

# H-Net Reviews

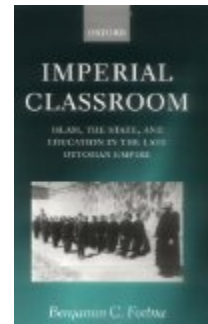
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Benjamin C. Fortna. *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. xv + 280 pp. \$74.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-924840-7.

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## Ottoman State Education between Nationalism, Islam, and Westernization

Ottoman State Education between Nationalism, Islam, and Westernization

In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire gradually took the education of its youth under its control. Benjamin Fortna examines this process, its aims and contents, and tries to show how it was actually taking place. For this project, Fortna studied many Turkish archival sources on education as well as Ottoman textbooks and visual materials (mainly maps and photographs). He also used an extensive list of scholarly publications on education (not only in the Middle East), state and education, religion and education, and Middle Eastern history.

The Ottoman state, like various other states at the time, realized the importance of education as a tool for achieving political, economic, and social goals. Whereas in the past, education in the Ottoman Empire (as in Europe) was mostly in the hands of men of religion, states in the nineteenth century wanted to have education under their control. This desire resulted from the belief that by shaping their youth they would be able to determine the character of their future citizens and thus carry out the state's policies. State education required a lot of planning, accurate implementation, and continuous reexamination and adjustments. Fortna examines both the planning of Ottoman state education and how it was implemented in the center and in the provinces. He pays special attention to the sources of influence of various ideas and reactions to existing operations, and how these foundations shaped outcomes.

Fortna's main thesis is "that the late Ottoman state assigned education the conflicted task of attempting to ward off Western encroachment by adapting Western-style education to suit Ottoman needs" (p. 12). He starts by examining various state-controlled educational systems in Europe during the nineteenth century and then compares these developments to what happened in the Ottoman Empire. He shows that while much of the curricula in Ottoman state schools was influenced by European educational systems, the contents were gradually shifting towards a more Ottoman-centered and Muslim-oriented program. This change included minimizing the use of foreign languages for instruction and the increased use of Arabic and Muslim-related subjects.

Fortna shows how the Ottoman state fought the encroachment of foreign state-sponsored and missionary educational systems in the empire by adapting secular components which it deemed important and supplementing them with Islamic and Ottoman elements. The study, indeed, focuses on state education and how its Islamic character developed. It examines to a lesser degree the non-Muslim elements involved in the system, especially as they relate to students in state schools and non-state minority education. The examination of the foreign influence focuses on state and Christian education and does not examine Jewish European initiatives, such as the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), which had been active in the empire since the 1860s. AIU and other foreign-based schools were often attended by children of Ottoman state officials in provincial cities due to the ab-

sence of state schools.

Fortna examines in great detail how the Ottoman educational system came to include more Muslim and Arabic components and how this change required the employment of traditional Muslim clerics in state education. Such employment, of course, caused the schools to include two different kinds of teachers. It would be interesting to learn more about how these two groups of teachers interacted and worked together. More information about the training of the new state teachers, who had to cover new subjects and aimed towards different goals than the traditional Muslim education or that of the palace schools, also would be valuable.

How the system really worked is hard to determine because of scanty data. There are, though, some reports on the subject, often resulting from complaints and investigations, and Fortna provides interesting examples on this issue. This coverage contrasts to the AIU system, in which teachers and directors had to prepare detailed reports on a regular basis to Paris on developments in their schools.

An interesting examination in this study is the treatment of physical elements: school buildings, their locations in towns, and their internal plans. The book includes some contemporary photographs showing school buildings. Fortna examines also the use of maps, not only as teaching material but also as visual objects fostering nationalism and pride. Through the examination of maps and photographs, he shows the move from continent-

based maps of parts of the Ottoman Empire to maps showing the whole state on three continents. While all these maps were based on European cartography, they were in Ottoman Turkish and produced by the Ottoman army for military, administrative, and educational purposes.

This study has little to say about gender, and it is mainly a study of boys' education. It is true that most schools in the system were for boys. Nonetheless, the beginning of state education for girls is an important turning point in Ottoman social and cultural perceptions, and should be examined in more detail. Similarly, the education of the non-Muslims inside and outside the state system is only touched upon.

Fortna provides us with an interesting study on Ottoman state education, its aims, its national-religious character, and its development. Thanks to its comparative elements, the study is highly recommended to scholars of education, those dealing with religion and education, state and education, and obviously Ottoman and Middle Eastern education. Thanks to the extensive use of Ottoman archival materials, this study considerably advances our understanding of the motives behind the development of Ottoman state education, its growing Islamic and national character, and how these ideas and plans were implemented. Though somewhat repetitive to my taste, this is an important contribution to the understanding of late Ottoman political, cultural, and social goals as reflected through the development of state education.

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