

Grassi, Fabio L. *A New Homeland: The Massacre of the Circassians, Their Exodus to the Ottoman Empire and Their Place in Modern Turkey*

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Emre Başok*

A NEW HOMELAND: The Massacre of The Circassians, Their Exodus to The Ottoman Empire and Their Place in Modern Turkey is a very informative source on the history and the tragedies of Circassians who live in many countries as a diasporic nation. As a historian and academic who extensively published on the history of modern-day Turkey, Fabio Grassi's book on the not very well-known tragedies of Circassians is a valuable contribution to the literature.

The author maintains the purpose of the book as "to provide a reasonable account of the forced exodus of the Muslim populations from Western Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire, and the way their arrival was managed by the central and local authorities when it reached its greatest and most dramatic dimensions, during the sixties of the nineteenth century" (p. 13). Many historians, some of whom the author cites in this book, acknowledge the Tsarist Russian Empire's cruel acts on Circassians as genocide. However, the author emphasizes in the very beginning that "the aim of this book is not to support the claim of the umpteenth "forgotten genocide", but to recall a really neglected tragedy" (p. 13). In line with this goal, the author purposefully avoids using the term genocide throughout the book when describing the atrocities that Circassians lived through at the hands of the Tsarist Russian Empire. However, he uses terms such

* Emre Başok, PhD, The Ohio State University, Master of Arts,
E-mail: emrebasok@gmail.com

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as “neglected tragedy”, “migration”, “deportation”, “exodus”, “catastrophe”, “massacre”, “extermination” and “elimination”.

The book is comprised of two parts and the first part has five chapters including the background information on Circassians, the Russian conquest of the Northwestern Caucasus, Circassians’ defeat and resettlement in modern-day Turkey, their integration in the host country and claims regarding the “Circassian genocide” are presented in the first part. In the second part of the book, the author presents French, British and Italian historical documents regarding Circassians’ exodus from their homeland to the Ottoman Empire. While these archival documents, either in the form of newspaper articles or government reports, provide a great deal of information on the atrocities that Circassians went through, the reader needs to know French to understand the thirty-six pages of French documents provided without their English translations.

In the first chapter of the book the author addresses different hypotheses about the origin of the Circassians, different meanings of the word Circassian, the social organization of Circassians, religious practices, different Circassian tribes, and the social life of Circassians determined by a set of unwritten laws and customs. The author also mentions Circassians’ “strong but not always pleasant” (p. 32) relationship with the Ottoman Empire throughout the years and the broad Circassian diaspora where Circassians live today including (but not limited to) Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Israel and the U.S. The first chapter introduces the basic information such as who Circassians are, where their homeland is, their societal structure, and in which countries they live today in a concise and informative manner that readers who are not of Circassian origin can get detailed background information about Circassians. Before ending the first chapter, the author shares some of the prominent Circassian figures in the Ottoman Empire, perhaps to shed light on their successful integration in their new homeland.

In chapter two, the author shares the historical background of the Russian conquest of the Caucasus leading to Circassians’ final defeat in 1864. Throughout the chapter the author highlights the role of Cossacks during the Russo-Circassian War and the Ottoman

Empire's Islamization efforts of the Circassians. The chapter provides a chronological timeline of the events during the Russo-Circassian War that resulted in "the first organized Circassian mass migration" (p. 44) in 1828. The chapter also provides important information regarding the prominent figures who shaped the fate of the Caucasus for a long-time including Imam Shamil, Gazi Muhammed, and Hamzat Bek. The author shares the failed attempts of Shamil to build a pan-Caucasian alliance with Circassians against Russians and his failed attempts to receive support from the Muslim world. International connections section on (p. 51) highlights some important figures who intensely campaigned for the independence of Circassia such as Sefer Zaniko and David Urquhart. This chapter provides a detailed synopsis on the historical and political events including major figures who played important roles in shaping the fate of the region and the Circassians.

Chapter three is titled *The Defeat and Exodus of the Circassians* and it reveals the systematic destruction of Circassians' lands, livelihood, and finally the conquest of the region by the Russian Empire with the help of Cossacks. The author shares the early mass migrations to the Ottoman land that took place consistently until Circassians' final defeat and exile in 1864 from their homelands. This chapter also highlights the last organized defense efforts of Ubykhs, Shapsugs and Abadzekhs by establishing the Great Free Assembly to fight against the Russian Empire's conquest. The author shares the failed diplomatic efforts of this committee to secure the support of European countries such as France, British Empire and the Ottomans in what turned out to be the last military campaign against the Russian Empire.

In chapter four, the author addresses the Circassians' resettlement in various parts of Turkey, which were in accordance with the Ottoman Empire's needs. It is clear from this chapter that the Ottoman Empire took a pragmatic approach in resettling the Circassians within the empire based on internal security and military concerns. The author also addresses some of the conflicts among the resettled Circassians and other minorities such as Kurds and Armenians. The chapter provides rich information regarding

the regions that Circassians were settled in modern day Turkey, the Balkans, and local conflicts among other ethnic groups. The author concludes the chapter by addressing how the Circassians integrated with the local Turkish population and “became new Turks” while maintaining their own cultures.

Chapter five is on the maintenance of the Circassian identity in Turkey after “the great exodus”. In this chapter, the author addresses the oppressive policies regarding the minorities in Turkey after the declaration of the Turkish Republic, especially during the single party period (1923-1945) that restricted minorities’ including Circassians’ language and cultural practices to their homes. The chapter also provides a detailed overview of Circassian institutions that played important roles in maintaining the Circassian identity in Turkey since 1864. Some of the prominent Circassian institutions that the author addresses in this chapter are the Cerkes Ittihad ve Teavun Cemiyeti (Circassian Association of Union and Mutual Aid), Guaze (The Guide) Newspaper, Cerkes Kadınları Teavun Cemiyeti (Circassian Female Association of Mutual Aid), and Cerkes Numune Mektebi (Circassian Sample School). In this chapter, the author also provides his justifications for not calling what the Circassians experienced in the hands of the Tsarist Russian Empire a genocide. He provides a comparison between what the Armenians in Turkey and the Circassians in their homeland experienced and concludes that it would be better to limit the use of the term “genocide” to exterminations where the state fully or partly exterminates a group based on ideological motivations and anthropological demonization. However, the author presents the views of prominent historians and researchers on the Circassian genocide in this chapter, almost all of whom disagree with his position.

For instance, the author shares the following quote from Annsi Kullberg, an analyst and co-founder of a Research Group on Conflicts and Terrorism:

The occasion of the Circassian Memorial Day on May 21 brings to our minds some of the worst experiences of modern history. It is particularly important to remember known as the Circassian genocide in the latter half of the

nineteenth century, because they were fully comparable, both in numbers and in proportions to the catastrophes that later faced Armenians and the European Jew, even though only the latter two remain widely known to the public (p. 144).

The author interprets the above quote by Kullberg as very harsh and an extremist interpretation which he refutes completely. While the author does not call the atrocities that the Circassians went through at the hands of the Tsarist Russian Empire, he does provide several perspectives that contradict his own. Finnish historian Antero Leitzinger's perspective on the Circassian genocide is another example that the author shares with his readers in which Letzinger states:

The Circassian genocide is certainly one of the least remembered genocides in world history. In all fairness we should avoid the temptation of a genocide rivalry. Nor should we spend too much energy on body counts or formal recognitions by political entities. Premeditated mass murder reckless deportations of populations based purely on their nationality, regardless of sex and age or military considerations, is a crime against humanity no matter how long ago it was committed and how many families it affected (p. 146).

The counterarguments to Grassi's viewpoint offered in the book are deeply compelling. Moreover, the author acknowledges that while he does not consider the tragedies that both the Circassians and Armenians faced as genocides; however, based on the U.N definition of genocide, it seems to be an appropriate term. This chapter thoroughly shares the different perspectives of scholars on a long-debated topic and the author's objective layout of these conflicting views enables the reader to come to their own conclusion of whether to consider the tragic events that Circassians faced as a genocide or not.

Another important contribution of the book to the scant literature on the Circassian genocide is that the author compiles

archival texts by the French, British, and Italian officials during the 1860s. While the French documents do not have their English translation, the Italian and the British documents shed light on the events that took place during that time and the tragedies that the Circassians endured. In sum, this book is an important contribution to the literature on the often-neglected genocide and exile of Circassians to modern-day Turkey. Throughout the book, the author provides rich information regarding the historical events that took place in the late nineteenth century, Circassians' exile to the Ottoman Empire and their role during both the Ottoman era and modern-day Turkey.