Refugees and Mass Migration to Istanbul in the Wake of World War I

by Kent Schull

World War I and its aftermath caused nearly 5 million deaths in the Ottoman Empire. It also resulted in the forced displacement of millions more, many of whom made their way to Istanbul in search of safety and refuge. After the signing of Mudros Armistice in late October 1918, waves of forcibly displaced persons continued to flood the streets and neighborhoods of Istanbul fleeing conflict, economic ruin, persecution, atrocity, and starvation. They came from across the empire and region, including the Balkans, Russia, and Central Asia representing a heterogeneous mix of peoples in terms of ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, and nationality. This talk discusses the challenges and plight that refugees to Istanbul faced in the wake of the official end to WWI, particularly in terms of security, stability, and relief, as they attempted to adapt to a world “turned upside down.”

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