

The Ottoman Legacy and Neo-Ottomanism: A Review Article

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The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power

By Sean McMeekin

Boston: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010, 496 pages, \$22.50, ISBN: 9780141957296

The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600

By Halil İnalcık

London: Phoenix, 2001, 272 pages, \$19.95, ISBN: 9781842124420

Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism

By Hakan M. Yavuz

New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 335 pages, \$34.56, ISBN: 9780197512289

Insight Turkey 2020

Vol. 22 / No. 4 / pp. 253-260

Received Date: 09/09/2020 • Accepted Date: 12/10/2020 • DOI: 10.25253/99.2020224.14

The ghost of the Ottomans still haunts us a century after the bloodless death of the dynasty at the creation of the Modern Turkish Republic. The increasing attention of Turkey towards the Middle East and the Balkans in its foreign policy is one reason for this haunting, but the outpouring of books by historians is surely another. Yet we are still far away from an objective account of why the House of Osman committed 'suicide' at the hands of the Young Turks by going 'all-in' to the European imperialist war in 1914, at the very birth of the new Automobile Age, when all the oil wealth of the Middle East, as we know it today, lay underground in the vast Arabian desert, all in Ottoman hands, and, with smart politicians rather than the juvenile dictatorship at the helm of the Sultan's government, could have facilitated a way forward to prosperity.

The three books selected for review here shed new light on the current popularity of Neo-Ottomanism and the bloody endgame of the Empire in 1918.

The Berlin-Baghdad Express

Based on extensive archival research in Turkey and elsewhere, McMeekin has produced a useful book, comparable to several recent contributions by Western historians on the Ottoman endgame. It is more balanced than, for example, Eugene Rogan's *The Fall of the Ottomans*, although each one has its own merits and demerits.

Despite its title, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express* is less about railroad geopolitics than about the general World War I (WWI) history. Specifically, the strategic and economic role of the German railway project is inadequate, in comparison to, for example, the saga of the warships *Göeben* and *Breslau*. All the standard topics, such as Enver Paşa's ill-fated adventure in Sarikamış, Cemal Paşa's misrule in Syria and his mismanaged campaign in Suez, as well as Mustafa Kemal's miraculous victory in Gallipoli, are all there, albeit sometimes unevenly.

McMeekin's treatment of Turkish nationalism is thin and short, Kemalist ideology is under-estimated and the War of Independence is minimal. Pan-Islamism is there, especially the German Emperor's exploitation of this empty ideology. But Ottomanism was overtaken by Turkism. Pan-Turanism, favored by Enver Paşa, was similarly an ideological mirage lost in the Caucasian mountains. McMeekin misses all of the ideological undercurrents. The reader looks, in vain, for a discussion of the rising modern Turkish nationalism, the role of the fiery patriots such as Halide Edip Adıvar. Instead of the long epilogue on Zionism, provided at the end of the book (pp. 340-366), McMeekin should have offered his views of Kemalist Turkey.

McMeekin's title suggested a historical account of German economic and financial imperialism, a sequel and updating of Edward Mead Earle's classic study of Turkey, the great

powers, and the Baghdad Railway. Chapter 2, however, gives scant information about the financing details of the contract awarded to the Deutsche Bank and the Sultan's subsidy per kilometer of railroad. However, the politics of construction delays and the fiscal insolvency of the Empire are avoided, and there are no details of the Ottoman Public Debt Administration atop the elaborate Capitulations system.

Vital questions remain unanswered: Why was the railway still unfinished in 1914? How could a bankrupt Sultanate defeat the British in India, Egypt, and free the Muslim Middle East? Why were all tax revenues controlled by the European imperialist powers? The Sultan entered the War financially and militarily dependent on the Emperor.

Pan-Islamic ideology is covered but lacks a Turkish perspective. Why did the Sultan fail so miserably as Caliph, while the British and French successfully recruited tens of thousands of Muslim soldiers from India and North Africa to fight the Ottoman armies in the sands of the Middle East? Was it simply Cemal Paşa's brutal policies in Damascus that turned the Sheriff of Mecca into secret plotting with Lawrence of Arabia? McMeekin underestimates oil politics in the Mesopotamian campaign and the Sykes-Picot partition plans.

Despite these limitations, McMeekin's study is a welcome contribution, shedding much light on particularly Arab and Zionist politics in the twi-

light years of the Ottomans. The Germans used adventurist Enver Paşa, and a Sultan with a deep mistrust of the French and English, in a global war of imperialism. The Turkish nation paid dearly for their folly. Had it not been for the foresight and military-diplomatic skills of the future Atatürk, the Turkish nation, almost certainly, would have vanished in the gambling casino which was the First World War in the Middle East.

The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600

Written by the eminent Turkish historian some 50 years ago, this classic work is still relevant. It is an excellent read of the Ottoman Empire at its best, in the Classical Age. Reprinted by Phoenix, İnalcık's study meticulously explains the Ottoman statecraft at its zenith.

This is not a book devoted to war and conquest: These topics are summarized and disposed of in Part One, in the first 55 pages of the book when the Ottoman state transformed itself from a 'frontier' principality to world power, the superpower ruling much of Europe and the Balkans, North Africa and all of the Middle East. By 1600, conquests were completed, limits of territorial expansion reached. Sultan Mehmet, the conqueror of Byzantium, built the definitive Empire, a worthy successor to Eastern Rome; Yavuz Selim, the victor over Mamelukes, elevated the Sultanate into a Calif-Emperor, and Suleyman I, the Lawgiver, created his

man-made *Kanun*, codified the land tenure, fiscal system and built the institutions of a superpower.

The key to the Ottoman's success as a world power was the home-made merit system. It was an Ottoman version of Darwinian survival of the fittest, prowess both in military and administrative areas. Religion or ethnicity did not matter. Rank, title, and dress code, symbols like horse-tails and headwear, (described at length especially in Chapter 12) were primarily for the show in ritual and ceremony. The system was a one-man rule. All subjects, Muslim, Jew, or Christian, were equal, the Sultan's *kul*, effectively slaves, all earthly possessions as well as the life of the subject, belonged to the Sultan. Only the best, determined by long and rigorous education and training, rose to the top. These *Kapıkulları*, the privileged *kuls* waiting at the Gate of Felicity for Sultan's grace, stayed there so long as, by skill and performance, they maintained the Sultan's confidence. Loyalty, always confirmed by winning for the Sultan, safeguarded survival, moving up the ladder in a labyrinth of hierarchy at the Sultan's will. Duty was a constant struggle, a job well done earned rewards. Losing once meant removal and often by beheading, in the case of members of the House of Osman, a bloodless death by the bowstring.

In this multinational Empire, the Sultan ruled in absolute power over two sources of talent: the *Devşirme* system and the Türkmen/Anatolian aristocracy. Machiavellian power

prevailed. Christian boys, converted to Islam and raised for total obedience to the Sultan, excelled in military or administrative fields, operating in constant competition with the Anatolian *beys*. Meritorious service carried rewards of fame and fortune distributed by the Sultan. Success was the ultimate test. Failure meant to shame and immediate removal, often beheading. In this system, no class of aristocracy (rich families, land-owning or trade-based) could emerge because no power could be tolerated, that could potentially challenge the absolute Sultan. Survival of the fittest also applied to succession, justified by the rules of fratricide, and intended to avoid civil war amongst competing sons of the Sultan.

At its height, the Ottoman Empire was the center of global trade. Part three is the most revealing part of İnalçık's book. Wonderful pictures of global power are displayed depicting wealth and high culture (pp. 132-133). When Sultan Mehmet conquered İstanbul, its population was a mere thirty to forty thousand souls. Within a couple of decades, the Conqueror has managed "to transform İstanbul into the world's greatest capital" (p. 140).

The Ottoman engine of growth was international trade. Trade enriched the Empire and increased tax revenues. Money was the lifeblood of the entire system. It paid the Janissaries, army and navy, the public servants, civil and religious officials, and, of course, the central and provincial government, atop of which the Sultan

ruled supreme. Prosperity emerged from trade and markets.

The Ottoman trading system was global. Spices came from the Orient; Chinese merchandise moved along the Silk Route. The China trade was linked to the Black Sea trading ports like Kaffa, Azov, Taman, and Trabzon. These trading ports also served the Muscovy trade. Beyond the Caspian Sea, Samarkand and Central Asia were trading hubs linking the Ottoman and Oriental worlds. Wherever trade flourished, prosperity financed high culture and learning. All trading routes converged on İstanbul, but Bursa, Konya, and cities in the Balkans, Crimea, Levantine, and all over the Empire shared in gains of trade. India, under the Moguls, participated in the Ottoman trading system, through Afghanistan, Persia, and the Caucasus. African ports on the Red Sea, managed slave trading and commodities, were linked with the Ottoman cities like Cairo, Aleppo, and Damascus.

Ottoman merchants, Muslim, Jew, and Christian, all partnered and prospered in commercial networks extending to Europe. Ottoman arts and crafts were the envy of the world. By the mid-16th century, France, Holland, and then England followed the Italian states in seeking trade privileges in Ottoman lands. A picture in the book (No. 12) shows a European ambassador, held up by two doorkeepers in the presence of the Sultan, lest he should shake and fall in God's shadow. That reflected Ottoman superpower status.

In Europe, trade originally was controlled by families such as Lorenzo de Medici in Florence. They competed with other families from Venice and Genoa, but gradually chartered companies, like the Levant Company, emerged. Profits from the Ottoman trade system accumulated in the West. Trade surplus first financed the Italian Renaissance, subsequently the rebirth of “mercantilist Western states” (p. 138). After 1492, the Atlantic economy emerged.

The Age of Discovery, associated with Columbus, Vasco de Gama, and Magellan, led to a global shift of world trade from the Ottoman Mediterranean to the European-controlled Atlantic. The flooding of Aztec gold and silver to Portugal and Spain caused a ‘price revolution’ spreading to Ottoman lands (p. 139). Inflation and frequent currency debasement followed, delivering the Ottoman trading system a mortal blow from which the Empire never recovered. Under the *Capitulations*, the Ottoman state finally went bankrupt.

At the zenith of the Ottoman Empire, in 1553 Suleyman killed his son Mustafa, the ablest successor was lost. Harem politics began and the long period of decline of the Ottomans followed. Cyprus, conquered in 1571, marked the last great military achievement of the Empire.

Nostalgia for the Empire

Hakan Yavuz's book, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ot-*

tomanism, is about an Empire lost and its traumatic impact on Turkish consciousness. A sense of loss, nostalgia for past glory vanished, is very much ingrained in modern Turkish identity. “*Bizler hüzünlü milletiz*” (We are a nation of melancholy) (p. 2). *Hüzün* is the key, a longing for a birthplace, rebellion against modernity, or personal dissatisfaction with the human condition.

Yavuz borrowed the idea of *Hüzün* from the great novelist Hamdi Tanpınar, the author of *The Time Regulation Institute*, the Turkish version of George Orwell, an attempt to reshape consciousness in some crazy Freudian experiment. Tanpınar’s anti-hero, *Ayarcı* (Regulator), is a psychoanalyst gone mad in the new Kemalist Republic, dedicated to constructing a new citizen in total subservience to an authoritarian state.

Yavuz’s Neo-Ottomanism is a personal account. He experienced tensions first in his childhood years in Bayburt in eastern Anatolia, attempting to reconcile Kemalist modernity with Ottoman/Islamic heritage. During his university career in the U.S., he observed the Bosnian genocide and the destruction of the last Ottoman community in Europe.

Two specific elements have shaped Yavuz’s view of Neo-Ottomanism. First, it represents “a pluralistic view of Turkishness, a weapon against Kemalist secularism (p. 13).” Second, the EU’s rejection of Turkey’s membership application, demonstrating the dead-end of the top-down “West-

ernizing orientation” of the Kemalist Republic (p. 2). The rejection was a wake-up call, forcing Turks to turn to their endogenous roots of identity. For most Europeans, conditioned by their Christian heritage, Turks were always at a ‘gate’ in Europe, Vienna in 1683 or Brussels in 1987.

Such internal and external forces have shaped contemporary ideas of Neo-Ottomanism. One cannot remove the past from the present. Ottoman/Islamic heritage was suddenly taken out of the Kemalist closet and (re)embraced as an indispensable part of the Turkish soul today. Most Turks today feel a sense of national insecurity, remembering how close their homeland came to extinction at the end WWI. Yavuz calls this insecurity the “Sevres Syndrome (p. 37).”

With the end of Westernization, turning to one’s roots, history and heritage is natural. In Turkey, de-linking from Europe has been a gradual process. In 1960, after the Menderes years, Ankara still aimed at closer integration with Europe, signing a Protocol with Brussel which targeted eventual Turkish membership of what became the EU. At the same time, a Turkish-Islamic synthesis was underway, and an early attempt was made at “Turkification of Ottoman history” (p. 55).

Neo-Ottomanism as a political agenda dates back to Turgut Özal, the neo-liberal reformer in Turkish politics, who surprised Turks and Europeans alike with his sudden application to Brussel back in 1987. In fact, Özal himself can be considered as an

early proponent of Neo-Ottomanism. For Özal, “a Turk is someone who is Muslim by religion and an Ottoman by shared history and memories” (p. 110). His political success stemmed from coalitions with Anatolian entrepreneurs, who eventually became Erdoğan’s supporters. These Anatolian bourgeois possessed their own culture and their own Kurdish, Al-evi, and ethnic traditions, steeped in Ottoman-Islamic heritage, very alive still with Sufi sects such as the *Nakshibendi*, *Nurcu*, and others, which Atatürk had disbanded but could not eradicate. Yavuz’s Chapter 3 gives a rich account of these sects, including their impact not only on politics but on popular arts, literature, and media. The Gülen Movement, as it was called such by then, ingrained itself within this popular culture and, by the time of the 2016 coup attempt, FETÖ (*Fetullahçı Terör Örgütü*, Fetullahist Terror Organization) had become a real threat to the constitutional order.

Yavuz makes it quite clear that there are many versions of Neo-Ottomanism, discussing, besides Özal, Erbakan, and numerous others. Each Sultan had his brand of ideology. Erdoğan may champion Abdülhamid, sharing his mistrust of Europe.

Little wonder, too, that Neo-Ottomanism, as a Turkish foreign policy, has met with such firm resistance in former Ottoman lands in the Balkans and the Arab countries. Understandably, people’s memories are short and, even then, only the worst is often remembered; for example, Cemal Paşa’s

brutal execution of Arab intellectuals when he served as the Sultan’s Governor in Syria.

Conclusion

The three books in review here, have a common thread: Shared history is multi-dimensional, subject to different interpretations. During its 600 years of existence, the Ottoman Empire underwent numerous phases: In its Classical Age, all subject people and countries shared in trade-based prosperity, as clearly documented by İnalcık’s masterpiece. At the bloody end of the Empire in 1918, as McMeekin’s book has shown, Ottomanism was buried deep, in hands of the inept Young Turks. Only the miracle of Kemalist ideology saved the Turks. Yavuz shows that Erdoğan’s Ottomanism is but one variant only, and his colleagues, and others, have different ideas.

Romantic Neo-Ottomanism amongst the rank-and-file Turks is an amusing exercise for the Turks themselves, as they watch those Turkish soap operas, now a rage internationally as well. The House of Osman died because the age of dynasties had passed. Now, European imperialism is passing. The age of hydrocarbons is ending as Green Energy emerges, a topic extensively documented in our recent book (Mehmet and Yorucu, 2020).

On the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the single best book is still David Fromkin’s masterpiece, *A Peace to End All Peace* (1990). As Fromkin

explains, the Ottoman's "wartime performance was surprisingly successful. Engaged in a three-front war, the Ottoman Empire defeated Britain and France in the west in 1915-16, crushed the advancing armies of British India in the east at the same time, and in the north held off the Russian invasion forces (p. 215)."

What killed the Ottoman dynasty was betrayal from within, not from one, but two sources: (i) The Arab Revolt, led by the Sheriff Hussein of the House of Saud, and (ii) Cemal Paşa, the Sultan's Governor in Damascus who came very close to materializing his nefarious plot to declare himself the new Sultan. The French and British used him too, while they carved the vast, hydrocarbon riches of Muslim lands for themselves, drawing lines in the sand. The notorious secret wheeling and dealing known as the infamous Skyes-Picot agreement,

created the modern Middle East, while the imperialists controlled all the oil wealth.

In war, winners take all and write the history. In WWI, the winners took all the booty; they denied prosperity not only to Kemalist Turkey (as in the case of Mosul) but no less shamefully, they exploited and impoverished the Arabs, especially the Palestinians. A few dynasties, like those in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, dependent on imperialists, monopolized their share of the oil wealth. ■

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