

**Nikolay Antov.** *The Ottoman "Wild West": The Balkan Frontier in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 342 pp. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-18263-9.

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In the fifteenth century, Deliorman, Gerlovo, and the adjacent regions of the northeastern Balkans were sparsely populated. Those who did inhabit the region were part of the native Christian population or seminomadic non-sharia-minded Turcoman Muslims who were central to the region's conquest by the Ottomans. Over the next century, the population grew dramatically from an influx of heterodox non-sharia-minded dervishes and Turcoman seminomads. In other words, Deliorman and Gerlovo were populated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the same sort of centrifugal *gazi* forces that Cemal Kafadar described in *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (1995), where he claimed persuasively that the Ottoman state's great success was subordinating them to the will of its centralizing administration in fourteenth-century Anatolia. Unfortunately, the available sources did not permit Kafadar to describe this process, and to be fair that was not the purpose of his book. Nikolay Antov provides an answer to this problem by analyzing the process in the context of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Balkans. Antov's *The Ottoman "Wild West"* successfully demonstrates how these heterodox seminomadic groups, which epitomized the struggle against the Ottoman state's centralizing project, were incorporated into the "Ottoman

political and administrative-territorial framework" (p. 282).

Based primarily on Ottoman tax registers and the *velayetname* (hagiographies of sorts) of the region's fifteenth- and sixteenth-century's heroes, Antov's argument is made through seven chapters that weave the reader through transformations in the social environment, which similarly transformed cultural and religious *mentailité* of the region. The central argument Antov puts forward is that the Ottoman state took an accommodationist approach to influence the social structure of the region through indirect policies (such as tax easements and pious endowments) to encourage urbanization in certain areas and subsequently produce a cultural *mentalité* that embraced the Ottoman state, agricultural activities, and conformist religious practices and beliefs.

The Abdals of Rum (which formed the predominant social group of the region) originated as non-sedentary, nonconformist, non-sharia-minded Turcoman Muslims in Anatolia who supported the Ottoman *gaza* effort in Anatolia and the Balkans in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Despite their nonconformity and even antagonism toward the Ottoman state's centralizing imperative in the fifteenth century, described in chapter 2, we learn by chapter 6 that the Abdals' cultural approach toward the Ottoman state transitioned to

one of respect, cooperation, and deference. Moreover, their religious views and practices had lost their most heterodox and antinomian characteristics. In the intervening chapters, Antov explains how the state implemented (primarily) indirect policies to gradually integrate the region into the state's authority through the Islamization of the space. The regions of Deliorman and Gerlovo were left largely depopulated by a series of attacks by the Cumans in the twelfth century and then again from the revolt of Bedreddin and the crusade of Varna in the fifteenth century that had dramatic demographic consequences. The region became a hotbed for migrants between 1480 and 1570, and the population grew by around twentyfold. These migrants came in two types: voluntary heterodox migrants, primarily Abdals, from the southern Balkans, and forced population transfers of heterodox migrants from Anatolia the Ottoman state feared might support the growing Shi'a Safavid state. The Ottomans supported the repopulation of the region primarily through giving tax privileges that slowly dissolved. Antov theorizes that the region would have appeared as a safe haven for the heterodox dervishes, inland and far enough from the state's reach to appear safe, which likely also made it appear as an ideal place for the state to place these unwieldy groups.

Chapter 5 on urban settlement patterns in the Balkans describes the process of the Ottomans' Islamization of space that integrated these centrifugal forces into the Ottoman system. This chapter makes the most interesting and substantive contribution to the historiography. Antov argues that it was the more-or-less indirect relationship between urban patterns and the Ottoman state that tamed the northeastern Balkans into an agrarian and conformist region firmly placed within the politico-administrative framework. Moreover, he shows that attempts to define the "Muslim," "Ottoman," or even "Balkan" city are folly because he can trace four distinct urban city types that developed in the small region of the northeastern Balkans: Hezargrad, a city founded by a pious endowment

from an Ottoman bureaucrat that led to dramatic population and Ottoman administrative growth; Shumnu, a pre-Ottoman city that was rebuilt by the Ottomans; Chernovi, a pre-Ottoman city that lost its significance because its location held little commercial or political importance under the new circumstances; and Eski Cuma, a city spontaneously founded by Muslim migrants that grew to a modest size. This chapter is the crux of Antov's general argument, because it was the Ottoman state's direct and indirect impact on the urban environment that tied its inhabitants' interests to those of the state. Hezargrad became the center of Ottoman (and Orthodox Sunni Islamic) authority in the region as the pious foundation funded a mosque, madrasa, and other Islamic institutions. Its population doubled in twenty years, thus becoming a seat of a sort of cultural imperialism, or "seat ... of Ottomanness" (p. 171). State interests drove urban growth indirectly as well. As Antov points out, cities not located in regions that served Ottoman strategic interests, like Chernovi, declined while those that were located in those regions grew, even without Ottoman intervention. As the population of the region grew, and urbanized, it was conditioned into the Ottoman environment as the urban centers became locations of Ottoman authority.

In the final chapter, Antov discusses the impact of his argument on the recent attempt by Ottoman historians like Tijana Krstic to apply the concept of confessionalization to the Ottoman case. Antov argues that the Ottoman accommodationist approach in the Balkan frontiers indicates that this model is not applicable, and I think the author makes a persuasive case. But at the same time, in doing so, he seems to question Krstic's underlying argument behind the use of the confessionalization model—that western Eurasian centralizing states experienced a common set of politico-religious problems as well as common responses to them, which has inspired much recent historiographical work—instead of arguing for the distinctiveness of the Ottoman case from Christian

Europe. But European historians have leveled the same criticisms of confessionalization as Antov does. While Antov implies that the nature of Ottoman and Western Christendom styles of “confession building” were distinctive, I was struck by the similarities between the Balkan experience Antov describes and the experience Ethan Shagan describes in Reformation England, 1,500 miles away, in *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (2003) (pp. 279-80). Nevertheless, while this might seem a rather innocuous debate within Ottomanist historiography, it is one perhaps European historians should consider. The root of the question Ottomanists are posing is important: to what degree was western Eurasia divided by different historical experiences and to what degree was it fundamentally connected? Indeed on this issue, European historiography has (with notable exceptions) simply assumed the former.

In the end, Antov has produced an important book on the centralizing process of the Ottoman Empire that will interest historians and graduate students of the Balkans and the Ottoman state. In line with recent historical work that has recast the Ottoman state as an accommodating and flexible empire, Antov demonstrates how these characteristics helped tame the Balkan “Wild West.” It would be good reading for anyone interested in state development in early modern Eurasia.

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