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MIGRATIONS AND FORESTS

Essay[1]

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MIGRATIONS AND FORESTS: SOME NOTES ON THE USE OF FOREST RESOURCES FROM THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE TO THE TURKISH REPUBLIC

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Due to the migrations brought about by global warming, climate change, and violence rooted in war and conflict, the pressure on natural resources throughout the world is gradually increasing. Throughout history, the changes prompted by migrations have played an important role in the formation and collapse of human societies and states. Today, the latest migration wave, especially from the Middle East and North Africa, has resulted in the greatest movement of populations since the Second World War and induced a subsequent political crisis. This crisis has precipitated a resurgence of concerns resembling those spurred by the rise in population and consequential resource scarcity that emerged after World War II.[1] However, today we are only able to make assumptions as to the extent of the potential pressure on natural resources the current crisis may generate. Therefore, overestimating the rise in population stemming from these migrations based on Malthusian fears would be out of place.

In the field of environmental history, new approaches that emerged after the 1990s have driven numerous researchers to examine the different uses of natural resources in both urban and rural contexts.[2] Environmental historians have developed new research methodologies; by studying how ecological, economic, and political transformations impacted various aspects of life in the past and today. They have also introduced new topics and perspectives, helping determining people's historical experiences in terms of the sustainable use of resources. All these developments have resulted in the accumulation of important literature, which has helped us apprehend the multidimensional

1 Björn-Ola Linnér, The Return of Malthus: Environmentalism and Post-War Population-Resource Crises (Isle of Harris, United Kingdom: White Horse Press, 2003).

2 Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

aspects of human-environment interactions and, eventually, the problem of sustainability. The economic and sociological changes and transformations caused by the great demographical displacements that occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries have constituted an important part of these studies.[3] As has been observed in the aforementioned time frame, important population movements—especially if occurring in a relatively short time frame—have the most effect on forestland, comparatively to other geographical landscapes. These movements result in significant pressure on local resources, challenging both the local populations and the traditional resource management by central authorities. By casting a closer look at the many strata of resource management contemporary to migration movements, we may acquire new knowledge regarding the relations among the society, the environment and a state engaged in modernity during the late Ottoman State and early Turkish Republic periods.

Forestry, one of the branches of resource management, constitutes a noteworthy phase in the historical exchanges between Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, by enabling a comparative analysis beyond the stereotypical assessments of European and Middle Eastern history, the study of the forest resource management of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic necessitates a renewal for our understanding of the fundamental concepts relevant to modernity.

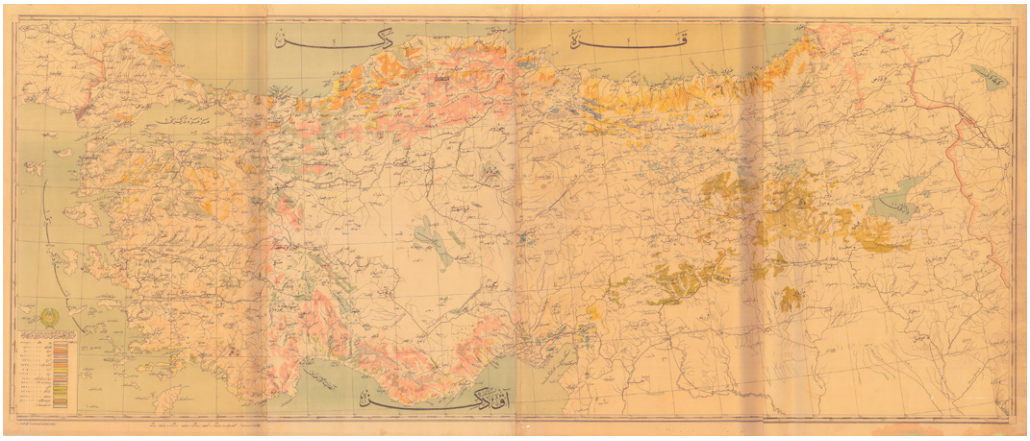


Lowering trees felled from the forest with pack animals. City of Sinop, 1950. Source: Ormancılıkta 1839'dan Bugüne (Ankara: Orman Genel Müdürlüğü, 2017), 70.

It is helpful to examine transnational forestry together with the various natural resource management systems in the context of different states. In the case of the Ottoman Empire, before examining the inner dynamics of the environmental transformations that occurred during the 19th and 20th centuries, we must first grasp an understanding of the processes through which the methods advocated by modern forestry, developed during the 18th century in Prussia under the caption of Kameralwissenschaft (cameral sciences), were adapted to various locations. While aiming to increase the productivity and

3 J. Donald Hughes, An Environmental History of the World: Humankind's Changing Role in the Community of Life (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene Since 1945 (Cambridge, MA and London, United Kingdom: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014); Mahesh Rangarajan and Ghazala Shahabuddin, "Displacement and Relocation From Protected Areas: Towards a Biological and Historical Synthesis," Conservation and Society 4th volume, 3rd issue (2006); for articles regarding migration, population, colonialism and soil erosion, see also: Environmental History 4th volume, 2nd issue (April 2019), special issue: "Africa and Environmental History".

efficiency in fields such as agriculture, trade, mining and forestry in order to consolidate the state treasury, this new discipline is about the administration of a centralized economy for the maximum benefit of the state.[4] Only then we can perceive how the natural resource management heralded by an incremental bureaucratization process—occurring in parallel to the geographical spread of continental and scientific forestry approaches in the Ottoman Empire or any other spatial context—has transformed local concerns and realities. Overall, the social transformations that have accompanied these environmental developments have brought about new social realities that ultimately became an inseparable part of modernity in the last two centuries. Therefore, the modernization processes unfolding outside of Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries necessitate a general re-examination of the fundamental concepts of modernity. In this way, notions such as rulership, state, economy, law, private, and the public can be redefined from an environmental standpoint.



The first record of forest tree species distribution map of the Republic of Turkey prepared by Forestry Service (Anonymous, 1926). Source: Republic of Turkey General Directorate of Forestry.

The connection between the aforementioned rational practices—which were called scientific forestry since the 18th century—and the forest resource management before and after the great displacements of populations during the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic period is very noteworthy. These migrations, which occurred after the Crimean War, the Russo-Turkish War, the Balkan Wars and World War I as well as the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s, have given rise to various struggles in terms of resource management and distribution. The main outcome of these migrations was the rearrangement of political, social, economic, and environmental equilibriums in urban as well as in rural contexts. A study that focuses on the synchronous processes of the emergence of scientific forestry in the Ottoman Empire and the settlement problems faced by the migrants must tackle two important tasks. First is the analysis of the social, economic, political, and environmental transformations occurring inside cities as a result of the aforementioned processes through the assessment of the development of irregular social structures related to the forest resource management practices from the end of the 19th century to the 1940s. The second task would be to follow the transition from an overall cosmopolitan approach to a more nationalist manifestation regarding resource management, from the end of the 19th century to the Republic period. This process presents itself as a transition

4 Keith Tribe, "Cameralism and the Science of Government," The Journal of Modern History 56th volume, 2nd issue (1984). Richard Hölzl, "Historicizing Sustainability: German Scientific Forestry in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," Science as Culture 19th volume, 4th issue (2010). Henry E. Lowood, "The Calculating Forester: Quantification, Cameral Science, and the Emergence of Scientific Forestry Management in Germany," in The Quantifying Spirit in the Eighteenth Century, prepared for publication by Tore Irängsmyr, J. L. Heilborn and Robin E. Rider (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

from an approach of multicultural inclusion in the 19th century to a monocultural exclusion in the modern Turkish Republic. If the goal of such a study is to examine the interactions between the population movements and forest resources, this, in turn, necessitates an inquiry into the use of forest resources by people who possess different socio-cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds and their ways of engaging in practices of exchange.

The settlement of migrants in towns and cities in the second half of the 19th century, resulting from the above-mentioned wars, has greatly influenced the resources allotment and management, and therefore social and economic organization. These major migrations have brought about increased pressure



Large logs are often cut into pieces on the site because it is difficult to unload them from the mountain. City of Sinop, 1950. Source: Ormancılıkta 1839'dan Bugüne (Ankara: Orman Genel Müdürlüğü, 2017), 62.

on rural resources, the main supplier of urban food demand. In short, because of the need for timber to build houses for newcomers, wood charcoal to cook food and heat houses and wood for kitchen utensils, towns and cities were compelled to access forest resources in addition to their food resources. As a result, the central government either assigned forestland to migrants for them to collect material such as wood charcoal according to their needs (based on a per household ratio) or allowed them to cut timber freely—that is free of tax—from state-owned forestland.

Without understanding the nature of the relations between migration and forest in the areas where the migrants were placed, it is utterly impossible to grasp the many dimensions of the debates concerning the use of forest resources and deforestation. Migrations contain an inner mechanism adverse to sedentary forest uses and local management methods. So much so that the authorization to clean up forests and the use of its resources, granted by the Ottoman government to migrants as an incentive for land reclamation in the second half of the 19th century, generated a ground for inequalities and conflicts in part of the local inhabitants. Privileges granted to migrants regarding the use of forest resources and the allocation of land led to hostile reactions from inhabitants who lived in the areas close to the populated forests.

As a result, the emergence of a conflict between the local population and migrants regarding the use of forest products was inevitable. In the aftermath of migrations, the central government received numerous complaints from the rulers of provinces regarding the felling of the forests by migrants. Facing an increase in similar complaints, the Ottoman government decided to displace newly settled migrants and to relocate them to different areas, including towns

and cities. However strictly the government may have tried to keep control over the supply of forest goods (apart from wood charcoal and timber) to towns and cities, mainly due to the shortages occurring during the winter months, it was unsuccessful in preventing smuggling, black market or the extraction of charcoal. As a result, first by an initial regulation which was followed by ancillary by-laws, scientific forestry as a new government-run activity emerging mostly after the 1870s, imposed restrictions on traditional use of forest resources. The state's spectacular arrival on the front stage, with its laws, bureaucracy, and forest guards, left the local populations—especially the poor townspeople and the landless peasants—deprived of some of their former sources of income. Furthermore, the central government did not hesitate in fending off such self-governing establishments that had become the de facto ruling of the field for so long and whose uses had become accepted as "customs". Thus, the state power took possession of those official or unofficial establishments that had been traditionally ruling resource allocation and redistribution, and evicted them off the decision-making mechanisms, depriving them of their former critical role and privileges in the resource assignment processes. Before these changes were made, those customs, which had been in effect for too long even for their roots to be remembered by anyone, were granted the force of law as long as legally unchallenged in writing.[5]

After the cleansing of the traditional establishments from forest management, a sort of unconstraint reigned in the areas where the state could not or deliberately did not wish to intervene. The local establishments gradually declined under the traumatic blows of the Balkan Wars and World War I, during a period when the inclusive policies in the field of forest resources management were inactivated. One of the most striking expressions of these developments in literature is the description of the fate of the forest in Refik Halit Karay's story entitled Yatır. In 1916, in the middle of the war, Karay mentions the villagers' despair at finding wood for winter, at a time of pandemic when the wood supply reached almost at a penury level.[6]

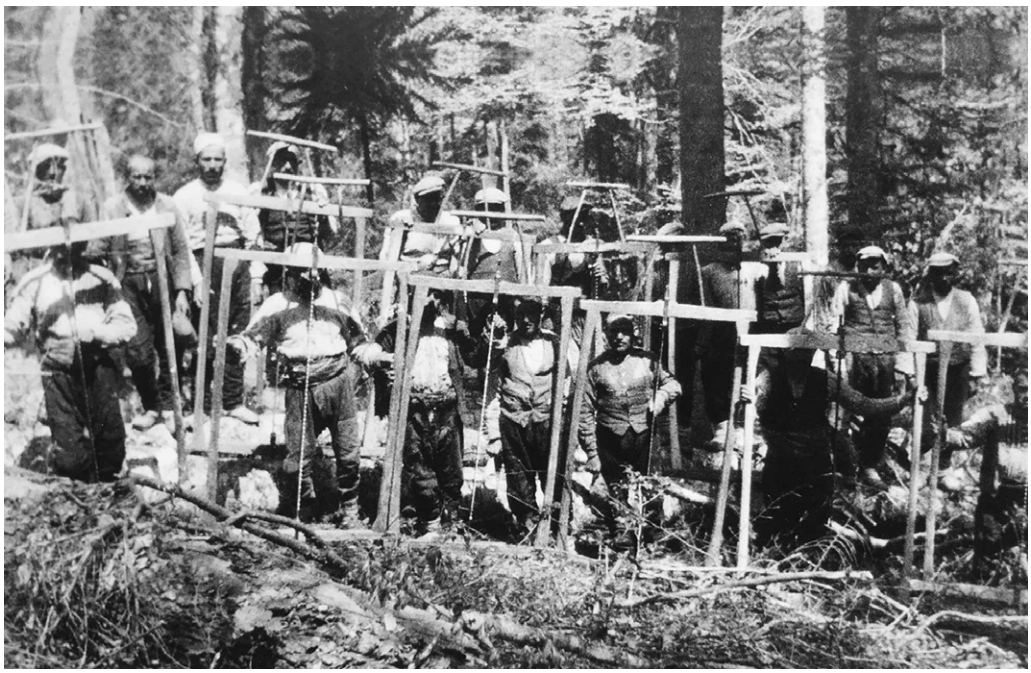
Towards the end of the 19th century, title deeds granted for forestland constituted an important problem. By this time, the opening of plots on state-owned forestland by way of land title had become an unequal method of acquiring land. This situation became the primary ground for controversy and conflict between migrant communities among themselves and with the local populations. Migrants and nomads started to leave the lands they previously occupied to settle on the lands allowed for agricultural practices in forests. Eventually, the forest trees were damaged by communities settling there as a result of both inner and outer migrations. The migrants harvested timber and wood for the huts and constructions they built in or about the forests without paying any tax. When the central government received notice of such settlements, it appointed the local authorities with the task of preventing the migrants from settling in or about the forests until they received empty land and relocating those who wished to settle in the forests to appropriate locations before they destroyed the area. At times, the local villagers were even compelled to pay for the damage brought to the land by the migrants who had settled in the forests. The practice of converting forestland into cultivable plots remained limited in the beginning, but once the word spread among the migrants that forestland was vast and fertile and that settling there was easy, it increasingly gained momentum toward the end of the 19th century. The most effective factor in slowing down this process of forest clearing was the proclamation made in 1893 in every province that, upon the government's highest authority's decision, no title deed or other document would hereafter be issued for the private ownership of state forestland, after denunciations by local forest management offices were given credit to. It would be presumptuous, of course, to assume that unofficial exploitation of forestland stopped entirely after that announcement. For instance, such policies of the relocation of migrants in and about forests were

5 E. P. Thompson, Customs in Common (London: Merlin, 1991), 4.

6 Refik Halit Refik Halit Karay, Memleket Hikâyeleri (İstanbul: İnkılâp, 2009), 118-19.

implemented even during the early Turkish Republic period. To sum up, during this period where there was no planning existed as to the use of forest resources, complaints (especially from professional foresters) regarding forest destruction by citizens never decreased throughout this period.

During the 1920s and the 1930s, the period in which the regime evolved toward the Turkish Republic and the constitution of the nation-state, forestry shifted towards an approach of monocultural exclusion. The Republican bureaucracy defined their forestry policies in opposition to the Ottoman



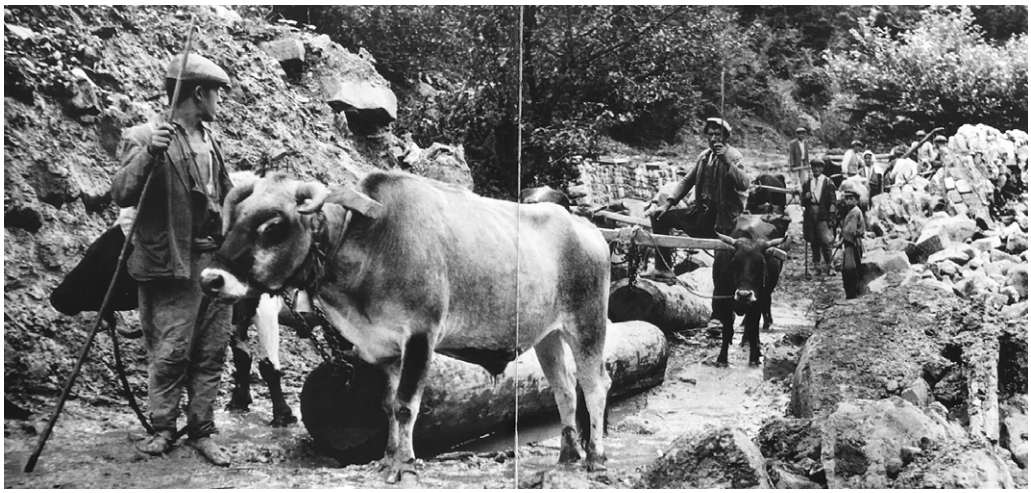
Cutting trees with hand saws from the forest was a labor-intensive job before the invention of large water sawmills and chainsaws. City of Sinop, 1950. Source: Ormancılıkta 1839'dan Bugüne (Ankara: Orman Genel Müdürlüğü, 2017), 67.

understanding of forestry based on the assumption that the people had been harmed by the previous forest resource management system. At that time, the waves of population coming from neighboring countries with the exchange of populations and the increase in nationalist statements regarding the country's natural resources brought the government to behave more and more in an exclusionary manner in terms of the distribution of income and resources to the minorities. To some extent, the new nation-state perspective contributed to shaping discriminatory policies, for which the negative perception of the former cosmopolitan behavior toward minorities also had an influence. Differently from this, the approach to forest management and location allotment for displaced populations that took place during the late Ottoman State period was mostly motivated by economic and instrumental concerns—independent from identity and belonging-related struggles and positions. In the second half of the 19th century, however radically the multicultural, multilingual and multi-ethnic inclusiveness of the Ottoman regime evolved into the early Republican period's exclusiveness, somehow, through occasional concessions, a forestry policy was passed on from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic.

The study of the effects the forestry policies in the Ottoman and Republican periods had on resource management may help us understand how the discursive shift unfolded from an inclusive to an exclusive one. Aside from the "illiterate peasants" in the Ottoman period, the minorities started to be systematically blamed for and designated as the main perpetrators of deforestation during the early Republic period. For instance, some foresters claimed that the main reason why non-Muslims would damage the forests was their rebellion against the Ottoman Empire, although they constituted the richest segment of the population. The same foresters argued that the Empire's cosmopolitanism was one of the main factors of deforestation during the

Ottoman period. To put it simply, the conservative forestry policies implemented at that time—especially during the 1940s—constituted the biggest backer of the monocultural exclusivist perspective directed against peasants and minorities.[7] As a result, it is explicit that the study of the public debates and dominant discourses of the time regarding forestry-related issues will deepen our understanding of the characteristics of the nation-state and its historical development.

The forestry policies must be apprehended together with the economic, social, legal, and political developments triggered by the formation of the modern state. This in turn necessitates a close examination of the people's interactions with forests and of the uses they make of the forest resources. In the context of



Forest products have been an important source of livelihood for villagers throughout history. City of Sinop, 1950. Source: Ormancılıkta 1839'dan Bugüne (Ankara: Orman Genel Müdürlüğü, 2017), 72-3.

the Ottoman Empire, the developments that occurred in the 19th century have mostly been interpreted as a struggle between "tradition" and "modernity." But this and similar binary oppositions—such as despotic/democratic, underdeveloped/developed, static/dynamic, etc.—prevent us from carrying out a comparative analysis of the diverse and the collective experiences and grasping the complexity of the concept of modernity. Instead of applying the tradition/modernity dichotomy, which produces and propagates other related binary oppositions, the relation between forest and society should be apprehended a lot more accurately by espousing a term inspired by Ulrich Beck: that of "inclusive oppositions".[8] In other words, on the path to modernity, we need to emphasize the internal processes within the state and everyday life, rather than focusing only on the one-way transfer of ideas and institutions.

Moreover, traditional history writing has very little material to offer as far as the use of natural resources is concerned. While disrupting traditional limits as well as the relations between the state and civil society, public debates and discussions on topics such as the use of natural resources and environmental change can produce new horizons.

Modern forestry emerged in the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century with the implementation of modern forest management practices after the convergence of the economic, political, administrative, legal and environmental processes and the global opinions in relation to rational forest management were embraced and internalized. The Ottoman Empire formed a

7 For a study encompassing this and resembling views, see: Selçuk Dursun, "The History of Environmental Movements and the Development of Environmental Thought in Turkey, 1850-1980," in Environmentalism in Central and Southeastern Europe: Historical Perspectives, prepared for publication by Hrvoje Petrić ve Ivana Žebec Šilj (Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Lexington Books, 2017).

8 Ulrich Beck, "The Cosmopolitan Society and Its Enemies," Theory, Culture & Society 19th volume, 1st-2nd issues (2002), 19.

different politico-legal regime case study, in which the state occupied a central role in the consumption and redistribution of resources and state ownership of forestland was strained.

As I have tried to demonstrate here, rather than explicating the important transformation experienced by Ottoman modern forestry during the 19th century in oversimplifying terms such as "centralization" and "Westernization," examining this transformation's internal limits and weaknesses will bring a lot more to a historical account. After all, caused by the disappointment, impoverishment and despair that permeated in the aftermath of capitalism's recent crises, have led to the acceleration of efforts to find a salvation from these catastrophes outside of the limits of capitalism itself. "Commons," a concept relatively new in Turkey, has emerged as an alternative viewpoint to the privatization craze, neo-liberal economic policies, the never-ending exploitation of natural resources, and the ever-growing impoverishment of the population. Recent studies have triggered debates as to whether societies should re-implement such traditional ways of managing forests, water and other natural resources as commoning, or whether the management of these resources should be shared with the communities who traditionally make use of them. Consequently, drawing on past experiences and the commoning of resource management are the only directions that will allow us to overcome the challenges driving from future migrations, which are destined to further increase in the 21st century because of global warming, climate change, wars and conflicts. Only in this way, will we be able to at least alleviate the environmental impacts of the social, economic, political and sociological transformations triggered by migrations for the next generations.

About the author

Selçuk Dursun is an environmental historian affiliated with the History Department at the Middle East Technical University. Dursun's current research focuses on the environmental (ecological) and economic history of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, with a particular emphasis on the commons and the use and management of natural resources, such as forestry and fisheries. He previously conducted post-doctoral research at the Europe in the Middle East/Middle East in Europe (EUME) program at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin as a fellow and at the Leibniz Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) an associated fellow.