THE BALKANS IN OTTOMAN HISTORY: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FOR STUDYING THE
NINETEENTH CENTURY REFORMS

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Abstract

Studies on the late Ottoman Empire focus on the evolution of the state from imperial forms of indirect rule to more centralized modern state structures starting with the Tanzimat reforms. The earlier studies attempted to understand this transformation in state structures and as a result were more state centered. In the last three decades, more society-centered viewpoints have emerged in which how different social actors and groups responded to the changing state structures. This shift in the focus of scholarship also influenced the way the Rumelian provinces of the Ottoman state was studied. This paper maps different viewpoints on studying the Balkans in late Ottoman Empire and analyzes the recent trends that focus on society-centered analysis of the region and the period. There are some major questions that necessitate attention in the study of the Balkans in the 19th and early 20th century: An important issue is related to the study of the Ottoman state. Shift from state-centered to society centered approaches calls for studying how different social actors and underrepresented groups survived and responded to the centralizing reforms of the Ottoman state. Therefore, studying different religious and ethnic groups, women and labor became popular topics of historical studies. A second issue is more specific to the Balkans: 19th century was the time of nationalist movements and the foundation of nation-states in the region. The dominant view assumed that the nationalist movements were produced in the West and imitated in Eastern Europe by elite led revolutions. However, in the recent years this Western European understanding has been challenged by studies that focused on internal social, political, cultural and economic dynamics of nationalist movements in the Balkans and questioned the replication of the Western European model. A third issue concerns with historiography. Histories of the Balkan states that have long been written from a nationalist perspective were isolated from its Ottoman context, that is the formation of the new nation-states and socio-economic and political transformations were seen to take place as a result of elite leadership isolated from the dynamics of the Ottoman empire. The recent scholarship contextualizes the nation-state formation processes in a dialogue with Ottoman history. By providing examples from the scholarship, the paper will discuss changes in scholarship on these three issues related to the history of the Balkans under late Ottoman rule.

KEYWORDS: Late Ottoman empire, the Balkans, historiography.

INTRODUCTION

The nineteenth century witnessed two processes simultaneously coexisting in the Balkans under Ottoman rule. On one hand, the Ottoman state was centralizing and increasing its presence in the provinces starting with the Tanzimat reforms. On the other hand, separatist nationalist ideas and movements were spread among the Balkan populations in the same period. Historians of the Balkans and the late Ottoman Empire have difficulty explaining these two seemingly contradictory processes that is state centralization and nationalist movements to break away from the empire.

Majority of studies have focused on the evolution of the state from imperial forms of indirect rule to more centralized modern state structures in the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire. The earlier studies attempted to understand this transformation in state structures, and as a result they were more state centered. In the last three decades, more society-centered approaches emerged which studied how different social actors and groups responded to the changing state structures. This shift in the focus of scholarship also
influenced the way the European provinces (Rumelia) of the Ottoman state was studied. This paper maps different viewpoints on the Balkans in the late Ottoman Empire and analyzes the recent trends that focus on society-centered analysis of the region and the period. This paper presents a review of literature on the issue, discuss the recent turn in historiography and present major challenges in studying the Balkans in the late Ottoman Empire.

The term Balkans is politically loaded and the term has been criticized in the literature for being ideological and historical construct as the “other” of Western Europe. The Balkans were usually defined as chaotic and full of religious and ethnic rivalry in this Western discourse. This paper employs the term “Balkans” since the stigma comes with the term is very much part of this paper on the question of the role nationalism in the late Ottoman Empire.

Nation-state policies and international relations of the Balkan states had an impact on the way historians of the region studied the Ottoman past. When the new independent nation-states were created in the 19th and early 20th centuries, nationalist historiographies dominated the way Ottoman history was narrated. The emancipation from the “Ottoman yoke” under nationalist leadership glorified the insurgencies and condemned the Ottoman rule in the new Balkan states in the interwar era. The relations among Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania and Turkey were quite tense despite attempts to for alliances in the region such as the Balkan Pact. Many unresolved issues such as the situation of minorities in the neighboring states, population exchanges, border issues and rise of fascist and racist ideologies all over the world fueled the nationalist historiographies from 1920s to 1940s. In the new Turkish Republic, the history writing focused on the foundation of the Republic and disregarded the Ottoman past in this time period. Reform attempts of the 19th century, the Tanzimat for example, was acknowledged as a move towards westernization. They were also seen as insufficient attempts of modernization under the limitations put by ineffective Sultans and conservative officials.

The impacts of modernization theory in the Western world dominated the history writing of the Turkish Republic in 50s and 60s. The disregard for the Ottoman past continued, and reform attempts of the 19th century were considered incomplete modernization and secularization. In this time period, a state centered reading of Ottoman history was dominant in Turkey. Thus, the 19th century reforms were read as a top down imposition of the ruling elites who struggled with conservative Sultans to reform the administration. Reforms failed when they were faced with separatist nationalist movements spread to the Ottoman Balkans that were encouraged by outside powers. The role of international actors such as Russia and Britain and diaspora communities was emphasized in supporting nationalist movements and ideas.

There were exceptions to this state centered understanding of the 19th century in this time period in Turkey. Halil İnalcık's PhD Dissertation studied Nish and Vidin uprisings from a bottom up perspective in which he attempted to understand responses of local actors and social forces to the Tanzimat policies. Unlike nationalist historiography that argued for outside factors, he showed that the causes of discontent was located inside the

2 *Tanzimat: Yüzüncü Yıllöümü Münasebetiyle* (1940) İstanbul: Maarif Matbaası.
social and economic dynamics of Ottoman provinces. There were also other arguments that challenged unilinear modernization and secularization argument of the early Republican era such as Ömer Lütfi Barkan’s article on the Land code. Barkan argued that instead of secularizing, the Land Code referred and adopted some articles from Sharia since it was more beneficial to use them for state purposes of private property during the Tanzimat. Instead of the elimination of Islamic law, what the land code was introduced was the increasing acknowledgment of it whenever useful of the imperial center. In 1970s, under the impact of Marxist scholarship there was an increasing interest in economic history. Workers, peasants and women (the understudied groups in Ottoman history) emerged as a subject of study in Turkey. This contributed to the rise of a more society-centered (bottom up) reading of Ottoman history.

In 1950s and 60s, under the impact of Marxist historiography most nationalist histories of the Balkan states adopted a static look at the Ottoman past. The Ottoman rule was defined as a despotic rule very much in line with the Asiatic mode of production defined by Karl Marx. In this reading, Sultans exploited peasantry through taxation and military force and their despotism could not be challenged by internal social forces. The forces of modernization that came from outside the empire brought the end of the imperial rule and contributed to the formation of nation-states. The archaic imperial structures when faced with modernization was unable to reform and adapt to changing circumstances. The nationalist intelligentsia in this sense acted as the vanguards of revolution. There were exceptions to this viewpoint too. Nikolai Todorov’s the Balkan merchant was written from the Marxist viewpoint and studied the formation of the first niche of bourgeoisie and capitalist entrepreneurs in Ottoman Bulgaria. He shows that the rise of Balkan merchants was not only the result of outside forces and commercial connections with the European market, but also economic relations and privileges provided by the Ottoman state. For example, the Gumushgerdan family emerged as a capitalist enterprise because it controlled trade of cloth (aba) with Istanbul and was able to monopolize state benefits and incentives in this trade. This shows that the dynamic of change was available within the empire.

Changes in the world context, the end of the Soviet Union, dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and the rise of neoliberalism contributed to the rise of a revisionist version of Ottoman historiography in 1990s and 2000s. This turn was also influenced by suspicions about modernization theory’s unilinear progress assumption especially after the Iranian Revolution, rise of post-colonial studies and increasing concern for giving voice to underrepresented groups in history such as women. This new focus shifted the attention from state-centered analysis to more society-centered perspectives. More importantly, with the rise of new approaches in social and political sciences that questioned the boundaries

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6 Lawrence Krader. The Asiatic Mode of Production: Sources, Development and Critique in the Writings of Karl Marx, Van Gorcum & Comp, 1975.

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between state and social forces from a relational perspective, analysis argued for an interactionist perspective in which state and social forces define and transform each other as a result of negotiation, conflict and contention.

Examples of revisionist historiography mostly studied pre-19th century of the Ottoman Empire. Karen Barkey’s “Empire of Difference” argues that the Ottoman state’s flexibility provided incorporation of many diverse groups to the Ottoman rule in the foundation period. Since most identities were in making and in flux, earlier Ottoman Sultans mastered the network of relations. By forming ties to different social actors from various religious and ethnic origins, state rulers were able to broker and bridge the relations between disconnected actors. The Ottoman rule relied on minimized connections among diverse social groups so that the state emerged as the main intermediary among different regions, communities, tribes, groups and so on.8

According the Barkey, the major challenge of the late 18th and 19th centuries was the formation of connections among disconnected actors and regions. Forces of modernization that is commercialization, urbanization, migration, etc. accelerated formation of ties especially when the Ottoman merchants started to integrate to the European market. In addition, changes in taxation from timar to iltizam (tax farming) and administrative practices related to this change led to the accumulation of political and economic power in the hands of notables (ayan). These notables developed ties with local subjects, accumulated economic and political power and became a kind of informal or semi-formal rulers in their regions. Thus, the imperial center was challenged by the formation of ties within and across periphery as well as with outside actors. The 19th century reforms were thought to be a remedy for the issues of increasing connectivity in the provinces of the Ottoman Empire.

The revisionist historiography has also studied the Tanzimat reforms from this interactionist perspective and challenged the state centered discourse. Instead of seeing the reforms as a top down state project, they studied how the reforms were negotiated and contended by local actors. Responses of various social actors from different religious and ethnic communities, occupational groups, tribes, workers, peasants, women, etc. and the way these groups experienced the impact of reforms and centralization became the subject of historical research. Thus, starting with 1990s new studies on Ottoman provinces in the 19th century flourished in the literature. These studies mostly focused on the Arab provinces which were previously understudied with the increasing importance of the Middle East in world politics.9 There is a growing bunch of new scholarship that studies different Balkan provinces in the 19th century: Milen Petrov’s unpublished dissertation studied the reception of the Tanzimat by Bulgarians studying Ottoman courts,10 Sefa

Saraçoğlu’s study on local councils in Bulgaria, Isa Blumi’s comparative work on Yemen and Albania, my own study on the comparison of the Tanzimat in Edirne and Ankara, Anna Vakalis’s recent dissertation on local councils in Salonica and Tuna are all examples of this growing concern on Ottoman provinces. These studies have shown that the Tanzimat reforms reflected a constant negotiation between the imperial center and local groups. Reforms were accepted, negotiated or refused by local actors, leading to cooperation or open conflict (uprisings). State authorities modified reforms based on these relations with social forces.

These studies have also dealt with the challenge that was the coexistence of centralizing Ottoman state and separatist nationalisms in the Balkan provinces during the reform period. The Balkans were usually seen as chaotic, full of ethnic and religious rivalries since the Middle Ages. This image partially resulted from the archival sources used in historical research such as European traveler memoirs and consular reports. 19th century was the time of nationalist movements and the foundation of nation-states in the region. The dominant view assumed that the nationalist movements were produced in the West and imitated in Eastern Europe by elite led revolutions. However, in the recent years this Western European understanding has been challenged by studies that focused on internal social, political, cultural and economic dynamics of nationalist movements in the Balkans, which questioned the replication of the Western European model.

The conventional assumption was that it was the middle classes (bourgeoisie and professionals) who were the leaders of nationalist movements. They were inspired by nationalist ideas emerging after the French revolution through trade connections or education in diaspora communities. The Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek nationalist movements were led by these professionals and bourgeoisie while the old elites (religious leaders and kocabaşı/çorbacıs) were interpreted to resist change. The recent historiography has shown that groups that were used to be seen as leaders of nationalist struggles actually played a dubious role. Non-Muslim elites took an active role in the reform process and challenged the conventional view that the Tanzimat reforms reinforced Balkan separatist nationalisms. These non-Muslim middle classes formed allegiances up to the point of fostering their own versions of a common Ottoman identity (Osmanlılık). They played dual roles as nationalist leaders and loyal Ottoman state agents. The examples of them are available in Christine Phillou’s analysis of Stephanos Vogorides as the prince of Samos who was both an Ottoman official and a nationalistic leader. Vangelis Kechriotis has

14 Anna Vakalis. Tanzimat in the Province: Nationalist Sedition (fesat), Banditry (eşkiya), and Local Councils in the Ottoman Southern Balkans (1840s to 1860s), Unpublished PhD Thesis (University of Basel, May 2017).
shown that the ideas of Ottoman citizenship prevailed among Greek nationalists as late as the Second Constitutional Era (1908). Similarly, çorbacıs or kocabaşıs were loyal agents of the state benefitting from economic and political privileges. During the Tanzimat, this old elite grasped new opportunities in centralizing state administration and expending commercialization after the adoption of free trade policies. At the same time, these groups invested a lot in community development. They donated money for construction of schools, education in mother tongue, literary activities and philanthropic groups. Through these investment they helped the formation of national identities especially distinct from Greek identity among Orthodox Christians of the Balkans. Existing connections and alliances that were used to generate loyalty for the Sultan and the reforms had the potential of turning into support networks for separatist nationalisms. Thus, the recent scholarship focused on mapping these networks and alliances among various social actors and showing this transformative capacity under changing social, political and economic conditions.

Another important issue related to the nationalist movements in the Ottoman Balkans has been the role of agency. The state-centered studies of reform and elite led readings of separatist nationalisms did not have much space for the agency of ordinary individuals. How did peasants, urban poor, workers, and women experience reforms that aimed at both state centralization and formation of an Ottoman identity? Did these groups support nationalist movements in the Balkans? The answers to these questions still need more detailed studies since the archives provide limited information about ordinary subjects who were mainly illiterate. A recent source istintaknames that were depositions of defendants registered in detail in local councils of the Tanzimat provides an important source for analyzing reactions and experiences of ordinary people to the Tanzimat. The analysis of them have proved to provide that some subjects were very aware of the Tanzimat regulations and formed their depositions using the Tanzimat idiom. Whereas referring to old customs and regulations was another strategy to prove the rightfulness of defendants depending on circumstances. The depositions of bandits and participants of nationalist seditions has shown a very complex relation between national identities and the Ottoman state. There were Muslims rebelling for the Greek nationalist cause and there were non-Muslims defending Ottoman identity.

My final point concerns with historiography. Histories of the Balkan states that have long been written from a nationalist perspective were isolated from its Ottoman context. The formation of the new nation-states and their socio-economic and political transformations were seen to take place as a result of elite leadership isolated from the dynamics of the Ottoman Empire. The recent scholarship contextualizes the nation-state formation processes in a dialogue with Ottoman history. They did not only study the dual role of nationalist leadership in their relations with Ottoman state authorities and their kinsmen but also pay attention to the diversity and flexibility of religious, ethnic and national identities in the Balkans. Recent studies have shown that national identity was not a rigid and static category. Especially in the nation and state making processes of the 19th

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19 Vakalis, ibid.
and early 20th centuries, identities were in flux. Recent scholarship has shown that most nationalist struggles started as local grievances about taxation and wrongdoings of Ottoman state officials and of clergy in the Orthodox Church. Their consolidation into a national movement came quite later, in most examples after the foundation of independent nation-states. The belief in the continuation of imperial rule and ideas of Ottoman citizenship were still alive in the Balkans as late as the early 20th century. Therefore, the presumption about the inevitable collapse of empires as a result of forces of modernization in the 19th and early 20th centuries derives more from our anachronistic reading than the realities of the period.

In conclusion, instead of writing nationalist histories in isolation from the imperial context, the history writing on the Balkans in the nineteenth century should emphasize connections and interactions among different social actors, communities and the imperial center. The Balkan historiographies should study coexistence that continued at a time of modernization and nationalism. How the coexistence survived that long until the early twentieth century was a major process to be explained in the age of conflict and rising nation-states.

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