

### The Ottoman Cataclysm: Its Beginnings

**Veranstalter:** Hans-Lukas Kieser (Zurich); Maurus Reinkowski (Basel)

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The late Ottoman World is recently being revisited in a series of centenaries. Several conferences have been dedicated to the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, and more will be dealing with the Great War in the Ottoman lands, as well as with the Armenian genocide over the next two years. While this triennial of events is exciting in its own right, however, it also bears some risks. Focusing on each specific event at the expense of the historical context bears the risk of shifting emphasis away from historical complexities and towards simplified narratives serving political expedience. Many conferences in Turkey on the Balkan Wars, for instance, seemed to be preoccupied with the depiction of atrocities committed by newly emerging Balkan nations and the suffering of Muslim refugees. The Great War perspective and a preoccupation with great power politics may be employed to understate the destruction of Armenians in 1915. And some commemorations of the Armenian genocide may be looking only at the perpetrators at the expense of the context within which they acted and the gradual descent into destruction.

A Symposium at the University of Basel, convened by Hans-Lukas Kieser (Zurich) and Maurus Reinkowski (Basel), proposed an alternative perspective on the events that led to the „Ottoman Cataclysm“ and resulted in the destruction of an imperial order that had been in place, despite challenge and contestation, for more than 600 years. Focusing in particular on the years from the constitutional revolution of 1908 to the Balkan Wars and WW I, that is on the understudied years „in between“, their interest was to propose a non-deterministic understanding of the dissolution of the imperial order and the violence, which came with it. Without a clear understanding of the events and ideologies leading

to 1908, the effects of the 'Macedonian question', the 'spill over' of Balkan nationalisms as well as refugees into the remaining Ottoman lands, and the psychological alienation of the empire's ruling elites, later episodes of violence and revenge are incomprehensible. The same can be said for the succession of ethnic and economic conflicts over land and attempts at reform in the eastern provinces with major Armenian and Kurdish populations. As MAURUS REINKOWSKI (Basel) stressed, returning to the 1910s and early 1920s is indeed „much more than historians' obsessiveness. The core of Turkish national identity is intrinsically bound to this period.“

Establishing the analytical framework with the biblical reference to „cataclysm“, HANS-LUKAS KIESER (Zurich) drew attention to the diverging perceptions held by actors on the ground. The millennial currents among Protestant missionaries with their European headquarters in Basel, only a stone's throw away from the conference venue, were premised on the anticipation of Ottoman demise as „an apocalyptical event that would make way for the reconstruction of Israel in Palestine and a new era: a global kingdom of god, or rather republics of Jesus“. For the Muslim cadres of the empire, the cataclysm became synonymous with an „Ottoman War of Independence“ (Mustafa Aksakal) and increasingly with the defence of a „Turkish homeland“.

The Symposium consisted of three panels, which discussed the demise of Ottomanity – the promise of a non-sectarian, non-ethnic citizenship in a multicultural empire – in the Balkans and Anatolia; the contested and increasingly half-hearted efforts by European powers and the empire's rulers at salvaging this promise; and Ottoman Palestine on the eve of the British mandate.

#### Macedonia in Anatolia, Syria in history

The „Ottoman Cataclysm“ was framed by two keynote lectures. HAMIT BOZARSLAN (Paris) led through a century of statehood in Syria, concentrating on the dynamics of tribal, ethnic and religious contestations of the state. Bozarslan concluded that the current destruction of Syrian statehood does not bode well for the future of the post-Ottoman territorial

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arrangements that came into place after WW 1.

ERIK-JAN ZÜRCHER (Leiden) established the crucial importance of Macedonia for the cadres of the Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*, abbreviated as CUP) in his lecture on „Macedonia in Anatolia“. Tracing the actions of Musa Kazim (Kazim Karabekir) and other CUP leaders, he reconstructed the emergence of a Young Turk worldview in Macedonia during the years leading up to the foundation of the Ottoman Freedom Society and the uprising against Sultan Abdülhamid II that resulted in the constitutional revolution of 1908. The Young Turks' leading cadres hailed from the *Vilayet-i Selase*, the three provinces of Salonica, Monastir and Kosova, and witnessed European plans for administrative reform, and after the Balkan Wars, the loss of those territories. If, during the celebrations of 1908, Young Turk cadres still felt bound by the conventions of a more inclusive notion of Ottomanism, the shift towards explicitly Turkish and Muslim notions of national identity was already occurring. The violence of the Balkan Wars, the trauma of losing Rumelia, as well as the sequence of events (reform attempts failing to prevent the outbreak of national liberation wars leading to the independence of former subject nations) created the prism, whereby CUP cadres engaged with the empire's eastern territories.

### **The demise of Ottomanity**

This panel dealt with the effects and uses of the Macedonian question, the radicalisation it had on the realm of Ottoman politics, the rise of early Turkish nationalism, but also with networks and sociabilities that clung on to imperial identities. The focus was on the Balkans and Western Anatolia.

DOĞAN ÇETINKAYA (Istanbul) discussed the impact of Ottoman „atrocity propaganda“ during the Balkan Wars and established the discursive constructions of Christian otherness that have influenced Turkish politics to our days. Contextualising this propaganda of the „other side“ in the climate of mutual allegations of mass violence, he showed how all Balkan states used references to the „civilised world“ to gain legitimacy among the great

powers. „Atrocity propaganda“ was also a tool to extend the war to the civilian population and a first step towards the modern notion of a „total war“. The extent to which such propaganda was used to mobilise civilian populations, but also the limits thereof, were at the core of EMRE EROL's (Leiden) paper on the ousting of Ottoman Greeks from Western Anatolia before WW 1. Elucidating the case of Foça on the eve of the Greek-Turkish War, Erol presented a wide range of sources from local Muslims, Greeks, Consuls and Ottoman state agencies. In this wealthy, mostly Greek town, deportations and massacres were the outcome of the interplay between organisation and chaos. Massacres were planned and carried out by bands from outside the district. While local Muslims initially resisted participation, they joined in, once the ousting operations intensified and intervention by the gendarmerie failed to materialize. Foça here differed from cities closer to the war zones in the Balkans, such as Edirne, where the local populations had lived through military action and saw the plight of Muslim refugees from Bulgaria and Greece.

VANGELIS KECHRITIS' (Istanbul) synopsis of historiographical narratives on the Balkan Wars explored the changing context of Greek historiography after the Greek army's success and the country's massive territorial extension. If, before the wars, the Kingdom of Greece had grudgingly come to terms with its Ottoman neighbour as a „necessary evil“ and a largely pro-Ottoman Orthodox merchant class in the empire had continued to pay allegiance to the Sultan, the Balkan Wars proved to be the watershed, after which the Greek nation state emerged as the key, and increasingly only, reference point for the empire's Orthodox subjects. As Greece emerged victorious from the Balkan Wars and the conditions for its Orthodox subjects in Western Anatolia deteriorated, intellectuals, who had thought of themselves and wrote as Ottoman historians (such as the historian Carolidis, whose translation of Kritovoulos' biography of Mehmet II into Ottoman Turkish was published only a few days after the breakout of the Balkan Wars) suddenly found themselves facing biting criticism from their Greek colleagues. Carolidis, was the last *homme de lettres*, who

stood in the long tradition of Greek-Orthodox subjects distinguished by their service for the empire.

Another casualty of the interwar period was the prevalence of Judeo-Espanol as *lingua franca*. EYAL GINIO (Jerusalem) surveyed the Judeo-Spanish press during the Balkan War and its function as a network for the flow of information about Prisoners of War, news about communities and as avenue of mobilising help and financial support. These newspapers had to perform multiple balancing acts as they stayed loyal to their respective national governments, most of which were at war with each other at some moment during the Balkan Wars, while they also sought to address the needs of the Jewish communities. With the demise of the empire, the need for Ladino as Jewish *lingua franca* as well as the possibility of a Jewish linguistic space within the empire began to subside.

This first panel demonstrated the impact of the Balkan Wars in the formation of Ottoman Muslim and increasingly Turkish identity and the radicalising effects of the crisis of Muslim refugees created by the Balkan Wars. This was, as the papers showed, aggravated by the imminent danger of a Greek-Turkish War.

### **Ottomanity saved?**

The participants of the corresponding panel examined the question of Ottoman reform efforts in the Six Provinces of the East (*Vilayet-i sitte*). Despite a series of massacres against Christians in the late 19th century and again in Adana and Cilicia in 1909, and long-standing land disputes between Kurdish tribes and both Christian and Muslim communities (the eastern „Agrarian question“), reform efforts were taking place in the interwar years. That they did not only fail but were followed by the Armenian genocide was owed to the aforementioned interdependent dynamics between the empire's Western and Eastern borderlands, and due to a number of factors, among which the expulsion of the Ottoman Greeks in Western Anatolia in June 1914 and the radicalising conditions of the July crisis were two of the most important.

That there was a realistic window of opportunity, international pressure for reform before the war, as well as no credible alternative

to reform for the CUP government was the argument of THOMAS SCHMUTZ (Zurich), who looked into the German role in the reform discussions of 1913-1914. For his diplomatic history of German reform involvement in the Six Provinces, Schmutz presented the correspondence of Hans Freiherr von Wangenheim, German Ambassador to the Porte between 1912-1915 and discussed the Mandelstam reform plan of 1914. Reminiscent of the earlier reform plans for Macedonia, the plan had already been amended significantly to appease Ottoman fears of foreign intervention, only to be rendered obsolete by the outbreak of WW 1.

NILAY ÖZOK GÜNDOĞAN (Ohio), in her paper on „Petitions from the Ottoman East“, built on a large number of such documents to explore the negotiations on land rights in the context of centralization, market integration and peasant dispossession. These „highly asymmetric power relations“ (Zürcher) were examined further by MEHMET POLATEL (Istanbul), who analyzed reports of the Armenian Patriarchate on land seizures, and discussed the agreement between the CUP and the main Armenian party, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation.

The power asymmetries between Kurdish tribes and Armenian peasants is also reflected in the memory books (*Houshamadyan*), which VAHÉ TACHJIAN (Berlin), the founder of the eponymous research project, presented alongside other forms of Armenian archival material (priests' reports, family archives, sound-recorded testimonies). Mostly written and collected after the genocide, Armenian sources have, so far, been widely absent from the field of Ottoman studies.

### **Ottoman Palestine**

The third panel investigated the issue of imperial loyalty in the Mutassariflik of Jerusalem, and the Sandjaks of Acre and Nablus. YUVAL BEN-BASSAT (Haifa), like Özok Gündoğan, presented his work on petitions by residents of Palestine, whether Arab notables, Bedouin tribes or Jews. In those petitions, he found the reverberations of the new political language of the second constitutional period, but also of discontent with

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the growing land purchase by Zionist groups. Many Palestinian Arab petitioners expressed concern about the emergence of a Jewish „state within the state“. MICHELLE CAMPOS (Florida) approached the notion of entrenched imperial loyalty by looking at the wide range of newspapers, which sprung up in Palestine after the lifting of censorship in 1908. She suggested that there was a considerable level of awareness about developments in the larger Ottoman imperial space. During the Albanian Revolt in 1911-1912, both Arabs and Jews thought that the Albanian struggle could revive the credo of the unity of the elements (*İttihad-ı annasır*), which would allow Arab and Jewish co-existence in an Ottoman imperial framework.

The unity of elements and the idea of an Ottoman nation did not survive the twilight zone of Ottoman decline between 1908 and 1915. Neither was the descent into ethno-nationalism and genocidal destruction a foregone conclusion at any given moment between these two dates. With a collection of excellent research papers, „The Ottoman Cataclysm“ substantiated this insight convincingly. As Bozarslan remarked, a more systematic examination of the Levant and particularly of Syria and Iraq, as well as of the empire's more distant North African provinces would have been desirable. Yet even without such a complete view, the presented material shed light on a period of uncertainty that flies in the face of deterministic readings of the empire's final years.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Keynote lectures*

Erik-Jan Zürcher (University of Leiden): Was the Ottoman cataclysm unavoidable? Young Turk attitudes at the time of the constitutional revolution

Hamit Bozarslan (EHESS, Paris): Syria 1913-2013

*Panel I: Demise of Ottomanity: Watersheds in the Balkans and Anatolia, 1912-14*

Y. Doğan Çetinkaya (University of Istanbul): Ottoman „atrocities propaganda“ during the Balkan Wars

Eyal Ginio (Hebrew University, Jerusalem):

Negotiating identities during a time of war: The Judeo-Spanish press in the Balkan Wars

Emre Erol (University of Leiden): „The Macedonian question“ in Western Anatolia: The ousting of the Ottoman Greeks before World War I and the case of Foça

Murat Kaya (University of Basel): Western imperialism and the formation of the Young Turk mindset

Vangelis Kechriotis (Bosphorus University, Istanbul): From the Balkan Wars to World War I: the first historiographical narratives in Greek

Ebru Boyar (METU, Ankara): The impact of the Balkan Wars on Ottoman history-writing

*Panel II: Struggle about „Ottomania“ in Palestine, 1912-14*

Dominique Trimbur (Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem): An eternal Ottoman Empire? French views on the destiny of Turkey at the eve of World War I: the case of Palestine

Yuval Ben-Bassat (University of Haifa): Petitions from Palestine in 1912-1913: A turning point in local support for the Empire?

Michelle Campos (University of Florida): The Ottoman sickness and its doctors: Imperial loyalty in Palestine on the eve of World War I

*Panel III: Ottomanity saved? A focal point of reform 1912-14: the Eastern Provinces*

Vahé Tachjian (Houshamadyan, Berlin): Village and town life reconstructed; potential and fissures made visible

Nilay Özok Gu'ndoğan (Denison University, USA): Can the „ahali“ speak? Petitions from the Ottoman East, 1909-1914

Mehmet Polatel (Bosphorus University, Istanbul): The effects of land disputes on the reform question in the Eastern Provinces

Thomas Schmutz (University of Zurich): The German role in the reform discussion of 1913-1914

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