




## EDITOR INTRODUCTION

# Special issue Editors' Introduction: narrating exile in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman world

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I leaned my head against the seat and closed my eyes. I was leaving behind a life of struggle. The people for whom I'd sacrificed so much faced their most difficult hour, and I lacked the freedom to defend them. My heart ached. I felt the warmth of tears on my lips.

Sabiha Sertel, *Roman Gibi* (Sertel 2020 [1969]).<sup>1</sup>

When Sabiha Sertel boarded a plane with her family for Paris in the summer of 1950, fleeing relentless state persecution, she probably did not suspect that she would not see her country again. Eighteen years later, the pioneering journalist passed away in exile in the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), but not before completing her captivating memoir of an activist life spent in perpetual movement in and between collapsing empires and ascending nation-states (Sertel 2020 [1969]). The specter of exile has cast a profound shadow over modern history, affecting the lives not only of prominent figures such as Sertel, but of countless individuals and communities too, most of whom remain nameless and unremembered today. Mass displacement has triggered seismic shifts in political, economic, and social landscapes worldwide. The tremendous turmoil in the period 1912–1948 in particular, spanning the Balkan Wars and the Nakba, produced wave upon wave of forced migrations that reshaped global demographics, borders, and societies. Dispossessed communities had to endure hardships, discrimination, and renewed threats to their lives in unfamiliar territories. In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, anticolonial wars of liberation, inter-imperialist competition, state terror against dissidents, and sectarian conflicts caused further mass flight and expulsion.

While intergenerational trauma has long been the standard drift of scholarship, historians are increasingly turning toward the resilience of uprooted communities. Scholars pay attention now to how groups of refugees and exiles have contributed, in often creative but rarely acknowledged ways, to their host societies, infusing them with diverse perspectives and talents that have driven cultural, political, and intellectual change. Thinkers and leaders for whom exile was fundamentally

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<sup>1</sup> The quote is taken from the recent English edition of Sertel's famous memoir, expertly introduced and translated by David Selim Sayers and Evrim Emir-Sayers. See Sertel (2020, 240).

formative – from Rosa Luxemburg to Albert Einstein, Mohandas Gandhi to Ruhollah Khomeini, or Nazım Hikmet to Ghassan Kanafani – have left indelible marks on history. Displaced communities' struggles for justice and homeland preservation have also influenced geopolitical strategies and international norms. Diasporic activism – such as that of Armenians in France or Kurds in Sweden – offers many cases in point. Conversely, exile sometimes fosters political radicalization and new conflicts, as seen with extremist groups formed from dislocated populations.

Exile is not an alien theme to the history of the Ottoman Empire (Blumi 2015 [2013]; Gorman and Kasbarian 2015; Kasaba 2009). Flight, exile, expulsion, and forced population transfer have deeply affected societies and peoples in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman landscape (Kirişçi 2008). It is through the prism of exile that one can recognize the shared and often painful histories that connect these different displaced individuals and communities. Since premodern times renegades, rebels, and heretics traversed the frontiers allegedly separating Ottoman subjects from their European neighbors. The Empire had long branded itself as a sanctuary for persecuted minorities, and it continued to attract droves of European “dissidents” throughout the long nineteenth century (Dominik 2015; Firges 2017; Landweber 2016; Tóth 2014). Some sought refuge from persecution or hoped to further their revolutionary or religious gospel; others hoped to organize new bases for resistance. Exile has been a defining thread of Ottoman and post-Ottoman history, from Sephardim fleeing Christian purges in their Iberian homelands to settle in Ottoman Salonica, to Young Turks escaping imprisonment and traveling to Paris and London, to Armenians fleeing genocide (Dakhliya and Kaiser 2013; Hamed-Troyansky 2024; Hanioglu 1995; Öztan and Yenen 2021; Quella-Villéger 2011; Sayım 2022; Vincent and Dakhliya 2011). Taken together, these exiles represented a motley group, including religious militants, converts, freedom fighters, rebel leaders, former criminals and convicts, political radicals, republicans, constitutionalists, avant-garde artists, nationalists, socialists, and anarchists. Some stayed temporarily before moving onward; others settled permanently.

How to read the itineraries, experiences, interactions, and (self-)narratives of these individuals and communities? How to link their stories to larger historical transformations and processes? How to narrate the reciprocal dynamic between exile and host society and their possible after-effects for the country of origin? And how, ultimately, did the Empire become a container, a catalyst, and a channel for exile and refuge? These are some of the questions that we first presented to the attendees of the first international conference of the Turkey Studies Network in the Low Countries (TSN), organized in 2021 in Amsterdam.<sup>2</sup> Some of the results of that fruitful encounter are collected here in this special issue.

Zooming out from the experiences of individuals and communities to macro-historical developments, one can recognize how refugee flows in and out of the Empire could also have drastically different outcomes. Migration, far from only fostering ethnonational antagonism, intercommunal breakdown, and sectarian violence – that is, the dynamics with which complacent Western observers still automatically equate the Ottoman “final century” – also influenced the formation of

<sup>2</sup> The conference's original title was “Narrating Exile in and between Europe and the Ottoman Empire/Modern Turkey” and took place between November 11 and 12, 2021.

what Ussama Makdisi has identified as a new and decidedly modern “ecumenical frame” bonding Muslims and Christians in the Ottoman Mashriq. As Makdisi (2019, 85–86) explains in his *Age of Coexistence*:

[T]he movement of nearly twenty thousand Syrian Christians to Egypt, and of nearly three hundred thousand mostly Ottoman Christian subjects to the New World, between 1860 and 1914 inadvertently bolstered the ecumenical frame. . . . [A]nd far closer to home, the various urban locales in the Ottoman Empire itself witnessed sustained interaction between Arab Muslim and Arab non-Muslim compatriots as the Ottomans transitioned from being a Muslim empire to being an empire of nominally equal citizens.

This mass emigration from Ottoman Syria and Lebanon to the Americas also contributed to the formation of large-scale Ottoman diasporas abroad. These diasporas would gradually become global, stretching from South Africa to the Americas and Oceania. The fraught histories of these expatriate communities are now being uncovered in a flurry of exciting new work (Bali 2012; Balloffet 2020; Fahrenthold 2019; Pastor 2017; Schayegh *et al.* 2016; Stein 2016).

Migration from and to the Empire and its immediate inheritors has also long been a powerful stimulant for the articulation of cultural diversification. The syncretic cultural forms that sprang from the exchange of tangible and intangible heritage – architecture, visual arts, music, literature, theater, film, oral culture, folklore, and gastronomy – complicated existing social, political, and economic boundaries within and beyond the Ottoman domains (see, among others, Cohen 2014; Dmitriev *et al.* 2019; Meyer 2014; Roberts 2015; Stein 2019). Ever more intense encounters with Western and Central Europeans, for instance, produced momentous changes in the late Ottoman urban fabric, especially but not exclusively in İstanbul (Çelik 1986; Eldem *et al.* 1999; Girardelli and Godoli 2019; Kentel 2018). As Malte Fuhrmann (2020, 4) demonstrates in his new study of eastern Mediterranean port-cities, Europe was:

not only a distant imperial center that through its great military and economic might managed to reach out into the lives of inhabitants of the marginalized periphery. It was also an intimate part of people’s everyday lives, as intimate as factors such as ethnicity or denomination.

The twentieth century would introduce new “national” realities worldwide, as well as novel strands of imperialism, tensions and ruptures between capitalism and collectivism, war and demographic engineering, and further mass migration. These in turn unleashed different culturally and ethnically homogenizing forces within the post-Ottoman lands (Gingeras 2009; Üngör 2011; Yenen 2023). Exile and displacement were, yet again, central to these histories of dissolution and reinvention. The founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal, is rarely remembered as a refugee (*muhacir*), yet he was. Born and raised in Salonica, he never returned to that city; after 1912 Ottoman Selânik would be known by its ancient name, Thessaloniki, while Kemal became known as Atatürk in 1934. Together with him, a generation of Southeastern Europeans were exiled to a rump Ottoman society in Asia during the massive transformations that accompanied the Empire’s end days (see, among others, Boeckh 1996; Mulligan *et al.* 2015; Zürcher 2005). From the

Balkans to Anatolia into the Caucasus, a century of transfer and dislocation of populations came to characterize the collective experiences of millions of imperial subject populations that Western imperialists, secessionist nationalists, and later historians increasingly sought to distinguish and confine in “recognizable” (but analytically flawed) “ethnonational” subgroups such as Circassians, Macedonians, Turks, Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds, or Syrians. Exile would also come to inform the memory politics in several post-Ottoman nation-states; or, as Isa Blumi (2015, 1) aptly notes in the opening of his *Ottoman Refugees*:

It is the precarious existence of exile—whose life is haunted by the unabated beckoning of an ever distant homeland while left wanting in a foreign land—that leaves a collective anxiety in a national polity’s memories.

The contributions gathered in this special issue explore different case studies and investigate a range of themes and foci from the broader perspective of exile and displacement. A question that recurs across these contributions, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, is how we, as historians, can narrate the exilic experience from often highly fragmented sources. All are wary of the nationalist straitjacket into which post-Ottoman successor states have often tried to frame or trivialize traumatic uprooting. As Blumi (2015, 9) writes, an “Ottoman migrant story must at all costs be freed from the political intrigues of the era in which the foundational narratives to the present-day nation-state were forged.” This themed issue presents one attempt in that direction.

Ramazan Hakkı Öztan takes us to the Danubian towns of the *fin de siècle* and tells the story of a set of forgotten Young Turk activists and their failed attempts to foment revolution. Underscoring the singular importance of Rusçuk (Ruse), Öztan counters mainstream narratives centering on Paris, Geneva, and Salonica in explaining the build up to the 1908 Young Turk revolution. He demonstrates how this Bulgarian port-city was a vibrant node in Ottoman revolutionary networks due to its high rate of diverse refugee populations and exiled revolutionaries. Öztan also emphasizes the oft-ignored limitations of radical networks and activism, filling an important gap in the literature on the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). The episodes of failed radicalism he discusses show that revolutionary cooperation was never a natural outcome, but always shaped by a complex and volatile conjuncture of revolutionary alliances and rivalries.

Displacement often intersects with a variety of other social processes, including mass protests and political activism. Uğur Peçe investigates the agency of displaced Cretan Muslims in the Empire and shows how they were a driving force behind the empire-wide Crete demonstrations between 1909 and 1911. Uncovering various journalistic iterations of “Crete-speak” and listening to the “sounds” of mass rallies, Peçe questions conventional arguments on the dominance of mainland political and intellectual refugee elites in reshaping late Ottoman society. He demonstrates instead how members of this understudied refugee community, including both activist intellectuals and, importantly, working-class actors, proved instrumental during those pivotal days of mass protest on the cusp of cataclysmic war.

The landscape of the Caucasus and the history of enslavement are powerfully fused in the prose of late Ottoman authors whose mothers were (former) slaves. Burcu

Gürsel inspects a particular form of “intimate biofiction” in which the writer is haunted by the lost Caucasian “mother/land.” Centering on Abdülhak Hamid Tarhan’s poem *Vâlidem* (ca. 1897), where the mother is remembered while Circassia is reincarnated as a “mother/land” that lost her to a new “father/land,” and the ways in which the author’s sister, poet Mihrünnisa Hanım, commemorates both their mother and their childhood nanny, who remained enslaved throughout her life, Gürsel calls attention to the intergenerational ambiguities of “late Ottoman anti-slavery literature” and its relation to the larger imperial edifice.

Using the rich and largely untapped holdings of the Oral Tradition Archive of the Centre for Asia Minor Studies in Athens Artemis Papatheodorou investigates how, after World War I and the forced population exchange, displaced Ottoman Greeks from Anatolia held on to various archeological heritage objects to retain the fragile ties to the landscapes of their homeland. While in exile in the Greek mainland they fostered their memories of Ionian antiquities to resist the Hellenization of the Greek nation-state. These “rescue archaeologies” provided the Anatolian refugees with one way to cope with the trauma of displacement. In addition, Papatheodorou highlights how the history of the archive itself was significant in the understanding of the pluriform nature of the Greek-speaking world. By capturing, storing, and filing the voices of Ottoman Greek refugees the archive made a case for a Romeic identity based on a shared history and heritage with Muslims that challenged the hegemony of the Hellenic national narrative.

The collections from the Centre for Asia Minor Studies also form the backbone of Charalampos Minasidis’s contribution. By carefully reading a rich and diverse corpus of diaries, memoirs, letters, and oral testimonies from disparate groups of Ottoman Greek internal deportees during World War I, including civilians and soldier-laborers, he restores their agency, showing that the traumatic experience of exile for Ottoman *Rum* subjects was highly differentiated. Although ethnic homogenization, securitization, and forced labor were the main incentives for the CUP regime’s demographic engineering policies, Minasidis also reveals how the inconsistencies of the deportation policy and differing local circumstances had a strong impact on internal exiles’ survival chances. Crucially, he demonstrates how solidarity was often key “not only for their survival and the maintenance of their cultural ties but also for the protection of Ottoman pluralism, as solidarity was also shown by Muslims.”

Alexandros Lamprou flashes forward to World War II, when thousands of European refugees sought refuge in the young Republic. Spotlighting those displaced from Greece he discovers both continuities and ruptures in the “regimes of displacement management” that Ankara put in place. Muslim and non-Muslim refugee communities were subjected to widely divergent policies. In contrast to Jewish citizens fleeing persecution in Europe, displaced Greek subjects “enjoyed comparatively favorable conditions and relative freedom of movement.” Drawing on a rich set of primary sources from Turkey, Greece, and the United Kingdom, Lamprou shows how the Turkish authorities’ different responses were conditioned by contradictory official attitudes related to refugees’ religious and ethnic backgrounds, on the one hand, and by shifting “practical and ideological, financial, humanitarian, and foreign policy considerations,” on the other.

Finally, Edhem Eldem’s epilogue paints a broad perspective of how exile and migration remained salient in the *longue durée* of Ottoman history. He also reminds us

how the Ottoman past spills over in the Turkish present, continuing to shape the larger contours of official policies as well as popular reactions *vis-à-vis* refugee populations. Meanwhile, he points out how political and economic realities in Turkey today are pushing citizens into new forms of exile, seeking their future beyond the national borders. Eldem also highlights how an ethnoreligious polarity between Muslim and non-Muslim was a crucial facet of imperial collapse and the violent nation-building projects that came in its wake. Importantly, the critical category of exile is profoundly molded by those who self-narrate their exilic experience. Most of the testimonies preserved are the perspectives of privileged male, activist, and elite narrators, rendering the experiences of the majority of exiles irretrievable. Offering a counterpoint, Eldem closes with a discussion of the memoirs and diaries of Selahaddin Efendi, son of the deposed Sultan Murat V. If we thread carefully through these remarkable writings, he shows, we can hear the restive and resistant voices of those enslaved and uprooted women who were confined in the Ottoman court.

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue recover various episodes and themes of exile relating to the end of the Empire, rethink received narratives, and probe how displacement engenders destruction as well as resistance. The period under examination might seem long gone, but the consequences of the refugee flows discussed here reverberate in the post-Ottoman world and continue to dramatically influence domestic and international politics up to this day.

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