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Population Transfer

Negotiating the Resettlement of Chechen Refugees in the Ottoman Empire (1865, 1870)*

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In the half century before World War I, mass population migrations occurred between Russia and the Middle East. Among the largest was the migration of Muslims from the Russian Empire's North Caucasus region to the Ottoman Empire. These Muslims called themselves muhajirs (refugees or immigrants; from Arabic *muhājir*). Most muhajirs from the North Caucasus were western Circassians who were expelled by the Russian army or fled in the final stages of the Caucasus War of 1817–1864. Muslim migrations from the North Caucasus continued after the end of the war, when the region had been fully incorporated into the Russian Empire. Thousands of Chechens, Abkhazians, Kabardians, Ossetians, Karachays, Balkars, and Dagestanis emigrated to the Ottoman Empire. These muhajirs left Russia due to dispossession in the course of tsarist land reforms, forced internal displacements, their unwillingness to live under Russian occupation, or expectations of a better life in the Ottoman Empire.¹

Most Chechen territories came under Russian rule with the defeat of the Caucasus Imamate in 1859. In 1865, the Russian and Ottoman governments negotiated a population transfer, whereby many Chechens would be resettled in the Ottoman Empire. This semi-forced resettlement followed an anticolonial revolt in 1864, inspired by the teachings of the Qadiri shaykh Kunta Hajji.² After the suppression of the revolt, the Russian administration spearheaded the emigration of Muslims from the north-central Caucasus (Map 6.1).

According to official Russian figures, 4,990 Muslim families, comprising 23,057 individuals, left the Terek province for the Ottoman Empire in 1865.³ Most muhajirs were Chechens; others were Ingush, Kabardians, and Ossetians. They were divided into twenty-eight processions, which departed from Vladikavkaz throughout the summer of that year. After crossing the border into the Ottoman Empire, muhajirs registered with

* Sources: Reports from Ambassador Nikolai Ignat'ev to Chief of Staff of the Caucasus Army Aleksandr Kartsov, National Archives of Georgia (SSSA), f. 545, op. 1, d. 95, ll. 1–6 (August 21, 1865), ll. 7–10 (August 28, 1865); Petition from Jantemir to the Interior Ministry of the Ottoman Empire (16 *dhu-l-qa'da* 1286, February 17, 1870), Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive (BOA) DH.MHC 1/40, f. 2).

¹ On Chechen migrations to the Ottoman Empire, see Said-Emi S. Badaev, *Chechenskaia diaspora na Srednem i Blizhnem Vostoke: istoriia i sovremennost'* (Nalchik: Respublikanskii poligrafkombinat im. Revoliutsii 1905 g., 2008); Zarema Kh. Ibragimova, *Emigratsiia chechentsev v Turtsiiu (60–70 gg. XIX v.)* (Moscow: Maks Press, 2000).

² See Alexandre Bennigsen, "The Qadiriyyah (Kunta Hajji) Tariqah in North-East Caucasus, 1850–1987," *Islamic Culture* 62, nos. 2–3 (1988): 63–78.

³ SSSA, f. 545, op. 1, d. 90 (1865), ll. 124–454.



Map 6.1 Population Transfer from the Caucasus to Anatolia and Syria, 1865–1868.

the Ottoman Refugee Commission, a governmental agency created in 1860 to resettle new immigrants from Russia.⁴ In accordance with the Ottoman Immigration Law of 1857, muhajirs could expect a plot of free land and temporary exemptions from taxation and military service. Upon receiving their land allotments, muhajirs were effectively treated as Ottoman subjects.

Chechens continued emigrating to the Ottoman Empire throughout late tsarist rule, with sizable rounds of emigration in 1895, 1900–1902, 1905–1906, and 1912. Those later groups of muhajirs settled in the Ottoman provinces of Aleppo, Damascus, Mosul, and Baghdad. By World War I, about 40,000 Chechens had arrived in the Ottoman Empire.⁵

The three letters here, translated from Russian and Arabic, illustrate different stages of Chechen resettlement in the Ottoman Empire. The first two are from 1865 and contain reports by Nikolai Ignat'ev, the Russian ambassador in Istanbul, to Aleksandr Kartsov, the chief of staff of the Caucasus Army, based in Tiflis (now Tbilisi, Georgia). Ignat'ev served

⁴ See David Cameron Cuthell Jr., "The Muhacirin Komisyonu: An Agent in the Transformation of Ottoman Anatolia, 1860–1866" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2005).

⁵ Vladimir O. Bobrovnikov and Irina L. Babich, eds., *Severnnyi Kavkaz v sostave Rossiiskoi imperii* (Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2007), 179.

as Russia's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire between 1864 and 1877. Best remembered for his Slavophile, particularly pro-Bulgarian, policies, he also played a major role in forging Russia's policies toward its mobile Muslim populations.⁶ Ignat'ev's reports demonstrate the extent of the Russian involvement in the resettlement of Muslims, formerly Russian subjects, in the Ottoman Empire.

The Chechen emigration of 1865, coordinated by the two imperial governments, exemplifies how intertwined the displacement and resettlement of Russian Muslims were. Under Russian pressure, the Ottomans agreed to resettle Chechens in the interior regions of the empire. Chechen muhajirs had originally asked to be settled together to preserve their community or to re-create, in the words of an observing British consul, "another Tchetcheanaia."⁷ The Ottoman authorities preferred to divide immigrants into smaller groups to reduce the power of their chiefs and to accelerate their relocation. By 1868, the Ottomans had settled 13,648 Chechens around Ra's al-'Ayn in northern Syria, 7,196 in the Sivas subprovince in central Anatolia, 621 in the Biga subprovince in western Anatolia, and 300 in the Maraş subprovince in southern Anatolia, with only 155 remaining in the Kars subprovince in eastern Anatolia.⁸ The two governments declared the Chechen resettlement to be a success; the Ottomans bestowed military orders to eight Russian officials in charge of emigration, and the Russians awarded military orders to fourteen Ottoman officials responsible for resettlement.⁹

The third letter is a petition in Arabic by Jantemir, a chief of Chechen muhajirs in Ra's al-'Ayn, in northern Syria, addressed to the Ottoman Interior Ministry in Istanbul in 1870. Jantemir's petition spotlights the muhajirs' leadership during the resettlement process. The muhajirs' leaders, who often came from elite North Caucasian families, served as interlocutors between refugees, Ottoman authorities, and host communities. Throughout the empire, muhajir leaders negotiated, cooperated, and sometimes clashed with Ottoman powerholders. In Ra's al-'Ayn, the arrival of thousands of Chechens altered the local balance of power.¹⁰

Together, these three letters show how the Russian and Ottoman governments negotiated mass resettlement, and how refugees experienced their displacement.

Reports by Ambassador Nikolai Ignat'ev in 1865

Writing to Caucasus Army Chief Aleksandr Kartsov, Ignat'ev reports on the negotiations between Russia and the Ottoman Empire over the final sites of Chechen settlement. By August 1865, the Ottoman Refugee Commission temporarily housed around 20,000 muhajirs around Erzurum and Muş, near the Russo-Ottoman border. The Ottoman Foreign Ministry notified the Russian

⁶ See Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 61–67; Viktoriia M. Khevroolina, *Rossiiskii diplomat graf Nikolai Pavlovich Ignat'ev* (Moscow: Institut Rossiiskoi Istorii RAN, 2004).

⁷ National Archives of the United Kingdom, Records of the Foreign Office 195/799, Finn to Lyons, f. 283r (March 19, 1866).

⁸ Russian State Military-Historical Archive (RGVIA) f. 400, op. 1, d. 49, ll. 34–34ob (January 31, 1868).

⁹ SSSA f. 545, op. 1, d. 2786, ll. 40, 75–79, 103–106 (1866–1868). On the Ottoman-Russian-Chechen negotiations of 1865 over the final settlement areas, see Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, "Imperial Refuge: Resettlement of Muslims from Russia in the Ottoman Empire, 1860–1914" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2018), 400–405.

¹⁰ On relations between Chechen muhajirs and the Shammar tribe in the Ra's al-'Ayn region, see Samuel Dolbee, "The Locust and the Starling: People, Insects, and Disease in the Late Ottoman Jazira and After, 1860–1940" (PhD diss., New York University, 2017), 124–138.

government that, due to logistical and financial constraints, it considered settling muhajirs permanently in the Ottoman frontier subprovinces of Kars, Bayezid, and Van. The Russian government deemed this to be in contravention of the previous understanding not to settle North Caucasian Muslims close to Russian borders and demanded that the Ottoman government move refugees farther away from the border. Tsarist officials feared that Chechen muhajirs, if resettled in the vicinity of the Caucasus, would attempt to return to Russia or be used by the Ottomans against Russia in a future conflict.

Russian diplomats were particularly concerned about the influence of the muhajir Musa Kundukhov, who advocated the compact resettlement of Chechens. Kundukhov, born into a Muslim Ossetian princely family, made a successful career in the Russian army and organized the emigration of 1865 from the Terek province. Unexpectedly for many, he then also emigrated to the Ottoman Empire. He would later join the Ottoman army and, during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–1878, lead a regiment consisting of North Caucasian muhajirs on the Caucasian front.

Dear [Chief of Staff of the Caucasus Army] Aleksandr Kartsov,

. . . I have corresponded with the Governor [of Erzurum] about the necessity to abide by the conditions [on the resettlement of Chechens] that the Porte accepted last spring. The Governor explained that, after further discussions about the resettlement of Chechens, the [Ottoman] Government has established that the provinces of Diyarbekir and Erzincan did not, in fact, contain sufficient land to settle all Chechens. The surplus of immigrants will be directed to the southern part of the Muş subprovince. The [Ottoman] Foreign Minister assured me that the settlement of the Muş subprovince would only commence as a measure of last resort, when all free lands near Diyarbekir and Erzincan were occupied, and that only the southern tip of the subprovince, south of the city of Muş and Lake Van, would be settled. The Governor also promised to pay particular attention to scattering immigrants around and avoiding settling many of them in one area.

I further conveyed to the Porte that Nusret Pasha [Ottoman commissioner for settling Chechens] should resist the demands of [Musa] Kundukhov, who wishes for emigrants to resettle together, so that he could exert his influence on them. The Governor confirmed that the Porte would summon Kundukhov to Constantinople and delay him there. Considering that the Turks hold Kundukhov in high regard and intend to grant him a position, we must consider that this emigrant might be very harmful to us not only in Asia Minor but also in Constantinople.

Nikolai Ignat'ev [Russian ambassador in Istanbul]

August 21, 1865

* * *

Dear Aleksandr Kartsov,

The Governor [of Erzurum] has confirmed in writing the promises that he gave me regarding the settlement of Chechens near Erzincan and Diyarbekir, therefore fully satisfying all our demands. Considering that the Turkish Government had initially hoped to settle Chechens in the frontier subprovinces of Kars, Bayezid, and Van, which

gave it many administrative, financial, and political advantages, and then acceded to a series of our demands, we must agree that it has reached the extreme limit of possible concessions in our favor and that demanding more would be useless.

Regarding the Turks' consideration of Muş for the future settlement of Chechens, I would like to draw the attention of Your Excellency to the fact that, until now, both our Embassy and the Porte had been negotiating the settlement of 5,000 families. It came to my attention that this number may be tripled, which makes our prior calculations no longer applicable. The information about a potential increase of immigrants made a strong impression on the Turkish Foreign Minister. A new influx of mountaineers puts the Porte in a quandary and into further debt. Until now, the Turkish Government preferred, while expressing sympathy to the tribes on our left flank, to allow immigration of no more than 5,000 families.

In conclusion, I have the honor to inform Your Excellency that Nusret Pasha will be replaced by another Commissioner, yet to be elected. It was intimated that Nusret Pasha is being replaced due to our complaints that he had not followed the Porte's instructions about the resettlement of Chechens.

Nikolai Ignat'ev
August 28, 1865

Petition by Jantemir in 1870

A petition by Jantemir, a Chechen muhajir who had settled in the small town of Ra's al-'Ayn shortly after 1865, recounts a conflict he had with Ottoman officials there and in the Diyarbekir province.¹¹ Prior to leaving the Caucasus, he had served as a local judge and a mufti (Islamic jurist) first in the Caucasus Imamate in 1854–1859 and then under Russian rule in 1859–1865. By the time he wrote this petition to the Ottoman Interior Ministry in 1870, he had been arrested, reportedly for sedition, by provincial authorities.¹² After being imprisoned in Diyarbekir, he was sent to the town of Eğin (now Kemaliye, Turkey), without the right to return to Ra's al-'Ayn.

Jantemir's petition to Istanbul lays bare some points of contention in Ra's al-'Ayn, including gun ownership by Chechen muhajirs and corruption by district authorities. It also highlights the religious aspect of Chechen migration to the Ottoman Empire. Many muhajirs perceived their migration, or chose to express it, as a hijra, using the Arabic term denoting the Prophet Muhammad's journey from Mecca to Medina with his followers. Jantemir starts his petition by explaining that he and other muhajirs are in the Ottoman Empire because they have "emigrated for Almighty Allah." He emphasizes how much

¹¹ Another possible version of this name is Jantamar (Джаьнтамар). I thank Said-Khasan Muskhadzhiiev for sharing with me his expertise on Chechen names.

¹² Jantemir wrote two petitions, one to the Interior Ministry and one to the Grand Vizier. For a translation of the latter petition, see Chris Gratien, "Sources in Translation: A Chechen Immigrant's Petition to the Ottoman State (1870)," *Ottoman History Podcast* (July 25, 2020), <http://www.ottomanhistorypodcast.com/2020/07/dzhantemir.html>. At the final stage of our respective translations, we learned that we had been working on two related petitions. Thereafter, we compared notes, which proved helpful for this publication.

the muhajirs had endured “for the sake of the prophetic hijra.” Muhajirs’ petitions to the Ottoman government were typically written in Ottoman Turkish. Jantemir’s petition, in contrast, is in Arabic, the language he knew best. He likely obtained religious training in Dagestan, where Arabic long served as a lingua franca of Muslim intellectuals and where Arabic learning flourished in the nineteenth century.¹³ Jantemir’s petition is a particularly striking example of an emotional appeal to the authorities to redress personal injustice, while outlining general grievances of the empire’s newest immigrant community.

This is a petition to the Interior Ministry of the Exalted [Ottoman] State.

We emigrated for Almighty Allah from the land of Dagestan. When we arrived in this Islamic land, weapons of all muhajirs were taken, as is appropriate by the laws of the Exalted State. After we arrived in the town of Ra’s al-‘Ayn, those weapons were transferred, stored, and preserved there. In the month of *jumādā al-ūlā* of the year 1286 [August 1869], muhajirs from the villages gathered in Ra’s al-‘Ayn and appealed to me that I ask Isma’il Pasha, the [provincial] governor, to return the weapons to their owners. I went to Diyarbekir, where the governor resides, and asked him to return weapons to them. He gave me a letter, whereby he ordered the return [of weapons]. I returned happily and gave the letter to Ya’qub Bey, the district governor of Ra’s al-‘Ayn.

Ya’qub Bey returned weapons to most muhajirs, but 833 weapons remained [in his custody]. Ya’qub Bey wrote a letter to the aforementioned governor [of Diyarbekir], notifying him that he had returned weapons to their rightful owners. He then ordered me and five members of the *majlis* [local council] to stamp seals [on that letter]. We did not stamp our seals, because many weapons had not been returned and their owners were present and were asking for them, and so we demanded their return. Ya’qub Bey became angry with us, kicked us out of the *majlis*, and mocked us. And so a conflict began between him and muhajirs. Muhajirs then wrote a letter to the governor to complain about him and to expose his faults. Twenty-one leaders of the muhajirs traveled to see the governor, and I—your humble servant—was among them. We gave that letter to the governor. He became angry with us and imprisoned me along with Captain of Gendarmerie Sa’adallah Bey, ‘Abdulqadir Efendi, *majlis* member Hadis Bey, *majlis* member Chechen Jantemir, and Karabulak Jantemir. I was sent to this town of Egin, and my family was later sent to [be with] me. This is the reason for my imprisonment.

The [true] reason for sending me here is as follows. Muhajirs in the town of Ra’s al-‘Ayn come from two tribes, Karabulaks and Chechens, and I am from the Chechen tribe.¹⁴ A girl of great beauty lived in the town, and she was from the Chechen tribe. She did not have a father or a brother, only a mother. She was coveted [in marriage] for my son, and her mother wanted her to marry him. District governor Ya’qub Bey fell deeply in love with the girl, proposed to her, and offered 12,000 piastres¹⁵ in *nikāḥ* [marriage contract].

¹³ See Rebecca Gould, *Writers and Rebels: The Literature of Insurgency in the Caucasus* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 12.

¹⁴ Karabulaks are a Vainakh-speaking people related to Chechens and Ingush. The Russian military singled out Karabulaks as a particularly rebellious group and expelled most of them to the Ottoman Empire. By 1865, 6,187 Karabulaks had left for the Ottoman Empire; Badaev, *Chechenskaia diaspora*, 101. In the Soviet era, the remaining Karabulaks were claimed as a subgroup within the Ingush and Chechen nationalities.

¹⁵ Piastre, or *kuruş*, is an Ottoman unit of currency. In 1870, a Russian ruble was worth 11 Ottoman piastres; Markus A. Denzel, *Handbook of World Exchange Rates, 1590–1914* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 394.

If her mother had asked for more, he would have offered more. The mother and daughter refused *nikāḥ*. Ya'qub Bey then determined to marry her against her will, by force. The two women fled the town for another village in fear of him, as is well-known among muhajirs. Ya'qub Bey accused me of having arranged for the two women to refuse his *nikāḥ* and to escape him. He became angry with me but could not find a good reason to imprison me and to inflict torture on me.

One notable from the Karabulak tribe by the name of Shovkhal had feuded with me, which is known to Ahmad Bey, an ousted district governor from Ra's al-'Ayn, who now resides in the blessed city of Istanbul. That notable colluded with Ya'qub Bey. Shovkhal arranged for Ya'qub Bey to marry a girl whom he chose from his tribe. They were seeking a reason to torture me and torment me. When the governor imprisoned us, they whispered to the governor that I was spreading sedition among muhajirs and undermining their well-being in Ra's al-'Ayn. Even though I built, on my own, three houses, two shops, a teaching room, and a mosque that is large enough for everyone in the town. I also dug two canals filled with water sufficient for one year. If I wanted [to incite] sedition among muhajirs and ruin their good lives in Ra's al-'Ayn, why would I waste my money on these expenses when I am not a wealthy man myself? This governor did not consider anything of what I had to say. He was deceived by the words of backbiters and liars, Ya'qub Bey and Shovkhal. As [the Prophet] said: "The believer is honorable and dignified, and the hypocrite is wicked and evil."

I served Muslims in the land of Dagestan as a judge and a mufti for five years in the time of Shaykh Shamil¹⁶ [1854–1859] and, after him, for six more years in the time of Muscovy [1859–1865]. I then served muhajirs of Ra's al-'Ayn, in the name of Almighty Allah, but not [formally] as a kadi or a mufti, since we arrived here and until I was imprisoned. Not a single governor was angry with me, and they gave me gifts, appropriate to my status, until [a new] governor came to the city of Diyarbekir to rule this blessed province.

Now, in the month of *jumādā al-ūlā*, he put me in jail because of the whispering of backbiters. He made a mistake, but even the prophets were not free of mistakes. As the Almighty said: "O you who have believed, if there comes to you a disobedient one with information, investigate!"¹⁷ The Almighty also forgave the mistakes of his prophet David. And if this governor had ordered me to do what he needed me to do, without putting me in jail, I would have obeyed his orders. How would I not obey him, when I am a weak man in his hold? The Almighty ordered obedience to the rulers: "O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you."¹⁸ However, the governor did not give me any orders. Instead, he dropped me in the deep of tribulations.

My misfortunes are many. I left my house, my homeland, and my country for the sake of the prophetic hijra [*al-hijra al-nabawiyya*]. I was separated from my relatives and my loved ones for the sake of that hijra. The separation from them is one of the most severe

¹⁶ Shaykh Shamil was the third leader of the Caucasus Imamate and the most prominent figure in the history of North Caucasian resistance to Russia. His surrender to the Russian army in 1859 led to the collapse of the Imamate and, shortly thereafter, the tsarist conquest of the entire North Caucasus; see Moshe Gammer, *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan* (London: Frank Cass, 2005); Gammer, "Shamil in Soviet Historiography," *Middle Eastern Studies* 28, no. 4 (1992): 729–777.

¹⁷ Qur'an 49:6.

¹⁸ Qur'an 4:59.

miseries. Fifty-seven of my brothers, sisters, uncles, and their sons and daughters died in Ra's al-'Ayn. Those who remain are widowed women and orphaned children, and some of them are now crying for me. Three of my sons and two of my daughters died. The oldest of them was the most knowledgeable of scholars. Adversity put the light out of his knowledge.

It is no wonder that we are tested. Even the prophets have tasted the tribulations of this world. How much did the saints drink of its sadness? And how many blessed men were confounded by its sorrow? My sorrow comes from the aforementioned governor. It lies heavier on my soul than anything I have faced before because it stems from false accusations of backbiters and lies of liars, without any sin or crime on my part. Is it acceptable, according to the laws of the Exalted State, that souls of Muslims are tortured by the lies of liars? No, and no, and praise be to Allah for that.

If the governor had understood the truth of the incident that happened between us, he would not have tortured me. Instead, he would have punished the backbiters and the liars, the ones who corrupt the good. In this case, the governor would have a duty to punish them. But he tortured me because he did not recognize the truth of the matter.

Caliph Harun al-Rashid jailed and tortured Yahya for the betrayal committed by the Barmakids, not by him. He assisted the Caliph in protecting the provinces. The Caliph thought that the betrayal by the Barmakids was also a betrayal by Yahya, so he tortured him in jail. Likewise, the governor thought that these lies and false accusations coming from those backbiters and liars are true, even though they were most untruthful lies.

Everything that I own, including buildings, furniture, books purchased in Dagestan for 8,000 piastres, farm animals, and the rest, remains in Ra's al-'Ayn in the custody of Tawfiq Efendi, the deputy of Ya'qub Bey. He told my children, when he sent them to me, "Do not sell or carry anything from your belongings with you because you are coming back to Ra's al-'Ayn after one or two months." Some of my children remained with our property in my house in Ra's al-'Ayn, trusting what Tawfiq Efendi had said. But I have been living in this town of Egin with my children for six and a half months. I did not receive permission from the governor to return or not to return. I have little money left to last through this month. No one supports me in this country. The reason for my many expenses is that everything, including bread, firewood, and charcoal, is expensive in this town. It is not easy to do agriculture in this town because the land is rocky. People in this town are craftsmen, and I have no such skills to make a living. How can I live with my poor children in this town?

I am appealing to you in the name of the One who elevated the tribulations of Prophet Ayyub, to deliver me from my misfortunes. No one can do it except you. In the name of the One who returned Yusuf to Ya'qub, please return me to my poor relatives, who remain in the town of Ra's al-'Ayn. In the name of the One who gave Yahya to Zakariya, please order my release.

If you free me, it will neither diminish nor increase your authority, and [I will pray that] Almighty Allah would increase your wealth day by day in the name of the master of the messengers [*sayyid al-mursalin*; i.e. the Prophet Muhammad].

Written on the 16th day of the month of *dhu-l-qa'da* in the year 1286 [February 17, 1870].

Signature: Your weak servant, the dirt of your feet, Jantemir, chief of muhajirs living in Ra's al-'Ayn.

Further Reading

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