultati ot prebroiavanie na naselenieto na 1 ianuarii 1881 godina* [Final Results of the Population Census on 1 Jan. 1881] (Sofia, 1890), 6–7.

TABLE 2.
DEMOGRAPHICS IN SOUTHERN DOBRUJA

1877			1880		
	Population	%		Population	%
Bulgarians	43,180	25.2	Bulgarians	64,123	40.3
Muslims	119,754	69.8	Turks	72,811	45.8
Others	8,678	5.1	Tatars	4,827	3.0
Total:	171,612		Others	17,330	10.9
			Total:	159,091	

Sources: 1877 data: estimated by Russian authorities for the Varna subprovince. Koyuncu, [Tuna Vilâyeti'nde Nüfus ve Demografi, 1864–1877', 725.

1880 data: the Bulgarian census for the Varna and Provadiia districts. *Okonchatelni rezultati ot prebroiavanie na naselenieto na 1 ianuarii 1881 godina*, 6–7.

Tatar houses, fields, and pastures. The new states asserted themselves as successors to the Ottoman Empire with regard to land ownership and built their land and immigration laws upon the Ottoman legislation. They inherited both the legal mechanisms and the logic of resettlement, favouring

TABLE 3.
DEMOGRAPHICS IN NORTHERN DOBRUJA

	1878		1882		1912	
	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%
Romanians	46,504	20.6	49,724	29.8	216,425	56.9
Bulgarians	30,177	13.4	30,349	18.2	51,149	13.4
Russians	12,748	5.6	16,668	10.0	35,859	9.4
Tatars	71,146	31.5	31,114	18.7	21,350	5.6
Turks	48,783	21.6	24,247	14.6	20,092	5.3
Circassians	6,994	3.1	—	—	—	—
Others	9,340	4.1	14,710	8.8	35,555	9.3
Total:	225,692		166,812		380,430	

Sources: 1878 data: estimated by Romanian authorities before the region's integration into Romania. Karpát, *Ottoman Population*, 199.

1882 data: Iordachi, *Liberalism, Constitutional Nationalism, and Minorities*, 477.

1912 data: Jean N. Roman, 'La Population de la Dobrogea', in *La Dobrogea Roumaine*, ed. Nicolae Iorga et al. (Bucharest, 1919), 92.

TABLE 4.
DEMOGRAPHICS IN THE NIŠ REGION

	1877			1884	
	Population	%		Population	%
Bulgarians	270,000	75.4	Serbs	343,270	96.8
Muslims	77,500	21.6	Albanians and Turks	2,250	0.6
Others	10,800	3	Others	8,961	2.5
Total:	358,300		Total:	354,481	

Sources: 1877 data: estimated by Russian authorities for the Niš subprovince. Koyuncu, 'Tuna Vilâyeti'nde Nüfus ve Demografi, 1864–1877', 725.

1884 data: the Serbian census for the districts of Niš, Vranje, Toplica, and Pirot. *Državopis Srbije*, vol. 16 (Belgrade, 1889), 29–30.

communities that aligned with the governments' vision of who the perfect immigrants were. Instead of heterodox foreign Muslims, those were now co-ethnic Christians, underscoring the

transition from a nationalizing Muslim empire to homogenizing nation states. The legislative continuity, apparent in the post-1878 land allotment and resettlement practices, challenges nativist and nationalist readings of histories in the Balkans.

The seizure of Muslim refugees' 'abandoned land' was part of post-Ottoman state-building and has had a lasting legacy in the Balkans. First, it propped up state sovereignty at a critical period after the international recognition of Serbia's and Romania's independence and Bulgaria's autonomy. In the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–8, the Balkan governments faced a challenge in asserting control over their new populations and territories. The seizure and reclamation of Muslims' abandoned property established national governments as arbiters of property ownership. Second, the confiscation of abandoned property marked Muslim refugees as outsiders whose claims to the land were illegitimate, which undermined the standing of other Muslim communities. Seizing the property of non-native Muslim refugees and prohibiting their return proceeded alongside appropriating some of the lands of native Muslims, whether those who also became refugees in the Ottoman Empire or those who stayed put in the Balkans. The most conspicuous and intended outcome of those policies was continuous Muslim emigration from Bulgaria, Romania, and Yugoslavia throughout the twentieth century.¹⁰⁴ The empowerment of the state, through land appropriation and redistribution, and pressure on minorities to leave characterize many postcolonial state-building projects worldwide. The post-Ottoman Balkans are a particularly striking example of demographic transformation in a short period of time and across several countries, and this study elucidates legal mechanisms that were used to achieve it.

The Balkan governments used abandoned land to bolster their nation-making projects. Tens of thousands of Bulgarian, Serb, and Romanian immigrants relocated internally or emigrated from the Ottoman, Russian, and Habsburg empires. Their

¹⁰⁴ On Muslim emigration from the Balkans in the twentieth century, see Edwin Pezo, *Zwangsmigration in Friedenszeiten? Jugoslawische Migrationspolitik und die Auswanderung von Muslimen in die Türkei (1918 bis 1966)* (Munich, 2013); Tomasz Kamusella, *Ethnic Cleansing during the Cold War: The Forgotten 1989 Expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria* (London, 2019). On minority Christian emigration, see Theodora Dragostinova, *Between Two Motherlands: Nationality and Emigration among the Greeks of Bulgaria, 1900–1949* (Ithaca, NY, 2011).

settlement lays bare a thin line between nation-making and settler colonialism. Decolonization in the Balkans meant recolonization. The new Christian immigrants, representing the state's dominant ethnic group and often themselves refugees, were settling the land that had previously been granted to Muslim refugee settlers, but few newcomers were themselves rooted in that land. The governments framed the settlement of those immigrants in terms of national liberation and land restitution, while largely reusing Ottoman policies that had previously harmed local communities. The ethno-religious remaking of national territories, after violent expulsion of entire communities, has been a hallmark of nation-making, whether in the Middle East in the early twentieth century or in central Europe and South Asia in the mid-twentieth century. In the post-Ottoman Balkans, this process relied on imperial legal foundations.¹⁰⁵

The contestation over abandoned land highlights the limits of the new governments' authority. While the governments succeeded in auctioning off some of the land and reapportioning some of it to new immigrants, they faced consistent opposition. Local Balkan Christian communities were aggrieved by the failure of land restitution, while emigrant Muslim communities challenged dispossession and the ban on their return. New Bulgarian, Serb, and Romanian immigrants, many of whom were in desperate need of housing, did not receive sufficient land and financial aid. The refugees' 'abandoned land' generated new grievances and exposed the new states' fiscal constraints and weakness in enforcing their unpopular land legislation.

Over a century and a half later, the once abandoned Muslim land has become thoroughly 'national' after several rounds of displacement and property redistribution during the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, World War I, and World War II. The relationship between the land, its tenants, and the state underwent major changes, as Sofia, Bucharest, and Belgrade implemented socialist reforms during the Cold War and then capitalist reforms since the 1990s. Yet the legacy of Ottoman-era inhabitants and their stewardship over the land in the northern

¹⁰⁵ See Ümit Kurt, *The Armenians of Aintab: The Economics of Genocide in an Ottoman Province* (Cambridge, MA, 2021); Volha Charnysh, *Uprooted: How Post-WWII Population Transfers Remade Europe* (Cambridge, 2024).

Balkans persists in geographic names. Throughout the countryside, from the Black Sea coast, across the Danubian plain, and deep into the Balkan Mountains, one may still come across terms like Abazkoto selo (Abkhazian village), Cherkezki bostan (Circassian garden), and Tatarska mahala (Tatar neighbourhood). Their old residents are long gone, and only their names faintly hint at the protracted contestation over land ownership that helped to create the modern Balkans.

Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky
University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

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