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Ebru Boyar. *Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans: Empire Lost, Relations Altered*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2007. 256 pp. \$84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84511-351-3.

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Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans

A serendipitous location in medieval Bithynia, nestled next to what remained of the Byzantine Empire, was one of the main reasons behind the early Ottomans' success in state-building. The lands that transformed this fledgling state into an empire, however, lay across the straits in the fertile plains of Rumeli. They were the first to be incorporated into the Ottoman fold, and, following the First Balkan War, the last in Europe to be relinquished since the empire began losing territory in the seventeenth century.

"In 1913 the Ottoman empire lost its soul," writes Ebru Boyar, because the "Balkans, symbolizing more than territory, was at the heart of what made the empire" (p. 1). The reaction of the Ottoman and early Republican elites to this loss is the subject of her monograph. The book, in the words of the author, "considers the development of the Ottoman/Turkish intellectual relationships with the Balkans and tries to understand in what ways the loss of the Balkans colored Ottoman/Turkish self-perception and shaped the relations of the empire and later the Republic with the outside world" (p. 2). The shock, humiliation, and bitterness generated by this loss were expressed in, and presumably filtered through, the literary and historical output of these elites and became influential factors in fixing the shape of Turkish national identity in the early republican era. Boyar's book is a tour of this discursive landscape, and an important contribution to the historiography of the transition from Ottoman Empire to Turkish Republic. The long-lasting effects of the trauma of the empire's attrition into what was essentially

an Asian country, and complete disappearance shortly thereafter, have been invoked frequently in scholarly and popularizing works alike. In fact, traces of what may be called "nostalgia for Rumeli" have lately appeared in popular culture media such as TV dramas. Boyar's book, to the author's credit, does not follow the nostalgia vogue. To the contrary, it is an attempt to systematically analyze how this territorial loss shaped the mindset of a generation of elites and put an indelible mark on the first years of the Turkish Republic. Boyar has performed an invaluable service to the field by undertaking such a project.

The author has consulted a wide range of primary sources for this project, which she has organized under four main groups. The first consists of "the history writing of the period," including official chronicles or histories, textbooks, popular history texts, and scholarly publications. Popular literature and memoirs comprise the second and third groups. The fourth group of sources she mentions is the official state documents. That this final category occupies significantly less space in the book's bibliography is not necessarily a dire methodological handicap, since the author is mainly concerned with the intellectual repercussions of what one might call "the Loss," and a historiographic/biographic analysis is more suited to that purpose.

The text is based on the author's D. Phil. thesis, and displays certain flaws inherent in dissertations published as monographs. This is unfortunate because the topic and the research agenda Boyar has astutely identified are an

excellent conduit for engaging important historiographical problems concerning the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of Balkan nationalisms. The first chapter of the book, entitled “History-writing in the Late Ottoman/Early Republican Era,” is a twenty-page sampler of history texts ranging in date from the Tanzimat reforms to the early republican period. Here the author’s purpose seems to be establishing a continuity of historical approach from the Ottoman into the republican period with respect to the centrality of the state: “Either Ottoman or Turkish, either conservative or radical, all Ottoman/Turkish historians in the late Ottoman/early Republican period perceived history as a useful means to reach a political or social aim of the state regardless of whether they used modern historical techniques or not.” The reason, according to the author, had to do with the peculiar relation of the historian to the state: “The Ottoman/Turkish historian, as a member of the intelligentsia, existed in a direct relation with the state rather than with any class ... the intellectuals functioned as the ‘deputies’ of a state, whose power was not merely physically coercive” (p. 21).

The centrality of the state in Turkish history-writing is indeed pervasive, and dates well before the early republican period. As for the Ottoman intellectuals, one needs only to take a look at the convergence of the otherwise widely different agendas of Prince Sabahaddin and Ahmed Riza, for instance, concerning the urgency of “saving the state,” to comprehend the centrality of this issue. Presenting a historiographical continuum based on this obvious common thread creates several problems, however. The first concerns the nature of the state in question—this the author partly acknowledges: “From the late Ottoman era to the Republican era, the ‘location’ of the historian within the state did not change, although the state transformed itself from a multi-religious empire to a nation-state” (p. 25). On the other hand, the possible shifts in the state’s coercive powers, physical or ideological, are ignored. More importantly, the theme of continuity is so broadly defined that the reader is left with no appreciation of the different intellectual sources and methods of historians such as Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, Zeki Velidi Togan and Ahmed Refik, even though the author has evidently considered these differences in her research. The new regime’s use of entirely new tools to impose the hegemony of official history, such as the publications of the Turkish Historical Society, the formulation of a “Turkish History Thesis,” efforts to infiltrate popular history texts through the “People’s Houses,” and the new pedagogical agenda to be applied in schools—all

of which underscore the potent, novel role of history in disseminating an officially defined national identity—are clumped in the last few pages of this short chapter.

The next two chapters on “The Definition of the Balkans” and “The Representation of the Balkans,” examine the Ottoman and Turkish definitions and perceptions of the Balkans and the nationalist movements originating therein. These two important themes have largely been left out of the recent debates that have occupied Balkanists—debates concerning the historical production of the category “Balkan” and “Balkanism” as a special case of Orientalism.¹ The information presented here would have been more meaningful had it been employed to revisit, revise, or alternatively, to complement this ongoing dialogue, whereas the author prefers to opt out, ignoring a body of scholarship extremely pertinent to her research agenda. She proceeds instead with a series of speculations about a presumed Ottoman resistance to the term “Balkans” prior to 1908, speculations that she repeatedly repudiates herself. Her analysis of Balkan nationalist movements as they were understood by Ottoman/Turkish intellectuals suffers from a similar lack of conceptual frame of reference, and a presentation style that is eclectic rather than synthetic. The author’s stated aim is to search for the collective “mentality” of these intellectuals, which, she argues, can be found in their choice of terms for describing nationalist movements (p. 43). What follows, however, is one dictionary definition after the other (including a definition of the word “movement”), and disparate quotes rather than a well-focused analysis of the Ottoman/Turkish intelligentsia’s discursive preferences regarding the uprisings in the Balkans. For instance, Ottoman historians’ varying explanations of the European support for the Greek uprising in the Peloponnese, ranging from the purely emotional to the more level-headed balance-of-power interpretations, might have been presented as a counterpoint to totalizing views of Ottoman/Turkish nationalism as reactive or derivative. Unfortunately, they are instead reduced to incomprehensible non sequiturs: “Although the first unsophisticated explanation was used mainly in the nineteenth-century texts, while the late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts tended to use more sophisticated and more systematic interpretations, the more simplistic explanations still appear in these later writings due to the simple and didactic character of the texts” (p. 69).

The main theme of “The Balkan People and the Balkan States,” the nine-page chapter that follows, is Ottoman condescension towards the petty Balkan states. This condescension—regardless of its sources—and what the

author identifies as the “peripheralization” of the Balkans by the Ottoman elite in the preceding chapter, bring to mind the notion of an Ottoman attempt to “colonize” their provinces in the nineteenth century that has recently been introduced as an alternative to the modernization paradigm, especially in the Arab periphery of the empire.² While one might take issue with the appropriateness of “Ottoman colonialism” as a conceptual tool to analyze the final years of Ottoman rule in the Balkans, and the republican intellectuals’ recollections of it, some of the examples Boyar provides in this brief chapter, such as persistent references to the Serbians as “pig farmers,” beg for a comparison that takes into account not only the dominant European discourse of the late nineteenth century that viewed the Balkan peoples as noble savages at best and corrupt slaves at worst, but also the ways in which this discourse penetrated the Balkan peoples’ (and, evidently, the Ottomans’) own formulations of a sliding scale of nations.

The following, final, and longest chapter of the book, “The Multi-Images of the Balkans,” alludes to the possibility of such a comparison. The author asserts that “without understanding the centrality of the European civilization debate for the Ottomans and Turks, it is impossible to understand the reasons behind the image of the Balkans as a space of confrontations with Europe in Ottoman and Republican historiography, or Ottoman and Turkish sensibilities over the region” (pp. 83-84). The author’s discussion here follows three main threads: Russian and European reactions to the plight of Christians in the Ottoman Empire; the Ottoman reactions to what seemed to be European indifference to Muslim suffering; and finally the different images the theme of the “Balkans” conjures up in literary and historical writings from the late Ottoman into the republican period (for an unexplained reason, possibly because of its connection to Greek nationalism, Crete is treated as part of the Balkans

here, as it is throughout the book).

This eclectic panorama of Balkan scenes completes the book, leaving largely unexplored the most obvious question one would have liked to see addressed in such a study, namely the link between the violent and protracted process of Rumeli’s separation from the Ottoman Empire and the genesis of an ethnically and religiously exclusive Turkish nationalism that claimed Anatolia as its homeland as the result of an even more violent process. The author’s conclusion to this chapter is: “The existence of the multiple images of the Balkans demonstrates the centrality of the Balkans in the late Ottoman and early Republican mentality. The region came to symbolize the injustices, losses, yearnings, and failures suffered by the Ottoman and Turks. These images were constantly reproduced in the history texts and the literature well into the Republican era and the vivid impact and emotive power of the Balkans still remain strong in the Turkish psyche” (p. 140).

Overall, this is a well-conceived book that offers new and interesting information on a theme that has been underserved. However, it also suffers from a serious lack of conceptual organization, engagement with pertinent scholarship, and editorial guidance, the last of which is certainly not the author’s fault. These shortcomings notwithstanding, Boyar’s monograph is a timely contribution that will be appreciated by those interested in the historiography of this period.

Notes

[1]. For a review see K. E. Fleming, “Orientalism, the Balkans and Balkan Historiography,” *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 1218-1233.

[2]. See, for instance, Usama Makdisi, “Ottoman Orientalism,” *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 768-796.

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