

# LIMEN

Journal of the Hungarian Migration Research Institute

3 (2021/1)



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## **Frontispiece:**

The Ugandan army patrolling the refugee settlement in Rwamwanja, January  
2020, photo: Sándor Jászberényi.

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## **Founders:**



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## Muslim refugees in the process of state and society building – Turkish examples from the 19–20<sup>th</sup> century

Péter Kövecsi-Oláh

### Abstract

Turkey has a long history of accepting and managing refugees and immigrants in its territory. This is reflected by the fact that the country has hosted a large number of immigrants relative to its total population, over the past centuries. In a way, this process is special since those arriving in Anatolia (and Thrace) were predominantly Muslim and/or of a Turkish ethnic background, but, in many cases, came from a completely different cultural milieu. Two conditions should be emphasised with regards to successful integration. On the one hand, the Turkish concept of nation state, and, on the other hand, the Turkish imperial consciousness rooted in the Ottoman traditions that looks at itself as a civilisation-creating factor. These ethnic groups – in particular, peoples of the Balkan and Russian Tatars – played and still play a key role in the development of the Turkish concept of nation state. The imperial consciousness fed by the successes of the Ottoman past partly explains the behaviour of the Turkish state regarding today's migratory processes that affect Europe.

**Keywords:** Turkey, refugees, nation building, migration, Balkan, Caucasus, Tatars

### Introduction

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The dilemmas emerging in today's Europe relating to Muslims are often presented as a Christian-Muslim issue, or sometimes as a secular-Muslim issue. In this study, we put this approach aside and attempt to examine, in view of the limitations on scope, how different Muslim ethnic groups got on when they had to start a new life for various reasons, in a majority society with similar religious affiliations, but sometimes described by a significantly different cultural environment. We pay particular attention to how political leadership viewed the arrival of Balkan Muslims, Crimean and Volga Tatars, or even Ahiska Turks or Azerbaijanis in the first decades of the Turkish Republic.

## Peoples from the Balkan

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These days, mentioning the words “Balkan” and “migration” in the same sentence makes everyone think of the large numbers of different ethnic groups settling in territories west of the River Leitha, right after the breakup of Yugoslavia, and a process that has been ongoing since then. Though this statement holds true, maybe it is not pointless to pay some words to an emigration wave of similar volume, i.e. where masses of Balkan Muslims left their motherland behind to find a new home across Asia Minor. The newly arrived masses included, what we would call today, economic immigrants (“göç-göçmen”, “hicret” or “muhaceret”) and also those leaving for political or economic and social reasons (“mülteci” or “sığınmacı”).

Although the process had already started in parallel with the revival of nation state building efforts (note that the Serbian statehood started its successful fight against the Ottoman imperial rule around 1806), true mass migrations were boosted by the Russian-Turkish war of 1877–1878. The Balkan wars (1912–1913) and World War I were the developments which finally put this issue in a new dimension. The trend kept going on even once the Turkish Republic was established, since some researches argue that nearly 1.2 million people moved from the Balkan region to Turkey between 1923 and 1960. The majority came from Greece and Bulgaria (approx. 780 thousand), but the number of those settling from Yugoslavia and North Macedonia also reached 270 thousand. The remaining part of those arriving (roughly 120 thousand people) left Romania.<sup>1</sup>

Another approach argues that the number of people fleeing Greek territories from 1912 reaches 2 million along with those resettled under the Turkish-Greek population exchange signed in 1923 (this group is often called “mübadil”).<sup>2</sup> Even if we consider this number exaggerated – justifiably to some extent –, Greece was certainly the largest sending country at that time. The mentioned Turkish-Greek population exchange ordered nearly 1.2 million Orthodox (Rum) people to leave Turkey, and approximately 0.5 million Muslim-Turks were brought in “in exchange”. As their special characteristic, they considered religion their number one identity factor. This explains why the so-called Orthodox Christian Karamanli community was also forced to leave despite the fact that they identified themselves as Turkish.

The most recent research argues that roughly 2.5 million people left the Balkans and settled in Turkey between 1878 and the early 2010’s. In practice, this means

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<sup>1</sup> HATIPLER 2018, pp 427–429.

<sup>2</sup> LOZANMUBADILLERI 2020.

that, currently, approximately one in every five Turkish families believes they have at least one ascending line with Balkan roots.<sup>3</sup>

Also, we have to mention that the majority of the mass concerned strived to live as close to their motherland as possible, thus mainly settling in either the European part of Turkey (in geographical terms) or in the region of the Aegean Sea and Istanbul, i.e. in more developed parts of the country. In addition to Istanbul, the cities home to the largest communities with Balkan ascendants in the country today are İzmir, Bursa, Kocaeli, Sakarya, Aydın, Balıkesir and Edirne.

This argument is more valid for Romania, as the mass of roughly 120 thousand people did not make it even to Istanbul, and rather settled west of the city, mostly in Edirne, Rodosto and Kırklareli. Moreover, the population movement essentially came to a halt by 1949 with the lowering of the Iron Curtain.

In turn, in the case of Bulgaria, we can talk about multiple waves. Following the signing of the Turkish-Bulgarian settlement agreement in 1925, by 1949 nearly 220 thousand people had moved to Turkey. Then in 1950–1951, over 18 months, owing to the acrimonious situation involving the Bulgarian government, a further 153 thousand people left their homeland under pressure from Sofia. This wave was followed by the bilateral agreement Bulgaria and Turkey entered in the late 1960's in a changed geopolitical environment, ordering a further 116 thousand people to emigrate from the communist country. The largest, fourth wave also occurred in the shadow of significant global political changes. With the last days of the Soviet hegemony approaching in Eastern Europe, the Bulgarian authorities had expelled approximately 310 thousand people from the country by the end of 1989. Thus, we can conclude that a total estimated number of 800 thousand people were resettled from Turkey to Bulgaria or the other way around between 1923 and 1989.

Similarly, emigration of Muslims in large numbers from Yugoslavia to Turkey mainly took place after World War II, in particular after 1955. 95% of the roughly 305 thousand people had the chance to freely decide where to live in the country. From 1992 to 1995, a further 20 thousand people – mainly Bosnians – settled in Turkey due to the Yugoslavian war. They did not reach the “heart” of Anatolia either, as they started a new life mostly in Istanbul, concentrated in specific districts of the city (Pendik, Bayrampaşa).

As for recent developments, 17 thousand Kosovans settled in the country of Asia Minor after 1999, followed by a further 10 thousand North Macedonians after 2001.

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<sup>3</sup> ÖZLEM 2011.

Relating to the above statistics, homogenisation efforts aimed at creating a nation state flared up from time to time with varying intensity in the mentioned period. In Yugoslavia, this was often coupled with the confiscation of property and Slavisation from as early as the 1930's, turning into an Albanisation in the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia after 1945. This was enabled by the Surname Act, under which, from 1946, the suffix "jevich" had to be changed to "jevi", making it possible to keep record of Macedonian Turks as part of the Albanian minority. In weakening the positions of Muslims in the society, pogroms were also organised in addition to bureaucratic practices (such as the exclusion of Muslims from the class of civil servants).

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Muslims who had appeared in the Balkans after the Ottoman extension of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (mostly Turkish-speaking people, though many Balkan Slavs were Islamised as well) had already had a history of five hundred years in many places. Five hundred years in the Balkans – or we could also mention Central Europe – is such a long period that it can practically make an ethnic group indigenous in their place of residence. One can think of the Kun or Jasz people in Hungary, or the Saxons in Transylvania. These ethnic groups became an integral part of the majority culture over five hundred years even if they kept their traditions and language in specific cases.

Accordingly, the accelerating emigration of Balkan Muslims in the 19<sup>th</sup> century still has lasting effects, and the descendants keep their ancestors' homeland in their thoughts. Those with Balkan origins have established more than 200 associations, institutions and cultural clubs, and have become fully integrated into the Turkish society.

### **State considerations behind settlement and resettlement**

When talking about immigration from the Balkans, beyond the above historical and social reasons, we should also briefly assess what the receiving state had to offer its new citizens. In 1923, in an economical sense, , as a country having been involved in war for more than a decade, Turkey had no chance to provide any social services to its "kins" ("soydaş"). The so-called Resettlement Act, which came into effect on 24 June 1934, however, attempted to attract those to the country who were departing from Bulgaria and Romania and somehow fitted into the category "of Turkish origin" or "connected to Turkish culture". At the same

time, the Act separately addressed the category of “anarchists, agents and nomadic gypsies”, whom it strived to keep out of the country.<sup>4</sup>

At that time, resettlement was also supported politically by the government. Interior minister Şükrü Kaya worded the following opinion regarding the people coming from Bulgaria, in one of the most popular daily newspapers, *Cumhuriyet* (released on 17 July 1935):

“There remains no doubt that the Bulgarians will attack us at the right moment to get their hands on Thrace... That is why we have to strengthen Thrace in every possible respect. The government decided to settle the several hundred thousand refugees fleeing to Turkey in Thrace and East Anatolia. At the same time, the Bulgarians’ hunger for land and Thrace right before their eyes made this nice area the number one issue. So, this is why... Thrace comes first! Yes, we should settle the Turks who come to us to the front, in Thrace...”<sup>5</sup>

The security aspects, however, did not only concern Thrace, since the other key destination region was East Anatolia. The Elazığ-Muş and Diyarbakır-Erzurum lines lie in a strategic location, crossed by the East-West and North-South routes.<sup>6</sup>

Turkey, as a young state dealing with country building, put great emphasis on ensuring that their society would warmly welcome their “brothers”.

In autumn 1934, Turkish citizens were able to read the following thoughts in the newspaper ‘Yeşilyurt’ in Thrace: “From among foreign hands, many come to the motherland. These people will cultivate large lands of our beloved Thrace, enriching and thriving our homeland. Today, they come with small toddlers, the elderly and tired mothers, they are all exhausted, and sometimes seek help from us, their brothers. It is our duty to give them, as our brothers, a helping hand. We encourage all citizens to continuously make an effort and do everything possible to give back this brotherly love we receive.”

Under the planned resettlement, those arriving were provided not only with a place to live, but also material assistance for conducting agricultural activities (through state banks). The previously mentioned Settlement Act was also intended to set up a legal framework for this. Moreover, adopting a law was not only necessary for the planned resettlements in 1934, but was also justified by the fact that these people arrived in communities of different ethnic composition and sociological

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<sup>4</sup> DUMAN 2009, p 478.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p 480.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*.

background in the western and eastern parts of the country.<sup>7</sup> The Kurdish population, which has built its own society in a tribal system traditionally, was rather sceptical about the centralisation efforts of Ankara in the East Anatolia region. The active appearance of the state in the region questioned the system in which the “landlord” (“aga”) arranged for the everyday life of a whole community – up to tens of thousands –, from going to work to jurisdiction. Accordingly, beyond addressing the situation of “settlers”, the law in question could be interpreted as Ankara’s attempt to expand its rule to areas where the state previously – in the Ottoman era, for quite some time – had turned a blind eye to the special status of the local Kurdish elite.

The above examples well demonstrate how politics seeing potential (workforce) in the newcomers utilised population movements for its own purposes. However, from the perspective of actual people who were behind the statistics and subject to the mentioned agreements, most recent research does not necessarily see success stories in the population exchanges and movements concerning hundreds of thousands of people. Still, according to the Turkish nationalist historical narrative, this phenomenon continues to carry an essentially positive message.

In contrast, the sociological approach rather underlines the trauma caused as a result of changing their place of residence. As Hirschon stresses, for example, people being resettled from Ottoman areas to Greece meant a great loss, as their first-generation still preserved the Ottoman identity that highly valued diversity.<sup>8</sup> Özbay emphasises that the groups of people settled across Anatolia included many orphans and youngsters with only one parent left due to the war. In such cases, the community, naturally, strived to pass on its own values and beliefs. Many of them went to a military school, and, in exchange for a secure career – lacking other options –, a much more homogeneity-centred culture concept came to the forefront of identity.<sup>9</sup>

Staying with the Greek-Turkish population exchange, the memo prepared by an outside observer, US diplomat Raymond Hare, from 1930, reveals an interesting insight. According to Hare, “from the population exchange, Greece benefitted in economic terms, but lost politically. In turn, Turkey benefitted politically, but rather lost in economic terms.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> İÇDUYGU – ERDER – GENÇKAYA 2014, p 115.

<sup>8</sup> Cited by *ibid*, p 108.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p 109.

<sup>10</sup> Cited by *ibid* p. 109.

## Muslims in Russia

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It is a historical cliché that the Soviet Union played an important role in the birth of modern Turkey. Without going into detail, we will just briefly mention that Mustafa Kemal, leader of the Turkish war of independence, entered into a treaty of amity in the spring of 1920 with Moscow, which was also in the middle of a fight for life and death. The treaty determined the Caucasian (Armenian-Turkish and Soviet-Turkish) borders, then the Soviets started to supply gold and weapons to the Ankara government. By 1920, however, many Russian Turks (Azerbaijanis, Volga and Crimean Tatars, Bashkirs, etc.) had already found a new homeland in the Ottoman empire, and were struggling with flourishing Russian nationalism, in particular owing to their own nationalism. Although the group in question was much smaller in number compared to the Balkan refugees, their historical impact was perhaps more significant.

The group of Russian (Volga and Crimean) Tatars was the community which was actually the driving force behind the appearance of the Turkish national issue on the agenda. This was mostly explained by the wealthy and influential civic class serving as the basis of this process, which was able to adopt the most recent ideological ideas from the Russian intellectuals, and which was able to bring together and organise the Muslim community in Russia.

Of the territories controlled by the tsar, approximately 10-11% were populated by Muslims in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. And 90% of this population belonged to either of the Turkish ethnic groups.<sup>11</sup> Based on a figure from 1897 – if we want to express this share in absolute numbers –, we can talk about roughly 13.6 million “Turks”.<sup>12</sup> The issue of the Muslim minority in Russia practically overlapped with the issue of Turks in Russia. For comparison, this number, more or less, corresponded to the total population of the Turkish Republic at the time of its proclamation.<sup>13</sup> However, we should mention here that no specific numbers can be cited in connection with the settlement of the community concerned in Turkey. Yet, we can conclude that the largest part of this group was (and still is) made up of the so-called Qarapapaqs, a specific group of Azerbaijanis, who are the closest to Anatolian Turks both geographically and linguistically. Scientific literature

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<sup>11</sup> ZENKOVSKY 1960, p 9.

<sup>12</sup> LANDAU 1995, p 7.

<sup>13</sup> The first official population census of the republic was held in 1927. At that time, as many as 13.5 million people were registered in the territory of the country.

estimates their number at somewhere between 80 and 200 thousand today, and they mostly live in the eastern periphery of the country.<sup>14</sup>

Returning to the territories ruled by the tsar, the Turkish ethnic groups living there formed a relatively homogenous bloc. And the fears among the millions of Turks in Russia grew stronger day by day. In order to assimilate foreign people, Russian politics intentionally used both orthodoxy and Russian nationalism, and strived to disguise these efforts under Pan-Slavism and Christianity.

The so-called Ilminsky system set up in 1860 offered the first real chance for the state to homogenise the country, which development later re-appeared stronger in the Pan-Slavic ideas of Alexander III.<sup>15</sup> Education and religion were the key dimensions. These two issues are closely related to one another. The tsar's efforts basically aimed to ensure some kind of autonomy in religious issues – which was quite extensive in the empire – in order to win the support of the Tatar clergy. The Crimean Muslim Religious Council was established for this purpose in 1831, with a comprehensive control of power over Muslim religious life. They acted on legal issues under Islamic law, and had a direct influence on selecting mullahs, hodjas and imams.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, they were not interested in creating modern education, as the appearance of new types of schools also reduced their power.

A paradox situation emerged in which Muslim religious leaders – originally tasked with ensuring the rights and survival of their community – became the most enthusiast supporters of the Russification policy that aimed to preserve the positional advantage against the Tatars by preserving the obsolete educational system.

The problem was recognised by Şehabeddin Mercani. He was the first to notice that, without learning Russian and other Western European languages, the Tatar society would not be able to catch up, and without the knowledge of modern languages the Turkish-speaking minority in Russia would not have any chance of learning the modern European ideologies, ideas.<sup>17</sup> Pan-Turkism as a fundamental political idea originates from here. As such, we can talk about a defensive mechanism, but its impact reached even the Ottoman areas. To put it simply, we can say that the fundamentals of modern nationalism were not born in today's Turkey, but in Russia instead.

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<sup>14</sup> BEZANIS 1992, p 11., ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ISLAM (Karapapaklar).

<sup>15</sup> GEORGEON 1996, p 13.

<sup>16</sup> FISHER 1978, pp 94–109.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Blurring the lines between the concepts of Turanism (“Turancılık”) and Pan-Turkism (“Türkçülük”) – both intentionally and unconsciously – started as early as the beginning of this period. This is primarily explained by the same meaning attached to the two concepts – in particular by the 1920’s –, that is the unification of people of different Turkish origins.<sup>18</sup> There is a consensus in the literature that the mixing process was significantly facilitated by a journalist named Tekin Alp from Saloniki. In its irredentist publication entitled “Türkler bu muharebede ne kazanabilir?” (What can the Turks win in this clash?),<sup>19</sup> he was the first to report on the phenomenon of Pan-Turkism to the European public (as it was soon translated into several European languages).

We have to mention two of the most influential thinkers who played a key role in spreading Turkish nationalism – and thus, naturally, Pan-Turkism. They are İsmail Gaspıralı (1851–1914) and Yusuf Akçura (1876–1935). Gaspıralı is mostly known for the education reform, which he developed to raise the level of literacy of the Tatar youth to that of the Russian average. The reform – which was born in Bakhchysarai, the quasi-capital of the Crimea – was designed to eliminate the old madrasa system.

He tried to expand the system – which was based on Quranic studies that were widely spread in the Muslim world at that time – by adding mathematics, history and geography classes beyond the Russian language, and integrating them into the curriculum.<sup>20</sup> Gaspıralı’s other important initiative was the journal entitled *Tercüman*, launched in 1883.<sup>21</sup> The journal was first issued exactly a hundred years after the annexation of Crimea by the Russians.<sup>22</sup> It aimed to strengthen the cultural identity of the Turks in Russia by developing a common language that could be understood by every Turk. The motto of the thus born *Tercüman* later became the motto of the entire Pan-Turkish movement: “Unity in language, acts and thoughts.”<sup>23</sup>

Yusuf Akçura also played a key role in shaping the Turkish national identity, and later in defending and maintaining the concept of the nation state. His most significant work is entitled *Üç Tarz-ı Siyaset*, with which he brought Pan-Turkism into political publicity, being the first to appoint the unification of different Turkish groups as

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<sup>18</sup> POULTON 1997, p 131.

<sup>19</sup> The original name of Tekin Alp was Moise Cohen (1883–1961). Title in English: “What can the Turks win in this clash?” In: LANDAU 1995, p 34.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> FISHER 1978, pp 94–109.

<sup>23</sup> “Dilde birlik, işte birlik, fikirde birlik.”

the most effective way to save the Ottoman Empire (if all external and internal conditions were met). With this piece written in 1904, he actually created “Turkism” as a political concept that first defines the Turks as a cultural, linguistic and historical unit. Both mentioned thinkers – in particular Akçura – form an integral part of the process as a result of which Turkey defines itself as a nation state.

As a consequence of the above, the German (Hungarian) propaganda also used the encouragement of the Russian Turks’ autonomy efforts during World War I. By March 1920, however, this policy became unsustainable, in particular due to the fact that the Kemal administration could not expect support from either great power, as British, French and Italian troops were deployed in the country. But, at the same time, when Kemal decisively refrained from embracing the issue of Turks in Russia as well as using them as a tool against the Soviet leadership, he admitted that Moscow could view the situation of Turks living in its territory purely as a home affair. The issue of Turkish groups stuck beyond the new borders was removed from the agenda by the new Turkish leadership having stabilised its position by 1923, in order to reach a calmness in foreign policy so domestic reforms could be implemented.

Nonetheless, two developments are worth mentioning. First, the Turkish government admitted the Turkish ethnic groups fleeing from Russian and Caucasian regions, the so-called Ahiska Turks (“ahıska” in Turkish). In 1933, approximately two thousand Ahıska Turks found a new homeland in the country of Asia Minor. Second, the government, which engaged in a definitely secular politics at home, called the Turkish communities living beyond its borders primarily Muslim, and not Turkish.

Moreover, publications spreading Pan-Turkish propaganda among Turkish ethnic groups living under Iranian or Caucasian Soviet authority that were produced in printing houses in Turkey had to be banned in some cases. Beyond the Soviet-Turkish or Iranian-Turkish relations, the issue also emerged in Polish-Turkish relations. This was explained by the fact that the newspaper “Yeni Kafkasya”, which was established by Caucasian refugees as part of Poland’s anti-Soviet propaganda, was provided with Polish funding (among others).<sup>24</sup>

And though the debate on the Turks in Russia, as well as the Russian connections of Turkish communists, flared up in the Russian Pravda and the Turkish Milliyet from time to time, the Soviet-Turkish cooperation established in 1920 (from 1925, a treaty of amity) proved to be lasting, as it still represents one of the pillars

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<sup>24</sup> DEMIRICI 2020, p 65.

of bilateral relations to date.<sup>25</sup> Beyond the benefits offered by the migration of Turkish groups from Russia to Turkey, the process also implied a political risk for Ankara. 1931 can be deemed a watershed year, when the Kemal administration broke off all ties with Turanist groups from the Soviet areas (among others).<sup>26</sup> Some people concerned – including Zeli Velidi Togay, academician with excellent Hungarian connections – moved to the West. Those who accepted the realities and the minimum expectations of politics kept their positions (like Yusuf Akçura).

Beyond the above examples, another important aspect is worth mentioning in connection with the birth of the modern Turkish Republic. Namely, the egalitarian policy pursued by Turkey after 1923, explained by the painful and living memories of the Ottoman past. As far as our topic is concerned, this practically meant that the state strived to create an identity which could be accepted by all. And, as part of this – despite some critics from the West –, the state considered the whole Muslim population as Turkish. People of other religions – Jews, Armenians and Rums – were only referred to as official minorities (quasi on the ruins of the millet system).<sup>27</sup> However, as experience from the Ottoman times made the then elite think that minorities posed a potential threat to state unity, it strived to reduce their independence and autonomy as well as to ascertain their loyalty to the secular state. This policy proved to be more or less successful. On the one hand, the majority of non-Muslims staying in the country saw (and still see) their own safety guaranteed in the secular state, and, on the other hand, the Alevi community – making up 15–20% of the population according to specific estimates – became a pillar of the Atatürk model in many places.

## Summary and conclusions

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Overall, we can argue that the modern Turkish state is strongly connected to refugees, or even economic immigrants, living in its immediate neighbourhood or farther, in terms of both its ideological and social structure. Though it is true that the people in question showed similarities with regard to their language and culture (i.e. religion), they moved to a completely different environment compared to their previous political ideas or social conditions in which they had lived before. Integration proved to be challenging for the Turks coming from Russian lands, but the average Macedonian Turks – who moved to areas populated by Kurds (and previously Armenians), with state support – also struggled. The Turkish example

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<sup>25</sup> DEMIRCI 2020, p 63.

<sup>26</sup> BEZANIS 1992, p ii.

<sup>27</sup> GÜLLÜ 2018, p 287.

shows, among other things, that resettlements or mass population movements can easily lead to tension in society (at least, in the short run) even if the state sees potential benefits in the process, as was the case with people from the Balkans. However, at the same time, the processes and examples addressed herein go back to historical periods when humans were pictured and perceived completely differently from today. Human life as a universal value – be it faith arising from “creation” or simply workforce – was judged differently compared to how we see it today. As a result, translating actions from the past into the present may seem obvious in many cases, but it can easily mislead even well-intentioned historians.

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