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Becoming a *Muhacir*: Writings and Narratives of Displacement in the Late Ottoman Empire

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Abstract

The Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78 was a pivotal event for the Ottoman Empire in various ways, but one of its defining characteristics is its association with the large-scale displacement of people. This article seeks to contribute to the history of migration and displacement in the late Ottoman Empire by exploring how Muslim refugees understood and narrated their experiences. Methodologically it underscores the use of narrative sources, such as memoirs and literary works. The aim is to examine displacement from the perspective of the refugees through sources reflecting their voices, rather than from the standpoint of state and administrative actors. The article focuses on an account of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78 and subsequent flight (*hicret*) by Hüseyin Raci, a Muslim ‘alim, teacher, and poet from Eski Zağra, a city in the Balkans, while also drawing connections with other literary works penned by Muslim refugees.

Keywords: *muhacir*; refugees; displacement; Russo-Ottoman War (1877–78); narratives

The Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78 was a pivotal event in the history of the Ottoman Empire, its Balkan successors, and Europe, while also producing reverberations among Muslim communities around the world. The war and subsequent permanent peace settlement negotiated at the Congress of Berlin forced the empire to relinquish two-thirds of its possessions in the Balkans and territories in Eastern Anatolia. The crisis surrounding the conflict allowed Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) to consolidate power by proroguing the constitution and suspending the parliament. The aftermath signaled a shift in the empire’s priorities and legitimation of power towards preoccupation with Muslim populations and greater emphasis on Islam. In addition, the war came to be associated with another phenomenon—the mass displacement of people. The overwhelming majority were Muslims, but Bulgarians, Jews, and Greeks were also on the run. It is difficult to know the number of displaced people. According to a medical commission in the Ottoman capital, over half a million Muslim refugees from the Balkans had passed through Istanbul.¹ However, the

¹ Gabuzzi, Mordtmann and Stécouli, *Les réfugiés de la Roumélie en 1878* (Constantinople: Typographie et lithographie centrale, 1879), 8. According to Justin McCarthy, between the 1820s and the outbreak of WWI, the number of Muslim refugees was two and a half million, *Death and Exile: the Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1820–1920* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1995), 339.

number was most likely higher, as thousands of others sought shelter in parts of the Balkans still under Ottoman control and many fled from the area of the Caucasus front.² Estimates for Bulgarians suggest that in the summer of 1877 alone, over 100,000 fled north of the Balkan mountains.³

Dealing with an influx of people who fled war or were victims of forced displacement was not a new experience for the Ottoman state. Following the wars that pitted the Ottoman Empire against the Habsburgs and Venice, many Muslim families from Slavonia and Hungary fled to the Ottoman domains at the end of the 17th and early 18th centuries. More significant numbers of Muslims started streaming in from the end of the 18th century onwards, after the Russian annexation of the Crimean khanate and the empire's subsequent loss of territories to Serbian and Greek revolutionary turmoil. The numbers increased in the 1860s with the arrival of numerous Muslims from the North Caucasus and Crimea. Muslim refugees streaming into the Ottoman domains were called *muhacir*, an ostensible analogy with the followers of the Prophet Muhammad who accompanied him to Medina.⁴ This term both underscored the refugees' religious identity and cast the Ottoman state as a defender of the abode of Islam. The Ottoman authorities were faced with the task of finding administrative mechanisms and economic resources to accommodate the newcomers.

The Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78 is a crucial episode in the history of displacement and migration in the empire in several ways. First, it was important in terms of sheer numbers, as well as the victimization the displaced experienced. Another comparable catastrophic episode would occur years later with the debacle of the Balkan Wars (1912–13). Second, the Russo-Ottoman War unfolded in the public eye. Many inhabitants of the empire, including those in Istanbul, witnessed the crisis firsthand. Europeans got a sense of it through vivid journalistic reports and newspaper illustrations.⁵ And finally, but crucially, unlike previous crises, most of the Muslims displaced during the war were Ottoman subjects, rather than the subjects of other states. Thus, the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78 was the event during which the name *muhacir* became ubiquitous as a reference to all Muslim refugees. In comparison, during the Greek revolt and War of Independence in the 1820s, Ottoman authorities referred to the Ottoman Muslims fleeing rebel violence as *firari* (fugitive).⁶ But when thousands of Balkan Muslims threw themselves into desperate flight in 1877–78, they also came to be known as *muhacir*. The war demonstrated the stark reality

² The author of the work discussed in this article, Hüseyin Raci Efendi, mentions one million, although the source of this estimate remains unknown. Hüseyin Raci, *Tarihçe-i Vak'a-i Zağra* (Istanbul: Hürriyet Matbaası, 1326 [1910/11]), 15.

³ Goran Todorov, "Deinostta na Vremennoto Rusko Upravlenie v Bŭlgaria po urezhdane na agrarnia i bezhanskia vŭpros, 1877–1879," *Istoricheski pregled* 6 (1955): 27–59, 28. On Jewish refugees, see Julia Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Ottoman Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 40–41.

⁴ Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024), 8. It is important to underscore that the term *muhacir* was used to denote non-Muslim immigrants to the Ottoman Empire, as well as notably in the 1857 Migrant Regulations; see Ella Fratantuono, *Governing Migration in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024), 25–54. On early 18th-century migrations, see Edin Hajdarpasić, "Frontier Anxieties: Towards a Social History of Muslim-Christian Relations on the Ottoman-Habsburg Border," *Austrian History Yearbook* 51 (2020): 25–38, especially pages 30–31; Enes Pelidija, "O migracionim kretanjima stanovništva Bosanskog ejaleta u prvim decenjima XVIII stoljeća," in *Migracije i Bosna i Hercegovina* (Sarajevo: Institut za istoriju u Sarajevo, 1990), 119–131. Many of the migrants settled in Bosnia.

⁵ See the following issues of *Le Monde Illustré* on the war and Muslim refugees: 17 November 1877, 12 January 1878, 23 February 1878.

⁶ For example, see references in documents from the Ayiniyat defterleri, Şükrü İlicaç, ed., "Those Infidel Greeks:" *The Greek War of Independence Through Ottoman Archival Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 652, 1408. The same term was also used for Greek rebels who fled elsewhere, including under British protection.

that Ottoman subjects could also be *muhacir*, even the inhabitants of Rumeli who were proud of being pillars of the state for centuries.

Mobility, migration, and displacement were inseparable parts—and, at times, defining phenomena—in the history of the Ottoman Empire. More recently, these issues have become the subject of growing scholarly attention. Historians have explored the connections between forced mobility and the unravelling of the Ottoman imperial order, the rise of ethno-nationalism, Russia's imperial expansion, and ethnic cleansing, as well as Ottoman institutional responses.⁷ More recent scholarship has brought critical new insights into the social, economic, political, and environmental ramifications of the migrations and migrant settlement, along with tracing the emergence of an Ottoman migration regime. Importantly, such works have emphasized the complex and even ambiguous role of the *muhacir*, who could be pawns in the state's policies but also agents who used existing economic, administrative, and legal frameworks to advance their position and interests. They were vulnerable refugees and, simultaneously, internal colonizers and economic manpower with the potential to reshape the empire.⁸ Finally, it should be underscored that practices dating to the late Ottoman period endured after the collapse of the empire and into the strategies of European mandate powers, thus contributing to the shaping of the modern Middle East.⁹

This article aspires to contribute to the history of displacement and migration in the late Ottoman Empire by exploring how refugees, migrants, and displaced people understood and narrated their experiences. As such, it also tackles one of the challenges of writing on the history of displacement: the challenge of finding and using refugee voices to construct such a history.¹⁰ Methodologically, this article underscores the use of narrative sources, such as literature and memoirs. Here, the aim is to examine displacement from the perspective of refugees through the use of sources reflecting their voices, rather than from the standpoint of state and administrative actors. At the same time, this article aims to overcome the anonymity often associated with the mass movement of people by seeking to gain insight into the refugees' individuality, agency, and subjectivity. As such, I ask the following questions: how did those caught in the maelstrom of panicked flight understand and narrate their ordeal? What did they make of the events at the time? Where did they, as individuals, stand amid an upheaval of such a large scale? To address these questions, this article examines a work written by Hüseyin Raci, an *'alim*, *rüşdiye* (middle school) teacher, and poet from Eski Zağra, a city in what eventually

⁷ Notable studies include McCarthy, *Death and Exile*; Nedim İpek, *Rumeli'den Anadolu'ya Türk Göçleri, 1877-1890* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1994); Abdullah Saydam, *Kırım ve Kafkas Göçleri (1856-1876)* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1997); Ufuk Erdem, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Muhacir Komisyonları ve Faaliyetleri (1860-1923)* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2018); and the document collection Bilal Şimşir, ed., *Rumeli'den Türk Göçleri: Belgeler*, 3 vols. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1968). For an overview of Ottoman history through the lens of mobility, see Reşat Kasaba, *Moveable Empire: Nomads, Migrants, and Refugees* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009).

⁸ For recent representative publications, see Fratantuono, *Governing Migration*; Hamed-Troyansky, *Empire of Refugees*; Chris Gratien, "The Ottoman Quagmire: Malaria, Swamps, and Settlement in the Late Ottoman Mediterranean," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 583–604; Ahmet Erdem Tozoğlu and Seda Nehir Gümüşlü Akgün, "Settling Down the Crisis: Planning and Implementation of Immigrant Settlements in the Balkans During the Late Ottoman Period," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 2 (2021): 215–40.

⁹ For a pertinent discussion, see Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

¹⁰ Peter Gatrell, Anindita Ghoshal, Katarzyna Nowak, and Alex Dowdall, "Reckoning with Refugeedom: Refugee Voices in Modern History," *Social History* 46, no. 1 (2021): 70–95. Some of the challenges identified by these authors for refugee history in general are also valid for the history of the Ottoman Empire. On the problem of anonymity and representation in mass displacement, see Peter Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10–11.

became part of Bulgaria, who experienced the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78 and became a *muhacir*.¹¹ Titled *Tarihçe-i Vak'a-i Zağra* (The Short History of the Zağra Event, henceforth *The Short History*), this work bears the characteristics of a chronicle and memoir, but one of its most valuable parts is a long poem titled “Hicretname” (A Story of Hicret). The work was eventually published in book format in Istanbul in 1910, after the author’s death. This article also draws connections with other literary sources authored by people of *muhacir* background. Raci Efendi’s work reveals that forced displacement was a transformative and devastating experience, shaping one’s identity and position in society. For the writer and many of his co-religionists who shared his destiny, the fact that Ottoman subjects like them could become *muhacir* was even more unsettling, as it put them in the position of being strangers in their own homeland. Based on these observations, this article argues that for Raci Efendi and other *muhacir* authors, writing was a way to both express their trauma and assert their own voice and narrative of their ordeal.

The Work and its Author: A New History from Below

This article draws methodological inspiration from the “new history from below” and debates concerning the subject of these inquiries, the “below.” History from below, which was pioneered many decades ago, has focused on the experiences of people belonging to underprivileged, underrepresented, and marginalized groups; in general, those whose stories have not made their way into the historical record.¹² While this approach has opened the way for rich historiographical possibilities, one of its limitations stems from its rather impersonal feeling, as it focuses on communities, groups, or collective action. In contrast, the new history from below aspires to study individual experiences and the agency of the broader category known as “ordinary” or “common people.”¹³ Proponents of this approach have drawn attention to the potential of so-called “ordinary writings,” a term used to describe texts produced by people of humbler backgrounds. Such texts belong to a variety of genres, including memoirs, diaries, amateur chronicles, family books, and letters. Studying the Ottoman and Middle Eastern historical context, scholars have already drawn on writings by people of more modest background to examine social and political history, as well as to address questions of subjectivity and popular mentalities. Such writings include chronicles, letters, unpublished memoirs, and notebooks. Among their authors, one finds a female mystic, prisoners of war, a barber, and Muslims in European captivity.¹⁴

¹¹ The city is known as Eski Zağra in Turkish, and Stara Zagora in Bulgarian. This article will use primarily the Ottoman Turkish version of place names because it discusses events in this historiographical context, although it also recognizes that these places held significance for various histories. The account itself is not an unfamiliar source for scholars of Ottoman history. See, for example, Ebru Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks, and the Balkans: Empire Lost, Relations Altered* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 101, 130. The source has also been mentioned in works on Turkish migrant literature. See, for example, Hayriye Süleymanoğlu Yeniso, *Edebiyatımızda Balkan Türklerinin Göç Kaderi* (Ankara, 2005), which incorporates excerpts of first-hand accounts, folklore, fiction, and poetry.

¹² Of course, this was the case many decades ago rather than nowadays. One of the first to use and practice “history from below” was E. P. Thompson, see E. P. Thompson, “History From Below,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966. On more recent debates concerning this concept and approach, see the online symposium “The Future of History from Below,” 2013, <https://manyheadedmonster.com/history-from-below/>.

¹³ For a detailed elaboration of the concept of “the new history from below,” see Martyn Lyons, *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1800–1920* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), especially pages 14–18, 252–56.

¹⁴ Examples include Cemal Kafadar, “Mütereddit bir Mutasavvıf: Üsküp’lü Asiye Hatun’un Rüya Defteri, 1641–43,” *Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Yıllığı* no. 5 (1987): 168–222; Yücel Yanıkdağ, “Ottoman Prisoners of War in Russia, 1914–1922,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 1 (1999): 69–85; Dana Sajdi, *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth Century Ottoman Levant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Nabil Matar, *Mediterranean*

One might reasonably ask whether we can consider Hüseyin Raci to have been an ordinary man, a representative of the “below.”¹⁵ After all, he does not fit neatly into the description of a common or lower-class man, as he attained higher religious education in Istanbul and enjoyed certain prestige in his community as a teacher, and later mufti. He had literary talent and aspirations. Addressing these points raises the much-discussed and debated question: Who is the “below”? While the “below” has usually been understood as groups, such as peasants, workers, the poor, or the so-called common people, historian Simona Cerutti has pointed out that the “below” is not necessarily synonymous with the common people or any specific social group. Rather, this concept should be understood as those who, at a certain point, found themselves in a subordinate position in their relationship to power, and whose history has remained largely neglected.¹⁶ The *muhacir* and other refugees in the Ottoman Empire can be considered one such category. Their history is not necessarily neglected, given the recently growing body of scholarship on the subject, but there are still many aspects to be explored. Furthermore, as works of Subaltern Studies remind us, status is socially contingent. One’s position can change depending on place, context, or a particular experience.¹⁷ Forced displacement can be one such transformative experience. As Raci Efendi’s text makes repeatedly clear, being a refugee strips everyone of whatever advantage, privilege, and status they once possessed. Even when he returned to settled life, the memory and trauma of *hicret* remained with Raci Efendi forever. It is worth noting that he went through *hicret* twice—once during the war and again in the 1890s. What defined Raci Efendi’s identity and voice as the author of *The Short History* and “Hicretname” were his experiences of war and displacement, i.e., becoming a *muhacir*. This does not mean that he lost his literary talent or could not take up an important post, such as mufti, but rather that he wrote his account of the war and refugee plight while acutely feeling the loss of power associated with these tribulations. At the same time, he sought to use the power of his words to present a different narrative, one that centered the *muhacir* and Muslims. Finally, it should be noted that Raci Efendi wrote and elaborated parts of *The Short History* and “Hicretname” over the course of two decades, 1877–97, while keeping these writings largely private. Very few people would have known about the manuscript until 1906–7, several years after his death, when sections of *The Short History* were published for the first time in Turkish-language newspapers in Bulgaria. Their circulation was probably limited, however, until the entire work appeared in book format in Istanbul in 1910. Thus, Raci Efendi’s writings, and those by other *muhacir*, can help us reconstruct a new history of displacement from below, one in which we do not lose sight of the individuality of those caught in the maelstrom.

Captivity Through Arab Eyes, 1517–1798 (Leiden: Brill, 2020). For other narratives by people with practice in writing, but who did not occupy the highest elite echelons, see Madeleine Zilfi, “The Diary of a Müderris: a New Source for Ottoman Biography,” *Journal of Turkish Studies* 1 (1977): 157–72; Cemal Kafadar, “Self and Others: the Diary of a Dervish in Seventeenth Century Istanbul and First-Person Narratives in Ottoman Literature,” *Studia Islamica* 69 (1989): 121–50; Ralf Elger and Yavuz Köse, eds., *Many Ways of Speaking about the Self: Middle Eastern Ego-Documents in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish (14th–20th century)* (Wiesbaden: Hassarowitz, 2010); and James Grehan, “Fun and Games in Ottoman Aleppo: the Life and Times of a Local Schoolteacher (1835–1865),” in *Entertainment Among the Ottomans*, eds. Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 90–120.

¹⁵ One of the questions of debate include: who is the subject of the history of below? See Mark Hailwood, “Who is Below?,” online symposium “The Future of History from Below,” 19 July 2013, <https://manyheadedmonster.com/2013/07/19/who-is-below/>.

¹⁶ Simona Cerutti, “Who is Below? E. P. Thompson, historien des sociétés modernes: une relecture,” *Annales* 4 (2015): 931–956. Cerutti uses the term “‘forgotten’,” (quotations in original), rather than neglected, underscoring the process of shaping and manipulating memory.

¹⁷ Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India,” in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1–8, especially 8; Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7–8.

The fate of Muslim refugees became a literary subject for Ottoman authors around the time of the war. A piece attributed to a 19th-century popular poet, Aşık Feryadi, wistfully admires the migrant girl whose beauty is augmented by the dignity with which she bears her torment.¹⁸ Namık Kemal, the notable writer and Young Ottoman intellectual, composed a poem called “Bir Muhacir Kızının İstimdadı” (A *Muhacir* Girl’s Cry for Help), which laments the fate of a *muhacir* girl whose appearance emanates unspeakable suffering.¹⁹ The fate of refugees inspired theater plays, although none of their texts or descriptions remain.²⁰ However, locating sources authored by *muhacir* that narrate the experience of displacement is not easy. The overwhelming majority of people who fled were illiterate, and not many of those who were literate wrote of their ordeals. Still, there are possibilities to uncover *muhacir* voices in documents such as petitions and letters.²¹ There is also a significant body of oral record expressed in folk songs (*türkü*).²²

Remarkably, a few *muhacir* narratives did make it into print. In addition to Hüseyin Raci’s work, a couple of other titles should be mentioned, although this is by no means an exhaustive list. Remarkably, these titles are in poetic form, attesting not just to the authors’ skills but also the potential of poetry to express emotion. One is a collection of poems titled *Neler Çektik* (What We Endured) by Necmi Raci, Hüseyin Raci’s son, an Ottoman officer who experienced the war as a child.²³ Another is the rare work of a female *muhacir*, dating to the period of the early Turkish republic. This work is a poem-letter written by a young woman we only know as Nihal, who came to Turkey as a part of the Greek-Turkish population exchange (*mübadele muhacirlerinden*). The poem-letter, addressed to her sisters, the young women of Istanbul, recounts the tragic fate of the author’s family in Greece and her feelings of sadness, alienation, and hope now that she is in a “foreign land” (*garib ili*), but which, in fact, is the “mother homeland” (*anavatan*). We do not know anything else about Nihal, except that she headed to settle in Samsun. Although she promised to write more, and the publisher pledged to convey her letters to readers, there seem to be no other texts by her.²⁴

Hüseyin Raci’s work stands out in several ways. From what we know, it is the first account of *hicret* (Arabic *hijra*) in the Ottoman context that appeared in print and was written by an author who was himself a *muhacir*. The poem “Hicretname” is similarly unique for being arguably the first published literary work about such experiences, as well as for its remarkable artistic qualities. In addition, the account is the only narrative of the Russo-Ottoman War written by a civilian.

¹⁸ “Göçmen Kızı Acıyorum,” in *XV. Yüzyıldan Bugüne Rumeli Motifli Türk Şiirleri Antolojisi*, ed. Ahmet Emin Atasoy (Bursa: Asa, 2001), 116.

¹⁹ Namık Kemal, “Bir Muhacir Kızının İstimdadı,” in *XV. Yüzyıldan Bugüne Rumeli Motifli Türk Şiirleri Antolojisi*, ed. Ahmet Emin Atasoy (Bursa: Asa, 2001), 170.

²⁰ Basiretçi Ali, *İstanbul Mektupları* (İstanbul: Çağaloğlu Kitabevi, 2001), 707–8. Also see correspondence regarding a play titled “İsmet Veyahut Hicret,” Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (henceforth BOA), MF.MKT 58/16, 17 September 1878.

²¹ For petitions or petition summaries attesting to the struggles of *muhacir* life, see BOA, YB.021 78/112, about the complaints of a widowed *muhacir* woman made to share a house with a mentally ill *muhacir* woman abandoned by her husband, 12 June 1883; BOA, DH.MKT 1426/47, relating the request for support of a *muhacir* wounded during his service; and BOA, A.MTZ.04 173/53, featuring the complaints of *muhacir* from Türnovo whose estates were taken over by the Bulgarians, 30 December 1908. For works using petitions, see Fratantuono, *Governing Migration*, 78–81, 147, 161; Hamed-Troyansky, *Empire of Refugees*, 89, 103–7, 157–58, 177–81.

²² For example, see Zeynep Zafer, “Bulgaristan Türklerinin İki Türkülünde Göç Konusu,” *Milli Folklor* 52 (2001): 110–16; and some pieces in Ahmet Emin Atasoy, ed., *XV. Yüzyıldan Bugüne Rumeli Motifli Türk Şiirleri Antolojisi* (Bursa: Asa, 2001).

²³ Necmi Raci, *Neler Çektik* (Der Saadet: Hürriyet Matbaası, 1327 [1909]),

²⁴ *Muhacir Bir Kızın Sergüzeşti – Nihal’in Mektupları* (İstanbul: Şems Matbaası, n.d.). Nihal’s versed letter was sent to relatives in Istanbul and, as such, came to the attention of the publisher.

Mustafazade Hasanzade Hüseyin Raci was born in a village near Karınabad (Karnobat in Bulgarian), in the southeastern part of the Balkan peninsula.²⁵ He completed his religious education in Istanbul and served as a teacher and principal at various schools in his native area. At the time the Russo-Ottoman War broke out, he was a *rüşdiye* teacher in Eski Zağra. When an advance detachment of Russian troops and Bulgarian volunteers briefly held the city in July 1877, he was detained along with other notable Muslims. The Ottoman counter-offensive led to his release. He left the burning city with his family shortly thereafter, merging with the mass of Muslim refugees fleeing to territories still under Ottoman control. After the war, he spent a couple of years in Istanbul serving as a teacher in the Fatih *rüşdiye*. Then he returned to Eski Zağra, which, in the meantime, had become part of the autonomous province of Eastern Rumelia.²⁶ The city to which he returned bore the scars of the war. The population had dropped dramatically: on the eve of the war, there were 36,000 inhabitants; in the mid-1880s, there were 15,000. Of the 12,000 Muslims prior to the war, 2,500 were living in the city in the 1880s.²⁷ Devastation was still visible through the remnants of charred buildings. But at the same time, there were also rapid changes. Rebuilding this urban center was a priority for the Eastern Rumelian authorities. Consequently, the city was the first in Eastern Rumelia and then Bulgaria to have a proper street and regulation plan, the implementation of which affected many of the remaining Muslim properties; one of the many signs of the changed political situation.²⁸ In 1885, in a bloodless coup, Bulgaria declared union with Eastern Rumelia. For many, there was no doubt that even nominal Ottoman authority was not coming back. Upon his return, Raci Efendi served as a *rüşdiye* principal and then a mufti of Eski Zağra for years. In the late 1890s, he emigrated permanently to the Ottoman Empire. Nothing is known about the circumstances of his second, permanent emigration. It was not accompanied by such violent circumstances as the first, but this does not mean that it was not a difficult experience. He was among the numerous Muslims who left because they found it increasingly difficult to live in the aspiring Bulgarian nation-state.²⁹ For the rest of his life, Raci Efendi served on the Higher Education Council in Istanbul. He died in 1901/2, before *The Short History* was published.

²⁵ On Hüseyin Raci Efendi's life, see Bursalı Mehmed Tahir, *Osmanlı Müellifleri*, 2. Cilt (Istanbul: Ali Şükrü Matbaası, 1338 [1922/23]), 207; BOA, Umum Tezakir Defteri, 917-57-1, 15 September 1881; BOA, MF.MKT 55/22, 10 April 1878; BOA, MF.MKT 70/4, 2 October 1880; BOA, BEO 1275/95566, 4 March 1899.

²⁶ The Treaty of Berlin proclaimed the establishment of the autonomous province of Eastern Rumelia on the area stretching south of the Balkan mountains up to the southern slopes of the Rhodopi. The province that incorporated a diverse population of Bulgarians, Turkish and Slavic-speaking Muslims, and Greeks, among others, would remain under the formal suzerainty of the sultan but governed by a Christian governor. On Eastern Rumelia, see Richard Crampton, *Bulgaria: a History, 1878-1918* (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, distributed by New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983), 85-100; Mahir Aydın, *Şarki Rumeli Vilayeti* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1992).

²⁷ See statistical information in Konstantin Jireček, *Pütuvania po Bŭlgaria* (Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1974), 232.

²⁸ The new plan for the city, which was considered groundbreaking for its time and dubbed "American" after its rectangular gridline patterns, was the brainchild of an Austro-Hungarian architect. On the planning of the city, see Grigor Doytchinov and Christo Gantchev, *Österreichische Architekten in Bulgarien, 1878-1918* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2001), 34-37. On Muslim protests against the city plan, see "Eski Zağra...", *Hilal* 35 (18 August 1884): 2.

²⁹ Muslim emigration continued after the establishment of Bulgaria. In the period 1888-1893, about 50,000 Muslims left the country; Tsentralen Dŭrzhaven Arhiv - Sofia, TsDA, f. 176k, op. 1, a. e. 824, 28 November 1894, 2. For comparison, in 1880/81, the overall number of Muslims in the Bulgarian Principality and autonomous province of Eastern Rumelia was over 750,000; in 1905, it was 600,000. The decline was mainly a consequence of emigration. M. K. Sarafov, "Naselenieto na Kniazhestvo Bŭlgaria po trite pŭrvi prebroyavania," part 3, *Periodichesko spisanie* 44 (1894): 201-46; *Statisticheski godishnik*, 1909 (Sofia: Dŭrzhavna pechatnitsa, 1910), 38.

In addition to his religious training, Hüseyin Raci was well versed in Ottoman historiography, Arabic, and Persian. He had literary talent, yet he remained humble about it, and wrote poetry, little of which can be located.³⁰ In fact, it is in poetic form that he was able to convey his deepest sentiments. None of the sources surveyed suggest that he had direct links to the concerted endeavors in cultural and education reform among Bulgaria's Muslim community at the time.³¹ His name became more widely known among local Muslim reformist circles after his death, mainly with the publication of parts of *The Short History*. Nevertheless, Raci Efendi contributed to local culture in his own ways and remained invested in communal affairs.³² He apparently came to harbor deep resentment toward Abdülhamid II, as censure of the sultan is visible in some passages of *The Short History*. Even more indicative is a satirical poem Raci Efendi composed titled "The New Hamidian March" (Yeni Marşı Hamidi), also published posthumously in one of Bulgaria's Muslim journals. The poem criticized the sultan for various afflictions brought upon the Ottoman state. The war remained a burning wound. Among the poem's grievances was the torment Muslims endured at enemy hands, while Abdülhamid II submissively relinquished Rumeli to Bulgaria.³³

Raci Efendi wrote an account of Eski Zağra's ordeal shortly after he fled to Istanbul in the fall of 1877. He tried to publish it, even receiving permission from the Ottoman Ministry of Education, which vetted potential publications. However, amid the massive Ottoman retreat in December 1877, the project was put on hold. After the end of the war, official interest in producing the book seems to have dissipated. Conceivably, there was perhaps even a ban on publishing works on the topic. Over the next few years, Hüseyin Raci expanded the manuscript, incorporating information on the events surrounding the war and the associated refugee crisis.³⁴ The "Hicretname" was completed in 1878/79 or 1880/81, probably while Hüseyin Raci was still in Istanbul.³⁵ It is impossible to know the extent of the work's circulation prior to its publication, although it must have been limited. The author mentions that, in 1877, he was aware of a general desire to publicize the story of his flight and was encouraged by distinguished people to do so. Later, as he worked on expanding the initial account, he suggests that eminent people and military familiar with the events of the war gave advice on his work, although we do not know their identities. Perhaps members of his family, including his son, and close friends knew about it; and perhaps Raci Efendi also read the "Hicretname" at private literary gatherings with other ulema and friends. While Raci Efendi benefitted from the advice of others, there is no doubt of his authorship, as his voice, style, learning, and emotions come clearly through the text. As time went by, Raci Efendi became increasingly disillusioned with the regime in the Ottoman Empire and indignant about the position of his co-religionists in Bulgaria. He likely lost hope in seeing his work published in his lifetime, or while Abdülhamid II was still on the throne, and hence did not hold back in his criticism of the sultan. In 1897, perhaps feeling the burden of age, Raci Efendi

³⁰ For a contribution to Eastern Rumelia's newspaper *Hilal*, see "Asar-ı Edebiye," *Hilal* no. 4, 27 March 1882, 3.

³¹ On cultural reform and political mobilization among Bulgaria's Muslims during the period, see Milena B. Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation: Muslim Reform in the Balkans* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021).

³² See Raci Efendi's report on Bulgarian encroachment on Muslim establishments, BOA, Y.MTV 88/136, 27 December 1893.

³³ "Eski Zağra...", *Uhuvvet*, no. 107, 15 April 1906, 3.

³⁴ See the author's introduction Hüseyin Raci, "İfade-i Müellif," *Tarihçe*, 5–6. Another source is the defense statement of one of the military commanders of Abdülkerim Nadir Pasha (1807–1883) during the war, who incidentally was born in the vicinity of Eski Zağra. The source was largely interpreted as pointing to Istanbul's responsibility for the defeat, see a later edition Abdülkerim Nadir Pasha, *Serdar-ı Ekrem Abdülkerim Nadir Paşa'nın Müdafanamesi* (Der Saadet: Matbaa-i Nefaset, 1329 [1911]).

³⁵ Raci Efendi lists the year of completion as 1296. It is likely that it was Hijri, which would make the date of completion 1878/79.

signed off the preface to the final version of his work and entrusted it to his son to publish when the time was right.³⁶ Five years later, Raci Efendi was dead.

Parts of the account came out for the first time in serialized form in 1906–7 in *Rumeli* (1905–6) and *Balkan* (1906–c. 18), two Ottoman Turkish-language newspapers in Bulgaria noted for their Young Turk sympathies. The manuscript was most likely sent by the author's son, Necmi Raci, who served in the Ottoman military and was himself a Young Turk. The first sections of Raci Efendi's book appeared without a foreword or introduction; readers had to instinctively understand the book's subject and significance. Parts of the work were subsequently published as supplements, introduced as the only true narrative of the Russo-Ottoman War, a disaster of the Ottoman nation.³⁷ The work likely resonated with many of Bulgaria's sizable Muslim community—the war and displacement also being part of their collective memory. Crucially, many had been *muhacir* themselves. The *muhacir* experience marked not just those who fled to and settled in the Ottoman domains but also those who returned to their native places, now under new political authority. For their part, Young Turk groups in Bulgaria readily seized upon the opportunity to use the work in their criticism of the Hamidian regime.³⁸ However, there were probably other reasons for the book's publication at that particular time. The thirtieth anniversary of the war was looming, so publishing the account would have been a way to present an alternative to the Bulgarian national narrative. Unfortunately, we have no information about the responses. Publication of the supplements ceased shortly after, in the spring of 1907, perhaps under pressure from the Bulgarian authorities. It remains unknown whether, at this stage, *The Short History* had any circulation in the Ottoman domains, via smuggled copies of *Rumeli* or *Balkan*; if it did, the circulation was minimal. In the Ottoman Empire, Raci Efendi's work reached wider circulation after its publication as a book in 1910, after the Young Turk revolution.

Memories of a War and Place

The Russo-Ottoman War put Ottoman capabilities to the test.³⁹ The war was fought on two fronts: in the Balkans and the Caucasus. The war commenced in April with an offensive in the Caucasus. In Europe, military action began in June. Shortly after, Russian armies crossed the Danube and embarked on a steady advance. In July, a vanguard of Russian troops and Bulgarian volunteers under the command of General Yosif V. Gurko descended south of the Balkan Mountains, reaching Eski Zağra on July 10. They occupied the city for ten days, during which time the military contingent and local Bulgarians took the helm of local government. While Muslims were given reassurances for their safety, they became the targets of violence during the brief occupation. The occupation force withdrew in the face of an approaching Ottoman counter-offensive. As authority changed hands, so did the fortunes of the city's

³⁶ Hüseyin Raci, *Tarihçe* 5–6. Titles of poetry collections include “Eser-i Aşk,” “Bedreka,” and “Divançe”; Bursalı Mehmed Tahir, *Son Asır*, 207. However, they could not be located.

³⁷ See “Osmanlı-Rus Muharebesi Hatıratından” in the following issues of *Rumeli*: no. 27, 29 June 1906, 2–3; no. 28, 6 July 1906, 2–3; no. 29, 13 July 1906, 2–3; no. 30, 20 July 1906, 2–3; and no. 31, 4 August 1906, 2–3. Also “Mühim Bir Eserdir, Kaçırmayın,” *Balkan*, no. 128, 2 February 1907, 4; Edhem Ruhi, “Osmanlı-Rus Muharebesi Hakkında Bir İntikad-ı Tarihi,” *Balkan*, no. 166, 27 March 1907, 1–2.

³⁸ On the Young Turks prior to the 1908 revolution, see M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

³⁹ For a general overview of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78, the preceding events, and subsequent settlement, see W. N. Medlicott, *The Congress of Berlin and After: a Diplomatic History of the Near Eastern Settlement, 1878–1880* (Oxon, UK: Frank Cass, 1963). For some aspects of the war, see M. Hakan Yavuz and Peter Sluglett, eds., *War and Diplomacy: the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 and the Congress of Berlin* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2011).

residents. This time, many Bulgarians were victimized. During the battle, Eski Zağra burned. The remaining Bulgarians followed those who had fled earlier, north of the Balkan Mountains, while Muslims hastily abandoned Eski Zağra, embarking on a precarious journey. For a long time, the city resembled a ghost town—the embers of fire burned for months, as a few survivors sheltered in the ruins.⁴⁰ For several months, the war came to a standstill as Osman Pasha fortified himself in Plevne/Pleven, enduring a grueling siege, while Russian forces and Bulgarian volunteers blocked the Şıbka/Shipka mountain pass to prevent the passage of Ottoman reinforcements to the north. In December, after the fall of Plevne, Russian armies began a relentless advance, reaching the outskirts of Istanbul in mid-January 1878. Earlier in January, they controlled for the second time whatever was left of Eski Zağra. In March 1878, the Ottomans were compelled to sign the San Stefano Treaty, the harshest conditions of which were subsequently amended at the Congress of Berlin.

Muslims began fleeing with the onset of military action, but following the fall of Plevne, thousands threw themselves into desperate flight towards Istanbul and other areas still under Ottoman control. The capital bore the brunt of the crisis. In mid-January, Istanbul was overwhelmed with thousands of people arriving daily.⁴¹ In spite of the extraordinary mobilization efforts at the administrative level and within Ottoman society, as well as the assistance of organizations under foreign patronage, relief was often inadequate.⁴² As time passed, uncertainty persisted, and refugees became a ubiquitous sight on the streets of Istanbul. Sympathy seemed to be fading, while fear of the spread of disease grew.⁴³ It became urgent for the refugees to be sent away from the Ottoman capital, so the authorities worked to resettle them and encouraged their repatriation after the conclusion of peace.⁴⁴

The war carried different meanings for the various sides. For Bulgarians, it became the War of Liberation, marking the establishment of the modern Bulgarian nation-state. While the Bulgarian narrative gave Russian troops their due share of gratitude, it went on to underscore one particular theme: the Bulgarians' contribution to the war, highlighting the participation of the detachment of Bulgarian volunteers (*opülchentsi*) who fought alongside Russian armies at the strategic Shipka pass and elsewhere, including Eski Zağra.⁴⁵ For Russia, the war was a chance to realize its long-standing goal of territorial expansion. Yet, the conflict had another important dimension: Russia could demonstrate in practice its commitment to the codification and expansion of international law regulating the conduct of war, a cause it had championed for some time.⁴⁶ In subsequent years, Russia emphasized the

⁴⁰ For accounts of the fate of Eski Zağra, see Hüseyin Raci, *Tarihçe*; Dimitur Ilkov, *Prinos kŭm istoriata na grad Stara Zagora* (Plovdiv: Tŭrgovska pechatnitsa, 1908), 196–249.

⁴¹ “Muhacirler,” *Vakit*, no. 799, 13 January 1878, 1; “İş Vicdana Dokunuyor,” *Vakit*, no. 800, 14 January 1878, 1–2.

⁴² For support provided by the Ottoman authorities and various individuals and communities, see BOA, Y.PRK.KOM 1/14; 1/27; “İlan-ı Resmi,” *Vakit*, no. 847, 1 March 1878, 4; “Ahval-ı hazıra...,” “Muhacirîne...,” *Vakit*, no. 802, 16 January 1878, 4. One of the prominent aid societies was the Turkish Compassionate Fund founded under British auspices; H. Mainwaring Dunstan, *The Turkish Compassionate Fund: an Account of its Origin, Workings and Results* (London: Remington & co., 1883). In a major moment of Muslim solidarity, Indian Muslims contributed significant funds for relief of Ottoman soldiers, widows, and orphans; Azmi Özcan, *Pan Islamism: Indian Muslims, the Ottomans, and Britain, 1877–1924* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 64–88. For the inadequacy of this support, see, for example, BOA, Y.PRK.KOM 1/14, 26 January 1878; BOA, Y.PRK.KOM 1/27, March–April 1878.

⁴³ On public health concerns, see BOA, Y.PRK.KOM 1/27, 1 April 1878; BOA, HR.TO 520/25, 22 April 1878; “İstanbul'da Sıhhat-ı Umumiye,” *Vakit*, no. 865, 19 March 1878, 1–2.

⁴⁴ BOA, BEO.AYN.d 1149, 25 November 1878.

⁴⁵ At the time, this theme was most prominently expressed through literature, the most iconic work being a poem by Ivan Vazov (1850–1921) celebrating the feats of the volunteers at Shipka. See Ivan Vazov, “Opülchentsite na Shipka,” in *Epopeya na zabravenite* (1893), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2890/2890-h/2890-h.htm>.

⁴⁶ See Peter Holquist, “The Russian Empire as a ‘Civilized State’: International Law as Principle and Practice in Imperial Russia, 1874–1878,” http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceer/2004_818-06g_Holquist.pdf.

military aspects of the conflict in which it scored an overwhelming victory, even though it could not capitalize diplomatically on this success. In 1900, Russia's military headquarters commenced the publication of a massive documentary collection on the war, which eventually reached close to 100 volumes.⁴⁷

Although the war left a deep mark on the Ottoman state and society, only a few works by Ottoman authors were written about it in the subsequent three decades, coinciding with Hamidian rule. Only six such works were published in the empire in the years up until the Young Turk revolution. Similarly, there was little public reflection or effort to discuss the consequences of the war. Most sources do not provide any explanation for this relative silence. If we are to believe works published after the Young Turk revolution, however, then it is quite possible that the Hamidian regime looked unfavorably upon such discussions because they could have raised questions about responsibility for the defeat and stir discontent against the sultan. In fact, in a bid to prevent accountability, the palace and certain Ottoman governing circles were quick to divert blame to some of the commanders, such as Süleyman Pasha.⁴⁸

Despite the losses, suffering, and collective trauma, the few published accounts painted the war in heroic terms. Within this narrative of bravery, Gazi Osman Pasha and the siege of Plevne loomed large. Of the six books of varying genres published in the Ottoman domains in the period up until the Young Turk revolution, five dealt with the feted Ottoman commander and the city, which captured the hopes and fascination of Muslims in the Ottoman Empire and beyond.⁴⁹ If there was an attempt to produce an official narrative, it was Ahmed Midhat's *Zübdetü'l-hakayik* (The Quintessence of Truths). The Ottoman writer, who was noted for his support for Abdülhamid II, published a sizable compilation of documents on the war along with some brief commentary. The work served a double purpose: it sought to exonerate the sultan from responsibility for the defeat and provided a sense of transparency with regards to Ottoman affairs.⁵⁰

The Young Turk revolution presented opportunities to discuss and reassess the war. Most of the authors of works dating to the post-revolution years hailed from the ranks of the military and were Young Turk sympathizers. They exuded a spirit of militarism. Ottoman heroism was recognized but the war was seen as a defeat that contributed to major losses. Such works more openly debated the reasons for the debacle while highlighting how it served the goals of Abdülhamid II.⁵¹ Some publications were exclusively military histories.⁵² The aftermath of the revolution was also a chance to rehabilitate unjustly accused commanders, such as Abdülkerim and Süleyman Pashas, by publishing memos of self-defense

⁴⁷ For the first volume in the series, see *Sbornik materialov po russko-turetskoi voine, 1877-78, na Balkanskom poluostrove*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: Izdanie voenno-istoricheskoi komisii Glavnogo shtaba, 1900); *Opisanie Russko-turetskoi voyny, 1877-78 na Balkanskom poluostrove*, 3 vols. (St. Petersburg: Voennaya tipografia, 1901).

⁴⁸ Basiretçi Ali, *Yıldız'ın Hatası: Devlet-i Aliye ve Rusya Muharebesi*, 1293 (Der Saadet: İkbâl-i Millet Matbaası, 1324 [1908/9]), 47.

⁴⁹ These works ranged in genre, style, and intended audience. They included a laudatory pamphlet praising the commander and Ottoman soldiers, the proceeds of which went to wounded veterans; memoirs of officers who took part in the defense of Plevne; and studies of military history. See Hikmet, *Plevne Kahramanı Gazi Osman Paşa* (Istanbul: Basiret Matbaası, 1294 [1878]); Talat Bey, *Plevne Tarih-i Harbi* (Istanbul: Kırk Anbar Matbaası, 1296 [1880/81]); İbrahim Edhem, *Plevne Hatıraları: Sebat ve Gayret Kıyametten Bir Alamet*, haz. Seyfullah Esin (Istanbul: Tercüman, 1979); Osman Sena'i, *Plevne Kahramanı Gazi Osman Paşa* (Istanbul: Feridiye Matbaası, 1317 [1901/2]); Ahmed Cemal, *Mefahir-i Milliye-i Osmaniye'mizden Plevne Müdafası* (Konstantiniye: A. Asaduryan Matbaası, 1316 [1900]).

⁵⁰ Ahmed Midhat, *Zübdetü'l-hakayik* (Istanbul: Takvim-i Vekayi Matbaası, 1295 [1878]).

⁵¹ Mehmed Hulusi, *Niçin Maglub Olduk? 1877-78 Seferi Avrupa Cihetindeki Harekat* (Istanbul: Sancakçıyan Matbaası, 1326 [1910/11]), for more specific arguments, see 31–34, 54–55, 59–60, 114, 121; Ahmed Saib, *Son Osmanlı-Rus Muharebesi* (Mısır: Matbaa-yı Hindiyeh, 1327 [1910/11]).

⁵² Ali Fuad, *Musavver 1293-1294 Osmanlı Rus-Seferi* 3 cild (Istanbul: Kütüphane-i İslam ve Askeri, 1326 [1910/11]).

and court proceedings.⁵³ Crucially, the new political circumstances opened the way for the publication of Hüseyin Raci Efendi's account in the empire.

Finally, it is important to note the significance of Eski Zağra for Ottoman Muslims and Bulgarians alike. The city became one of the starkest symbols of destruction and victimization in the memory of each side. For Bulgarians, the city evoked the violence they endured at the hands of Ottoman troops and Muslims. For Muslims, it symbolized the brutality inflicted on them by Russian soldiers and Bulgarians. These perceptions were expressed in images. After the war, Bulgarian commemorative postcards featured piles of skulls along with a monument honoring the fallen.⁵⁴ The Ottomans, for their part, commissioned a series of photographs of Muslim victims from Eski Zağra, exclusively women and children, in the fall of 1877. The images, collected in a brochure, were presented to European governments in an effort to win their support.⁵⁵ Bulgarian histories of the city invariably dwelled on its tragic wartime fate, which turned this "jewel" (*brilyant*) into a pile of bones.⁵⁶ And Hüseyin Raci's account, notably titled *The Short History of the Zağra Event*, was also his way of commemorating his hometown, which he saw disappear in flames and to which he returned, at least for a while, in a bid to start a new life.

The Short History of the Zağra Event: The Account

The Short History is notable for being a civilian account of the war, and it is particularly valuable as a unique personal narrative of displacement. Crucially, the work reveals aspects of the experience that are not captured by other sources. The book straddles several genres, bearing the characteristics of a memoir, chronicle, and work of modern-style historical writing, as well as featuring literary work, the poem "Hicretname," and numerous verses throughout the rest of the text. Emotions feature strongly throughout the book. Raci Efendi felt the urgency to write the account because he viewed the war as unprecedented—in the history of both the Ottoman Empire and humanity. The events were a disaster of extraordinary proportions, bringing unimaginable suffering, destruction, and chaos. The scale of devastation was even more noteworthy, the book underscores, as it took place during the existing stage of human civilization and before the eyes of the civilized world. Various expressions convey the sense of catastrophe: it was a "calamity of calamities" (*dahiye-i dehya*), an "affliction" (*musibet*), "mayhem/chaos" (*herc ü merc*), and "disaster" (*felaket*). Occasionally, even the well-versed author is short of words to describe what took place, only able to compare it to scenes of Judgment Day (*kiyamet*). The war quickly mobilized religious sentiments, and many contemporaries interpreted it in religious terms. Such perceptions are visible in Raci Efendi's account. The conflict was conceived as a war of religion, a crusade (*muharebe-i ehl-i salib*) against the empire, the author asserts. For Muslims, it harkened back to a dark past, when they were targeted for their faith and subjected to various "inquisitions" (*engizisyonlar*) and "auto-da-fés" (*otodafeler*), the penance, often deadly, imposed on people accused of heresy in the

⁵³ Abdülkerim Nadir Pasha, *Serdar-ı Ekrem Abdülkerim Nadir Paşa'nın Müdafaaanamesi* (Der Saadet: Matbaa-i Nefaset, 1329 [1911]); Süleyman Paşa *Muhakemesi: 1293 Osmanlı-Rus Muharebesi* (Kostantiniye: Matbaa-yı Ebu Ziya, 1328 [1910/11]).

⁵⁴ For an image, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stara_Zagora_massacre#/media/File:Klane_na_Stara_Zagora.JPG.

⁵⁵ Furthermore, the images made their way to European newspapers, see a copy of *Le Monde Illustré* dating to November 1878 in BOA, HR.SYS 1242/37. For a discussion of this album, see Martina Baleva, "The Empire Strikes Back: Image Battles and Image Frontlines During the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78," *Ethnologia Balkanica* 16 (2012): 273–94.

⁵⁶ See, for example, the work of a local historian in Ilkov, *Prinos*, 196–249.

Medieval period. But even more remarkable were the atrocities they endured, unprecedented in the wars of modern times.⁵⁷

In hindsight, Raci Efendi could see how the war came about. Russia had harbored ambitions towards Ottoman domains for a long time, particularly after the Crimean War. To this end, it stirred the Serbs, Montenegrins, Vlachs, and Bulgarians against the Ottoman government. The ill-fated decisions of the Ottoman authorities and military commanders only made the Russians' breach of the European Ottoman domains easier.⁵⁸ At the time though, among the Muslims of Eski Zağra, there was a sense that the war descended upon them unexpectedly. Anxiety and then panic gripped the people when they heard rumors of the Russians crossing the Danube and Balkan Mountains. Bulgarians, for their part, were visibly heartened by the news. They reassured their Muslim fellow townsmen that civilians would not be hurt, as the war would transpire before the eyes of the Great Powers. One day, when Raci Efendi was busy with the yearly exams at the *rüşdiye*, he witnessed a "strange event" (*garibe*). Two flocks of crows descended upon the city, covered the sun, fought with each other, and then flew away. This occurrence reminded Raci Efendi of a similar episode in the chronicle of Naima (1655–1716), considered a classic Ottoman historical text, about the Ottoman offensive at Kanije (Kanizsa in Hungarian), which, at the time, was interpreted as a prophecy of a looming battle. He was seized by a heavy premonition, later seeing this unusual event as an ominous sign of the imminent occupation.⁵⁹

On July 10, a Sunday, in Eski Zağra, the church bells rang festively, and there was a cheerful commotion among the Bulgarians. The force comprising the Cossacks, Bulgarian volunteers, and Bulgarians from the neighboring mountains (*Balkan Bulgarları*) entered the town. To the petrified Muslims, the cheerful bells sounded like the sinister hooting of owls predicting the destruction of the country. The occupation authority soon introduced a new order: the government building was taken over, telegraph lines cut, and Muslims were disarmed. The author observes how the oldest mosque in town was turned into stables and Muslim shops were plundered. Raci Efendi's family spent a sleepless night listening to the terrifying sounds of an assault on their neighbors' house.⁶⁰ The next day, he and other prominent Muslims were arrested on charges of shooting at Russian soldiers. To Raci Efendi, though, there is little doubt that the goal was to deprive the local Muslim community of leadership. At the government building, the detainees personally meet the leaders of the force—generals Gurko and Skobelev. Skobelev was the same famed commander who had participated in the conquest of Turkestan, Raci Efendi observes. The author captures the general's peculiar accent in Turkish, perhaps in a bid to predispose the Muslims, while exhorting the Bulgarians not to assault them because it was a "sin" ("*günah*" [sic], rather than the correct *günah*). Skobelev apologized to the detainees but still imprisons them. The author then recounts how the captives spent days awaiting their fate, with trepidation; some are later executed.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Hüseyin Raci, *Tarihçe* 16, 36, 112, 132, 145, 146, 147, 152. Many Ottoman Muslims used similar terms for the war and in their criticism of European imperialist aspirations. See, for example, "Yahu Avrupa...", *Vakit*, no. 548, 9 May 1877, 1–2. Out of a desire not to alienate the empire's non-Muslim subjects, the Ottoman authorities, for their part, hesitated to declare the war a jihad, even though it was still portrayed in such terms by contemporary publications and rhetoric. See Mustafa Aksakal, "The Ottoman Proclamation of Jihad," in *Jihad and Islam in World War I*, ed. Erik-Jan Zürcher (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2016), 53–70. One of the books on the Russo-Ottoman War and Osman Pasha mentioned here refers to the commander's exploits as "mucahadat," and his soldiers as "erbab-ı cihad," Hikmet, *Plevne Kahramanı*, 20.

⁵⁸ Hüseyin Raci, *Tarihçe*, 10–15.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 20–22, 34–35. On Naima and his significance for Ottoman history writing, see Mehmet İpşirli, "Naima," *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi* 32. Cild (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2006), 316–318.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 35–40.

⁶¹ Ibid., 43–49.

As news of approaching Ottoman armies reached the town, most of the occupying force hastily withdrew, leaving a few Russian soldiers and Bulgarian volunteers. The account describes the ensuing mayhem. Church bells rang again, only this time, in an anxious knell. Süleyman Pasha's counter-offensive brings another outburst of violence, this time against the Bulgarians. Regular Ottoman troops advanced methodically, Circassian irregulars descended like "death angels" (*melaik-i acal*), and local Muslims took their turn retaliating. The city's Russian and Bulgarian defenders perish, having taken their last stand in a local church.⁶² In the meantime, Raci Efendi was released and returned home to find that several members of his family had been killed. Along with other Muslims, he visited Süleyman Pasha's camp, where he sensed a strange commotion: people preparing to abandon Eski Zağra. Although Ottoman armies had retaken the city, many Muslims feared for their safety, scared of a repeat occupation. Süleyman Pasha seemed reluctant to discourage locals from leaving. Raci Efendi reluctantly gathered his family in an oxcart and headed out of town. Once outside, he casts a final glance at Eski Zağra and is moved to tears: "our dear homeland" (*vatan-ı azizimiz*) has been turned into "the scene of Judgment Day" (*meydan-ı haşr ü nüşur*), he laments. Fires started during the battle begin to engulf the once flourishing city. Raci Efendi watches tearfully as everything he has known in his life is swallowed by the flames: his neighborhood and his own home, the main street, the clock-tower, and the non-Muslim quarter. He mournfully observes, however, that few seem to share his emotions.⁶³

Weather extremes, vividly portrayed in the account, add to the adversities the Muslims endured, as if even nature was against these unfortunates. The anxious wait for news from the war, the occupation of the city in July 1877, and the flight of Muslims from Eski Zağra all took place in scorching heat. The city disappeared in flames. Thirst seemed to have been on people's minds as much as hunger.⁶⁴ The mass flight of Muslims following the Ottoman retreat from December onwards occurred in extreme cold and snow, with many perishing. Refugees waited in the snow for trains, walked through blizzards, and children were abandoned in haste, or out of desperation.⁶⁵

In addition to providing an account of his ordeal, Raci Efendi was determined to explain the causes of the misfortunes. A pious man, Raci Efendi was also clearly struggling to find meaning in these traumatic events. Thus, he states that if the Muslims had to endure such tribulations, it must have been God's will, but there were also more mundane reasons. The author points to the decay of national morals (*ahlak-ı millye*), particularly after the Crimean War. Selfishness had taken root, while those who abided by the shar'ia were punished, he observes reproachfully. Clearly, he was not enthusiastic about the direction of the Tanzimat reforms, especially their breach of longstanding Ottoman traditions. Crucially, for Raci Efendi, the Ottoman government and Sultan Abdülhamid II shared culpability for the disaster. Having relinquished hope of seeing his work published, at least in his lifetime or while Abdülhamid II was on the throne, Raci Efendi did not hold back in his criticism. The sultan did not live up to the task of leading the country in challenging times, Raci Efendi states. He was more interested in retaining control over the government than following the example of past Ottoman rulers, who had personally headed the army under the green banner. Even if many ordinary Ottoman soldiers fought courageously, the command was plagued by incompetence.⁶⁶ Such critical remarks made it impossible for the book to be published in the Ottoman Empire at the time.

⁶² Ibid., 53–55, 66–77.

⁶³ Ibid., 85–87, 90–91.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 19, 29, 90.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 133, 144, 149, 150–51.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 151, 108–9, 11–13, 112, 117, 15–16, 125, 143.

According to the author, however, Russians and Bulgarians bore foremost responsibility. The account portrays Russia as a relentless enemy coming from afar, whose armies fought with deadly efficiency. Bulgarians, in comparison, appear as cunning and insidious. A section of the work, titled “Bulgarian atrocities” (*Bulgar mezalimi*), recounts the various ways Muslims were victimized by local Bulgarians.⁶⁷ While the term *mezalim* had been used previously to denote injustice and oppression, European reactions to the 1875–76 Balkan uprisings, the Ottoman response, and competing humanitarian discourses infused the word with the new politicized meaning of “atrocities.”⁶⁸ It is noteworthy that when the Ottoman authorities published a brochure about the wartime Rumeli atrocities, which also featured the sad fate of Eski Zağra, one Ottoman newspaper made a point of sending a copy to William Gladstone, the author of the *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*. The British statesman published his pamphlet shortly after the Bulgarian uprising of 1876, and it soon came to be seen as the epitome of anti-Ottoman rhetoric.⁶⁹ Thus, Raci Efendi’s choice of words is a clear reference, even a response, to Gladstone’s pamphlet. Finally, European Great Powers are held accountable for their double standards, as they were eager to protest when Christians suffered but remained silent when Muslims were victimized. The war took place under Europe’s gaze. It was incredible, however, that Russia was allowed to engage in hostilities contrary to the “laws of war” (*kavaid-i harb*), Raci Efendi argues, anticipating that Russia could perpetrate outrages against civilization (*hilaf-ı medeniyet zülm*) with the tacit permission of other Great Powers.⁷⁰

The outcome of the war was grave. “Rumeli, the prosperous land, which was essential for the life of the Ottoman state, the pillar of its felicity, and, in fact, the depository of its might,” and had been protected from invasion in the past, was destroyed. As Rumeli plunged into “chaos” (*herc ü merc*), numerous Muslims were killed, and many others faced another affliction: *hicret*.⁷¹

Becoming a *Muhacir*: A Narrative of Experience and Identity

The war, violence, and atrocities were traumatic and unprecedented. Yet, being “trapped by the afflictions of *hicret*” (*hicret musaibine giriftar*) was a new devastating condition.⁷² There was the shock of having to abandon one’s home, losing everything, and enduring a perilous journey in the hopes of reaching safety. But, as Raci Efendi and his co-religionists soon discovered, physical, emotional, and material loss were only part of the ordeal. Becoming a *muhacir* was a transformative experience that defined one’s identity and status in society. It was as much about losing one’s individuality, previous identities, and past as it was about losing one’s home. Flight stripped people of their wealth and standing. As the text portrays

⁶⁷ Ibid., 21–22, 30–32, 39–42, 103, 141, 34, 64–65, 81–82, 145–49, 92–98.

⁶⁸ Regarding the previous meaning of *mezalim*, see, for example, a report dating to the turbulent time of the ‘ayan (provincial notables) that featured complaints about the “repressions and violations” (*mezalim ve taaddiyat*) perpetrated by the Sofia governor and his soldiers against the local inhabitants, BOA, C.AS 552/23135, 14 November 1803.

⁶⁹ William Gladstone, *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* (London: John Murray, 1876). The word “atrocities/-ies” is encountered on pages 13–18; throughout the text, there are various other terms that can be considered synonyms. Gladstone used the pamphlet in his electoral pitch against the serving British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli. On the newspaper’s campaign, see “Rumeli mezalimine...,” *Vakit*, no. 770, 15 December 1878, 2–3. On the Ottoman brochure, which was also mentioned earlier in the article, see BOA, HR.TO 37/101, 13 December 1877, 1–2. See also “İngiltere ve Moskof Mezalimi,” *Vakit*, no. 621, 19 July 1877, 2; “Bulgar Mezalimi ve Mösyö Gladston,” *Vakit*, no. 647, 15 August 1877, 2–3.

⁷⁰ Hüseyin Raci, *Tarihçe*, 20, 36, 39, 145.

⁷¹ Ibid., 112.

⁷² Ibid.

the multitude of people streaming out of Eski Zağra, Raci Efendi ponders the vicissitudes of fate. A flourishing city built over the course of 500 years was reduced to ashes in eleven days, while the fortunes of wealthy and influential individuals vanished in an instant. One of the notables, whose immense wealth could fill fifty carts, left with only what could be loaded into one carriage.⁷³ All refugees seemed to blend into an undistinguishable anonymous mass. The common lament of refugees summed up so expressively by Hannah Arendt in the mid 20th century, “nobody here knows who I am,” would have resonated with many of the *muhacir* in the 19th century.⁷⁴ Raci Efendi and his family were allowed on a train to Edirne because they were sick and wounded. Upon arrival, they were put into an insect-infested house, then a *medrese*. There, the author seethes with indignation when he needs to prove to the Ottoman authorities that the few possessions his family owns are indeed their own rather than pillaged goods. When he approaches local administrators to protest, to his shock, even though some of them are his acquaintances, they do not recognize him and send him away.⁷⁵

These sentiments are most powerfully articulated in the “Hicretname.” As the poem demonstrates, being a *muhacir* was a liminal condition.⁷⁶ These Ottoman Balkan subjects became refugees in their own homeland, struggling for acceptance within their own community. Among them, there was a sense that, by bearing the label *muhacir*, they remained outside this community. They were objects of compassion, but this sentiment was transient, easily turning into indifference and even hostility. The poem expressively portrays the changing reactions. When the *muhacir* initially streamed into Istanbul, the authorities, local people of every social stature, and even foreigners rushed to their aid. But as “thousand and one feet gathered crawling along” (*bin bir ayak bir araya cem ü derc*) the streets of the capital, the mood changed. The *muhacir* became a ubiquitous sight, languishing on the streets, in mosque courtyards, and schools. Disease decimated them and began spreading among the people of Istanbul. With a looming Russian threat to the city, its inhabitants began thinking of their own salvation, and even individuals as wise as Plato, in Raci Efendi’s words, turned away from the unfortunates. Refugees were shipped en masse to Anatolia, regardless of whether they were protectors of the nation (*hami-i millet*) or simple *reaya* (ordinary subjects).⁷⁷ For Raci Efendi, this amounted to sedition (*fitne*) within the nation. His tone changes from lament to indignation as he recounts the contempt the *muhacir* endured. The humiliation was even more hurtful as the *muhacir* were reduced to being strangers in their own homeland, and insult came not from enemies but from their own co-religionists:

They were clean in their homeland, pure
Here these dear people became filthy
While we paid taxes, we were all aghas
Clean well-mannered respected gentlemen
They turned the people into beggars, what a pity
Fearing Istanbul saw us as a burden

⁷³ Ibid., 191.

⁷⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Meridian Book, Inc., 1958), 287.

⁷⁵ Hüseyin Raci, *Tarihçe*, 100–2.

⁷⁶ On the liminality of refugees, see Liisa Malkki, “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 24–44; Dawn Chatty, *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 279–304. These works more specifically discuss liminality with regards to national belonging and identity. Here, liminality refers to belonging to community altogether.

⁷⁷ Hüseyin Raci, *Tarihçe*, 160–62, 164–65.

Constantly a way is sought to get rid of us
They started turning away their faces
Saying, unjustly, filthy *muhacir*.

*Pak idi bunlar vatanında temiz
Burada pis oldu bu kavm-i aziz
Vergi verirken hepimizdik ağa
Pak temiz terbiyeli Beybaba
Eylediler halkı dilenci yazık
Hif ‘stanbul bizi gördü sakil
Defimize her dem araniyor sebil
Yüz çevirüb başladılar cabcaba
Pis muhacir demeğe nareva.*⁷⁸

Yet, “filthy” are those who utter such unworthy words, Raci Efendi indignantly proclaims. Rumeli had fed the state for 500 years, and if people in Istanbul had their positions and *konaks* (mansions), it was because of these unfortunates.⁷⁹

Raci Efendi bemoans the reactions of the Istanbul folk for whom the abject refugees had become a burden and source of trouble, danger, contagion, and immorality. The people of Istanbul remarked wearily that life is hard for everyone, while dismissing the *muhacir* as exploiters of their own misfortunes (*felaket tacirleri*). Everything bad started to be blamed on the refugees and, as such, the name *muhacir* became an affront. The author rebuffs such unfair accusations, pointing out that any offensive deeds had either been perpetrated by a few unworthy individuals or were acts of desperation. The *muhacir* came to the “threshold of mercy” (*bab-ı terahhum*) to protect their religion, honor, and life. As Raci Efendi recounts harrowing stories, he insists that refugees did not choose to abandon their native land; instead, the Doomsday (*Ruz-i Haşr*) came for them when they were assailed by merciless enemies. No one would substitute the burned black stones of the homeland for the supposed gems of exile, nor did the *muhacir* want to be beggars. Those who had eaten bread earned with their own labor did not want the charity of Hatim of Ta’yyi, the legendary figure known for his generosity. If there was safety, the *muhacir* would have eagerly returned to their homes.⁸⁰

Some benevolent initiatives were insensitive, the author protests indignantly. The tragic fate of refugees turned into theater entertainment organized under the pretext of gathering aid for them (*Facia-i hicretimiz geceler/Oldu tiyatroda eğlenceler*). Even sedition was stirred in their name. This is a probable hint at the Çırağan incident of May 1878 in which Ali Suavi, one of the most prominent Young Ottomans, led a group of discontents that included many Rumeli *muhacir* in a failed attempt to reinstate Murad V (r. May 30-August 31, 1876) to the throne.⁸¹

The *muhacir* could expect no help, not from their co-religionists or the European powers scheming to dismantle the Ottoman state under the pretext of negotiating peace. They also could not hope for compassion and justice:

We are orphans, the world looks at us askance,
because evil is showering us with roses,
there is no court for our case to be examined,
who looks at our cries and complaints.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 167.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 174.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 168, 178, 167, 174, 165, 170, 172, 159. On Hatim al-Ta’yyi, see C. van Arendonk, “Hatim al-Ta’i,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online*, ed. P. J. Bearman et al (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

⁸¹ Hüseyin Raci, *Tarihçe*, 178, 181.

Öksüzüz alem bize eğri bakar
 Çünkü recim üstümüze gül saçar
 Mahkeme yok bakıla davamıza
 Kim bakıyor naleş ve şekvamıza.⁸²

Significantly, the account tries to reclaim the name *muhacir* from those who had unjustifiably turned it into a slur. In a notable statement, Raci Efendi proudly proclaims that *hicret* and exile are not shameful, but tradition among the Muslim community (*Gurbet ve hicret değil 'ar-i ümmete/Hicret onun sünnetidir millete*).⁸³ Refugees are not just victims, nor are they cowards, the author continues. They are heroes and martyrs (*şehid*) who bravely defended the homeland. Now, however, they suffered the ingratitude of lowly people.⁸⁴ The refugees were true patriots; for them, “love for the homeland is a fruit of faith, the dust of the homeland is kohl for the eyes” (*Hubb-i vatan meyve-i imandır/Hak-i vatan sürme-i çeşmandır*).⁸⁵

The end the poem turns into a prayer imploring God to liberate refugees from their life of exile and allow everyone, both ordinary and distinguished, to return to their places (*Kıl bizi gurbetten ilahi halas, Yerlerine gitsün avam ve havas*).⁸⁶ The last stanzas, however, seem to be addressed as much to the divine as to the readers, appealing to them to be generous and accept those who had been chased away from everywhere.⁸⁷

The sentiments in Raci Efendi's poem are echoed in other works. Necmi Raci, Raci Efendi's son, published a booklet comprised of six poems titled *Neler Çektik* (What We Endured) shortly before *The Short History* appeared in print. Necmi Raci was an officer and Young Turk sympathizer. The verses, originally penned in 1902–3, relate his childhood experiences of the war and subsequent flight. The events remained etched in his memory, but for Necmi Raci, the trauma turned into a desire for action. In his words, he became a soldier to take revenge and fight, just like the Ottoman troops who sacrificed themselves to take over Eski Zağra.⁸⁸ Each poem consists of snapshots of memory, some akin to those portrayed by Raci Efendi. Criticism and emotions are expressed through the depiction of scenes rather than elaborate text. The poems move chronologically, beginning with the war and Eski Zağra's tragic fate, through the calamities of *hicret* and *gurbet*, and end with the bleak fate of the *muhacir*. The last two poems, ostensibly set in Istanbul, are even more vivid in depicting the alienation experienced by the refugees. “Filthy *Muhacir*” (Pis *Muhacir*) portrays a woman with a child in a snowy street. She laments her fate, while indirectly responding to an insult inferred from the poem's title. She tearfully recounts her carefree past in a bid to invoke sympathy, regain her humanity, and become less of a stranger in the eyes of those around. She, too, used to be a “lady girl” (*hanımzade*): she grew up in her mother's arms and had a gentleman father (*bey baba*) and a husband. The poem ends abruptly with an indignant exclamation, ostensibly by the author: “To our glory it was said filthy *muhacir*, ah, traitors got into our blood!” (*Pis muhacir dinildi şanımıza/girdi hainler ah kanımıza!*). In “Have mercy!” (İnayet Ola!), readers are presented with a contrasting setting. A desolate *muhacir* family with a child, who once enjoyed all comforts, and an ailing father wounded in the war stand in the street. At the same time, one can hear the loud sounds of merrymaking from a nearby *konak*. A drunken man looks around the carousing party, then calls on it to have mercy on the unfortunate ones.⁸⁹ These lines may be recollections of real scenes, but can also be seen as an allegory of Ottoman society at the time: while the *muhacir* suffer, people react with apathy and even hostility; the rich and powerful revel in decadence, oblivious of the realities around them.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 157.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 173.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 183.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 184.

⁸⁸ Necmi Raci, *Neler Çektik*, 2–6.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 16–20.

The poem-letter by Nihal, the young woman who arrived in Turkey during the population exchange, iterates similar experiences. Once the beautiful and educated daughter of a respected and prosperous family, her fate turned when her home was attacked by Greek bandits (*eşkiya*). The dramatic encounter is recounted in some detail. Now an orphan and *muhacir*, her life is overtaken by sorrow, poverty, and loneliness. Like others, violence and the experience of being a refugee have erased any marks of social status. Nihal admires the magnificent sights of “İslambol,” where no Muslim should be a stranger, yet she feels as if she is “in exile” (*gurbette*), as no one notices her tears and anguish. At the end of her poem, there is a ray of optimism: Turkey embraces those like her, giving them hope in the future, and the “Gazi Pasha,” an ostensible reference to Atatürk, is a father to all.⁹⁰

The newspaper *Muhacir*, the organ of the Society of Rumeli Muhacir (Rumeli Muhacirin-i İslamiye Cemiyeti), is another source echoing some the sentiments of the “Hicretname.” The publication was founded by a group of refugees from Rumeli, mainly from Bulgaria, in 1909 after the Young Turk revolution. Treading the line set by the post-revolutionary regime, the journal announced its intentions to defend the rights of the *muhacir*, impossible during the Hamidian period, as well as teach them of their patriotic duties in the Ottoman homeland.⁹¹ The journal’s contributors implicitly addressed some of the prejudice by reminding readers that the term *muhacir*, used by certain ignorant people as an insult, was in fact a sacred and honored (*mübeccel*) name.⁹² The *muhacir*, though vulnerable, were presented as heroes forced to abandon their homes under great duress. Yet, they were ready to rebuild their lives and contribute to the country in any way they could.⁹³ Such arguments aimed to restore the *muhacir*’s respectability in the eyes of Ottoman society. Some contributions are more personal, giving insight into how *muhacir* understood the ordeal of displacement, although were mediated by and entangled with the agenda of the journal and Young Turk regime. In a rendition of a conversation between a *muhacir* father and son, readers learn that being a *muhacir* means that the ancestral orchard—its sweet fruit and warm memories—has been left behind, becoming the property of a foreign and hostile family. But fortunately, the homeland (*vatan*) remained, implicitly pointing to the Ottoman state. So, it was the *muhacir*’s duty to help the homeland in every way, including by contributing to the construction of a new navy. Otherwise, this *vatan* would be lost as well, the father warns, perhaps implicitly stirring an unspoken fear that, in such case, other Muslims would become *muhacir* or have to live under foreign rule.⁹⁴

Conclusion

Historians studying the writings of people not commonly represented in the literary domain have underscored that such individuals write for various reasons: to commemorate important events, record experiences, assert their individuality, process trauma, and make sense of the world around them, especially during times of upheaval.⁹⁵ Crucially, writing can also give people a certain sense of power: they can advance a particular narrative and perhaps change another, while also becoming characters in these stories. Such motives likely propelled Raci Efendi to write his account of the war and the poem “Hicretname.” What he witnessed was an unprecedented disaster. Yet, narratives of the war and public discourses during the years after its end were silent about the suffering, although many of those who bore the trauma were around. Thus, the account seeks to challenge the existing

⁹⁰ *Muhacir Bir Kızın Sergüzeşti*, 3–6; 14.

⁹¹ Lofçalı Mehmed Hulusi, “İfade-i Hususiye,” “Donanmamıza Muavenet Lazıme-i Hamiyettir,” *Muhacir*, no. 1, 22 December 1909, 2. On the *Muhacir* newspaper and some of its discussions, see also Fratanuono, *Governing Migration*, 203–205, 209–217.

⁹² “İfade-i Meram,” *Muhacir*, no. 1, 22 December 1909, 1.

⁹³ Ahmed Şükri, “İzah-ı Meram – 3,” *Muhacir*, no. 4, 1 January 1910, 1.

⁹⁴ Bezci Edhem, “Evlat Baba Musahebesi,” *Muhacir*, no. 10, 4 February 1910, 3.

⁹⁵ Martyn Lyons, *The Writing Culture*, 1–18.

narratives by breaking the silence about the Muslims' suffering. This is not a story of heroism, but one of suffering, betrayal, and alienation. Osman Pasha's stand at Plevne is mentioned only passing. Compassion is short-lived, as apathy and estrangement become the norm. The incompetent conduct of the war and the sultan's personal responsibility are revealed, alongside the duplicity of the Great Powers. Moreover, the account aims to invert the prevalent European narrative about victims and perpetrators of atrocities.

The account is an attempt to grapple with both Raci Efendi's own personal trauma and the collective trauma of the countless other Muslims. The violence of the war, the refugee experience, the sense of rejection within Ottoman society, in essence, becoming a foreigner in one's homeland, and the silence around this suffering are all entangled layers of this trauma. Raci Efendi reveals himself as a *muhacir* author whose purpose is to shed light on the ordeal of flight and exile, along with the individuality of the *muhacir*. Committing the harrowing experiences to paper was a bid to find some relief and perhaps meaning in what he endured. Completing the book, however, does not seem to have given him any sense of closure. The final stanzas of the poem exude lingering unease, as he pleads with God and the readers not to reject the *muhacir*. Perhaps there is a glimmer of hope that relief may come when they do so. In the end, of course, it is all God's will, as Raci Efendi concludes his "story of exile" (*name-i hicret*).⁹⁶

Other *muhacir* also turned to writing to express their sentiments. Necmi Raci became a determined officer, but his poems were an inseparable part of his past experiences.⁹⁷ Similarly, Nihal, the young woman who was part of the population exchange, felt the need to share the grief of her ordeal. No one asked her about her tears, as if those around did not notice this young girl's desolation. So, one evening, unable to bear the torment, she decided to put her sorrows in verse: "I conveyed the sobs overflowing from my words on this piece of paper" (*ben şu kağıt parçasına bu kelimden taşan hıçkırıklarımı naklettim*). There are many other *muhacir* like her who converged in Istanbul, she noted, each telling of their own woes.⁹⁸ While their stories may be lost, Nihal's was captured in her writing.

Raci Efendi's writings, which only a few people knew of before his death, have turned into an extraordinary source that allows us to embark on reconstructing a "new history from below" of displacement in the Ottoman Empire. Finally, there is one particularly notable feature of Raci Efendi's work: the way its sentiments resonate with the experiences of refugees of various backgrounds in different historical periods. Violence, loss of family and homeland, alienation, and fading into anonymity would be recognizable to many of those forced to flee. Thus, the significance of this work transcends the Ottoman and Muslim context, indicating its place in the larger history of migration and displacement.

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⁹⁶ Hüseyin Raci, *Tarihçe*, 185.

⁹⁷ Necmi Raci, *Neler Çektik*, 4.

⁹⁸ *Muhacir Bir Kızın Sergüzeşti*, 4–5.

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