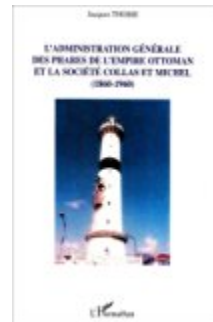


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jacques Thobie. *L'administration generale des phares de l'Empire ottoman et la societe Collas et Michel, 1860-1960*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004. 300 pp. EUR 30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-2-7475-5872-3.

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In 1974, Robert H. Coase wrote a famous article entitled “The Lighthouse in Economics,” in which he challenged the idea that only government can provide the lighthouse as a public good, available free of charge for users. Coase’s analysis was based on a detailed history of the English and Scottish Lighthouses Authorities, the Trinity House and the Northern Lighthouse Board, which in the nineteenth century charged ships for their use of lighthouses. France had the same system during the Old Regime, but turned it into a free public network ruled by engineers of the public technical corps of Ponts et Chaussees in the middle of the nineteenth century. In this perspective, Jacques Thobie’s book about the Lighthouse authority in the Ottoman Empire is a major contribution to a comparative history of Lighthouse authorities, which is quite different from a mythical history of the Lighthouses, from the building of Alexandria to the narratives based on the life of the lighthouse keepers, or a traditional history of technology focused on the invention of modern lenses at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Jacques Thobie, professor at the Paris-8 University and former director of the French Research Centre in Istanbul (IFEA), began his research in the archives of the administration of the Ottoman imperial debt under the supervision of Jean-Baptiste Duroselle and Pierre Renouvin, back in the 1960s. He then discovered the file of a French company, Collas and Michel, which was in charge of the Ottoman lighthouses since 1860. Before the end of the Crimean War, Marius Michel (1819-1907), a French merchant navy officer who frequently travelled between Marseilles and the Near East for the Messageries Impériales, became the head of the Ottoman Lighthouse authority, thanks to an agreement between the French am-

bassador, Antoine Thouvenel, and sultan Abdul-Medjid. Michel created the firm with another officer, Camille Collas (1819-98), and negotiated the first concession contract in 1860. The peculiarity of this contract is that it deals with a matter of strategic interest for the Ottoman Empire.

The business was highly profitable: offices in the Empire collected the lighthouse fees and the profits—73 percent of an average income of 3.6 millions francs between 1862 and 1913—were shared between the company and the state. Michel and Collas made huge personal benefits: Michel, for instance, financed a seaside resort in the South of France, Tamaris. Collas invested in the railway line between Jaffa and Jerusalem. The company built many lighthouses—almost a hundred in the first twenty years, where only a few existed before—and bought French lens apparatus. Little is said about the relationships between French engineers and Turkish lighthouse keepers, mainly former seamen. The construction of the lighthouses and the technical issues are also ignored, with the main focus of the author centering on the concession and the economic aspects of the contract. The author does not explore the different levels, times and scales of the company, but remains focused on the head management and the negotiations with the Turkish government.

I noticed that the history of the Turkish lighthouses started with the Crimean War. Along with business history, diplomatic relationships are a second field in which the book provides the reader with accurate and valuable information. England was very reluctant to accept French control over the Turkish lighthouses, as the English vessels were the major contributors to the taxes col-

lected by Collas and Michel. The latent conflict—which means English pressure over the tax level at the end of each contract—increased with the question of the lights of the Suez Canal in 1881. Under the pressure of French diplomacy, Collas and the Ottoman Empire challenged the Egyptian favorite, an English company. The canal became a laboratory of new lighthouses technology—concrete tower, electric lights—with the strong commitment of French industrial companies (the Barbier, Benard et Turenne, and Henry-Lepaute companies), which reinforced their world-wide domination at the end of the nineteenth century.

In 1914, from the Red Sea to the Black Sea, 176 lights shined on the coasts of Turkey as well as in Greece, Bulgaria and Italy. Thus, the geography of the network did not fit the borders of Turkey, as the decline of the Ottoman Empire came to an end. The gap increased after the First World War. Collas and Michel had to rule lighthouses in the English protectorate of Palestine and the French one in Syria. The political changes in Turkey also had significant consequences, even if the new regime held nothing against the French contracting company. In 1935, the Turkish State announced its wish to break

the contract in order to buy the lighthouse network. It took total control over the lighthouse administration a few years later. For the Collas and Michel company, this was the end of a unusual story that lasted ninety-three years.

As a conclusion, Jacques Thobie emphasizes the interest of the history, both economic and political, of a French company ruling the Turkish lights with substantial benefits. His book proves also the consistency of the lighthouses as an historical object to analyse crucial issues such as the private/public relationships to organize a complex technological network, if not large, as defined by Thomas P. Hughes. Thobie's book also suggests that further development could be undertaken in order to characterize different "governance styles" of the lighthouse networks in the Mediterranean Sea and elsewhere.

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