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Review Article

Ottomans in early modern global history

Empire of difference: the Ottomans in comparative perspective

By Karen Barkey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xv + 342. 2 b/w illustrations, 2 tables. Hardback £52.00, ISBN 978-0-521-88740-3; paperback £18.99, ISBN: 978-0-521-71533-1.

The second Ottoman empire: political and social transformation in the early modern world

By Baki Tezcan. Cambridge Studies in Islamic History. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xviii + 284. 20 b/w illustrations, 5 maps, 1 table. Hardback £55.00, ISBN: 978-0-521-51949-6.

The Ottoman age of exploration

By Giancarlo Casale. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xix + 281. Hardback £32.50, ISBN: 978-0-19-537782-8.

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In the growing field of early modern global history, few regions remain so poorly understood as Ottoman lands. Although they have played their part in narrative accounts of the rise and fall of empires, the Ottomans have figured little if at all in most comparative or structural analyses of history.[1] This shortcoming stands out not only in comparison with Western countries but also in contrast to most of Asia. Unlike other fields – for example, Southeast Asian history (Victor Lieberman) or Chinese history (Peter Perdue) – Ottoman studies has produced few historians who have crossed over from their regional speciality into major global and comparative studies.

Three authors are reviewed here who have taken promising initial steps in that direction. Unfortunately, none offers the truly global perspective or rigorous comparative framework that global historians might want. Yet each does provide a preview of how the history of the Ottoman empire might come to play a new, more prominent role in the study of the early modern world.

Above all, these three works illustrate different ways that Ottomanists may finally work around the historiographical roadblock of imperial 'decline'. Specialists have long since refuted the once widespread notion that the Ottoman empire fell into irreversible decadence in the late 1500s, a passive victim of the rising West. Yet the very task of refuting 'decline' has become a preoccupation in itself, posing obstacles to any new core narrative of early modern Ottoman history, lest it carry a taint of declensionism. Consequently, Ottomanists have settled on a language of 'crisis and transformation', emphasizing the empire's resilience and adaptation, while at least occasionally acknowledging its troubles. However, this paradigm has proven too vague for many, both in and out of the field, who may justifiably ask what 'crisis and transformation' really means – and is it just a polite way of restating 'decline'? The three works here answer that last question with a definite 'No'. While differing in their interpretations, each proposes some meaningful new

1 Compare for instance, the empire's prominent place in John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: the global history of empire since 1405*, New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008, with its near absence in Victor Lieberman, *Strange parallels: Southeast Asia in global context, c.800–1830*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. World-systems analysis, while not discussed here, has been a partial exception to this trend.

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narrative of early modern Ottoman history, offering some substance to 'crisis and transformation'. And each does so with at least implicit comparative perspective.

At first glance, Karen Barkey's contribution appears the most ambitious. Already the object of scholarly praise and attention, *Empire of difference* promises nothing less than a sweeping new comparative analysis of Ottoman emergence, institutions, and transformations. The author, a historical sociologist at Columbia University, proposes to turn the decline paradigm on its head by examining the empire's striking longevity. In the end, however, the work turns out to be somewhat more modest. Barkey presents what may be better categorized as a series of historical sociology essays on particular moments in Ottoman political development, throwing in occasional comparisons with the Russians and Habsburgs. The work presents no original research but rather a new synthesis of secondary literature. Nevertheless, when taken together, these chapters offer a bold reinterpretation of the empire as a flexible and enduring 'negotiated enterprise' between centre and periphery.

The strongest feature of the book lies in its particular insights into early Ottoman political history. Chapter 2, for instance, makes creative use of network analysis to explain the rise of Osman I (*c.*1258–1324) as the paramount leader of Turkish raiders on the Byzantine frontier and thence the founder of the Ottoman dynasty. Chapter 3 advances the author's 'hub-and-spoke' model of Ottoman rule, examining how sultans played different military and civilian elites against each other, forestalling opposition alliances and keeping each dependent upon the imperial centre. Perhaps the most interesting discussion comes in Chapter 4, regarding the role of religion in the empire. Here the author makes a persuasive case that Ottoman sectarian pluralism represented a policy of pragmatism: 'a way to qualify and maintain the diversity of the empire, to organize the different communities, to establish peace and order, and to ensure the loyalty of these communities' that 'had little or nothing to do with ideals or a culture of toleration' (p. 110). Drawing on the ideas of James Scott, Barkey presents the Ottomans' *millet* system of semi-autonomous minority communities as a strategy of 'legibility', keeping subjects separated, measurable, and categorized. These insights alone make the *Empire of difference* an interesting and worthwhile read.

Nevertheless, the book's exclusive emphasis on political processes belies the scope of its ambitions. One may question Barkey's opening assumption that 'the answer to the question of the longevity of empire can be found in analyses of the organizations and networks connecting large segmented and constantly changing structures, and by focusing on the multivalent, networked, vertical, and horizontal linkages and the malleable compacts established between state and social actors' (p. 6). Doubtless such analysis offers *part* of the answer, but certainly not the whole. The author's version of Ottoman history makes little room for contingency, for geography, for technology, and for a variety of other forces. Moreover, as the foregoing quote suggests, Barkey's language and analytical framework can come across as overly schematic and a little opaque.

Like so much Ottoman historical writing, the work also suffers from the limits of a central-state perspective. Rather than questioning the field's heavy reliance on imperial archival evidence, *Empire of difference* almost embraces it, placing the imperial government squarely at the centre of almost every historical development. Thus Barkey's 'hub-and-spoke' model may turn out to be a point of view peculiar to the Istanbul archives, which vanishes when we examine Ottoman history from part of the periphery instead.[2] Furthermore, the central-state perspective may exaggerate the imperial government's agency in historical transformations and its effectiveness in dealing with challenges and crises in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as analysed in the latter half of the book.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Barkey turns to the uprisings and violent factional politics of the 1600s and 1700s. As a counterpoint to traditional narratives of decline, she repeatedly stresses the empire's 'flexibility'. In a brief space, the book illustrates how the dynastic state managed to co-opt many of its rivals and to persist as an institution through the overthrow of successive sultans and the decline of their personal patrimonial rule. Unfortunately, Barkey offers little explanation for the outbreak of so much political unrest in the first place; and, in order to emphasize Ottoman success, she rather underplays the serious damage inflicted by uprisings such

2 See e.g. Alan Mikhail, 'An irrigated empire: the view from Ottoman Fayyum', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, 4, 2010, pp. 571.

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as the 'Celalis' of the early seventeenth century.[3] Finally, Chapter 7 considers the empire's economic history, describing how trade and the commercialization of agriculture promoted the rise of new provincial notables in the later eighteenth century. It was this challenge, Barkey argues, that led the state onto a path of aggressive and inflexible centralization in the nineteenth century, which ultimately doomed the once accommodating, cosmopolitan empire and paved the way for its nationalist successor states.

By contrast, *The second Ottoman empire: political and social transformation in the early modern world* starts off with a more modest scope but rounds out with even more ambitious conclusions. Baki Tezcan, associate professor of history and religion at the University of California Davis, has drawn on an admirable depth and breadth of original research to present a novel interpretation of Ottoman history in the troubled seventeenth century. Of the three works reviewed here, this one may be the most geared toward specialists rather than a general academic audience. Nevertheless, as its subtitle suggests, the book addresses broader issues of modernity that should resonate with scholars of global history.

The second Ottoman empire proceeds from a simple historiographical question: why is the downfall of seventeenth-century Ottoman sultans considered a sign of decline, when we consider the overthrow of contemporary European monarchs, as in the Glorious Revolution, a sign of progress toward freedom and democracy? In fact, Tezcan argues, these two developments were not so different after all. Building on a detailed study of the regicide of Sultan Osman II (r.1618–1622), the book makes the case that Ottoman political turmoil arose not from imperial decadence but from its very opposite: the emergence of a market economy and the ascendance of new factions interested in limiting the power of the monarch. While not denying the depth of the empire's social or economic crisis during the 1600s, Tezcan argues that this Ottoman political transformation proved a positive development in and of itself. Rather than representing a step down from a supposed golden age of military patrimonial rule under Mehmed the Conqueror and Süleyman the Magnificent, this new order (or 'second empire') constituted a more diverse and inclusive 'proto-democracy'.

With this argument, Tezcan lays claim to a new grand narrative that places the Ottomans in the mainstream of (European) early modernity. The empire shared in the same early modern processes of monetization and market integration. The decline of Ottoman feudal cavalry and sultanic *kanun* law, the demilitarization of the Janissary corps, and the rise of tax farming – all traditional tropes of 'decline' – become instead signs of a more modern, 'civilized' (in the sense of *civil*ian) society, as in Europe. These changes also paved the way for the rise of imperial 'financial entrepreneurs', not unlike the contemporary French *noblesse de robe*. Therefore, the author blames Ottoman political instability of the seventeenth century not on the decline of established institutions but on the ambitions of 'absolutist' rulers such as Osman II, who resisted the new 'constitutionalist' factions. Relative stability emerged in the eighteenth century, once sultans had learned to accept the new restrictions on their personal power.

In the end, Tezcan does impose some limits on his historical revisionism. Unlike recent histories of China, for instance, the work forgoes any Ottoman claims of economic or scientific parity with early modern Europe. Rather, he makes the case that Ottoman 'proto-democratization' constituted a positive modernizing development in its own right, especially when compared to the centralizing, dictatorial tendencies of the late Ottoman empire and many of its successor states. In fact, Tezcan goes so far as to defend the institutions of the 'second empire' *even though* they positively hindered its military effectiveness and delayed the emergence of modern capitalism and industry (p. 240). 'Therefore', he concludes, 'the historical processes that made the Ottoman Empire an early modern one also laid the grounds for its decline' (p. 241). Here, intentionally or not, the book has posed a serious challenge to currents in early modern global history that celebrate the economic power of China and other Asian empires while deliberately downplaying any discussion of democratic institutions or culture.

As with *Empire of difference*, readers of *The second Ottoman empire* may question the decision to focus so exclusively on political history as a way to understand Ottoman transformations. One would like to see more material, geographic, and demographic context, or more concrete discussion of trade and urbanization. When briefly considering the empire's economic changes, the author relies rather heavily on a study of converging gold : silver

3 As explored in the work of Oktay Özel – see most recently Özel, 'The reign of violence: the Celâlis (*c.*1550–1700)', in Christine Woodhead, ed., *The Ottoman world*, London: Routledge, forthcoming 2011.

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arbitrage ratios – an interesting trend, but not quite the proof of trans-imperial market integration that he suggests.

Tezcan's revisionist narrative also raises a more fundamental question: if the rise of tax-farming or revenue-collecting 'financial entrepreneurs' did not actually promote economic or scientific development, then can we really consider these factions 'modern'? Why exactly, as other authors have noted,[4] did their representation in the state fail to promote the same positive institutional and financial reform as found in seventeenth-century Britain or the Netherlands? Here *The second Ottoman empire* only hints at answers in the final pages. As with *Empire of difference*, the reader is left waiting for a more thorough comparative study that could place Ottoman transformations in better perspective.

The final work reviewed here, Giancarlo Casale's *The Ottoman age of exploration*, takes an altogether different approach to the Ottoman empire in global history, in some respects more traditional and in others surprisingly novel. Casale, an associate professor of history at the University of Minnesota, has turned back to the sixteenth-century 'classical age' of conquest, revealing new dimensions of Ottoman maritime strategy and geopolitics across the Indian Ocean. Drawing on wide-ranging research in Ottoman and Portuguese sources, he undermines a central assertion of the 'decline' thesis – that the Ottomans somehow failed to respond to Western maritime aggression, letting their trade fall victim to European expansion. Instead the work makes the case for an independent 'Ottoman age of exploration', echoing similar claims from other historians of early modern Asia.[5] As the author demonstrates in Chapter 1, the Ottomans were themselves newcomers to the Indian Ocean world, only making contact with the Arabian Sea after the conquest of Mamluk lands in the 1510s. Rather than somehow 'failing to respond' to the Portuguese, it was the Ottomans who mounted a sustained and successful challenge to Iberian aggressors already in place, branching out into new realms of science, war, and diplomacy.

The story of that challenge occupies most of the ensuing book. By Casale's admission, the work remains 'at its heart, a narrative rather than comparative history', drawing only occasional parallels with rival powers (p. 9). Chapter 2 examines the Ottoman enterprise of reconnaissance and cartography in the early decades of the 1500s, mirroring that of contemporary Europeans and often drawing upon their work. The next chapters turn to a detailed account of Ottoman diplomatic and military efforts over the following generation, including an Ottoman–Portuguese 'world war' of 1536–46. The author also explores the Ottoman empire's remarkably ambitious, and for a time successful, claims to a pan-Islamic 'caliphate' in the mid sixteenth century, culminating in a sort of 'soft empire' at its zenith in the 1560s and 1570s (Chapter 5).

In the final two chapters, *Age of exploration* examines the late sixteenth-century challenges to Ottoman hegemony in the Indian Ocean world. These included the ascendance of Akbar's Mughal empire, as well as new powers in Ethiopia and Aceh, Indonesia. At the same time, Casale acknowledges the empire's domestic disorders, including the instability bred by factional politics following the 1579 assassination of the grand vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, the empire's most effective military and diplomatic strategist. By the 1620s and 1630s, the empire's pervasive troubles at home and abroad forced it to cede trade and territory at the margins to Yemeni rebels and to rising British and Dutch merchant companies. Nevertheless, as Casale is quick to point out, the Ottoman age of exploration was in some ways the victim of its own success. Having broken the Portuguese threat to its Asian commerce, it could finally let go of its expensive naval and diplomatic efforts.

Global historians will probably find *Age of exploration* the most compelling read among the works reviewed here. It stands out as the most thoroughly researched and most readable of the three. Moreover, the author and the subject matter deal most directly with the interests and historiography of early modern world historians. If anything, the book makes such a compelling case for an Ottoman 'age of exploration' that the reader is left waiting for a more thorough revision of sixteenth-century Indian Ocean history to take into account the impact of Ottoman geopolitics. By the time that

4 Eliana Balla and Noel D. Johnson, 'Fiscal crisis and institutional change in the Ottoman empire and France', *Journal of Economic History*, 69, 3, 2009, pp. 809–45; and Wantje Fritschy, 'State formation and urbanization trajectories: state finance in the Ottoman empire before 1800, as seen from a Dutch perspective', *Journal of Global History*, 4, 3, 2009, pp. 405–28.

5 See e.g. Tonio Andrade, 'Beyond guns, germs, and steel: European expansion and maritime Asia, 1400–1750', *Journal of Early Modern History*, 14, 1, 2010, pp. 165–86.

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the narrative reaches the later sixteenth century, Ottoman strength and ambitions appear so impressive that the original rivalry with the Iberians no longer seems as interesting as Ottoman relations with other rising Asian powers such as Mughal India, Aceh, and even Ming China. Ironically, rather than anticipating Ottoman 'decline' in the face of a rising West, the reader is inclined to sympathize with the plucky Portuguese facing a vastly superior opponent.

Each of the three books reviewed here not only revises some aspect of Ottoman 'decline' vis-à-vis the West but also proposes some new narrative in its place. Though problematic in parts, these new narratives will at least provide stronger guidance for historians than a loose paradigm of 'crisis and transformation' alone. Where such research may lead in the future remains unclear. The books considered in this article, while illustrating the ever wider and more sophisticated reach of Ottoman studies, also point to some ongoing challenges in the field. Above all, even those specialists pursuing a wider perspective on Ottoman history have mostly kept their focus on political history and on binary comparisons with Europe, rather than intra-Asian comparisons or more encompassing global approaches. Such Ottoman–European comparisons may certainly prove enlightening, as these three books have shown. However, for the future of global history, the Ottomans will have to take their rightful place alongside the Ming, Qing, Mughal, Safavid, and Tokugawa as one of the major agrarian empires that dominated the early modern world.[6] Such a perspective among Ottomanists could truly help the field move past 'decline' by shifting the discussion away from missing Western developments such as capitalism, industrialization, or nation-state formation and by offering more meaningful units of comparison for early modern Ottoman economic, environmental, and social history.

6 A few authors outside the field have recently taken steps in this direction – see e.g. Peter C. Perdue and Huri İslamoğlu-İnan, eds., *Shared histories of modernity: China, India, and the Ottoman Empire*, London: Routledge, 2009; and Stephen F. Dale, *The Muslim empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*, New Approaches to Asian History, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

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