

ROUNDTABLE

SOVIET–ARAB LINKAGES AND MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

Hijra from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union: Middle East Routes of Muslim Displacement

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In 1901, Cemaleddin Dağstani, a newly enrolled student at a madrasa in Bursa, sent a letter to his family in the district of Quba (now in Azerbaijan) in the Russian Empire. He excitedly shared what he had witnessed during his journey to the Ottoman Empire. Upon crossing the Russo–Ottoman border from Batumi (now Batumi, Georgia) to Rize, he was met by Ottoman officials who registered him as a *muhajir* (refugee or immigrant). Alongside other *muhajirs* from Russia, including Circassians, Dagestanis, Tatars, and Muslim Georgians, he boarded a state ferry to Istanbul. In seven days, he arrived at the Ottoman capital. He recalled meeting Muslim refugees from Bulgaria, Greece, and Habsburg-occupied Bosnia, and Muslim subjects of the British, French, and German colonial empires. The lion's share of *muhajirs*, however, like Cemaleddin, were former Russian subjects. In his letter, Cemaleddin marveled that at times of need Muslims from all over the world sought and found refuge in the Ottoman domains.¹

This essay provides an overview of Muslim displacement from Crimea and the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire and from Central Asia to Afghanistan and Iran. Between the late 18th century and the mid-1920s, over two million Muslims left the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. These displacements were primarily driven by tsarist and Soviet conquest, ethnic cleansing, and social reforms that transformed the occupied regions. I further reflect on how the study of Muslim migrations from Russia and the Soviet Union enriches Middle Eastern studies and on promising research avenues for scholars of the Middle East and the broader Muslim world.

Displacements in the tsarist and Soviet eras are rarely studied within one framework, partially a historiographical legacy of drawing a hard line at 1917. Yet those displacements are tied together through coercion of the state and by virtue of many refugees considering their forced migration to have been *hijra*. The term *hijra* denotes the journey of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Yathrib (Medina) to preserve and grow the nascent community of believers in 622 CE. The Prophet's followers are known in Arabic as *muhājir* (pl. *muhājirūn*). In the following centuries, many Muslim jurists interpreted *hijra*, or migration from a non-Muslim country to a Muslim one to preserve their faith, as a religious obligation. By the 19th century, *hijra* became an anticolonial movement of sorts, as European empires occupied

¹ National Archive of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət Tarix Arxivı, Baku) f. 45, op. 1, d. 35 (1901–02), ll. 22 (Ottoman Turkish), 17–17ob (Russian translation).

many Muslim territories. Muslims fleeing for safety to the Ottoman Empire described themselves as *muhājir* (*muhacir* in Ottoman Turkish). *Hijra*, which is often misunderstood as a voluntary movement, was nothing of the kind in the modern era. The language of *hijra* preserved its salience into the 20th and 21st centuries for new generations of Muslim refugees from Central Asia, South Asia, the Balkans, and beyond.

The first major refugee crisis in late Ottoman history was a Crimean one. In 1774, the Russian Empire forced the Ottoman Empire to acknowledge the Crimean Khanate's independence, effectively turning Crimea into a Russian protectorate. In 1783, Russia annexed Crimea and commenced its colonization by Slavic settlers at the expense of indigenous Muslim and Jewish communities of the peninsula.² Following Russia's annexation, between 150,000 and 200,000 Crimean and Nogai Tatars moved to the Ottoman Empire, including the khanate elites and those unwilling to live under tsarist rule and non-Muslim laws.³ The second mass Crimean displacement occurred after the end of the Crimean War of 1853–56. About 200,000 Crimean and Nogai Tatars fled for Ottoman Anatolia and the Balkans, fearing Russian reprisals for their perceived assistance to the Allied troops of France, Britain, and the Ottoman Empire during the war.⁴ Most refugees settled close to the Black Sea coast of Anatolia and the Balkans.⁵ In places like Dobruja, now split between Romania and Bulgaria, Crimean *muhajirs* formed a plurality in many districts, with Crimean culture shaping the identity of the region to this day. For the Ottoman government, this refugee migration served as a warning for things to come as Russia accelerated its southward expansion.

Between the 1850s and World War I, about a million Muslims from the North Caucasus left as refugees for the Ottoman Empire.⁶ Over a half of them were western Circassians, who were expelled or prompted to flee during the final years of the Caucasus War of 1817–64, which Russia waged against indigenous Muslim communities. The Russian military burnt Circassian villages to prompt a mass flight of refugees to the coast; up to 90 percent of the western Circassian population fled to the Ottoman Empire in what constituted ethnic cleansing or genocide.⁷ Muslim emigration from the Caucasus continued after the war. Many eastern Circassians, Karachays, Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Ossetians, Avars, Dargins, and others departed for the Ottoman Empire by World War I. Some fled after failed anticolonial uprisings, notably in Chechnya in 1864 and in Chechnya and Dagestan in 1877; many were pushed out through land reforms and mass immigration of Russian, Ukrainian, and other Christian settlers; and others left because of fears of conscription and suppression of their religious freedoms.⁸

² See Kelly O'Neill, *Claiming Crimea: A History of Catherine the Great's Southern Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

³ Alan W. Fisher, "Emigration of Muslims from the Russian Empire in the Years after the Crimean War," *Jahrbucher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 35 (1987): 356–71, 356–57n3.

⁴ 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, no. 1 (2000): 79–108, 79; and Mara Kozelsky, *Crimea in War and Transformation* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 8.

⁵ See Hakan Kırımlı, *Türkiye'deki Kırım Tatar ve Nogay Köy Yerleşimleri* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2012).

⁶ Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024), 23–55, estimates on 48–49.

⁷ National Historical Archive of Georgia (Sakartvelos sakhelmtsipo saistorio arkivi, Tbilisi) f. 416, op. 3, d. 1148, ll. 40b–120b (1863); d. 1177, ll. 1–199 (1863); d. 1190, ll. 1–25 (1864).

⁸ See Bedri Habiçoğlu, *Kafkasya'dan Anadolu'ya Göçler* (Istanbul: Nart Yayıncılık, 1993); Anzor V. Kushkhabiev, *Cherkesskaia diaspora v arabskikh stranakh: XIX–XX vv.* (Nalchik: KBNTs RAN, 1997); and Muhammad Khayr Mamsir Batsaj, *al-Mawsu'a al-Tarikhiyya li-l-Umma al-Sharkasiyya "al-Adigha": min al-Alf al-'Ashir ma qabla al-Milad ila al-Alf al-Thalith ma b'ada al-Milad*, 7 vols. (Amman, Jordan: Dar al-Wa'il, 2009).

Many Muslims from the South Caucasus also became refugees. About 19,342 Abkhazians left after the uprising of 1866, and 30,000 to 50,000 Abkhazians fled to Anatolia during the Russo–Ottoman War of 1877–78.⁹ Between 1878 and 1882, 111,202 Muslims, including Turks, Kurds, Karapapakhs, and Turkmens, received permission to leave Russian-occupied Batum, Kars, and Ardahan for the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰

In response to the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Crimean Tatar and Circassian refugees, the Ottoman government founded the Refugee Commission (Muhacirin Komisyonu) in 1860. The commission implemented the Ottoman refugee regime, built around the Ottoman commitment to protect Muslims seeking refuge.¹¹ In addition to free land and exemptions from taxation and military service, guaranteed by the Ottoman Immigration Law of 1857, the Refugee Commission provided financial aid, grain, and agricultural tools to help refugees set up their farms and survive their first winter.¹² The commission grew in size and efficiency through the first Circassian refugee crisis of 1863–65 and the Russo–Ottoman War of 1877–78, followed by the second Circassian refugee crisis of 1878–80, when Circassian refugees who had been resettled in the Balkans fled to Anatolia and the Levant. It was officials of the Refugee Commission whom Cemaleddin Dağistani met upon crossing the Russo–Ottoman border in 1901. By then, the commission had evolved into one of the world's largest resettlement agencies, having settled several generations of Muslim refugees from the Caucasus, Crimea, Crete, and the Balkans.¹³

Hijra continued in the Soviet era, albeit from another region. Between 1917 and 1926, about 480,000 Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz fled Central Asia primarily for Afghanistan, and some for Iran.¹⁴ The Russian civil war of 1917–22 resulted in not merely swapping tsarist authority for a Soviet one in Central Asia but also in expanding Soviet rule farther south. In 1920, the Red Army occupied and abolished the Emirate of Bukhara (1785–1920) and the Khanate of Khiva (1511–1920), which had been protectorates of the Russian Empire but retained sovereignty and outlived tsardom. The destruction of Bukhara was particularly violent, with Soviet bombardment destroying about a fifth of the city. According to oral recollections, Muslim religious authorities in Bukhara preached to the population after the Bolshevik conquest: “The *hijra* is a holy obligation now.”¹⁵ The conquest of Bukhara and Khiva precipitated a mass flight. Many Turkmen communities crossed the border into Iran's Khorasan. Most refugees fled to Afghanistan, which after the fall of the Ottoman Empire was seen by many pious Sunni Muslims as the last legitimate Islamic state.

In the 1920s, Soviet authorities nationalized land and confiscated large estates, abolished shari'a courts and waqfs, closed mosques and madrasas, and instituted the unveiling

⁹ Georgii A. Dzdziariia, *Makhadzhirstvo i problemy istorii Abkhazii XIX stoletia* (Sukhumi: Alashara, 1975), 278–95, 356–80.

¹⁰ Some stayed put, others emigrated and then returned, and many left without authorization; Candan Badem, *Çarlık Yönetiminde Kars, Ardahan, Artvin 1878–1910* (Istanbul: Aras Yayıncılık, 2018), 154–55, 215.

¹¹ Hamed-Troyansky, *Empire of Refugees*, 56–86.

¹² Presidential State Archives of the Republic of Turkey, Ottoman Archive (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı, Osmanlı Arşivi, Istanbul) HR.İD 24/23, f. 3, 25 February 1857.

¹³ See David Cameron Cuthell Jr., “The Muhacirin Komisyonu: An Agent in the Transformation of Ottoman Anatolia, 1860–1866” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2005); and Ella Fratantuono, *Governing Migration in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024).

¹⁴ In total, 40,000 Tajiks and Uzbeks left the Surkhandarya region for Afghanistan in the early 1920s; 7,500 Kyrgyz left for Afghanistan's Badakhshan and Qataghan in the first half of the 1920s; by early 1926, 225,305 Turkmens from Karakum and eastern Bukhara settled in northwestern Afghanistan; and, by late 1926, 206,800 individuals, mostly Tajiks and Uzbeks and some Kyrgyz and Turkmens, left eastern Bukhara for Afghanistan; Kamoludin N. Abdullaev, *Ot Sin'zsziania do Khorasana: iz istorii sredneaziatskoi emigratsii XX veka* (Dushanbe, Tajikistan: Irfon, 2009), 348–61.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

campaign, or *hudzhum*, in Soviet Asia.¹⁶ These reforms prompted further Muslim emigration and spurred a protracted war between the Soviet authorities and local militias, whom the government denigratingly called *basmachi* (Uzbek: bandits). Those transnational anti-Soviet militias operating between Soviet Central Asia and Iran and Afghanistan facilitated the flight and resettlement of new groups of Central Asian refugees in northern provinces of Iran and Afghanistan. By some estimates, by late 1926 every fourth resident of Tajikistan had fled as a refugee to Afghanistan.¹⁷

The overall Muslim emigration from late tsarist and early Soviet Central Asia approached a million people. In addition to those fleeing former Bukharan and Khivan territories, about 300,000 Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uyghurs escaped to Xinjiang during the violent suppression of the Central Asian revolt of 1916, and about 200,000 Kazakhs moved to Xinjiang to escape the Kazakh famine of 1930–33.¹⁸ In later years, many Central Asian—or “western Turkestani”—*muhajirs* moved to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, Syria, and Jordan.¹⁹

The displacements from Crimea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia are rooted in their local contexts. And yet underlying reasons for mass flight were the same: imperial expansion, violence against indigenous populations, and social reforms, including land redistribution. Although rooted in religious persecution and desire to preserve a Muslim identity, *hijra* in the 19th and 20th centuries encompassed various reasons to flee. Many refugees embraced the language of *hijra* and called themselves *muhajir* because it was familiar and readily available Islamic terminology and also because the framework of emigration to preserve one’s faith fit their circumstances of escaping occupation and non-Muslim rule. The language of *hijra* sometimes facilitated their acceptance by host states and new neighbors. *Hijra* is not incompatible with return migration. Many refugees hoped to, and tried to, return home, despite Saint Petersburg’s and Moscow’s attempts to seal the border.²⁰

Muslim migrations from Russia and the Soviet Union are critical for understanding the contemporary Middle East (defined in its broadest terms) and offer much potential for further research. First, *muhajirs* transformed demographics and economies across a vast space from the Balkans to Afghanistan. Although it may conventionally be assumed that refugee migration had influenced the making of modern states and nations in the region, the specifics of that impact—intellectual, political, infrastructural, culinary—require much more research. *Muhajirs* often added ethnolinguistic diversity to societies that were losing their religious diversity through the genocidal logic of a homogenizing nation–state. The scholarship on refugee migration is important if only for countering nationalist and nativist narratives in Turkey, the Balkans, the Arab world, Israel, and elsewhere.

Second, migration from Russia and the Soviet Union challenges conventional geographies of the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, typically understood in their 20th-century national boundaries and reified as such in scholarship through area studies funding and language training. Pushing spatial boundaries allows us to reconstruct how our historical subjects understood their geographies. Recently, historians have revealed astonishing

¹⁶ Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Abdullaev, *Ot Sin'tsiania do Khorasana*, 357–58.

¹⁸ Sarah Cameron, *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 42, 123.

¹⁹ See Gulnara M. Mendikulova, *Istoricheskie sud'by kazakhskoi diaspori: proiskhozhdenie i razvitie* (Almaty, Kazakhstan: Gylm, 1997); Shodmon A. Ha'itov, *Ўzbek muhozhirligi tarikhi (1917–1991 йиллар)* (Tashkent, Uzbekistan: Abu Matbuot-Konsalt, 2008).

²⁰ On return migration, see James H. Meyer, “Immigration, Return, and the Politics of Citizenship: Russian Muslims in the Ottoman Empire, 1860–1914,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 1 (2007): 15–32.

mobility between the Russian and Ottoman empires. Pilgrims, intellectuals, farmers, enslaved people, and prisoners of war traversed the two realms, tying histories of the Middle East and the Turkic, Slavic, and Caucasus worlds.²¹ I think of a space inhabited by Crimean and North Caucasian refugees and migrants as the Russo–Ottoman Muslim world.²² We can conceptualize the Russian–Arab worlds, in which transregional mobility and cultural exchange accelerated during the Cold War.²³ Through the lens of migration, one could think of the Black Sea region as a distinct geographic unit of analysis, on par with the Braudelian Mediterranean, or even of the Black-Caspian-Aral Sea world; and ponder over an enduring Turkestan legacy across five post-Soviet republics, China’s Xinjiang region, and northern Iran and Afghanistan.

For new students in the field of Ottoman and Middle Eastern history, which has been heavily archival, looking at refugees from the north might encourage methodological innovations. Collecting oral histories of *muhajirs* and their descendants holds much promise for social and cultural history. Building an oral archive of displacement is especially important because few refugee voices make it into the archival record, and those that do are often carefully curated. Environmental histories of migration are another way to advance scholarship in the field.²⁴ We have much to learn about how refugees transformed landscapes around their settlements; how climate, water, and soil shaped geographies of resettlement; and what new crops and agricultural knowledge *muhajirs* brought with them. Likewise, much work remains to be done on the political economy of migration. Refugees often transformed land usage practices, built new neighborhoods, and reinvigorated local economies in the Middle East. Finally, refugee history is particularly well positioned for public humanities and communal engagement. In countries that lost many people to displacement, notably in the Caucasus and Central Asia, the topic is tied to diasporic engagement and repatriation and collective grappling with imperial legacy and decolonization, especially amid Russia’s full-scale assault on Ukraine. Meanwhile, issues of refugee integration and return remain in the public eye throughout the Middle East, which tragically both produces and hosts some of the world’s largest refugee communities. In countries like Turkey—where every other family descends from *muhajirs*—refugee histories remain deeply personal.

The world of *muhajirs* that young student Cemaleddin Dağistani got a glimpse of in Istanbul at the turn of the 20th century manifests, through refugee displacement and survival, the deep and enduring ties between the Middle East and many regions of inner and northern Eurasia.

²¹ James H. Meyer, *Turks across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856–1914* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014); Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Andrew Robarts, *Migration and Disease in the Black Sea Region: Ottoman-Russian Relations in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Will Smiley, *From Slaves to Prisoners of War: The Ottoman Empire, Russia, and International Law* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018); Lâle Can, *Spiritual Subjects: Central Asian Pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj at the End of Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

²² Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, “Letters from the Ottoman Empire: Migration from the Caucasus and Russia’s Pan-Islamic Panic,” *Slavic Review* 82, no. 2 (2023): 311–33.

²³ Eileen Kane, Masha Kirasirova, and Margaret Litvin, eds. *Russian-Arab Worlds: A Documentary History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023).

²⁴ For recent excellent environmental histories of migration, see Chris Gratien, *The Unsettled Plain: An Environmental History of the Late Ottoman Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022); and Samuel Dolbee, *Locusts of Power: Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023).