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The Ottoman Balkans, 1750–1830

Edited by

Frederick F. Anscombe



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Introduction

FREDERICK F. ANSCOMBE

The papers presented in this volume operate in the widening gap between the recent trajectory of Ottoman studies and a continuing path of Balkan historical studies. Over the past two decades a number of Ottomanists have published studies which challenge, with varying degrees of success, the assumptions and conclusions crafted by previous generations of noted scholars. One of the shibboleths to come under concerted attack is the old notion of a long Ottoman “decline” beginning in 1566, the year of Süleyman the Magnificent’s death.¹ While some Ottomanists continue to debate a more appropriate date to mark the onset of “decline,” it now seems acceptable among others to question the very notion of decline at any point in the empire’s history. Such developments in the field of Ottoman history seem to have had less impact upon Balkan studies than might be expected, however. Although there are now very promising junior scholars in several countries of southeastern Europe who approach the Ottoman period with open minds, and some admirable work of high quality and nuance has been published since the end of the Cold War,² much of what has been produced concerning the Ottoman period still seems restricted by the conventions of “national” history and too often ignores Ottoman sources, let alone recent work in the wider field of Ottoman studies. It is significant that perhaps the

most noted work of Ottoman Balkan history to appear in recent years was a reissue of L. S. Stavrianos's monumental *The Balkans Since 1453*, originally published in 1958, a book meticulous in tracing national histories of certain (generally Christian) groups but less so with Muslims, particularly any who could fall into the broad category of "Turks."³ They are the eternal interlopers, regardless of how many generations of them were born, lived, and died in southeastern Europe, the dead wood obscuring the view of the (national) forest.

The tenacity of the "Ottoman period as x centuries of darkness for nation y " paradigm is reflected also in recent works which have attempted to explain southeastern Europe to a wide audience, drawn to the region by the recent wars of Yugoslavia's disintegration. Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* is the best-known of these. In a sense, the history recounted in *Balkan Ghosts* is rubbish (dangerously so, since the author writes compellingly—suspicion remains strong that President Bill Clinton long delayed American intervention in the Yugoslav wars because Kaplan's book taught him that oppression, murder, rape, and pillage were just Balkan traditions from time immemorial). Yet, in another sense, *Balkan Ghosts* is quite illuminating, because Kaplan talked to people in the region and simply parrots the popular beliefs drummed into them from an early age by aggressively nation-building school curricula, literature, and folklore.⁴ Misha Glenny, another journalist, performs a similar service in his book *The Balkans, 1804–1999* by retelling the grisly tales drawn from published works on the history of southeastern Europe.⁵ Works by academics are not necessarily any more rigorous in their search for evidence and interpretation. Andre Gerolymatos recently published a study of the roots of that supposedly endemic Balkan tendency to war in which he proved himself just as ready to revel in bloodthirsty (but often apocryphal) stories of the Turkish yoke as did Kaplan and Glenny. While Gerolymatos does occasionally acknowledge the existence of recent scholarship challenging the old Balkan paradigm of the Ottomans, he does not use any of it to challenge the myths he prefers. "[Nationalist] folklore so often distorts the historical reality. But that doesn't mean that myths and legends offer no insights into the past."⁶ Yet unsubtle folklore more clearly offers insights into present beliefs rather than past "reality," and Gerolymatos's implication that the Yugoslav wars of disintegration can be blamed upon the Ottoman yoke seems, itself, both simplistic and ahistorical.

Those readers afraid of drowning in my personal pool of pessimism will no doubt welcome a lifeline. As stated before, there are scholars in southe-

astern Europe who, having been freed of the old Marxist straitjacket, are now more than ready to test assumptions of this remaining pillar of history under the old regimes, nationalism. They face daunting challenges, including the financial and other problems besetting the educational systems in most of these countries. Even in North America, where a dissertation on the Ottoman Balkans all too often serves as a one-way ticket out of academia,⁷ at least a few researchers have been open to new ideas about the Ottoman period. At the same time as the Gerolymatos book appeared, Dennis Hupchick published a survey of Balkan history. It included the following assessment of "decline."

Historians traditionally characterize the period beginning with the death of Suleyman I in 1566 and extending through the eighteenth century as one of Ottoman decline. The word "decline" implies that factors inherent to the Ottomans' society led to its gradual deterioration, with deleterious effects on the empire's internal administration, its international position, and the condition of its assorted subjects. Ottoman society's institutions, [which functioned so well for 250 years] . . . did slowly begin to unravel following the mid-sixteenth century. Little evidence exists, however, to suggest that they did so on their own account and of their own accord. Compounding forces exerted by the Ottomans' Western European antagonists primarily were responsible for that development. Rather than "decline", it is more accurate to speak of Ottoman internal "destabilization", a result of consistent external, Western European economic and military-technological pressures. Either way, the period left a lasting negative legacy on the empire's Balkan subjects.⁸

Just as Hupchick has considered recent additions to Ottoman historiography, it behooves Ottomanists to think carefully about the quotation above. While the old long-decline paradigm needed revision, it would be just as misguided to overlook the fact that many parts of the empire endured extended periods of turmoil in the second half of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth centuries. This era saw large-scale Christian uprisings (the first not prompted by the approach of foreign armies since the fifteenth century), of Serbs in 1804 and of Greeks in 1821. It also witnessed the violent overthrow and deaths of two sultans, Selim III and Mustafa IV in 1807–8. This extended turmoil ushered in and legitimated the age of rapid, far-reaching reforms, begun symbolically by the destruction of the

Janissary corps in 1826. Difficult times afflicted many Ottoman provinces, and several excellent studies of conditions in Arab lands in the eighteenth century have appeared over the past fifteen years.⁹ Much less has been published about southeastern Europe, in spite of the importance of the Balkan provinces as the leading area of enduring concern for the sultan's government and as the staging ground for the most unsettling developments of the period.

The studies collected in this volume are intended to improve Ottomans' knowledge of conditions in a crucial part of the empire in crisis, and to add detailed pictures to the often sketchy information available to Balkanists interested in pre-nation-state history. The authors have picked issues which arose in different areas of the Balkans during this period, analyzed the roots of the problems and, where possible, assessed Ottoman authorities' attempts to resolve them. Several articles presuppose some background knowledge on the part of the reader, but others should be readily comprehensible to undergraduate students and educated general readers. For all, it is hoped that these studies will lead to a greater appreciation of the complexities of the Ottoman empire in the eighteenth century, of "decline," and of the exhaustive reform efforts of the nineteenth century.

Several common points of interest arise in the papers, suggesting the types of issues that should have concerned the Ottoman authorities the most. As in most pre-modern states, the Ottoman government of the eighteenth century had only a few basic purposes, beyond boosting the status and wealth of its principle figures: to deliver justice and peace within the realm, to wage war against foreign enemies (by this period more often wars of defense, fought on Ottoman territory, rather than wars of offense), and to raise the revenue necessary to carry out these tasks effectively. It is thus no surprise to see that the issues of concern generally fall into these categories. Not a surprise, perhaps, but distinctly alarming, since problems in these areas would affect major pillars of Ottoman legitimacy.

Two papers concern principally questions of justice and the application of law. Michael Hickok's exploration of issues involved in the investigation of murders in Bosnia makes clear that Ottoman central and provincial authorities had multiple avenues by which they could approach the crime of murder, following sharia, *kanun*, and customary law. Judge and governor could choose the approach which best met the state's interest in each case. In his analysis of several incidents of murder in Karaferye (Greece), Antonis Anastasopoulos echoes Hickok on this point and stresses that the state did

retain its longstanding interest in seeing justice done, even in the chaotic years of this period, and that the subjects of the sultan had enough faith in this state interest to continue to apply to Istanbul for justice. The old system still functioned.

Yet in all of the papers of this volume there are at least hints of problems in the legal system. Hickok, Virginia Aksan, and Rossitsa Gradeva all refer to the intrusion of foreign policy into the arena of administration of justice, adding to the avenues of legal approach identified by Hickok. A lengthening menu of such approaches offered flexibility to Ottoman authorities, but it also offered opportunities to clever transgressors, of whom killers seeking to avoid blood retribution (expected under customary law) by moving to areas more clearly ruled by sharia in Bosnia offer but one example. The rise of foreign influence and international legal principles could well complicate further legal questions in the empire, as it was to do in extreme form in the nineteenth century, when many non-Muslim Ottoman subjects came to enjoy legal immunities under the capitulations regime.¹⁰ The use of differing legal principles even in this earlier period increased the likelihood of conflict between officers of the government, who could well disagree over the choice of legal approach. Since *kadis* had only limited resources at their disposal to impose justice, such conflict and division could be very damaging. Indeed, Hickok notes that orders from Istanbul seemed to mandate much less active cooperation between *kadı* and *vali* by the end of the eighteenth century, in comparison to the 1750s.

When local and central authorities proved unable to craft a strong, unified response to legal challenges, the administration of justice could crumble quickly. Gradeva's and my papers focus upon well-armed groups of varying sizes that were able to defy divided local authorities. Distracted by external threats and weakened by losses in the wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Istanbul could muster neither the will nor the material means necessary to ensure the maintenance of justice and the application of law in the provinces. At best, the government could only hope to restrict "banditry" to its most hospitable bases, the frontier areas of the Danube and rough terrain such as Albania. While the justice system still offered hope to individuals in relatively well controlled areas such as Karaferye and central Bosnia, truly ambitious criminals could thrive in the mountains and in the borderlands.

Questions of taxation and the related issue of land tenure complicated Ottoman efforts to reimpose peace and justice in the Balkans. Ottoman re-

cords contain many complaints about excessive taxation, but in a sense such grievances were normal and could be managed. The avaricious tax collector is a well-known figure worldwide. Where the justice system continued to function, such wrongs could be redressed (as in the case of Ali Rüşdi Efendi cited by Anastasopoulos). A more serious problem emerges in this period, however, because more taxes were deemed illegal *per se*. In the case of Osman Pazvantoglu, whose virtually impregnable position in Vidin is analyzed at length by Gradeva, it is clear that this rebellious officer of the sultan attracted widespread support from both Muslims and Christians due to his attitude toward new taxes, introduced by Sultan Selim III to pay for military reforms. The introduction of an array of taxes and other innovations unsanctioned by religious law undercut the moral authority of the sultan among Muslims, further weakening his loyal representatives' ability to promote justice among an unsettled population.

That much of the population lived in uncertain circumstances is reflected in the high incidence of land disputes. In some areas peasants fled or were pushed off the land *en masse*, as armies and brigand gangs criss-crossed the Balkans. Few parts of the peninsula escaped these phenomena, although some areas recovered from the disruptions relatively quickly.¹¹ Other territories, especially border regions such as Vidin, Little Wallachia, and Serbia, were lastingly affected, as Aksan and Gradeva show. The majority of peasants involved there were Christians, and those who most often took advantage of the chaos to seize lands were Muslim military men. In these areas the Janissaries themselves were often recent migrants, driven out of lost border fortresses, very badly paid, and in all likelihood inclined to a feeling of entitlement *vis-à-vis* the distrusted Orthodox peasantry. They perhaps foreshadow the later refugees from Black Sea territories conquered by Russia, who are generally blamed for the excessive ferocity with which the relatively minor Bulgarian uprising of 1876 was crushed. As in issues of taxation, during times of peace the central and provincial authorities were able to keep extralegal land seizures by Janissaries and *ayan* under some degree of control, as Aksan and I show, but the pressures of war and its aftermath loosened that restraint. In these periods relations between Muslims and *zimmis*, which never really recovered from the shocks of the long war of 1683–99, were probably at their tensest. Christians dreaded lawlessness and scapegoating, while Muslims feared the appearance of Christian *haydud* bands in their midst, even though they rarely posed a serious threat to state or regional, rather than local, stability. It is instructive to consider the

actions of both Christians and Muslims in the Serbian “rebellion” of 1804: it started out as a campaign to assist in the reimposition of the sultan’s justice and law over the local Janissary bands and became an open revolt only when Istanbul’s troops turned on their erstwhile Christian allies following the defeat of the Janissaries. Christian military bands stirred deep unease.

In all of the issues mentioned so far, it is clear that war added enormously to the strains upon the Ottoman system in the Balkans. This was always the case, but in this period the frequency and duration of conflict (1768–74, 1787–92, 1799–1802, 1804–12, 1821–30) was exceptional, with the stresses compounded by Ottoman defeat in all of these wars. The reasons for that string of defeats—military “decline,” or something more complex?—is worthy of a volume of papers in its own right, but the bad effect of those losses on Ottoman provincial life is undeniable. Is Hupchick thus right to attribute Ottoman “destabilization” to “consistent external, Western European economic and military-technological pressures?” It is certainly a defensible assertion. As it had in previous centuries, the empire held doggedly to a handful of cardinal principles, as in the field of law and justice, but showed flexibility in the means used to achieve desired results. To speak of “decline” in a system which was never truly static or “mature” is indeed misleading. Given time, the empire presumably still could have repaired weaknesses which grew apparent in key areas such as the military and taxation. Yet time was a luxury of bygone years. The formerly leisurely adoption and adaptation of methods practiced by earlier regimes had to give way to a regimented quick-march—in short, to “reform” as finally introduced by Sultan Mahmud II and carried on through the rest of the existence of the empire. It needs to be borne in mind, however, that every regime in Europe was facing similar pressures to improve its military and boost the strength of the state. In this period practically every part of mainland Europe, from the Iberian peninsula to France to Italy to Russia, faced the threat or reality of revolts and revolutions, and many thought the Habsburg empire just as destined for demise as the Ottoman. Hupchick traces the period of crisis in the Ottoman Balkans to pressure from western Europe, but it is also reasonable to say that the Ottoman position on the periphery of the continent delayed by several decades each step of its inevitable confrontation with the European revolution in state and military power.¹²

Comparison with developments elsewhere in Europe is but one area in which there remains much scope for research.¹³ None of the contributors to this volume chose to study a topic drawn from the period between the fall of

Selim III and the formal recognition of an independent Greece. The background and course of the Serbian and Greek revolts, for example, would be well worth researching in Ottoman records but generally have been left oddly untouched. It is hoped that the studies presented here will not only help to bridge the gap between Ottomanist/Middle Eastern and Balkanist historiographies but also encourage more historians from both traditions to fill in these and the many other remaining lacunae.

Notes

1. To cite but a few of the more notable examples: Cornell Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Ali (1541–1600)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Rifaat Ali Abou-el-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State: The Ottoman Empire Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Binghamton: SUNY Press, 1992); Jane Hathaway, *Politics of Households in Ottoman Egypt: The Rise of the Qazdağlıs* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Rhoads Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Ariel Salzmann, “The Ancien Régime Revisited: ‘Privatization’ and Political Economy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire,” *Politics and Society* 21 (1993): 393–423.
2. Catherine W. Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj: Piracy, Banditry, and Holy War in the Sixteenth-Century Adriatic* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992) is an outstanding example.
3. Leften S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans Since 1453* (New York: New York University Press, 2000). Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) is more noted (and noteworthy) but is a work more directly concerned with the intellectual history of western Europe over the past two centuries than with the Ottoman Balkans *per se*.
4. Those interested in the underappreciated role of literature in nation-building should read Andrew Wachtel, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).
5. Misha Glenn, *The Balkans, 1804–1999: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers* (London: Granta Books, 1999).
6. Andre Gerolymatos, *The Balkan Wars: Conquest, Revolution, and Retribution from the Ottoman Era to the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 79. Gerolymatos lists even fewer works by Ottomanists in his bibliography than does Glenn, all at least thirty years old.
7. It may well be coincidence that none of this volume’s contributors works at a university in the U.S. Leaving aside those native to the region, however, most historians who have made significant contributions to the study of the

Ottoman Balkans work in western Europe.

8. Dennis Hupchick, *The Balkans: From Constantinople to Communism* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 164. Mark Mazower also shows a mind very open to reconsideration of the Ottoman period in the Balkans. See his *The Balkans* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2000).
9. Abraham Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) for Aleppo, and Hathaway, *Politics*, for Egypt.
10. The capitulations, which governed the status of Europeans in Ottoman lands, originally granted limited legal privileges and protections to visiting Christians, who otherwise would have been practically defenseless unless they paid the *cizye* head tax. By the era of reform of the nineteenth century, the capitulations had expanded to confer an extensive degree of legal immunity through extraterritoriality. The damage arose from the extension of those extraterritorial immunities to many (overwhelmingly Christian) Ottoman subjects through the granting of a form of “honorary citizenship”—the “*berat/ubarataire*” mentioned in Gradeva’s paper.
11. Archeological evidence can belie national traditions of desertion of the land to escape “Turkish oppression.” See, for example, John Bennet, Jack Davis, and Fariba Zarinebaf-Shahr, “Sir William Gell’s Itinerary in the Pylia and Regional Landscapes in the Morea in the Second Ottoman Period,” *Hesperia* 69 (July–September 2000). Archeology is perhaps the richest barely-tapped resource for Ottoman history.
12. For the international history of Europe in this era, see Paul Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). For analysis of the economic challenges facing the states of Europe in their efforts to modernize, see Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1988).
13. Such comparison has been done most forcefully by Salzmann in “Ancien Régime.” In this volume Hickok has drawn explicit comparisons, while several other contributors have done so more fleetingly or implicitly.