

Forced Migration and Mortality in the Ottoman Empire

An Annotated Map

Justin McCarthy

Professor of History at the University of Louisville

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From 1790 to 1923 more than 7 million persons were forced from their homes in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Anatolia. At the same time, another six million were counted among the dead, and many more dead were never counted. It was one of the worst human disasters in history, but is little known today. When the suffering of the time has been described, all too often only dispossessed and dead Christians have been considered. Yet the greatest mortality and exile were experienced by Muslim peoples—Turks, Circassians, Kurds, and others. All shared in the suffering in that terrible time.

The West

In 1790 the Ottoman Empire in Europe contained the lands south of the Danube River, Bosnia, and most of Romania. Much of that land was to be lost through Great Power intervention, mainly by defeating the Ottomans in war. Russia forced the independence of Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria. The Great Powers in concert forced the creation of an independent Greece. The Austrians seized Bosnia. By 1912, the new Balkan countries were strong enough to defeat the Ottomans themselves. Only a small wedge of Europe, Eastern Thrace, remained to the Empire.

Greece

The small Muslim population was largely expelled from Serbia in the early 1800s, but the effective beginning of the Turkish exodus from Southeastern Europe came in Greece. After the Greek Rebellion of 1822 to 1830 all of the Turks of the new Greek Kingdom were gone; all had either migrated or died. When Greece expanded to the north in 1880, 70,000 more Turks left the occupied territories for the Ottoman Empire. By the time Greece formally annexed Crete in 1913, all but a few of the Cretan Turks had been expelled.

The War of 1877-78

The 1877 Russian invasion of Ottoman Europe led to the flight of 515,000 and the deaths of 288,000 Bulgarian Muslims, nearly all Turks. Only 46% of the Bulgarian Muslims remained. In exchange, 187,000 Bulgarians from what remained in Ottoman Europe went to Bulgaria.

By percentage, the worst losses in the period took place among the Muslims in regions taken by Montenegro, Serbia and Romania. In the lands taken by Montenegro all of the Muslims were gone, in the lands taken by Serbia, 91% (119,000) were gone, in the lands taken by Romania 83% (152,000) were gone. Bosnian Muslims fled during a Serbian revolt in 1875 and after a failed Muslim revolt against Austrian occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1881-2.



The Balkan Wars

At the onset of the Balkan Wars, the Muslim population of Ottoman Europe was slightly over 50%—Turks in the East, Albanians in the West. Population numbers, however, were not a concern to

Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and Bulgaria. Each coveted the parts of Ottoman Europe that they viewed as their ancestral homelands. The problem was that each desired the same property. They joined together to defeat the Ottomans in the first Balkan War, then fought among themselves for the spoils. Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and Romania attacked Bulgaria. The Ottomans also attacked Bulgaria to reclaim some land in Europe.

Of the Christian peoples, it was the Bulgarians who lost most: 100,000 Bulgarians fled to Bulgaria from Ottoman Thrace and from the lands conquered by the other Balkan countries. It was the Muslims, however, who most suffered. 27% of the Turks of Ottoman Europe died and 18% were surviving refugees. No one counted the numbers lost in the great slaughter and dispossession of Albanians in the West.

Turkish War of Independence

An unknown number of Greeks, perhaps 100,000, went from Western Anatolia to Greece before World War I began, affected by anti-Greek economic pressure after the Balkan Wars. Aided especially by the British, the Greek Army invaded Western Anatolia in 1919. They immediately began attacks on Turkish villages and cities, ultimately forcing 1.2 million Turks from their homes in Western Anatolia and an unknown number from Thrace (what had remained of Ottoman Europe after the Balkan Wars). The Turkish Nationalists, led by Mustafa Kemal, defeated the Greeks by 1922. It was then the turn of the Greeks to take flight. A post-war agreement exchanged the Greeks of Turkey (excepting Istanbul) for the Turks of Greece (excepting Eastern Thrace). 850,000 Greeks were exchanged for 480,000 Turks. 530,000 Turks and 310,000 Greeks had died.

The East

The Russian Empire expanded to the south. When it annexed the Crimea in 1779 approximately 100,000 Crimean Tatars (Turks who had lived there for centuries) fled the Crimea and surrounding areas for the Ottoman Empire. Immediately after the Crimean War, they were joined by a further 300,000 Crimean Tatars and an unknown number of Nogay Tatars. Their place was taken by Christian subjects of the Tsar.

In the East, Russian conquest was to lead to a great exchange of Muslim and Christian populations, with much suffering that was to continue until 1920. In 1800, the area that is today's Armenia, Central Georgia, and Azerbaijan was a loosely governed part of the Persian Empire. The Ottoman Empire controlled a small area to the North of today's Turkish border. The Russians took the region in a series of annexations and conquests from 1801 to 1829. A large number of Azeri Turks fled to Iranian Azerbaijan in 1806-7. 20,000 Turks fled the Erivan Province (today's Armenian Republic) in 1827-9. Their place was taken by Armenians from Iran and the Ottoman Empire, drawn by the availability of land taken from the exiled Turkish farmers and Russian promises of freedom from taxes.

Circassians and Abhazians

The Russians continued and expanded their policy of forcing Muslims out of conquered lands. 1.2 million Circassians and Abhazians, Muslim inhabitants of the Eastern Black Sea region, were expelled to the Ottoman Empire in the 1860s. One-third of them subsequently died, mainly of starvation and disease. During and immediately after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, 78,000 Turks left conquered lands in Northeastern Anatolia, their places taken by 20,000 Armenians from the Ottoman East.

World War I

Armenian rebels had begun to take action against Ottoman troops and officials and Muslim civilians before the Ottomans entered World War I. In the first months of the war, civilian populations moved to cities and other safe places. During the war, Armenian units attached to the Russian Army and guerilla units of Ottoman Armenians spearheaded the

Russian invasion of Anatolia. The way in which the war was fought maximized civilian suffering. In 1914 and 1915 the Russians and Armenians invaded Eastern Anatolia. The invasion was accompanied by wholesale slaughter of Turks and Kurds. When the Russians were briefly defeated and forced to retreat, 300,000 Armenians fled to Russia and an unknown number to Iran. Until the Russian Revolution freed the survivors, the Russians allowed few of the Armenians to return to their homes. Great numbers, perhaps half, of the Armenian refugees starved or died of disease. By 1916, the Russians had returned, forcing the flight of more Turks and Kurds. From 1915 to 1916 more than a million Muslims had been forced westwards. Like the Armenians, they starved or were killed by disease. 62% of the Muslims of Van Province, for example, died.

The Ottoman Government responded to the perceived threat from its Armenian population by relocating 440,000 Armenians to Syria and, to a lesser extent, to Iraq.

At war's end, Armenians took control of Erzurum Province, but the Ottoman Army defeated them. Armenians escaped to the Northeast, killing Turks and destroying villages. In addition, by 1920, 220,000 Turks had fled the Armenian Republic for Turkey. The French took Cilicia (South-central Anatolia, the Adana region) after the Armistice. Armenians, especially those who had been relocated to Syria, moved into the region and attacked the Turks there. Many Turks fled the Armenians and the French. Others began a successful military campaign that drove out the French. The Armenians followed the French retreat. In all, 30,000 Armenians and an unknown number of Turks were refugees.

The Toll

The death toll in these wars and dislocations was tremendous. The dead on all sides were mainly civilians, and many more died from disease and starvation than were directly killed by their enemies. But consideration should be given to the calamity that struck even those refugees who survived. It was a life of hunger in refugee camps or begging on the streets—homes and farms gone forever. Many made new lives, but saw them ruined again. A Turkish farmer

who was forced out of Bulgaria at age 20 in 1878 might have fled to Ottoman Europe, where he survived, perhaps even prospered. Again forced out in 1912, he might have lived as a penniless settler near İzmir. In his old age, disaster struck again as he was forced to flee from İzmir in 1919. Most likely he would have left dead family and friends behind in each place, killed by the invaders who drove him from his home. Much the same story could have been told of Greeks or Armenians.

The Map

The size of the arrows on the main map indicates the relative size of the migrations. Placement of the arrows was in some places dictated by the necessity of placing many arrows in a small space, and thus is not geographically perfect. For example, the arrow for the exile of Turks from Armenia in 1918-20 should have pointed further south, were it not necessary to also include an arrow for the Armenian exiles to Armenia. Even approximations of many of the forced migrations are unknown. Rough estimates are reflected in the size of arrows.

“Anatolian Wars” in the small map of wartime mortality shows the percentage deaths of Muslims, Greeks, and Armenians. Muslim percentages are for the war zones in Eastern and Western Anatolia. Wartime migration, however, makes it impossible to give Armenian and Greek deaths only in the war zones. Those figures are for Anatolia as a whole, but they roughly correspond to the percentages for Muslims.

The map does not include many migrants that left their homelands looking for work, were attracted by offers of free land and relief from taxes, or simply did not wish to live under their home governments' rule. These would have included the Armenians whom the Russians attracted to their Caucasus conquests after 1829 to take the place of expelled Turks and the Greeks and Armenians who went to America seeking a better life. It would have included the Turks who continued to leave the Balkans and Russia up until the end of the twentieth century. It also would have included the great number of all groups who moved in peace time across ever-changing borders to escape persecution or simply to live with their fellows. Had these been included, the map would have been a mass of small arrows.

