



Review

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OTTOMAN REFUGEES, 1878–1939

Isa Blumi

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013

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Reviewed by Jeffery Dyer

In *Ottoman Refugees*, Isa Blumi examines the period of late Ottoman dissolution and the transition to the empire's numerous successor states through the filter of the refugees and migrants passing through, into, and out of the Ottoman domains. In doing so, he presents a credible alternative to persistent narratives in late Ottoman and nationalist historiographies crafted on the "entrenched stereotypes" of ethnonational and sectarian difference (143).

Central to Blumi's objective is the recasting of the refugee populations that flowed into and out of the Ottoman lands and surrounding regions in the decades under review. He distances the refugees in his analysis from the "political vulnerability and dependency" with which they are normally associated (49). Instead, he focuses on their role as self-interested agents whose actions forced otherwise more powerful central governments and financial interests to adapt to their presence in different ways. These migrant communities and their diverse motivations and experiences are key to his larger project of detaching the history of modernity from all-encompassing narratives based on "relics from an era where racism, politics, and 'science' intersected at violent junctions of modern history" (151). In demonstrating

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an alternative approach to the study of this important period, he highlights how the common factors of refugees, centralizing states, and agents of “Euro-American finance capitalism” intersected in different times and places to produce unique configurations of post-Ottoman power structures (26).

These themes act as connective threads for chapters that otherwise tackle various aspects of unique refugee/migrant experiences. The first chapter provides a baseline for what follows through an analysis of the last half-century of Ottoman rule with a heavy emphasis on political economy, weaving the author’s themes of international finance and refugees/migrants into the history of the late empire’s structural changes. The remaining chapters explore in a comparative manner the different contexts in which refugee and migrant populations interacted with the Ottoman state and various outside economic and political actors. The chapters radiate in their focus from the imperial center into the larger world: from programs to resettle migrants entering the Ottoman domains from the Balkans, Caucasus, and Persian Gulf; to Ottoman and former Ottoman populations in an “Ottoman proximate” world on the empire’s Romanian, Bulgarian, and Egyptian peripheries; and finishing with two chapters on Ottoman subjects further afield in territories from East Africa to Southeast Asia and Latin America. These latter chapters in particular offer some intriguing alternatives to historical literature on the Ottomans in the Indian Ocean in the nineteenth century, which is too often reduced to a focus on Hamidian-era pan-Islamic policies. Among others, the section focusing on how Ottoman migrants interacted with labor and finance networks in the Philippines and the South China Sea offers a fresh take on how Ottoman historians can examine the region outside of state-centric policies and Islamic solidarity (101–10).

The study is informed by Blumi’s expansive archival work in, among other places, Turkey, Albania, Austria, Italy, Zanzibar, Singapore, and the Philippines. The geographical breadth of the archival work and the substantial bibliography of consulted sources enabled the tracing of Ottoman migrants’ experiences within divergent global contexts. The increasing flows of people into and out of the Ottoman domains in this period meant that Ottoman migrants’ stories could as easily have begun or ended in Singapore or Buenos Aires as Kosovo, Yemen, or eastern Anatolia. In this respect, Blumi’s broad framework captures some of the dynamic eccentricities of these migrants’ histories that could be obscured by an overly narrow geographical focus.

The book is self-conscious in its attempt to “disaggregate the geographic focus” of most existing studies of the late imperial transformations (153). Yet the turn away from a geographic approach should not be mistaken for a neglect of how these refugee experiences were shaped by varied geographical spaces. Rather, Blumi examines how urban and rural environments—bisected and restricted by newly imposed and constantly shifting borders—posed new challenges and opportunities for refugee communities. The ethnic or sectarian orientation of whichever government had jurisdiction over the territory where these refugees eventually settled was not always as important as the impact that new state boundaries had on communities’ access to winter pasturage or the reactions of established communities to the arrival of new migrants. This dynamic was most prominent in the sections related to the Niš *muhacir* and their resettlement in areas of Serbia and Kosovo. In the examples in this section, conflict and coexistence were determined not by how Muslim or Christian populations interacted with Ottoman or non-Ottoman regimes, but rather by how various actors sought to procure their share of scarce resources or how regimes sought to balance their ideological leanings with their need to retain tax-paying subjects. In other cases the relative absence of strict regional or social boundaries in the Philippines or Central America meant that the Ottoman migrants’ status as outsiders afforded them opportunities for reinvention that may not have been possible at home.

At times the book seems a bit uncomfortable with the terminology available to describe its central protagonists, slipping between terms such as refugees, migrants, and “itinerant Ottomans” in various chapters. The slippage, though, is productive in reflecting the author’s discomfort with a fraught history of the terminology describing refugees that associates them with dispossession, helplessness, and longing for a collectively defined “homeland.” These are precisely the elements of the refugee experience that Blumi is seeking to challenge in recasting refugee communities as “temporary polities” with diverse and contingent interests not defined by the ethnonational or sectarian identities so important to the outside parties of “Great Powers” or international capital (153).

The question can also be raised whether all of the migrants’ histories explored in the book are fairly labeled as “Ottoman.” When the analysis incorporates Malabar-born Hadhrami shaykhs in Hijaz, Baghdad-born

Jewish bankers in Bombay, Nablus-born Arab merchants in Mexico, and Chechen Muslims settling in eastern Anatolia, the headache of defining what constitutes an “Ottoman” in this period becomes apparent. Yet the book does not suffer as a result of this nomenclatural ambiguity. Rather, that these migrants did or did not—could or could not—at various times identify themselves as Ottoman plays into Blumi’s portrayal of them as defined by “various contradictory, and crucially, constantly modifying, sets of constituent interests” (18). The extent to which these migrants would tie their identity to the Ottoman Empire as a “legal, cultural, and economic point of reference” was contingent on many factors related to shifting personal and collective motivations (16). Blumi’s refugees and migrants are self-interested actors aware of the opportunities available to them in a dynamic environment of threats and opportunities. For a Syrian migrant seeking economic opportunities in the Philippines in the 1880s, identification with “Ottomanos” or “Turcos” could open unexpected doors. Yet the same migrant in Mexico or Central America was forced to adapt to entirely different, often more negative, racial and ethnic associations with respect to an Ottoman identity. The dramatic divergence in the examples that the books draws on are some of its greatest strengths, as they support the author’s overall claim that these events defy easy definition.

Thematically the book’s focus on refugees and migrants makes it a natural fit to be read alongside other recent publications on migratory populations like Reşat Kasaba’s *A Moveable Empire*. Yet Blumi’s emphasis on the period between 1878 and 1939 has a much tighter chronological focus than Kasaba’s *longue durée* approach, while also addressing a broader geographical area. Blumi’s focus on regional systems in the Mediterranean or the Indian Ocean will also put his study into dialogue with a number of works focused on those areas. The section on Egypt, for example, may be read productively alongside Ilham Khuri-Makdisi’s work on global radicalism in the eastern Mediterranean or Julia Clancy-Smith’s *Mediterraneans*. Similarly, the chapters on the Indian Ocean touch on themes comparable to Eric Tagliacozzo’s work on Southeast Asian Islamic networks or Amal Ghazal’s work on Zanzibar, *Islamic Reform and Arab Nationalism*.

In the end, the book makes a convincing case that studying the last years of the Ottoman Empire through the framework of refugees offers a “more complicated set of processes at work that does not surrender easily

to the reductive use of ethno-national, sectarian, and 'ethno-biological' categories to explain events as a product of 'difference'" (13). It develops some of the themes Blumi first introduced in *Foundations of Modernity* (Routledge, 2011) and defines the important role of Ottoman refugees in the creation of the modern order in the Middle East. Blumi also indicates that this study is only the first part of a larger planned project examining the great impact that these refugees and migrants had on the Ottoman and post-Ottoman states of the period. The book will be valuable reading for historians working on migratory networks or the transitional period between the late Ottoman Empire and the emergence of post-Ottoman states in the Middle East.