

Ottoman Military and Social Transformations 1760-1841: Engagement and Resistance in a Moment of Global Imperialism

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As a historian of the Middle East during the pre-twentieth century, when most of the territories of that region were part of the Ottoman Empire (1300-1918), I am constantly asked what caused the collapse and fall of that empire? The question has particular relevance to the violence of the present day in Iraq, and warrants a serious answer in terms of its global significance. Working with the *Globalization and Autonomy* project at McMaster has allowed me to ask if there was a particular moment in Ottoman history when a discussion of the struggle to maintain independence from transnational economic forces and encroaching imperial armies could effectively reframe that question about collapse, if not answer it in a different manner. In other words, I would prefer to ask what survived of the Ottoman Empire in its long struggle with the potential forces of dissolution rather than what caused its collapse. How did the Ottomans negotiate occupation, loss of territory, and internal ethno-religious conflicts, and what does that say about our present global moment?

I settled on the period from 1760 to 1841 for my pivotal moment, when, on the one hand, the British established themselves as the hegemonic powerhouse of the world, and, on the other, the Ottomans found themselves unable to resist Russian armies on the Danube River. The drama which unfolded after 1768, involving six major Russo-Ottoman wars between then and 1878, figures as the international context for my globalization moment. I am, however, more interested in Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II's (1808-1839) transformative innovations around order and discipline as measures to preserve Ottoman autonomy in the face of possible collapse and conquest. Mahmud II instituted a set of strategies which set the empire on the path which led to the nation state of the Turkish Republic of 1923, and essentially began a process which reduced the empire to the role of client-state of the European powers. The struggle for military autonomy, which I argue is very much an Ottoman indigenous construction, effected the relation between sultan and subject, and hence the very definition of what it was to be an Ottoman.

I ask two questions: did the resistance to foreign invasions and economic dominance actually force the sultans to refashion Ottoman imperial military and ideological systems, and if so, in what ways? And how did those changes influence the ethno-religious basis of Ottoman rule, forming citizens out of erstwhile subjects? In order to explore the transformations which were engineered by Mahmud II, I found it necessary to characterize Ottoman imperial aspirations and role of the military. Before 1760, the Ottoman Empire operated as a series of discrete orders, loosely defined classes, such as the army, religious officials, and the peasantry. The formidable Janissary army was not only emblematic of a strong, disciplined empire, but also the backbone of the elite of the Ottoman dynasty. The ruling class had immense tax privileges, served in the army, and was Muslim. The ruled were differentiated tax-payers, depending on whether they were Muslim or not, and were exempt from military service if they were non-Muslim. Furthermore, status distinctions were determined by dress and ostentatious wealth as much as by category of belonging. By contrast, by the end of Mahmud II's reign, in 1839,

that social structure had been replaced with a constitution, called the Gülhane Decree, which declared equality of citizenship, regardless of religion, and universal conscription, that is military service for all members of society.

What I learned about the process of transformation was how extensively Mahmud II disciplined his society as part of his reordering of the armed forces. He eliminated forcibly the last of the Janissaries, an outmoded praetorian guard, which had been underwritten by an immense social welfare system which benefited large segments of the Ottoman population. Understandably, eliminating societal privileges did not make him popular, but it was more particularly his introduction of European regimental command and dress which earned him the sobriquet of "infidel sultan." Mahmud II redrew the final, "do-or-die" boundaries of his northern frontiers, by rebuilding and refortifying four significant fortresses on the Danube River, where the last of the Russo-Ottoman wars was played out in 1877-78. The sultan, it turned out, proved far better at putting down internal rebellions than at protecting his borders, but nonetheless redrew the spatial and ideological boundaries of "Ottomanness."

Mahmud II also envisioned and addressed his subjects as citizens of a reformed Ottoman Muslim universalism. It is perhaps this last part that was so radical, and, it must be said, represented the most direct import of European ideas, although they were combined with a Muslim worldview. It took the rest of the nineteenth century, and tremendous upheaval and resistance among Ottoman Muslim and non-Muslim populations, for Ottoman intellectuals to make sense of the merging of Ottoman-Muslim political traditions and European thought.

Mahmud II's disciplinary measures ranged from brute force to utilitarian strategies such as ordering a census, enforcing discipline in the ranks of his new army, and redefining the loyal citizen as a "Turk" in the face of ethnic challenges from non-Muslim national groups such as the Greeks, who revolted in the Peloponnese in 1821. The more Mahmud's subjects challenged his rule and betrayed what he understood to be his trust, the more Mahmud II and his successors sought conscripts and officers from among trusted populations. Those most suitable for military conscription and its accompanying discipline often turned out to be "Turkic" speaking: largely Muslims from the Caucasus and from Anatolian Turkey.

What stood out for me at the end of this study is the fact that the reformed Mahmudian state in its broad outline, demographic composition, and reconfigured borders was embryonic of the twentieth century Turkish Republic, where rights of citizens, municipal politics, and state service vied with persistent crony, palace politics. It made me ask who were the advisors of this most reforming of sultans? The most curious thing I learned from this study is how little advice the sultan got from foreigners. While the influence of foreign officers in the armies of Europe and abroad in the period 1760-1841 was a feature of the era of coalition warfare, Mahmud II mistrusted foreigners, relying instead on his traditional elites, often emancipated slaves with enormous wealth and power, as well as diplomats and students he sent abroad for his information. There is a sense in which the Ottomans stubbornly carved their own destiny in this period, part of which included ruinous economic policies leading to their informal colonization by France and Britain. The Treaty of London of 1841 cemented that arrangement by establishing a free trade zone of the entire Middle East. The lesson from this moment of globalization is how enforced modernization, or more aptly, defensive developmentalism, restricted the full flowering of constitutionalism and economic autonomy. Glocality, or, the understanding of and imitating of the global in the local, in this case led to an interrupted constitutional evolution and disaffected populations. This Ottoman global moment offers us a glimpse into a society in crisis, where a web of contradictions and competing world forces effected a radical

transformation which continues to play itself out in the twenty-first century.

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