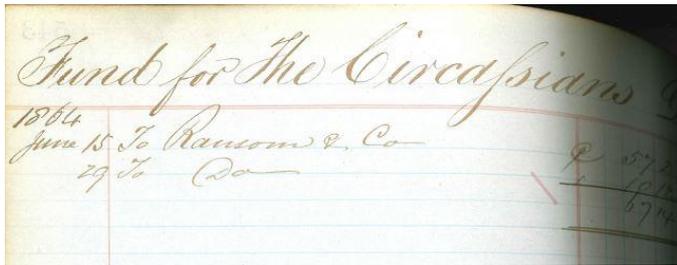


Manuscript of the Month October 2015

Fund for the Circassians, 1864



In June 1864, a subscription account entitled 'Fund for the Circassians' was opened at Hoare's Bank. The account was short lived: no donations were received after October that year. And the sum raised, £77-15-9, was modest. But the story behind the account provoked scenes similar to those being witnessed across Europe today.

Nestled beside the Black Sea, in a landscape of dramatic mountains and lush fertile valleys, Circassia was just one of a numberless jumble of ethnic groups that comprised the Northern Caucasus. Russia loomed large to the north, while to the south lay the mighty Ottoman and Persian Empires. For hundreds of years, much of the Northern Caucasus had been controlled by the two latter powers. But during the nineteenth century Russia launched a determined bid to seize control of the entire territory. Over half a century, the Tzar's armies invaded, conquered and annexed their way across the region, subjugating or expelling the indigenous populations as they went. The resistance these armies encountered along the way was intense. And few resisted more fiercely than the Circassians, some of whom held out for forty years. Ultimately, however, they were no match for the Russian military machine. In April 1864, their last stronghold, Vardar, capitulated and the outlook for the Circassians themselves appeared bleak.

Contemporary accounts did not quite agree on how much say, if any, the Circassians had regarding their fate. That the Ottoman Sultan, keen to cultivate the sparsely populated region of Anatolia and beef up his army with tens of thousands of experienced fighting men, had offered them refuge was certain. But whether the Circassians chose to emigrate, or were forced to do so, was less clear. Not that *The Times's* Constantinople correspondent entertained any doubt as to where the truth lay: *Whole tribes of these sturdy mountaineers have been compelled to avail themselves of the permission granted to emigrate to the Turkish territory; for the policy of Russia in the Caucasus has not been to conciliate these races, but rather to exterminate and drive them out of the country.*ⁱ

However it came about, by 1859 huge numbers of Circassians were setting out across the Black Sea for Constantinople. So many, in fact, that it proved impossible to secure sufficient transport. As a result, reported *The Levant Herald*: *vessels are crammed to suffocation with the exiles, who endure on the voyage to the Bosphorus all the horrors of another "middle passage". During the past stormy season in the Black Sea above a dozen wrecks of these emigrant vessels occurred, hurrying many hundreds of these miserable creatures to death.*ⁱⁱ By January 1860 up to 20,000 people had made the perilous crossing. But while willing to receive them, the Turkish authorities were unable to cope with such a sudden influx of cold, hungry, exhausted and penniless refugees. Packed into insanitary encampments on the outskirts of Constantinople, it was not long before many began succumbing to disease.

Great though these sufferings were, worse was to follow. In the weeks immediately after the final capitulation of April 1864, an estimated 300,000 displaced Circassians were herded down to the coast. There, with no shelter and little food, they were forced to linger for days or weeks before undertaking the arduous journey across the Black Sea on whatever transport the Turkish authorities

could muster: *Every little coasting vessel seems to be eagerly seized upon, reported The Times, and the unfortunate emigrants crowd upon every craft that comes in their way in numbers which defy any precautions for health or safety. In vain the Ottoman Minister of Marine beseeched ships' captains to accept no more than they could carry safely. For as soon as a ship docked it was overrun by hordes of desperate refugees who scrambled over the bulwarks and poured through the portholes in their eagerness to escape. The consequences were inevitable: Out of one cargo of 600 of these unhappy beings only 370 survived after a four or five days' sail. Women suffer the pangs of childbirth in the open air, with scarce clothes for themselves and none for their wretched infants, and dead and dying men lie thick upon the exposed decks...These are things now of everyday occurrence on the waters of the [Black Sea].*ⁱⁱⁱ

Conditions on the Ottoman side were not much better. By mid May the camps at various Black Sea ports, including Trabzon, Samson, Sinop and Varna, hastily erected to afford temporary accommodation for an anticipated 40,000 to 50,000 refugees, had been overwhelmed. Dr Barozzi, Sanitary Inspector to the Ottoman Board of Health, who reached Samson on 14th May, was appalled by the sight that greeted him – over 70,000 men, women and children crammed into tents, stables or warehouses, littering the streets and squares, sprawled beneath trees or in shop doorways, a tangle of the sick, the dying and the dead. Food, clothing and blankets were all in short supply; smallpox, typhus and dysentery raged unchecked. Nor was Barozzi's experience unique. Another eyewitness reported that the faces and hands of nearly every exile he encountered at Varna (Bulgaria) were raw with smallpox, while the sight of about 20,000 refugees huddled beside the Danube at Cernavodă (Romania) reminded Rev Benjamin Philpot of the Israelites in the Wilderness. And scenes at Inebolu (Turkey) defied the descriptive powers of a third man altogether; it would, he declared, require the pen of a Defoe.

Despite the best efforts of local officials and a personal donation of £50,000 by the Sultan, the scale of the crisis was too much for Turkey to cope with on her own. But the European powers were reluctant to become involved. Detailed reports submitted by the British Ambassador to Constantinople, Sir Henry Bulwer, to his government, along with a heartfelt appeal for action – *There should be something like a movement in Europe to aid her. Surely policy, humanity, public admiration for unexampled valour, public pity for almost unexampled distress, would come in to assist a cause to which no heart that has ever felt for deeds of patriotic heroism could be insensible?*^{iv} – prompted little immediate action beyond a gift of 600 tons of biscuit from the Royal Navy stores at Malta, an offer of additional transport to help convey the exiles across the Black Sea and vague murmurings of a Turkish loan secured against Trabzon's Customs revenue. To many politicians, Circassia was an obscure, distant land with no strong commercial ties. Their energies were occupied with matters closer to home: the American Civil War, the January Uprising in Poland and the Second Schleswig War, which had pitted Denmark against the combined might of Prussia and Austria and prompted the opening of a subscription account at Hoare's 'For the Wounded Danes.'

Amongst the general public too, sympathy for the Circassians' plight was limited. Until the 1830s, many people would never have heard of Circassia. Others, if asked, would have dismissed it as an uncivilized place inhabited by warlike barbarians who thought nothing of selling their daughters into slavery or concubinage. Nor did the press do much to soften these stereotypes. In 1789, The Times stated that: *A considerable trade is carried on with female slaves in Turkey, and some of the other eastern countries...the Circassians are the most sought after, on account of superior grace and beauty; they possess the exclusive honour of being admitted to the bed of the Grand Seignior, and that of the Tartarian Princes...Georgian women...are beautiful, but...they do not possess, in any degree, the delicacy of the Circassians.*^v And excitement rippled across London society in

1819 after it was reported that the Persian Ambassador had installed his Circassian concubine and her attendants, two black eunuchs resplendent in national dress and glittering sabres, in Berkeley Square.

This potent mix of beauty and exoticism was perpetuated by the culture of the day. Theatre goers feasted on: *an entire Grand Oriental spectacle, interspersed with Song, Dance and Action...called The Fair Circassian...[with] Dromedaries, State Canopies...Decorations, Trophies, Banners, Elephants, Camels.*^{vi} Literary types devoured Byron's wildly popular 'Don Juan' (1818-24), in which a Circassian girl – *Beauty's brightest colours had decked her out in all the hues of heaven* – was sold to the highest bidder. Ladies bent on beautifying themselves, meanwhile, were spoilt for choice. There were Circassian shawls by the thousand, brightly coloured and trimmed with gold tassels; Circassian straw hats – *their extreme beauty, lightness, and elegance, are really superior to anything we have seen* – available from Mr Brown's modish *magazin* in Lincoln's Inn Fields; even a Compound Balm of Mecca: *This elegant and odoriferous preparation has long been celebrated by the Circassian Women in the Seraglio of the Grand Sultan, who may truly boast the most charming complexions in the world...English Ladies may rely that its qualities are infallible in removing all those red disagreeable appearances so baneful to beauty, and that by constant use it will preserve the skin fair and clear, to the extreme of old age.*^{vii}

A greater contrast with the realities of 1864 can scarcely be imagined. But while press reports of their brave resistance had brought about an increased familiarity of and sympathy for the Circassian people from the 1830s, these old prejudices proved difficult to shake off. An appeal by barrister Edmund Beales on behalf of the Circassians in 1862 met with limited success. This renewed crisis, however, made a small group of men intimately familiar with Circassia and its travails determined to try again. A letter to *The Times* on 12th May 1864 from Laurence Oliphant, author, sometime diplomat and inveterate traveller who had briefly visited Circassia in 1855, led to the establishment of a Committee to Aid the Circassians. Headed by a former Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe, the Committee was composed of diplomats, scholars, travellers and their like, alongside a sprinkling of philanthropists and bankers including Hon Arthur Kinnaird MP, a partner in the banking house of Messrs Ransom Bouverie & Co and brother in law to the senior partner at Hoare's Bank, Henry Hoare (Staplehurst).

The Committee wasted no time in launching a public appeal for funds, although they were careful to stress that their motives were humanitarian rather than political. Furthermore: *The Committee trust that the circumstance that this nation [Circassia] is obscure and little known in this country will not deprive it of the sympathy of the public. Nor should the fact that the misery is on such a gigantic scale dishearten us in our attempts to relieve it. Whatever money is collected and subscribed in England will be applied to the relief of the most urgent cases of suffering.*^{viii} Finally, subscribers were reminded of the late Sultan's generosity towards Europe, not least during the desperate famine that had engulfed Ireland a decade or so earlier, and requested to pay in their subscriptions at Messrs Ransom, Bouverie and Co, Pall Mall East; Messrs Smith, Payne Smith & Smith, Lombard Street; or Messrs Hoare & Co, Fleet Street.

The account at Hoare's was opened on 2nd June 1864. Subscribers included the Earl of Ilchester, a former Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (£10); barrister Charles B P Bosanquet, soon to be appointed the Charity Organisation Society's first general secretary (£1); and Rev Holland Lomas, who contributed a portion of the Offertory at Holy Trinity Church, Walton Breck, Liverpool (£6-1-3). But the account struggled to attract donations. And, just as the Committee had feared, the overall response was muted. Two of the largest subscriptions (£100 each) came from banking heiress and renowned philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts and a former first secretary to the

British Ambassador at Constantinople, David Urquhart, who nearly thirty years earlier had triggered a diplomatic row after encouraging a British schooner to flout a Russian trade embargo by docking at Circassia.

Despite the disappointing response, the Committee was able to remit £1,000 to Constantinople in mid June and a further £1,000 a few weeks later. Part of this sum went towards supplying 226 orphans with mattresses, bedding and clothing, the remainder on blankets and warm clothes for general distribution. But, as the Committee was only too aware, £2,000 was a fraction of what was required. For there had been no let up in the tide of refugees and their condition remained pitiful. On 6 August, an Illustrated News correspondent reported stumbling across a makeshift camp amidst the white tombs and dark cypress trees of the local cemetery at Erzurum (Turkey): *the dying amidst the dead*. It was strange, he reflected: *to pass from the bustle which is going on from morning to night, and the crowd of Kurds, Persians, Armenians, and Turks thronging the bazaars and passing in their varied costumes, in and out of the numerous "khans" or the Custom house, which are said to be the largest in the empire, to the cemetery where, in the quiet of suffering and almost in the death of hope, the Circassian exiles have encamped.*

Notwithstanding this ongoing distress and renewed appeals from the Committee to Aid the Circassians, interest in the exiles' plight was short lived. By mid October, the account at Hoare's was dormant and the story no longer commanded fat column inches in The Times. Relegated firstly 'From Our Own Correspondent' to 'News in Brief', it soon became confined to occasional terse statements buried deep within the inner pages: *Feb 8th [1865]...Disturbances having taken place between the new Circassian contingent and the regular troops, the Circassians have been disbanded and shipped to Tripoli...Sept 27th [1865]...A collision has occurred between the Circassian immigrants and the Turkish troops at Enos [Enez, Turkey]. Several were killed on both sides... Dec 6th [1865]...The Circassian Emigration has been dissolved. It is therefore expected that the slave trade will now revive.* Before long, the most prominent mention of Circassia could once again be found amongst the advertisements: *Madame Rachel's talents have gained for her a world-renowned name for preserving and enhancing youth, grace, and loveliness. Her Royal Arabian and Circassian Bath [Wash], Spices, and Perfumes render the hair, teeth, and complexion beautiful beyond comparison, giving the appearance of youth and beauty to persons however far advanced in years, and have caused her name to stand a marvel of the age.*^{ix}

Although the exact numbers will never be known, it is estimated that between 700,000 and 2M Circassians fled their homeland between 1859 and 1880, while the number of deaths is put at about 600,000. Of those who fled, many settled in Turkey. Others found new homes in the Balkans, Iraq, Jordan or Syria.

ⁱ The Times, 25th April 1864

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 7th Feb 1860

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 8th May 1864

^{iv} Ibid, 17th June 1864

^v Ibid, 18th Dec 1789

^{vi} Ibid, 1st April 1799

^{vii} Ibid, 10th Oct 1804

^{viii} Ibid, 3rd June 1864

^{ix} Ibid, 1st March 1865