

Byzantium Between the Ottomans and the Latins: Politics and Society in the Late Empire

By *Nevra Necipoğlu*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 350 pp., ISBN 9780521877381, £59.00.

This volume is a welcome contribution to the study of the last centuries of the existence of the Byzantine state, the 'empire' that until its demise in 1453 had dominated the Bosphorus and the link between Europe and Asia Minor, even though its political authority was minimal from the early years of the 14th century. Yet authority and legitimacy aside (for the Byzantines always saw themselves as the legitimate heirs to the Roman empire) it exercised both a fascination for those around it as well as an importance and, until quite late on, an influence far in excess of its actual military or economic power. Necipoğlu's book focuses on the politics of the empire, more particularly on the ways in which different groups within the empire adopted, fought for, or abandoned particular views of their situation within Byzantine society and in the wider world, and more particularly in the context of the influence, cultural, military and economic, of the regional powers around it. The empire's Latin neighbors in the southern Balkans on the one hand, along with the central Balkan powers of Serbia and Bulgaria (albeit minimally for the period in question), and the rising Ottoman power in Asia Minor and then Thrace on the other hand, frame this portrait, and the chronology is set by the last almost-century of the empire's existence, from the 1360s and 1370s to the 1450s. But the author's real interest is not foreign relations or military events, but rather the ideological, one might even say psychological,

make-up of the various groups and factions within Byzantium, especially in Constantinople, Thessaloniki and in the southern Peloponnese, which can be detected in the sources of the period.

Preceded by an opening section consisting of a useful survey of the various sources, historical and archival or documentary, and a political-historical introductory chapter, the book is broken up into three subsequent sections, each taking a specific geographical-cultural focus as its setting: chapters three to five focus on Thessaloniki, chapters six to eight on Constantinople, and chapters nine to ten on the Morea under its various *despotai*. While the book is in its essence a carefully researched and detailed political history of the fate of these three interlinked regions or urban centers, it succeeds in the course of telling its story in offering important new insights into the factional strife which racked the empire in its last years, as the various vested interests coalesced or fought against one another to influence imperial or city policy to whatever challenges had to be faced at any given moment—the challenge from the west, primarily an issue of cultural identity balanced by the urgent and ever-growing need for military aid; and the challenge from the Ottomans, initially to maintain at the least a relatively independent vassal status, from the time of Bayezid I to resist incorporation into the Ottoman state and direct rule. At the same time, each of the three areas the author has chosen to

examine had its own particular regional needs in these respects, needs which were not always in harmony, and, after the loss of Thessaloniki to the Ottomans in 1430, for the Morea and Constantinople, even with their shared Aegean hinterland, seemed to have had even less in common than before. Morea had enjoyed a greater degree of independence and fewer attempts at actual conquest from the Ottomans than had the citizens of Constantinople or Thessaloniki. As a consequence Constantinopolitan approaches to the Ottomans were characterized (largely) by the desire for compromise and accommodation, whereas those in the Morea—anyway a much larger territory with a number of factional groups contending for their own relative autonomy within the Byzantine province—were typically far less willing to consider such tactics. In terms of small-state politics, and in respect of the social and economic tensions inherent in the structures of the empire in its last years, the skill with which the rulers at Constantinople and their advisors managed to maintain a tenuous independence is impressive, and Necipoğlu brings this out well. She also brings out the contradictions within the dominant elites in both Thessaloniki and Constantinople, showing how the increasingly desperate situation combined with political isolation brought out sharp factional oppositions and revealed more starkly the vested interests of particular groups. In particular the fact that merchants and others with investments and interests in commercial activities tended to belong to more than one political sphere, with interests extending well beyond any political boundaries, and had attitudes and commitments to match. This is not a tale of the heroic resistance of a monolithically united people against out-

side aggression, but one of highly nuanced concerns, interests, fluctuating identities and complex trans-political relationships and associations, even if religious identity complicated matters by appearing to paint one group or another as uniformly the same. In the end, material interests, access to wealth and its sources, and economic survival were the key motifs which characterized elite responses to conquest, the threat of conquest, and loss of political-territorial integrity.

What the author has not done is problematize the structural nature of the question—we learn, to be sure, about the workings of the rump Byzantine empire and its court, the relations between different groups in the cities of the empire, something of the effect of these political events on the producing population in the countryside; but it would have been especially interesting to have a more theorized discussion of the workings of a small medieval state system, the extent to which we might even talk of ‘states’ as opposed to kin- and clan-managed estates and territories, and the ways in which issues of resource management were the focus for competition between ‘state’ and ‘non-state’ aspects of late Byzantine society and governance. The result is that, while the account the author delivers is persuasive, the causal logic in respect of the way the late Byzantine ‘empire’ functioned—an empire that was, in effect, a congeries of small competing social groups—remains largely implicit.

This is a minor criticism, however, in comparison with the author’s main achievement. The present volume is a sensible and well-balanced discussion of the last 70-80 years of Byzantine history, which quite rightly highlights the social, ideological and economic diversity of Byzantine soci-

ety, places it in a broader context, and is thereby able to offer carefully grounded and plausible motives for the actions of both individuals and groups. The author is to be

congratulated on a scholarly and rigorously researched contribution.

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Britain, Turkey and the Soviet Union, 1940-45: Strategy, Diplomacy and Intelligence in the Eastern Mediterranean

By *Nicholas Tamkin*

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Turkey, due to its geopolitical position, was subject to political and military pressures by the Great Powers during and immediately after World War Two. During the war, the Great Powers exerted substantial pressures on Turkey to obtain its compliance in operating the Straits policy in accordance with their own strategic interests. This situation led to collaboration and competition among the Great Powers. In fact, the rivalry and collaboration of the Great Powers in the eastern Mediterranean during these periods, and the interaction of British, Soviet and American policies with those of regional states, has been examined by a number of Turkish and foreign researchers in recent years. Nicholas Tamkin is one of these authors and he has meticulously trawled through British archives and other published and unpublished sources available in Britain to elucidate Turkey's role in British strategy and diplomacy during World War Two. He makes a significant contribution on the formulation of British foreign policy and wartime strategy towards Turkey with a special emphasis given on Turkey's place in the uneven relationship between Britain and the Soviet Union.

Tamkin starts with a thesis stating that British policy towards Turkey during

World War Two was misapprehended and misguided as Turkey's belligerency against Germany would only have been a burden on the Allied side and would not bring much benefit to them due to Turkey's military weakness and inadequate preparedness. The author skillfully demonstrates the ups and downs which took place in the trilateral relationship of Britain, Turkey and the Soviet Union with well organized and outlined arguments in the nine chapters. Tamkin is perhaps too skillful, which leads to the loss of the complexities and ambiguities that characterized the relationships among these powers.

It is remarkable that throughout his book the author reveals the pragmatic attitude of Britain towards Turkey which at many times was ambiguous and as a result damaged Anglo-Turkish relations. One of the striking examples which explains this situation well occurred at a time when London to some extent recognized Ankara's fears of Moscow before the start of operation 'Barbarossa' and then the critical approach taken by Britain on the same Turkish fears after the German invasion of the USSR as London became an ally of Moscow and wanted to reconcile the sharp differences between Turkey and the