


ROUNDTABLE

At the Crossroads of What? Refugee Histories, the Middle East, and the South Caucasus

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The “crossroads” is a recurring trope in popular and academic writing on the South Caucasus. This trope can conjure simplistic explanatory frameworks of timeless “silk road” connectivity, or of the region as a meeting point of East and West, democracy and authoritarianism, or Christianity and Islam. However, it also is evocative of the powerful ways that the movement of people, goods, and ideas across the region have shaped its past and present. In this contribution I explore how histories of migration and refugees connect the South Caucasus and the Middle East, and what these histories may tell us about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Borderlands and Border-Crossing Histories

In the introduction to this roundtable Sossie Kasbarian discusses the marginal, insecure position occupied by Armenia and by Armenians in Middle Eastern studies. To an extent, this also has been true of Armenians in histories of the Russian imperial and Soviet worlds. For more than two decades Ronald Grigor Suny’s *Looking toward Ararat* seemed to stand alone, representing Armenia in a wave of histories of Soviet “nationalities.”¹ In recent years the situation has shifted. This shift is driven by scholarship which centers Armenians in analyses of the workings of imperial power, such as Stephan Badalyan Reigg’s *Russia’s Entangled Embrace*, or rethinks Soviet nationalities policies through examining experiences of non-titular “minorities,” such as Krista Goff’s *Nested Nationalism*.² These historiographical developments reflect broader concerns with decentering the field and call for decolonial perspectives on the former Soviet space that have assumed greater urgency since the Russian invasion of Ukraine.³

The shifts described above have developed alongside examinations of interactions between the Russian imperial/Soviet worlds and the Ottoman Empire/Middle East. In 2008 James Meyer reflected that despite multiple “parallels and connections” between the Russian and Ottoman imperial pasts, there had been relatively “little cross fertilization”

¹ Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993).

² Stephen Badalyan Reigg, *Russia’s Entangled Embrace: The Tsarist Empire and the Armenians, 1801–1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020); Krista A. Goff, *Nested Nationalism: Making and Unmaking Nations in the Soviet Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

³ Botakoz Kassymbekova and Aminat Chokobaeva, “On Writing Soviet History of Central Asia: Frameworks, Challenges, Prospects,” *Central Asian Survey* 40, no. 4 (2021): 483–503; Olesya Kromeychuk, “Where is Ukraine on the Mental Map of the Academic Community?” Keynote Lecture, BASEES conference, Cambridge, UK, 8 April 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJthjB1TKOY>.

between their historiographies.⁴ In subsequent years research in this area has blossomed, examining cross-border Islamic communities as well as intersections between the “modernizing” regimes of the Turkish Republic and Soviet Russia.⁵ In 2019 Alexander Balisteri observed that “structural, disciplinary, topographic, ideological, and linguistic hurdles remain too high for most scholars to write histories of the Caucasus that traverse geographic and temporal boundaries.”⁶ Nonetheless, histories of Ottoman and Russian, and Soviet and Turkish, interactions in the South Caucasus that also take seriously the role of regional actors, have become more common.⁷

It might be expected that Armenians, living across imperial divides and often invoked as an “archetypal” diaspora, would provide an entrance point for writing such border crossing histories. This has not always been the case. Pioneering works in Armenian modern history, not least Richard G. Hovannisian’s *Armenia on the Road to Independence* and the multivolume *Republic of Armenia* necessarily narrate a history that defies imperial divides. Other more theoretically inclined works, notably Razmik Panossian’s *The Armenians*, have meanwhile posited a multi-local development of Armenian identities across national and imperial borders.⁸ The Armenian Genocide also has occupied an important place in the historiography, addressing violence at the edges of the Ottoman, Russian, and Habsburg empires. Even so, a divide in Armenian studies seems to have endured between (a) scholarship on the Republic of Armenia situated in the field of Russian and East European Studies and focused on questions of national identity and the origin of post-Soviet conflicts, and (b) histories of the diaspora, focused on genocide and its aftermaths and the formation of diaspora communities, often situated in the framework of Middle Eastern studies.

The divide I describe is shaped by the geographical and conceptual frameworks that underpin area studies and modern history. It also is shaped by the politics and conventional boundaries of Armenian studies. Academic histories as well as popular conceptions of Armenian homeland-diaspora relations have sometimes reified the divide by emphasizing linguistic and cultural differences between Eastern (South Caucasian) and Western (Middle Eastern) Armenians. At the other end of the scale, Hourı Berberian’s *Roving Revolutionaries*, an examination of Armenian revolutionary politics across imperial borders, has unsettled this divide.⁹ This groundbreaking study has demonstrated the power of transnational methodologies and the need to consider the movements of people, goods, and ideas to better understand the modern history of Armenians and the wider South Caucasus region.

Beyond Natives and Newcomers

Since the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh arose at the end of the 1980s, it has been framed largely as a “post-Soviet” issue, one of several “frozen conflicts” at the fringes of the former USSR.¹⁰ The outbreak of renewed warfare in Nagorno-Karabakh due to an Azerbaijani offensive in September 2020 exposed the limits

⁴ James Meyer, “For the Russianist in Istanbul and the Ottomanist in Russia: A Guide to the Archives of Eurasia,” *Ab Imperio* 2008, no. 4 (2008): 281–301.

⁵ For example, Lâle Can, “Connecting People: A Central Asian Sufi Network in Turn-of-the-Century Istanbul,” *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 2 (2012): 373–401; and Samuel J. Hirst, “Soviet Orientalism across Borders,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian & Eurasian History* 18, no. 1 (2017): 35–61.

⁶ Alexander E. Balistreri, “Writer, Rebel, Soldier, Shaykh: Border Crossers in the Historiography of the Modern Caucasus,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 20, no. 2 (2019): 345–64.

⁷ For example, Etienne Peyrat, *Histoire du Caucase au XXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2020).

⁸ Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia*, 4 vols. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971–1996); Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

⁹ Hourı Berberian, *Roving Revolutionaries: Armenians and the Connected Revolutions in the Russian, Iranian, and Ottoman Worlds* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

¹⁰ See the introduction to Laurence Broers, *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

of this approach. The presence of mercenaries from Syria fighting on the side of Azerbaijan was perhaps the most prominent way in which connections with the Middle East were brought to the attention of international audiences.¹¹ However, the Turkish state's support of Azerbaijan through the provision of arms and intelligence also extended the material and symbolic boundaries of the conflict beyond the former Soviet space. For Armenians in the Armenian Republic, in Karabakh, and in the diaspora such connections rendered the temporal as well as the spatial boundaries of the conflict less clear-cut than ever.

Exclusionary national histories have flourished during the conflict over Karabakh. History writing in Armenia and Azerbaijan has been characterized by attempts to trace ever deeper roots in the region; or to determine territorial rights by establishing who counted as "natives" and who as "newcomers." This has extended beyond the realm of academic debate into popular culture and mainstream political discourse. Histories of migration have been mobilized in particular ways. For example, during the 19th century, war and shifting borders resulted in repeated population movements between the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian empires. In the North Caucasus this process was marked by the forced expulsion of Muslims into Ottoman territories. In the South Caucasus, population resettlements from the Ottoman and Russian empires in the aftermath of wars increased the overall Armenian presence in the region. This demographic shift continues to be deployed by Azerbaijani actors, in tandem with the destruction of cultural property, to erase long histories of Armenian presence in the region.¹²

Attempts to justify contemporary territorial rights through historical narratives in this way are a dead end. However, paying attention to the dynamics of displacement and resettlement in the 19th-century South Caucasus can offer other insights. Recent research on migration and resettlement both within and between the Ottoman and Russian empires provides a means to reframe the case of the South Caucasus. These histories invite consideration of resettlement not only in terms of the expulsion of "undesirable" groups, but also strategies for transforming natural environments or social and economic conditions.¹³ Connecting Armenia and the South Caucasus to the wider histories of migration shows that its modern history was not simply shaped by an internal logic of "ancient hatreds" but was very much a product of transimperial practices of managing mobility and fixing borders during an "age of migration." Situating the region in this broader picture does not necessitate generalization. Instead, we might ask how the particularities of the Caucasus, or of Armenians, may nuance the broad sweep of global or imperial histories.

Recent historiography on migration in both the Ottoman and Russian contexts also has echoed broader trends in migration history by approaching migrants as historical actors rather than pawns of empires.¹⁴ It has explored how people on the move for various reasons have played an active role in rearticulations of identity and intercommunal relations, even in the most difficult circumstances. Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky's account of voluntary conversions of Muslims to the Armenian Apostolic Church in the 19th century provides a striking example of the uncertain boundaries of religious, ethnic and legal identities. At the same time, it foregrounds the impact of migration on the region's social and economic

¹¹ See, for example, Bethan McKernan, "Syrian Rebel Fighters Prepare to Deploy to Azerbaijan in Sign of Turkey's Ambition," *Guardian*, 28 September 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/28/syrian-rebel-fighters-prepare-to-deploy-to-azerbaijan-in-sign-of-turkeys-ambition>.

¹² See "European Parliament Resolution of 10 March 2022 on the Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Nagorno-Karabakh," https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0080_EN.html

¹³ Nicholas Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Peter Holquist, "'In Accord with State Interests and the People's Wishes': The Technocratic Ideology of Imperial Russia's Resettlement Administration," *Slavic Review* (2010): 151–79; Chris Gratien, "The Ottoman Quagmire: Malaria, Swamps, and Settlement in the Late Ottoman Mediterranean," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 583–604.

¹⁴ On Russia, for example, see Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Leslie Page Moch, *Broad Is My Native Land: Repertoires and Regimes of Migration in Russia's Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

relations.¹⁵ Histories that center migrant experiences and complicate ethnic and religious boundaries in this way are not simply idealistic. They rarely provide an account of a past free of violence, nor do they offer easy solutions to contemporary conflicts. They do, however, create space for a more nuanced account of the historical experiences of the mobile, intermingled populations and overlapping attachments to territory that have characterized the South Caucasus.

New and Old Histories of Displacement

As a Russian-brokered peace agreement brought the second Karabakh war to its conclusion in November 2020, the Armenians of Kelbajar, faced with the return of the territory in which they lived to Azerbaijani rule, prepared to leave. They represented a relatively small number of the 91,000 Armenians displaced by this conflict.¹⁶ Still, images of these families burning their homes in desperation captured the attention of the international media.¹⁷ Twenty-seven years previously, Azerbaijani and Kurdish refugees had fled the same region in appalling conditions in the face of an Armenian offensive.¹⁸ The 60,000 people who fled Kelbajar were among one million people who lost their homes as a result of the conflict between 1988 and 1994, around six hundred thousand of these Azerbaijanis.¹⁹ During the years that followed a relatively small number of Armenians, some of whom had themselves been displaced from Azerbaijan during the Karabakh war, began to settle in some of these territories.

Although these two flights may appear to mirror one another, they also are connected to deeper histories of displacement. Understanding these histories requires making connections beyond Armenia and Azerbaijan. In particular, it requires deeper interrogation of the consequences of the Armenian Genocide for the South Caucasus. That the remembrance and denial of genocide has played an important role in shaping Armenian understandings of the Karabakh conflict is clear.²⁰ However, because histories of the genocide are most often framed in terms of Ottoman history, its experience and aftermaths for Armenians (and others) in the Russian territories of the Caucasus have been accorded much less attention. To take the example most pertinent for this essay, most histories of displacement and refugee relief in the aftermath of the genocide have focused on the Middle East, in particular Syria and Lebanon. However, South Caucasus also was a site of mass displacement.

From late 1914, hundreds of thousands of Armenians fled war and genocide in the Ottoman or Russian borderlands, seeking shelter in the Russian territories of the Caucasus.²¹ Understanding the dynamics that followed requires going beyond the conventional borders of the history of the genocide. Across the region Greeks, Kurds, Azerbaijanis (referred to at the time as Tatars), Georgians, and others all experienced mass violence and forced displacement, to different degrees. In some cases, Armenians

¹⁵ Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, "Becoming Armenian: Religious Conversions in the Late Imperial South Caucasus," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 63, no. 1 (2021): 242–72.

¹⁶ By the end of 2021, 26,725 individuals remained in a "refugee-like" situation in Armenia as a result of the Karabakh conflict; "Armenia," UNHCR UK, accessed 31 August 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/armenia.html>.

¹⁷ See, for example, "Azerbaijan Extends Armenian Pullout Deadline from Kalbajar," Al Jazeera, 15 November 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/15/armenia-cedes-disputed-land-to-azerbaijan-after-peace-deal>.

¹⁸ See Louise Hidalgo's interview for BBC World Service's *Witness History* with the photojournalist Khalid Askerov on his flight from Kelbajar in April 1993; "The Nagorno-Karabakh War," BBC *Witness History*, 4 April 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p04y7szn>. See also Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 211–13.

¹⁹ Discussion of the contested numbers of refugees and IDPs is provided in Broers, *Armenia and Azerbaijan*, 122–23.

²⁰ Harut'yun Tirani Marut'yan, *Iconography of Armenian Identity*, *Anthropology of Memory* 2 (Yerevan: Gitutyun, 2009).

²¹ Asya Darbinyan, "Recovering the Voices of Armenian Refugees in Transcaucasia: Accounts of Suffering and Survival," *Armenian Review* 57, no. 1–2 (2020): 1–36. See also Verzhine Svazlyan et al., *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eye-Witness Survivors* (Yerevan: Gitoutoyun Pub. House, 2011).

were perpetrators as well as victims of violence. As they fought to define the borders of the First Republic after 1918, Armenian forces violently expelled local Tatar communities in Nakichevan and other regions. Examining how war, imperial collapse, and state formation shaped these patterns of violence unsettles contemporary narratives about victims, perpetrators, and belonging. Paying attention to trajectories of refugees and patterns of resettlement also reveals the limits of understanding Ottoman/Russian or Soviet/Middle East histories as distinct. Instead, it underscores the importance of connecting these histories for understanding both individual lives and the development of states and societies in the years that followed war and genocide.

Ottoman Armenian refugees who arrived in the Caucasus during and after the genocide helped shape the political and cultural development of the Soviet Armenian Republic.²² However, although the origins of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are often sought in the 1920s, they are usually identified in Soviet border-making rather than the aftermaths of mass displacement. During the 1920s the Soviet governments of the Caucasus may have promoted a narrative of ethnic harmony, blaming past conflict on the evils of imperialism, but the situation was more complex. My current research considers questions such as how, when, and where refugees were resettled, and with what consequences. How did those who had been displaced negotiate belonging in new Soviet states, or in reconstituted towns or villages? How did neighbors, new or old, coexist in the aftermath of violence? These questions invite engagement with the growing literature on mobility, territorialization, minorities, and the making of states in the post-Ottoman Middle East.²³

A century of migration and diasporic life has resulted in layered connections between the Republic of Armenia and the Middle East. The Syrian Armenians who have settled in the Republic of Armenia since 2011 are the most recent of a series of arrivals from diaspora communities over the course of the last century.²⁴ Historical research on the “repatriations” of diaspora Armenians in the 1940s has demonstrated how Armenians from the diaspora have shaped Soviet Armenian society and culture, but it also has highlighted deep tensions over homeland and belonging.²⁵ This helps contextualize the fractures and solidarities between the republic and the diaspora that the Karabakh conflict produces. Yet the return of Armenians is only part of the story of how population movement has shaped the South Caucasus. It also is necessary to consider those who chose, or were forced, to leave Armenia. Such histories, for example the resettlement of Azerbaijanis that occurred in parallel with the repatriations of the 1940s, are deeply contentious and have become bound up with competing narratives of victimhood.²⁶ Situating the South Caucasus in the global dynamics of displacement, decolonization, and nation-making after the Second World War provides one way forward.²⁷

Which Histories Matter?

Existing research has already documented the causes of civilian displacement during the conflict, from military operations to communal violence and strategic ethnic cleansing. It

²² For example, see Hovannes Nazaretyan’s “How Genocide Survivors Made Yerevan Great,” *EVN Report*, 23 April 2022, <https://evnreport.com/magazine-issues/how-genocide-survivors-made-yerevan-great>.

²³ Among many, see Rebecca Bryant, *Post-Ottoman Coexistence: Sharing Space in the Shadow of Conflict* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016); and Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

²⁴ Armenuhi Stepanyan, *XX dari hayrenadarzut'yune hayots' in k'nut'yan hamarkargum* (Yerevan: Gitutyn, 2010).

²⁵ Maike Lehmann, “A Different Kind of Brothers: Exclusion and Partial Integration after Repatriation to a Soviet Homeland,” *Ab Imperio* 2012, no. 3: 171–211.

²⁶ Goff, in *Nested Nationalism* (75–81), shows how Armenian repatriation and the resettlement of Azerbaijanis were entwined and contextualized this within Soviet postwar nation-building.

²⁷ For example, see Pamela Ballinger, “Entangled or ‘Extruded’ Histories? Displacement, National Refugees, and Repatriation after the Second World War,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25, no. 3 (2012): 366–86.

also has traced the ways that states have used refugees to reinforce claims to territory, and highlighted the complexities of return. Yet the experiences of the displaced remain much less prominent in this scholarship than geopolitical analyses. Almost thirty-five years after the outbreak of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it is worth considering what it might mean to write a refugee history of the conflict. Accounts of refugee experiences, for example of “village exchange,” and of the less than warm welcome sometimes offered to refugees in Armenia and Azerbaijan, certainly have the power to unsettle binary narratives.²⁸ However, it also is important to remember that displacement can generate powerful narratives of national history that reinforce rather than challenge conceptions of belonging and difference, sustaining conflict.²⁹ Refugee narratives should not be regarded as a means to resolve conflicting accounts of the past.

Thus far the experiences of those displaced by the Karabakh conflicts have, for the most part, been addressed by those working at the intersection of peace-building or civil society initiatives and academic research.³⁰ Such work can be very fruitful. However, historians of displacement also have drawn attention to the dangers of instrumentalizing refugee lives or reducing them to “lessons” for policymakers.³¹ Before embarking on such a project it is necessary to reflect on the implications of different kinds of “outsiders,” including myself, who tell the stories of those forced to flee. We must ask who we are telling these stories for, especially in the context of authoritarian governments and of profound political upheaval in Azerbaijan and Armenia respectively. Does the intersection between academic histories, the policy world, and public audiences in the South Caucasus represent a crossroads we are still inadequately prepared to navigate?

²⁸ Sevil Huseynova, Arsen Hakobyan, and Sergei Rumyantsev, *Beyond the Karabakh Conflict: The Story of Village Exchange* (Tbilisi, Georgia: Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2012); Shushanik Ghazaryan, “We Are Strangers among Our Own People,” in *Women’s Everyday Lives in War and Peace in the South Caucasus*, ed. Ulrike Ziemer (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

²⁹ Peter Gatrell, “Refugees—What’s Wrong with History?” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 30, no. 2 (2017): 170–89.

³⁰ Conciliation Resources, *Forced Displacement in the Nagorno Karabakh Conflict: Return and Its Alternatives* (London: Conciliation Resources, 2011), <https://www.c-r.org/learning-hub/forced-displacement-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-return-and-its-alternatives>.

³¹ Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell, “What Is Refugee History, Now?” *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 1 (2022): 5.

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