

A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire

By *M. Şükrü Hanioglu*

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In light of the many texts that have been published recently which explore the vast history of the Ottoman Empire, a monograph has now appeared that focuses specifically upon making sense of roughly the last 150 years of the Empire's existence. For the Ottomanist, this period is rich in available sources. Ottoman archival documents, newspapers, private papers of Ottoman statesmen and foreign diplomats/expatriates, court records, etc., yield such a daunting volume of information that it can sometimes become overwhelming to try to decipher all of this material and to construct a coherent understanding of the events, the people, and the intellectual ideas that defined this "long 19th century." M. Şükrü Hanioglu's intimate knowledge and expertise in the field of late Ottoman politics and history, however, derived from his extensive research into the Young Turk movement and its evolution from a loose affiliation of anti-Hamidian forces into a powerful political organization that assumed autocratic control of the Empire in latter decades, gives him the unparalleled ability to formulate a narrative of late Ottoman history that is grounded in a synthesis of these various sources. Despite the fact that the Ottoman 19th century has been researched and dissected by an earlier generation of scholars, Hanioglu's account is an original and instructive survey of a very formative period in the history of the modern Middle East. *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* promises to be useful

for the late Ottoman historian who wants to better grasp the interconnectedness of the internal Ottoman socio-political realm – replete with its tug-of-war between Ottoman political center and the periphery, between elite and non-elite, between Ottoman sultan, bureaucracy, and new political actors, between the varying conceptions of modernity among Ottoman subjects – with events that were unfolding on the international stage: the shifting of European alliances in an atmosphere of imperial conquest and the threat of war, Western support for and intervention on behalf of nascent nationalist movements in Ottoman lands, and the Ottoman state's political/policy choices in trying to negotiate the best possible Ottoman future in this changing world order. Additionally, Hanioglu's text will assist students grappling with the complexities of the late Ottoman era who find it difficult to comprehend the enormity of change taking place in the world at large, as well as in the region of the Ottoman Middle East, the Balkans, and North Africa, in the 19th century.

The author follows a chronological progression in his examination of currents of thought, trends, and processes shaping the last century and a half of the Empire's existence. Beginning with a chapter that introduces the historical context of Ottoman state and society around the turn of the nineteenth century, successive chapters explore the underlying theme of the entire late Ottoman period: the various "Ottoman

responses to the challenge of modernity.” This leads to further discussion of state reform efforts and societal changes under Sultan Mahmud II, those initiated during the Tanzimat era and under the subsequent Hamidian regime, and its eventual overthrow by the Young Turks, leading to the political ascendancy of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) which lasted until the Empire’s demise in WWI. But unlike many previous studies of this period, which are typically burdened with the dryness of purely political and institutional data, Hanioglu manages in each chapter, in discussing an era and its characteristics, to inject a new energy into this history by providing a more nuanced view of how the Ottoman ruling class and its subjects experienced the consequences of international events, of Ottoman imperial decrees and attempts to impose centralization upon the provinces for example, or of innovations in science and the introduction of new forms of knowledge. And in each chapter, he outlines the conclusions drawn from his analysis in a way that allows readers to feel a sense of having gained a clearer perspective on actual life in the late Ottoman Empire. In so doing, he reminds readers that this Empire was no different from other contemporary empires in having to deal with the disruptive effects of modernity upon society.

Hanioglu’s approach to late Ottoman history is one that attempts to steer relatively clear of the politicized nature of some of the historiographical debates still raging today concerning the question of legacies to former Ottoman lands, the nationalist conflicts between Turks and non-Turks that have affected Ottoman scholarship, and the

tendency to assume a modernization theorist’s stance in positing much of domestic Ottoman political strife as simply rivalries between the religious and the secular, the Westernizing and the non-Westernizing elements of the Empire. At the same time, however, he lobbies for the rectification of certain teleological approaches to the late Ottoman period that sought to legitimate the Turkish nationalist narrative at the expense of Ottoman historical authenticity. That is, he wants to see this history not merely as the traditional nationalist narrative would dictate retrospectively, but to interpret the late Ottoman Empire without bias that causes Ottoman individuals, events, policies, or actions to be portrayed in ways that serve the current Turkish state. Therefore the tensions generated by the advent of modernity in the late Ottoman Empire cannot be so easily explained away as merely one group in favour of “European-style” progress (i.e. those who eventually forged a new Turkish Republic after WWI) and the other group(s) resistant to it. Endemic violence in the Empire from the late 19th century onwards resulted from more than just nationalist, ethno-sectarian hatreds: social and economic dimensions often precipitated or enhanced the dramatic demographic shifts in population caused by wars, loss of territories through foreign intervention and separatism. Rather than assigning blame to the violence, Hanioglu explains it in terms of historical processes: improved methods by the state for extracting taxes created social turbulence that could be manipulated into nationalist, anti-Ottoman fervor for example; the CUP’s response to any group or party opposed to its political hegemony was suppression by

any means available, whether through the rigging of political elections or with brute force. The author highlights the dilemmas faced by all sectors of Ottoman society in coping with such crises as an altered economy and mounting fiscal pressures, the emergence of new forms of identity, the effects of increased military involvement in governing the Empire, the burden of wartime mobilization, or the threat of foreign-inspired partition in the aftermath of WWI with the Treaty of Sèvres.

A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire will be a seminal text for any scholar of

late Ottoman history for decades to come – its organization and style make for a pleasant read, and the chapters include frequent point-by-point summaries of what are the significant trends to be remembered in a specific era. The use of maps and images throughout the book reminds readers of the realities of life in late Ottoman times; these visual aids all support the arguments made by Hanioglu as he strives to present a concise introduction to the period in a very detailed fashion. He has struck a nice balance.

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The Ottoman Road to War in 1914: The Ottoman Empire and the First World War

By **Mustafa Aksakal**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, Cambridge Military Histories, xv+216 pp., ISBN 978-0-521-88060-2.

Feroz Ahmad once described contemporary Turks as suffering from the “Sèvres Complex,” by which he referred to Turkish paranoia about having Anatolia carved up into small bits under foreign rule such as was to be their fate in the abortive Sèvres Treaty of 1920. In this new study, Mustafa Aksakal demonstrates with authority that the general apprehension of dissolution and partition that drove Ottoman officials in 1914 derived from the disastrous Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, not 1920, and was based on a plethora of very real threats and secret negotiations leading up to the Ottoman signing of the alliance with Germany on August 2, 1914.

The chief aim of this slim volume, part of the *Cambridge Military Histories* series, is to reconsider the question of the Ottoman decision to join the side of the Central Powers in World War I. Most historians have fingered Enver Pasha, Minister of War of the Committee of Union and Progress (hereafter CUP), for the decision. Enver is generally portrayed as militantly pro-German and pan-Islamist, part of a revolutionary cell which first toppled the sultan in 1908 and then assumed full and increasingly dictatorial powers in a *Putsch* in Istanbul in 1913. Enver Pasha and his circle have been accused of having been “corrupted by German gold, blinded by German prom-