

Two Sides of the Same Coin? Contrasting Narratives of Bosnian-Muslims Migration to Turkey in Late 19th and Early 20th Century

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Abstract

The decline of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19th century caused numerous consequences for the region of South-eastern Europe, most notably the mass migrations of Muslims from the European regions of the Ottoman Empire to Anatolia. In Bosnia, thousands of local Muslims feeling intra-state, but also external pressure by the non-Muslim population, left their homeland to find a safer refuge. Recognizing limited scholarly attention which was given to the sphere of the lived experiences of the migrant trajectories, this paper aims to give a portrayal of the reality regarding the nostalgia and financial everyday life of Muslims from Bosnia at the turn of the century in the Ottoman Empire. To this end, it predominantly through a narrative analysis of two letters sent by Bosnian Muslims who migrated to the Anatolian town of Durgut. The oddity of these letters is in two heavily conflicting views on the lived experience of migration. The first one embarked on a highly nostalgic, sceptical, and pro-return perception reflecting on a specific “othering” of Bosnian Muslims in Turkey. In contrast, the other one, which was sent as a response to the first one, portrays a joyous assemblage of numerous benefits of migration to Durgut, mainly through the prism of economic benefits of migration to Durgut. However, to comprehend these pro and contra migration narratives, it is necessary to lay out the socio-cultural background of both Bosnia and Anatolian Ottoman Empire in that period. By providing an additional layer of the socio-cultural mosaic that coloured the ambiguous Bosnia-Turkey relations in the period this paper showcases multiple competing and opposing public narratives. In addition, the paper incorporates private correspondence of the Nametak family, in order to give another private layer in the understanding of these events and deliver a more resonant understanding of the broader context that encompassing Bosnian migrations to Turkey. This migration had a strong political, religious, and economic aspects and all of them had more or less an equal barring on the emigration process this paper mainly focuses on the economic aspects on the migration of Bosnian-Muslims to the Ottoman Empire. The paper is also oriented towards two published letters and numerous private letters.

Keywords: Migration; nostalgia; Ottoman Empire; Bosnia; financial

Up until the middle of the 15th century Bosnia was an independent kingdom. This changed in 1463 when it was conquered and made part of the growing Ottoman Empire by Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. For the next couple of centuries, Bosnia had a vital role first as a *sanjak* and later as an *eyalet* (Filipović, 2019).² Bosnia soon became a regional centre for the further incursions made by the Ottoman forces into Central Europe. Their role was also that of a borderland of the Ottoman Empire with the rest of Europe. At first this did not pose a problem during the expansion period of the Ottoman Empire in all directions. The problem arose when the conquering stopped, and the Ottoman Empire was put on the defence. The period of European expansion of the Empire was ended in the late 17th century by the Treaty of Karlowitz concluded in 1699 (Roider, 2018). With this peace treaty the Ottoman Empire not only started to lose their territories, but they started to lose their standing as a European

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² *Eyalet* was the largest territorial entity within the Ottoman Empire, while the *sanjak* was a smaller district within the *eyalet*.



power. Besides this, the peace treaty negatively influenced the internal Ottoman politics, as well as the external struggles of the once strong Empire. This reflected on its provinces, especially those that were more secluded and located at the outskirts and periphery of the Empire. The problems and struggles were particularly evident in the provinces located on the frontier. One of these provinces was Bosnia, which held its ground during the 18th century, but as time passed on the failures of the Ottoman Empire started to reflect in Bosnia (Pelidija, 1989). Numerous wars fought in and around Bosnia led to a great number of refugees and internally displaced persons in the region.

Another blow to Bosnia came when the Ottoman Empire started to modernise following the West's example. First concrete measures were imposed by sultan Mahmud II at the beginning of the 19th century. His efforts in reformers were first aimed towards the historical backbone of the Ottoman Empire, its army (Goodwin, 2013). He was able to forcefully disband first the Janissaries and later the Sipahis. These reforms had particularly devastating consequences in Bosnia since the province was highly conservative with strong roots in tradition. This was especially problematic for the regional leaders who were mostly made up of established families who distinguished themselves as soldiers in numerous wars of the Ottoman Empire. Because of their actions these individuals and their families enjoyed certain privileges which in some cases lasted for numerous generations. This led them to gather generational wealth as well as a strong influence within their communities and in the region, as well as at the Ottoman court itself (Turhan, 2014).

When these reforms were started to be enacted the leading men of Bosnia expressed their discontent. Soon enough an armed uprising, known as the Bosnian Uprising 1831-1832, started. While at first the uprising gained traction and the Ottoman Empire was in an unfavourable position in Bosnia, in the end the revolt was unsuccessful and the leaders, who were also the regional leaders in Bosnia, were imprisoned. Some of them returned to their lands, while most of them were dealt with in one way or another. This ranged from imprisonment and exile, and for some even death (Alicic, 1996). The second wave of retribution came in the 1850s when Omer Pasha Latas, a high-ranking Ottoman official, was sent to strengthen the influence of the central Ottoman government at the expense of the regional leaders. He began somewhat of a new purge of the local elite and this time not even the individuals and families who were loyal to the Sultan during the Bosnian Uprising were spared. All of these actions left Bosnia without its leadership and soon the region and the situation became quite unstable. This coupled with the worsening economic situation for the domestic population who were taxed to unbearable amounts led to the final uprising in Bosnia during the Ottoman time (Šljivo, 1990). This uprising happened in 1875 and it marked the *de facto* end of Ottoman rule in Bosnia. The uprising ended in 1878 and was finalised by the Berlin Congress in which the Austro-Hungarian Empire was given a mandate to occupy Bosnia and Herzegovina (Manasek, 2021).

These events were seen by the domestic Muslim populace as a great blow to them which they did not know how to overcome. Some decided to fight the new occupiers and soon established a sizable defence force. In the end this was not enough, and Bosnia and Herzegovina were overrun by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in a matter of months. Also, some people just stayed neutral and did not take any action. There were also those who decided that their best course of action, regardless of if their decision was being guided by religion, economic factors, or perceived peril for their lives, was to leave Bosnia and follow



the retreating Ottoman Empire. While we still do not know the exact figure, nor will we ever know how many people stayed and how many left Bosnia, what we do know is that numerous people were keen on leaving Bosnia and a lot of them emigrated to the Ottoman Empire.

These people started to emigrate in great numbers especially after the finalisation of the occupation (Bandžović, 2006). While there were some instances where the emigration to the Ottoman Empire, later Turkey, was particularly active and popularised, these events and processes were long lasting. These spikes of interest were particularly prevalent after the Annexation of Bosnia in 1908, the Balkan Wars, and the First World War in the 1910s (Bandžović, 2003). After the conclusions of all these events more and more people were emigrating to the Ottoman Empire, later Turkey, seeing that it was a viable and safer option than staying in Bosnia, especially to the Muslim population. While the process gradually lost its momentum it nevertheless lasted for around a century up until the 1970s (Bandžović, 2006). Of course, seeing that not all people went willingly to their new homes and were in one way or another forced to do so, there were those who were able to assimilate and become part of the new culture and population and those who never truly could fit in. Some of these unhappy people expressed their dissatisfaction to people in their former homeland. While on the other hand there were those who defended their decision to emigrate and attacked anybody who said otherwise.

The debates surrounding the migration can be contextualised into numerous separate narratives. There were those who wanted to lead a more economically fruitful life by migrating more closely to the centre of the Ottoman Empire. Likewise, there were those who saw this as a matter of their pride and believed that a Muslim could not and should not live under non-Muslim rule. Some of them even had religious concerns and they even feared for their lives, since the act of occupation historically brought mass atrocities in the form of killings and forced conversion from one religion to another. Another important element that contributed to the migration was the highly conservative and patriarchal society whose members either did not want to or were not able to adapt to the new way of life, as well as the customs, language, and their new place in society.

These people, whatever their reasons might have been, decided to either start their journey and follow the shrinking Ottoman Empire, or to stay in their homeland and try to make the best of their new life. The leading voices in both these narratives were the Muslim clergy. The imams who were in favour of staying in Bosnia were predominantly those of higher stature and were more influential in the community (Karčić, 2011). Such was the case with the first and second reis-ul-ulema of Bosnia and Herzegovina Mustafa Hilmi-efendi Hadžiomerović and Mehmed Teufik-efendi Azapagić, who strongly advocated in favour of Muslims staying in Bosnia and Herzegovina. (Lavić, 1990)

On the other hand, the imams who were in favour of leaving for the Ottoman Empire were predominantly local imams as well as the military personnel and statesmen. There were even some such as Omerović ibn Husein Taslidžali who propagated that even the Ottoman Empire was too modernised and that it also fell in the hands of the West, and the only safe place for Muslims was the Arab world (Šuško, 2014).

The main focal point of this paper is the contrasting narrative of people who migrated from Bosnia to the Ottoman Empire, later Turkey with a special focus on the nostalgia as well as the economic aspect of their migration and their further reasons for staying in their new

homes. The focus is on two letters sent from Anatolia by Muslims who emigrated from Bosnia to the town of Durgut, which is most probably the town of Turgutlu in the early 19th century and on the letters sent to the Bosnian writer Alija Nametak during the first half of the 20th century by his family members who also emigrated to the town of Turgutlu in the 19th century.³

The first letter was from a certain Mehmed Bećirović who emigrated from the town of Ljubuški in Herzegovina to the town of Durgut in Anatolia. In his letter that was sent in February 1912 to the monthly periodical in Sarajevo called "Zeman" he explained that five years ago he left his home country and settled in Anatolia. He bought around 2 hectares of land and a house next to a military base. In his words soon enough, the soldiers started to harass him, and he was left with numerous problems. He expressed his problems to the police, which did not want to intervene and later he went to the commanding officer who in Mehmeds words hit him in the face and threatened even greater punishment if he was to return. After this he contacted the Austro-Hungarian Consul in Smyrna, today's Izmir, seeing that he was in fact their subject. He finished his letter with desperation: "I'm dying to see my homeland and will not wish for anybody this grave and unjust fate". In his words he would have gladly left the Ottoman Empire but he lost all of his money and was not in the position to earn enough to go back home ("Pismo Iz Turske," 1912).

While the tone of the letter is quite patriotic and focused on the negative aspects of the migration process and how it affects the people who left Bosnia, most commonly known as muhajirs. In the Muslim societies people who voluntarily or forcibly were displaced were called muhajirs or muhajirun. in general means "people who completed a Hijrah or a journey". While the term Hijrah is generally associated with the journey of the first Muslims, in fact it generally and broadly means "to emigrate". This term was used by the Muslims of the region, from the 19th century, especially after the occupation. The reason why this letter contained such narratives in which the author expresses his sadness for leaving Bosnia and urging other people to heed his advice and use his life as a cautionary tale is because the periodical "Zeman" was published by the Ujedinjena muslimanska organizacija or the United Muslim Organisation. This organisation was oriented towards establishing a strong Muslim political movement in Austro-Hungary (Jahić, 2017). The organisation was primarily focused on establishing an autonomous Bosnia in Austro-Hungary and trying to keep the Muslim populace in Bosnia from emigrating to the Ottoman Empire, while at the same time keeping their land safe from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. For those purposes they used their periodical "Zeman" to justify their agenda, with which they aligned the news and article content.

The letter of Mehmed Bećirović perfectly lined up with their political view seeing that he is highly critical of the Ottoman Empire and downhearted because of his current unsavoury predicaments in which he found himself. His main point of grievance comes regarding the financial ruin he fell in after he arrived, which was only further exacerbated by the torment of the local populace, especially the army, and even the other different government structures. By expressing his sorrow, the author also urged the people reading the periodical "Zeman" to take a lesson from his desolation and to think again before leaving their homes in Bosnia. His

³ In the letters sent by Ahmet Nametak to Alija Nametak the town was named Durgut during the first half of the 20th century, while later on it is mentioned as Turgutlu. It is then highly possible that this is the same town to which the muhajirs from Ljubuški migrated.



letter was intertwined with two distinct elements, the first being the economic hardship caused by his emigration to the Ottoman Empire and the nostalgia that he had towards his homeland and the agony of not being able to return because of his financial difficulties.

Soon enough a response from Mehmed's fellow muhajirs from his hometown of Ljubuško who also emigrated to Durgut arrived and was published in a different Bosnian periodical. This letter was presented in the monthly newspaper called "Novi Musavat" or "Yeni Musavat" from March 1912. This letter had numerous authors and signatories, all of whom lamented Mehmed calling him a gross liar and a terrible cheat. And that he only thinks about earning as much money as possible, because of this he did not just buy a house near the military base, as Mehmed pointed out, but rather he opened a pub in the house, which was primarily focused on catering for the soldiers. Besides this the authors depicted Mehmed as a person "without character and honour". To them he is with his letter tarnishing every other muhajir who left Bosnia and settled in Anatolia. In their words every Muslim from Bosnia who emigrated to the Ottoman Empire, and which wanted to go back home could, and they would return with more money than with which they arrived. They also pointed out that every person, even the poorest ones, who emigrated to the Ottoman Empire and wished to return to their homeland would be able to return with more money and goods, than when they left Bosnia ("Odgovor Na „Pismo Iz Turske“, Štampano u „Zemanu“ 10. Februara 1912," 1912).

These opposing narratives in the two letters can be attributed to the fact that the periodical "Novi Musavat" was an anti-Habsburg paper (Jahić, 2018). Which in some instances even propagated that Bosnia was in essence still part of the Ottoman Empire and that the Austro-Hungarian Empire only had nominal rule over Bosnia. While as previously mentioned the "Zeman" was centred around an idea of an autonomous Bosnia. It is no wonder then why in these two letters two highly confronting narratives exist and why the second letter was much more hostile in tone towards the author of the first letter. And the probability that both of the claims expressed in the letters are completely or partially false is rather possible and quite probable.

On the other hand, the private correspondence between the different members of the Nametak family from different countries reflect a more balanced view towards nostalgia and the economic hardships which were faced by the muhajirs in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. In the case of the Nametak family they migrated to the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the 19th century. The members of the Nametak family who were living in Turkey during the first half of the 20th century started to experience nostalgia towards their homeland or the homeland of their parents. The letters sent to Alija Nametak, most commonly by Ahmet Nametak were predominantly filled with Ahmet's expression of his nostalgia and interest in the situation in his homeland. In each of his letters to his cousin Alija, Ahmet asked him to talk more about the situation in Bosnia and the situation in their family. Compared to letters published in the magazines these letters had a more moderate approach. In the letters Ahmet did not express an outright nostalgia as did Mehmed, nor did he outright praise the Ottoman Empire, in this case Turkey. In his letters he expressed some discomfort with being able to obtain certain clothing articles, but all in all the prices of everyday products were reasonable and given the modest wealth that Nametak family possessed, they were affordable. (Nametak, 1944). It is unclear if this was in fact true or not since it is virtually impossible to verify his claims, even though he did include a list of objects and their prices in Turkey. The problem arises in determining the financial hardship or success of these groups or individuals since

these are private letters between estranged family members who would not necessarily be fully honest with each other while conversing on financial matters. This can be viewed as a way of preserving one's honour and dignity.

As far as the nostalgia element is concerned, Ahmet as well as his friends who emigrated from Bosnia were keen on establishing and re-establishing relationships with their family members in Bosnia but did not express a desire to go back and abandoned their newfound home. For example, a certain Salih Ćučurović wrote on the back of one of the letters sent by Ahmet to Alija asking Alija to send his regards to the Krilić family which lived in Durgut, or Turgutlu but have since gone back to Bosnia.

Another form of nostalgia which can be attributed to a longing for home and a way of preserving once identity can be seen and observed in the clustering of muhajirun families and their marriages in the local community (Kulu & Hannemann, 2019; Lichter et al., 2015). Muslims from Bosnia that settled in the Ottoman Empire strongly adhered to the practice of endogamous marriages in their community and the act of exogamous marriages were somewhat rare. In his letter Ahmet Nametak points out that he was married "from the Turks" but that he was pleased by the choice and does not find it burdensome (Nametak, 1944, 1977). Also the act of endogamous marriages was mentioned by Salih Ćučurović who refers to Alija Nametak that his cousin is married to the member of Krilić family that returned to Bosnia (Nametak, 1944). This form of nostalgia in which the members of the muhajir community married each other and seldomly members of different communities was not uncommon and represents a way in which these communities established a link with their homeland. This can also be viewed as an act of reconstructing the way of life which is deemed normal in their homeland.

Conclusion

The incorporation of different types of letters, firstly the two open letters, and secondly the private correspondence of the Nametak family suggests two distinct views on the questions regarding the migration of people from Bosnia to the Ottoman Empire and their reasons. Both types of these letters show different views on a wide range of subjects as well as the different approaches, one being a public correspondence primarily focused on the authors and their intent on propagating their world views regarding the emigration of Muslims from Bosnia to the retreating Ottoman Empire. The second set of letters were private and personal correspondence between family members separated by the migrations and their wishes to rekindle their connection with their homeland and establish a relationship with their family members back home.

The letters published in the two magazines and journals provide us with an insightful published source to understand the Bosnian migration and the life of emigrees in Anatolia. On the other hand, the letters stored at the Museum of Literature & Performing Arts provide an invaluable unpublished source for any researcher involved with exploring not only the everyday life of the people who emigrated from Bosnia to Anatolia, but also the reasons for their emigration with a specific focus on the economic factors. Both sets of letters are strongly influenced by two main elements: the first being nostalgia and the second being the financial implications of their emigrations. While the first set of letters were predominantly aimed at propagating the different political approaches in Bosnia of the time, the second set of letters were purely aimed at privately expressing the feelings and nostalgia of people who left their



homeland never to return. Mainly the patriotic worldview of the editors of “Zeman” wished to retain the Muslims in Bosnia after the withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire, while the second current centred around the “Novi Musavat” was predominantly propagating towards the need of fulfilling the religious duty for every Muslim.

All in all, these letters give us a better understanding in how different groups expressed their nostalgia especially when at the same time dealing with changing economic circumstances and how their newfound fortune or misfortune impacted their view on the life they had before emigrating from their homeland. This form of nostalgia was not only embodied on their view regarding their own financial standing or those around them in the Ottoman Empire, but rather also on the economic situation that was present in Bosnia through this period. This is evident in their constant questioning on the matters regarding the economic wellbeing of their family members and the prices of everyday items and their availability for purchase.

All in all, the economic aspect was one of the many that influenced the muhajirs and their decision to emigrate. Only after emigrating did they have second thoughts on their migrations and started to think regarding the impact on their financial gains or losses which stemmed from their migration to the Ottoman Empire. While there were some muhajirs that were second guessing their decision, not many did return to their homeland of Bosnia. This can also be attributed to claims showcased in the second letter of “Novi Musavat”, that the emigrated people lived in better conditions in the Ottoman Empire than they did in Bosnia and if they wished to return they would go back with more funds than when they left. But seeing that more muhajirs stayed in the Ottoman Empire, later the Republic of Turkey, it could be safely assumed that the economic aspect of their migration had a noticeable impact. And that the economic stability in their homeland was still a lingering question even in the second part of the 20th century.

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