

Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe

By *Marc David Baer*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 332 pp., ISBN 9780195331752.

Drawing on contemporary archival and manuscript sources, Marc Baer unfolds the most fascinating story of Sultan Mehmed IV. Although his reign was remarkably long (1648-87), he has almost been forgotten or depicted dismissively as weak and foolish. Aiming to retrieve that lost history, the book's central theme is conversion – of Muslims to “proper” Islamic practices, of Christians and Jews to Islam, and of space. Thus, the reader encounters the Kadızadeli movement that first rose to prominence in the 1650s. The movement advocated a revivalist pietism, in the sense that it called for the effective prohibition of unlawful innovations.

The structure of the book follows the sultan's reign. The narrative begins with the circumstances of the enthronement of the seven-year old Mehmed IV in 1648, including a strikingly vivid depiction of Istanbul at the time. Then the discussion moves to the “decade of crisis” that followed. In the face of external and internal challenges, central government proved to be ineffective – as between 1648 and 1656 there was a total of twelve grand viziers. The crisis raised the question of legitimacy; in particular, the position of power held by the *valide sultan* came to be seen as the source of all the empire's problems.

Beginning with chapter 3, Baer discusses factors contributing to an improvement in the situation. The Kadızadeli movement is introduced, whose growing influence on the elite suffered a set-back

when Köprülü Mehmed Pasha became grand vizier in 1656. During his term of office, the grand vizier managed to suppress internal rebellion and conquer again territory that had been lost. After reestablishing Ottoman rule the mosques that had been converted into churches, were turned back again into mosques (“conversions of sacred space abroad” – pp. 77/8). According to Baer, the grand vizier's success came at the expense of the sultan and the Ottoman household. Thus in the 1660s, Mehmed IV and the *valide sultan* worked hand in hand to strengthen the dynasty and the sultanate, drawing on notions of piety.

Baer explains that the destruction caused by the great fire in Istanbul in 1660 provided an opportunity to Islamize the city. At the time, nearly half of the city's inhabitants were non-Muslims (p. 104). He argues that “in a period of crisis, Islamization of areas inhabited by Christians and Jews in Istanbul served as a visible sign of the authority of the dynasty and religion that Hatice Turhan represented” (p. 101). The religious reorientation was not limited to the elite, “in the 1660s a new wave of Kadızadeli-inspired piety rolled over the city” (p. 104).

In 1663, Mehmed IV moved to Edirne, “the old warrior capital” (p. 105), while his mother stayed in Istanbul. At that time, Mehmed IV also appointed an official chronicler and developed a close relationship with the Kadızadeli preacher Vani Meh-

med Efendi, who became the confidant of the sultan, and also of Hatice Turhan and the grand vizier. At first, the religious reforms targeted Sufis, “especially Bektashis, Halvetis, and Mevlevi, the three orders that historically had had close ties with the military and the dynasty” (p. 112); and – with much less success – the consumption and sale of alcohol.

Baer gives an account of two conversion projects in the second half of the 1660s: Mehmed IV brought about the conversion of Rabbi Shabbatai Tzevi, the leader of the Jewish messianic movement, in 1665; and Hatice Turhan converted Jewish palace physicians by conditioning their employment on the conversion to Islam.

Chapter 7 “analyses how Ottoman historians writing after a mature Mehmed IV moved to Edirne depict him as [...] a pious, strong, manly, warrior (ghazi) sultan, who reclaimed power taken by royal women and, with his preacher at his side, converted people and places in Ottoman Europe” (p. 138). The discussion focuses on the conquest of Candia (Crete) in 1669, and the process of the conversion of space that followed.

Chapter 8 discusses the military campaigns in Europe in the 1670s that were led by the sultan in person. Baer explains that “These victories enabled Mehmed IV to expand the empire to its greatest limits, leaving in his wake bell towers converted into minarets and Christians circumcised as Muslims, which in turn increased the morale of Muslims in the imperial capital” (p. 140).

Chapter 9 explores the interrelation between hunting and conversion. Mehmed IV’s frequent hunting expeditions were said to have “demonstrated his bravery and courage, hence manliness, and trained

him for warfare” (p. 179). It also provided him with an opportunity to come in contact with his subjects, especially during a “drive,” the sultan’s favorite hunting technique, in which numerous local villagers were compelled to participate. For hundreds of peasants, their encounter with the sultan resulted in their conversion to Islam. Baer points out that historians have overlooked that the “sultan’s mobile court served as a traveling conversion maker” (p. 185).

Under the heading, “The Failed Final Jihad,” Baer recounts the siege of Vienna (1683) as the culminating point of the aspirations stemming from the ghazi-sultan conception. He stresses that despite negative omens, and despite the option of diverting it without loss of face, the campaign went ahead and ended in the devastating defeat. The discussion of the aftermath focuses on changing interpretations. Already a generation after his death (1693), “Mehmed IV had been remade into a sedentary sovereign” (p. 243); he was no longer referred to as *ghazi*. “Along with his active role in promoting military conquest of infidel lands, Mehmed IV’s conversion of Christian and Jewish souls and space also disappeared from the historical record after his reign. [...] his reign lent itself to erasure, in particular because it is remembered mainly for” the territorial losses following the unsuccessful siege of Vienna (p. 244).

The book concludes with general observations on “Islamic rulers and the process of conversion” and provides an overview on how some of the other major actors in the story are remembered.

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