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M. Sükrü Hanioglu: A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire

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Introduction

THIS BRIEF HISTORY aspires to cover a period of almost one-and-a-half centuries, during which enormous changes took place over a vast geographic area. As if this were not ambitious enough, the need to place the events of 1798–1918 in context requires a description of Ottoman reality in the late eighteenth century by way of background, as well as some discussion of the legacy bequeathed by the late Ottoman Empire to the new nation-states that emerged on its ruins. The compression of so much history into a concise book naturally necessitates certain choices and omissions, as well as the privileging of trends and analyses over facts and figures. The general nature of this work thus precludes a thorough discussion of any particular issue or field. Specialists—whether of cultural, diplomatic, intellectual, literary, military, political, social, or economic history—may thus be somewhat disappointed with the result. But they may find some compensation in the attempt to integrate the advances made in multiple subfields into a general framework that offers a new approach to the study of late Ottoman history.

There is also a more ideological problem. The usual human failure to take account of historical contingency has been reinforced by prevalent nationalist narratives in the Ottoman successor states, producing a conception of late Ottoman history that is exceedingly teleological. It is often assumed that the emergence of the Republic of Turkey in Anatolia, and of the neighboring nation-states in the surrounding territories of the disintegrated Ottoman polity, was the inevitable and predictable result of the decline of a sprawling multinational empire. This retrospective approach to late Ottoman history has become, it seems to me, a major obstacle to viewing the period as it really was. In particular, it distorts key historical processes by pulling them out of their historical context and placing them in a contrived chain of events leading up to the familiar post-imperial world. The point is not to deny the significance of the link between the successor nation-states—especially Turkey—and their Ottoman past; on the contrary, retrieving the historical roots of modern phenomena is a vital and worthy undertaking. But the attempt to frame late Ottoman history in a narrative of imperial collapse to the relentless drumbeat of the march of progress—usually

associated with Westernization, nationalism, and secularization—prevents a clear understanding of the developments in question. Rectifying this error is a major goal of this book.

An illustration may help clarify this point. Any deep, evocative understanding of Turkish Republican ideology necessarily entails retrieving its intellectual progenitors of the late Ottoman period. But a nuanced, contextualized examination of the ideological debates of late Ottoman times should avoid projecting this later historical reality of a struggle between revolutionary secularists and religious conservatives onto an earlier, altogether different one. Nor will it do to simplify historical reality by depicting two imaginary camps upholding the contending banners of scientific progress and religious obscurantism—as is too often the case with modern commentators blinded by the modern Republican reality. The importance of a work like *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought*,¹ in this context, is the corrective insight that the Young Ottomans were not secularist opponents of religious obscurantism, forming a link in the chain leading to secular republicanism; rather, they were the proponents of a uniquely Islamic critique of the new Ottoman order of the 1860s.

Thus, in order to locate the origins of modern Turkish official ideology in late Ottoman history, I have first tried to provide an account of late Ottoman history that does not assign it a teleological mission. More generally, I have avoided the fashionable but misleading tendency to see late Ottoman history primarily in terms of a struggle between competing ideologies. Although one of the tasks I have set myself has been to fill one of the more glaring lacunæ in the study of the late Ottoman period—intellectual history—I conclude that the ideas debated did not, in the final analysis, serve as the engines of historical change. A contextual analysis of the most important historical developments of the period places a premium not on ideologies as the driving force of history, but on the oppressive weight of circumstances, which inhibited the freedom of realistic policy makers who sought to innovate. For example, if we are to explain the Islamist policies adopted by the staunch secularists of the Committee of Union and Progress (hereafter CUP), we must first recognize that such contradictions exist (which is impossible from the Republican perspective), and then look to structural realities—like the increasing proportion of Muslim citizens in the empire that the CUP leadership inherited from its pious predecessor—to help us explain them. Likewise, if we are to make sense of the modernizing policies of Abdülhamid II, we must first avoid the trap of associating his rule with backward religiosity, and then look to imperial parallels in Europe, inter alia, to understand his reaction to the challenges of the day.

¹Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962).

My narrative emphasizes historical trends and processes more than single events, placing them within an analytical framework with four principal dimensions: the persistent imperial ambition to centralize, the shifting socioeconomic context, the key challenge of forging an Ottoman response to modernity, and the need to integrate Ottoman history into world history. Let me take each of these in turn.

First, where the nationalist narrative portrays the struggle of an oppressed people to liberate themselves from the Turkish yoke, I introduce a paradigm of struggle between the imperial drive to centralize and a variety of centrifugal forces. As the imperial center took advantage of the possibilities afforded by modern technology to launch an ambitious attempt to centralize and modernize the mechanisms of control over the loosely held periphery, nationalist movements, the aspirations of local rulers, and international encroachments exerted an ever-stronger pull in the other direction. Seen in this light, nationalism provided a powerful new ideological framework for the mobilization of the masses in the perpetuation of an older and more fundamental struggle between center and periphery.

Second, the struggle between center and periphery involved a wholesale transformation of the old order of the empire. Administrative reform entailed radical changes to economic relations, to Ottoman culture, and to the fabric of society. Thus, I have found it necessary to treat social, cultural, and economic developments within this larger context, and not as phenomena occurring in a vacuum. As with the question of ideas, here, too, I have avoided the tendency to ascribe historical developments to a single social or economic cause. Just as, for example, it is unhelpful to seek the origins of the Young Turk Revolution in the rise in inflation, it is equally misleading to ascribe opposition to the printing press to “religious fanaticism” alone, while ignoring the socioeconomic basis of this opposition among thousands of individuals who made a living from manuscript production. Historical developments in the late Ottoman period did not stem from simple economic, social, or cultural reasons, but were affected by all three.

Third, instead of the worn-out paradigms of modernization and Westernization, I have tried to write in terms of the Ottoman response to challenges brought on by the onset of modernity. The Ottoman state was not unique in adapting to modernity, though its task was perhaps more arduous than that of European states, if only because modernity was initially a European phenomenon (although a uniquely Ottoman version of modernity had emerged, arguably, by the late nineteenth century). Similar challenges confronted European contemporaries and provoked similar responses, of which the Ottoman establishment was not unaware. More important, analyzing societal transformation as the response of state and society to external challenge once again helps us avoid seeing change as driven by an ideology of modernization. This is not to deny that over time the concepts of

modernization and Westernization became slogans in their own right. But it is to assert that the simplistic picture of an uncompromising hostility to modernity confronting enthusiastic support for its wholesale adoption across an unbridgeable divide is to a large extent a fiction. The similarities between Young Ottoman constitutionalism, rooted as it was in Islamic principles, and later Young Turk constitutionalism, grounded in an intensely secular outlook, are greater than many would care to admit. Similarly, the “pious Caliph” Abdülhamid II’s responses to the challenge of modernity did not differ significantly from those of his grandfather Mahmud II, nicknamed the “infidel sultan” by devout Muslims ever since. Westernization, too, was not just a matter of importation. Rather, it was a complex process of acculturation, in which Western ideas, manners, and institutions were selectively adopted, and evolved into different forms set in a different context.

Fourth, I have attempted to portray Ottoman history as an integral part of the larger histories of Europe and the world. Integrating Ottoman history into world history does not mean situating it in grandiose theoretical frameworks, such as the “World Systems theory,” or reducing it to a matter of trade statistics. It does, however, involve the reintroduction of a long-neglected, now out-of-fashion area of study: diplomatic history. After the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the Ottoman Empire became fully integrated into the struggle for power in Europe. This makes late Ottoman history incomprehensible in isolation from European history. The story of European colonialism, of Anglo-Russian strategic rivalry, of the Austrian quest for stability—all hold vital keys to understanding Ottoman policy in the nineteenth century. Viewing Ottoman foreign policy through the lens of the centralization paradigm outlined above restores relations between the Ottoman government and the Great Powers of Europe to the proportions they held in the perspective of contemporary statesmen. It highlights the tension between the European wish to see a weak Ottoman entity subdivided into autonomous zones open to European commerce and influence on the one hand, and the Ottoman center’s wish to extend the area under its direct control on the other. Moreover, to understand the final collapse of the empire in the twentieth century, one must also look abroad. After all, it was not the internal dynamics of the empire but the new international order brought about by the Great War that sounded the death knell of the “Sick Man of Europe.” Although the Ottoman state lacked the innate power to transform itself into a new kind of empire, more suited to the modern age—as was the case for a while in the neighboring Soviet Union—its leaders might have prolonged the life of the empire considerably had they opted for armed neutrality in 1914.

Finally, a word on sources. The dearth of local sources that might aid in the reconstruction of late Ottoman history from the vantage point of the

periphery compels the student to accept the well-preserved records of the central bureaucracy. The best one can do to avoid the obvious pitfalls of reliance on such evidence is to treat imperial documents not as reliable mirrors of events on the ground but as filtered interpretations of them. The general nature of this study has necessarily reinforced this emphasis on the state, its agencies, and its communities—rather than on the individual. Still, I have tried where possible to present the average person's view of the sweeping changes under way around him or her, however briefly.

Despite the general nature of the study, I have found it valuable to incorporate material from original archival sources in conjunction with histories and treatises produced during the late Ottoman period. Although the book in no way pretends to revolutionize the field with new archival discoveries, this approach, it is hoped, will enrich the reader's perspective on late Ottoman history. I have also drawn on major monographs devoted to various aspects of late Ottoman history, while staying away from extensive consultation of general studies of the period, so as to avoid producing a mere summary of these secondary works. Finally, while refraining from turning the text into a series of statistics and tables, I have tried to provide a measure of quantitative information to amplify the central themes of this narrative.