Words in Space and Time

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Ethnic Cleansing in Central Europe Before the Balkan Wars

It is often remarked that the twentieth century was a “dark century” of European history, blighted by total war, authoritarianisms, totalitarianisms, genocide and ethnic cleansing. A nuancing caveat comes in the form of the recently developed notion of “Bloodlands” for the large swath of Central Europe where both Hitler’s and Stalin’s murderous regimes subsequently expelled and killed on a mass scale ethnic non-Germans and ethnic non-Russians during World War Two. Hence, the popular tendency is to identify ethnic cleansing and genocide with this war and its immediate aftermath. Although the former phenomenon typically evokes the brutal images of the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s. This association is deepened by the fact that the term “ethnic cleansing” is a translation from Serbo-Croatian that entered the international vocabulary of international relations and international law only in the mid-1990s. Similarly, the term “genocide” is a neologism, coined in 1943 by the Polish Jewish jurist, Raphael (Rafał) Lemkin, before it became part of international law in 1948 when the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

However, the phenomena denoted by both terms did take place much earlier. Instances of genocide from the past used to be referred to as “massacres,” “atrocities,” or “crimes against humanity,” while those of ethnic cleansing as “exoduses,” “expulsions” or “population transfers.” These terms were applied rather vaguely, and in the eyes of public opinion, “massacres” were often equated with “normal” war killings, and expulsions with the “typical” phenomenon of refugees when civilians flee war zones, or even with emigration. The steep rise in the degree of extermination, as characteristic of genocide, was lost in this terminological vagueness, alongside the fact that ethnic cleansers aim at removing a specific “type” of population from one state to another in their entirety. Before these two respective terms were coined, defined, and adopted by international law, there was no clear awareness that genocide and ethnic cleansing are instruments of demographic engineering and warfare. It appeared that no ruler, politician, general, or other decision-maker could be “so vile” to consider such an “evil” act. What is more, the confusion deepened between the end of the Great War and the mid-1990s, when the legal term “population transfer” was widely seen as an instrument for ensuring the observance of human rights and for furthering peace and stability. Politicians and public opinion both considered forced expulsions of thousands, or even millions, against their will as legal, if this helped bring about a desired form of homogeneity (usually, religious, linguistic, or both) in a given nation-state. As such the instrument of population transfer was then enshrined in numerous treaties contracted under international law and enforced accordingly. The belief was then rife that when the populations of all Central Europe’s nation-states were made ethnically (that is, linguistically or religiously) homogenous, stable peace and prosperity would be ensured across the continent. “Un-mixing” of populations followed swiftly, wreaking havoc on a continental scale.

Ethnic cleansing and genocide have taken place in Central Europe time and again since the early modern period, as indicated by the religiously motivated expulsions of Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Protestants or Orthodox Christians in the fourteenth-eighteenth centuries, alongside the examples of the near-genocidal military conflicts of the Thirty Years’ War, the 1654–1667 War between Poland-Lithuania and Muscovy (Thirteen Years’ War), or the Great Northern War. These forms of drastic demographic engineering became possible with the rise of the modern state characterized by ubiquitous bureaucracy, relative literacy (almost invariably full among the ruling elite), and centralized government. This triad was underwritten by a variety of methods and technological means to register and control the state’s inhabitants, identify “unwanted groups,” and deploy military rapidly across the polity’s entire territory, also for the sake of removing or exterminating selected “unwanted populations.” From the sociological perspective, both ethnic cleansing and genocide are an exercise in the targeted waging of the state’s “legal monopoly of violence.”

Because the concept of Central Europe as adopted for this atlas encompasses the vertical mid-section of Europe from Scandinavia to the Balkans, the Great War is not a good cesura, either for the end of the so-called “long nineteenth century,” or for the commencement of the “short twentieth century” of totalitarianisms. The two Balkan Wars (1912–1914) engulfed the southern half of the region two years before the formal outbreak of World War One, while the latter conflict continued there and in much of Central and Eastern Europe until 1923, though this late leg of the generalized warfare is usually known under the separate monikers of the Russian Civil War and the Turkish War of Independence (also known as the Asia Minor Catastrophe in Greek historiography). Hence, the “Long Great War” lasted across vast swaths of Central Europe for over one decade, from 1912 to 1923.

Map 11 begins the atlas’s series of maps devoted to ethnic cleansing and genocide during the “bloody twentieth century.”
This introduction takes a glance at selected examples of such phenomena from the eighteenth century until the early twentieth century (or in other words, through the “long nineteenth century”). During this period religion was predominantly used to identify unwanted populations for expulsion or extermination. In the wake of the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Western and Central Europe, the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, his religion) underwrote the new norm of religious (denominational) homogeneity within the boundaries of a single polity. This norm was alien to the Ottoman Empire, where monotheists of different creeds were organized into non-territorial autonomies, known as millets. However, Austrian (Habsburg), Russian and Western European incursions that facilitated the rise of the Christian nation-states in the Balkans at the expense of the Ottomans, also introduced this norm of confessional homogeneity to this Empire-cum-Caliphate.

The first early modern wave of religiously-motivated instances of ethnic cleansing (expulsions) was connected to the “rounding up” of the religious wars after the end of the Thirty Years’ War in 1648. People of the “wrong religion” (denomination) either had to convert to the state’s religion (denomination), or leave. One of the best-known examples of this kind is the expulsion-cum-forced emigration of about 150,000 Protestants from the Habsburgs’ Bohemia to Prussia and other Protestant polities in the north of the Holy Roman Empire, between the 1620s and 1650s. Later, in the wake of the wars between Prussia and the Habsburgs, between 1713 and 1716, about 0.9 million Protestants left the Habsburg lands for Prussia and other Protestant polities. The process lasted through the eighteenth century, when the principle of religious tolerance became more widespread, as exemplified by Emperor Joseph II’s 1782 Edict of Tolerance issued for the Habsburg hereditary lands. The Habsburgs’ reconquest of the lands of the Kingdom of Hungary resulted in the fluctuation of the frontier between their lands and the Ottoman Empire. The Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox populations caught in the middle of this prolonged struggle switched sides trying to predict who might be the winner of a given conflict. The Ottomans often saw this pragmatic survival attitude as disloyalty of their Christian subjects. Similarly, Habsburg forces considered as “renegades” those Christian subjects of the Sultan who chose to remain loyal to the Ottomans. Reprisals multiplied; vast areas were depopulated. Considerable groups of Christians felt compelled to leave the Ottoman Empire for the Habsburg lands or the Russian Empire, while Muslims (often alongside Jews) left the territories lost to Christian powers for the shrinking Ottoman Empire.

Muscovy’s westward expansion at the expense of Poland-Lithuania and other independent Rus’ principalities was driven by the desire to “gather all the lands of Rus’” in a single polity. On the other hand, Muscovy’s southward and eastward expansion was driven by the undeclared program of “gathering the lands of the Golden Horde.” This program was explicitly underwritten by the myth of Moscow as the “third and last Rome” of the Orthodox world. When Peter the Great overhauled Muscovy into a Russian Empire in 1721 in the wake of his victory in the Great Northern War, the seizure of Constantinople (Istanbul), or the “second Rome,” became the ultimate goal of Russia’s southward expansion. Between the 1770s and 1870s, in a series of devastating wars on the Ottoman Empire and its vassals, Russia annexed the entire northern littoral of the Black Sea from the mouth of the Danube in the west to the Caucasus in the east. The area’s population was overwhelmingly Muslim and predominantly Turkic-speaking. In most cases they were expelled or even exterminated, which was the fate of the Caucasian-speaking Circassians and of many Crimean Tatars in 1864. After this year almost no Circassians were left in Circassia (or today’s Krasnodar Krai in Russia). In the wake of the Russian conquests, Muslim survivors and refugees left on foot or by ship across the Black Sea for the Ottoman Empire. Ironically, a plurality settled in Rumelia, or the Ottoman Balkans, from where they were again expelled or had to flee, alongside the local Muslim populations, following further Russo-Ottoman wars and the founding of the Christian nation-states of Montenegro, Serbia, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria between the turn of the nineteenth century and 1878.

The sole Balkan nation-state from which Muslims were not expelled or felt compelled to emigrate was Albania founded in 1912. Unlike the other Balkan national polities founded on the ethnonational principle, Albania was established on the basis of the ethnolinguistic principle, that is, as a nation-state for all Albanian speakers, irrespective of their religion. It was the only pragmatic solution for preventing the partition of the Albanian-speaking territories between Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia, and for enabling Albanian-speaking Catholics, Muslims and Orthodox Christians to cooperate within a single polity in line with the Ottoman tradition of confessional tolerance.

Some commentators on genocide and ethnic cleansing in the course of the wars of Yugoslav succession during the 1990s see the origin of these phenomena in the Balkans in the 1702 extermination of “Turks” (that is, Muslims) in the de facto independent Montenegro. However, there is no document confirming that this extermination ever took place. It was the Vlađika (Prince-Bishop) of Montenegro, Petar II Petrović-Njegoš, who seems to have invented this event in his verse epic *The Mountain Wreath* (1847). Rather than being a commentary on the events at the turn of the eighteenth century, this epic poem expresses the attitudes of the mid-nineteenth century which saw the extermination of populations of “wrong religion,” as legitimate, as long as it was non-Christians perishing at the hands of Christians. The mass expulsions and massacres of Muslims during the Greek Uprising (or Greek War of Independence) and in the territories seized by Russia from the Ottomans, culminating in the 1864 Circassian Genocide, hardly raised an eyebrow in European (Christian, Western) public opinion. However, increasingly more brutal Ottoman reprisals in kind were often exaggerated and dubbed as “atrocities.” It was seen as “the proof” of “immeasurable sufferings” of Christians under the half a millennium-long “Turkish yoke.”

The rise of the ethnolinguistically defined nation-states of Italy (1861) and Germany (1871) as main European powers posed ethnolinguistic nationalism as a new desired norm
of statehood creation, legitimization, and maintenance across Central Europe. Similarly, reprisals in the wake of the failed anti-Russian uprising of the Polish-Lithuanian nobility (1861–1864) were centered around the policy of replacing Polish with Russian as the official language in Russia’s (Congress) Kingdom of Poland. In the 1880s this policy of enforcing Russian as the sole official language was extended across the entire European section of the Russian Empire. The early modern principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* was replaced with a new one of *cuius regio, eius lingua* (whose realm, his language). Due to European incursions and “modernizing reforms” that emulated European-style governance, elements of this new principle were also adopted in the Ottoman Empire. For instance, the confessional unity of the Rum (Orthodox Christian) Millet was split in 1870, when the Sultan founded a Bulgar (Bulgarian) Millet for Slavophone Orthodox populations. On top of that, although traditionally millets (or ethnoconfessional autonomies) were non-territorial in their character, the Bulgar Millet was endowed with a defined territory in the form of a Bulgarian Exarchate, founded in 1872. In this way the model of ethnolinguistic nation-state entered the Ottoman Empire in the guise of the traditional institution of millet.

That is why the 1894–1896 genocide (“massacres”) of Armenians in Anatolia is typically interpreted in national (that is, ethnolinguistic) terms, though the targeted populations were identified not through their language of everyday communication, but by the fact that they were the faithful of the Monophysite Armenian Apostolic Church. Armenian-speaking Muslims were not touched by these killings, while Turkic-speaking Monophysites were. Likewise, nowadays, earlier expulsions and exterminations tend to be reinterpreted in national (ethnolinguistic) terms. After the failed war (1795) and uprisings (1830–1831 and 1861–1864) against Russia, the Russian authorities exiled tens of thousands of Polish-Lithuanian nobles to Siberia. However, in Polish history textbooks these exiles are portrayed as “Poles,” that is, members of the Polish nation defined as (Catholic) speakers of the Polish language. The first clear-cut instances of expulsion driven by ethnolinguistic nationalism in Central Europe are perhaps that connected to the creation of Germany as an ethnolinguistic nation-state. Shortly prior to and in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), 40,000 ethnic German-speakers (mostly Prussian subjects) left France for Prussia, while after the Prussian annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, over 100,000 French (many bilingual) left the region for France (many resettling in French Algeria, from where, a century later, their descendants had to flee, following the 1962 independence of Algeria). After the founding of the German Empire as a nation-state, several thousand Danes were expelled from the northernmost part of this country to Denmark in 1898–1899. On the plane of confession, both the expellees and the expellers shared the same religion of Lutheranism (Protestantism). An earlier example of the so-called 1885–1887 “Prussian expulsions” (*rugí pruskie*), as known in Polish historiography, although portrayed as an ethnic cleansing of “Poles,” in reality was a mixed case of an expulsion that straddled the transition from religion to language as the instrument of identifying “unwanted populations.” The Kingdom of Prussia, within the boundaries of the German Empire, decided to round up and deport from its territory subjects of the Russian Tsar and the Austro-Hungarian Monarch, who happened to be Poles (that is, Polish-speaking Catholics) and Jews (that is, Yiddish-speaking Judaisms). From today’s perspective of growing xenophobia (especially after 2015), this expulsion could also be seen as a deportation of “illegal immigrants.”

A possibility of accommodating religious and linguistic differences in a peaceful and constructive manner was shown by Austria-Hungary’s occupation of Bosnia (and Herzegovina) and Sanjak (Sandžak), which was imposed on both territories in 1878. Apart from adding German to both regions’ official languages, the occupation authorities retained the use of Osmanlıca (Ottoman Turkish), alongside Slavic written in Arabic letters (“Bosnian” or “Arebica”) for Muslims, in the Latin alphabet (“Croatian”) for Catholics and in Cyrillic (“Serbian”) for Orthodox Christians. The freedom of confession continued with Arabic as the liturgical language for Muslims, Latin for Catholics, Church Slavonic for Orthodox Christians, and Hebrew for Jews. The ownership of land and properties, as established under the former Ottoman law, was meticulously observed for the sake of preserving socio-economic stability. However, this was a lone experiment, which was not emulated. The obverse of it, in 1878, was the largely forgotten ethnic cleansing of over half a million (overwhelmingly Turkic-speaking) Muslims from the Bulgarian nation-state founded in the wake of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–1878 (known as the Bulgarian War of Independence in Bulgarian historiography, and as the War of 1293 AH [After Hijra] in Ottoman and Turkish historiography).

Today’s focus on ethnic cleansing and genocide often leads to the neglect of other phenomena of generalized unfreedom, which might but did not have to be correlated with ethnicity defined in linguistic, religious, or other terms. The institution of serfdom, or unpaid labor obligation that peasantry was due to provide landowning noblemen and churchmen was gradually liquidated in the Austrian Empire and across Prussia from the turn of the nineteenth century to 1849. In the Russian Empire, where serfdom was the mainstay of economy in the lands seized from the partitioned Poland-Lithuania, the dismantling of serfdom began only in the 1860s and was not complete until the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Interestingly, serfdom did not exist either in Scandinavia or the Ottoman Empire. However, tenant farmers and landless agricultural laborers were, in numerous ways, excluded from participating in politics and the usual routes of social advancement in the former area until the 1870s, while arbitrary administration or scant administrative oversight in far-flung provinces allowed for unsanctioned serfdom-like oppression of peasantry in the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, slavery was not outlawed in this empire until 1909.

The question often arises whether there was any difference between serfdom and slavery. At its worst, serfdom was quite similar to slavery, including posses hunting for fugitive serfs. The difference, however, was that a serf was not a chattel and could not be legally sold or bought. That said, noth-
ing stopped a noble landowner from selling a village of serfs to another nobleman. Obviously, the purchaser also acquired the serfs’ duty to render unpaid labor. No serf was free to leave their village unless allowed by the land’s noble owner. The case of the Danubian Principalities of Walachia and Moldavia is quite interesting regarding serfdom and slavery. In these autonomous (vassal) territories of the Ottoman Empire serfdom existed until the mid-eighteenth century. Ending this system triggered a wave of serf fugitives from Transylvania, another autonomous Ottoman territory, where serfdom was liquidated under the Habsburgs only a century later. The late phase of Walachian and Moldovan serfdom was particularly close to slavery, because rogue noble (boyar) landowners did sell and buy individual serfs as chattel. They turned a blind eye to the legal difference between serfdom and slavery, because apart from serfs, in these Danubian Principalities many nobles and churchmen also possessed slaves. The two systems of serfdom and slavery existed there side by side, with a blurry boundary between them. But the latter was heavily ethnicized, because it was legal to enslave only the Indic-speaking Roma (“Gypsies”).

The end of Roma slavery in Moldavia in 1835 and a year later in Walachia triggered a wave of Roma emigrants to Austria’s Kingdom of Hungary and Russia’s Black Sea provinces. Freed Roma feared that if they remained at home slavery could be reintroduced. Slavery was abolished in the Russian Empire in 1723, but the majority of former slaves were turned into serfs, rather than freed. However, the Russian conquests at the expense of the Ottoman Empire and other Islamic polities in the Caucasus and Central Asia constantly brought into the empire new territories where slavery was still practiced. Officially, slavery was abolished there during the 1860s and 1880s, but in many ways this institution persisted until 1917. Many of these slaves were Persians and some “Russians” (Slavophones) captured in never-ending skirmishes with the Russian military.