

Book Summary

The Balkan Reconquista and Turkey's Forgotten Refugee Crisis

In the 14th century the Ottoman Empire made a meteoric rise, expanding throughout southeastern Europe, known today as the Balkans. Over the centuries of Ottoman rule, through a complex process of migrations and conversions, a sizable portion of the population of the Turkey-in-Europe was Muslim. This Muslim life was deeply rooted in the Balkan soil and was an important facet of the region. However, as the Ottoman Empire began shrinking in the 17th century, that Muslim life came under threat. Each war that resulted in yet another lost territory inevitably meant suffering for the Muslim population. When they could, Ottoman Muslims chased the borders trying to stay under the Sultan's protection.

This was the period that marked the beginning of nationalism in the Balkans. Balkan elites developed theories about a Turkish Yoke and made Ottoman rule into their national catastrophes, engendering sentiments of victimhood and revenge among the Christian populations. In the meantime, in Western Europe and Russia, tropes about the backward, barbaric Turks were taken for granted. The path was being prepared for violent retribution against the Muslim population of the Balkans.

The Balkan Reconquista and Turkey's Forgotten Refugee Crisis examines one of the most dramatic such episodes. In 1877 the Russian army crossed the Danube in order to liberate their Slavic brethren from the Turkish rule. Prior to this war, nearly half of the population of territory of Bulgaria was Muslim. However, during the war roughly 250,000 Muslim civilians died and 500,000 were rendered refugees in what remained of the Ottoman Empire. The violence against Muslim civilians was often deliberate and organized. The panic and flight of Muslim civilians was genuine. The book brings to life these dramatic events through the narration of eyewitnesses and first-hand participants. Massacres, burned villages, frozen bodies strewn along an icy wasteland, and panicked scenes at the railway stops are recounted in vivid detail as part of the violence and flight of the Muslim population of Ottoman Bulgaria.

Upon arrival to the safety of Istanbul, these masses of refugees continued to encounter the threat of starvation and disease. The city took on the role of a massive refugee center, and its most iconic buildings of Hagia Sophia (which hosted at the worst moment, upwards of 12,000 refugees) and the Blue Mosque, among many others, became huge refugee shelters. A pandemic threatened, discontented refugees attempted to overthrow the Sultan and the Ottoman government signed a humiliating treaty. The refugees were eventually resettled in the new homeland of Anatolia and the Ottoman Empire was forever changed by the major change in demographics (Istanbul becoming a majority Muslim city for the first time in its history) as well as seriously affected by the trauma from the debacle of the war and the inundation of refugees.

The book examines the results of this trauma on the Empire's psyche, and it also examines the perplexing question of how such a large-scale collective tragedy (the number of refugees in 1878 surpassed even the number of Muslim refugees created during the Balkan Wars) could have been forgotten. Indeed, in Republican Turkey, the refugee crisis of 1878 was largely forgotten. The book develops a collection of interesting explanations which give great insight into the way the Turkish Republic dealt with its past by creating a new history and the way that the New Turkey of Erdogan is revisiting its past in attempts to redefine the country's identity today.

The book can be read by both specialists and non-specialists, as it commences with a general introduction to the late Ottoman Balkans. It can also be seen as a cultural history with numerous quotations from the Russian giants of the period, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, as well as a host of Balkan writers. The analysis about collective memory and forgetting of trauma should inspire self-reflection for the reader regardless of origin.

For more information:

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