



# A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire

*M. Şükrü Hanioğlu*

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At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire straddled three continents and encompassed extraordinary ethnic and cultural diversity among the estimated thirty million people living within its borders. It was perhaps the most cosmopolitan state in the world--and possibly the most volatile. "A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire" now gives scholars and general readers a concise history of the late empire between 1789 and 1918, turbulent years marked by incredible social change.

Moving past standard treatments of the subject, M. Sukru Hanioglu emphasizes broad historical trends and processes more than single events. He examines the imperial struggle to centralize amid powerful opposition from local rulers, nationalist and other groups, and foreign powers. He looks closely at the socioeconomic changes this struggle wrought and addresses the Ottoman response to the challenges of modernity. Hanioglu shows how this history is not only essential to comprehending modern Turkey, but is integral to the histories of Europe and the world. He brings Ottoman society marvelously to life in all its facets--cultural, diplomatic, intellectual, literary, military, and political--and he mines imperial archives and other documents from the period to describe it as it actually was, not as it has been portrayed in postimperial nationalist narratives. "A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire" is a must-read for anyone seeking to understand the legacy left in this empire's ruins--a legacy the world still grapples with today."

## **A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire Details**

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# From Reader Review A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire for online ebook

## Lauren Hopkins says

Great history of the Ottoman Empire with the biggest focus on the 19th century up until the bitter end. Some bits are tough to get through (i.e. some of the economic history can be a little dull) but for the most part it reads almost like a novel. Not my favorite book about the region, but Hanio?lu is very knowledgeable and presents his view in a pretty unbiased manner, which can be tough to do when dealing with what is this politically/socially volatile part of the world. Best parts revolve around the Tanzimat and life under the CUP...I especially enjoy his sense of irony when discussing failure surrounding the constitutional eras. If you're a middle east buff, it's a good read.

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## Karl Georg says

Useful complement to Quataert's book.

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## AskHistorians says

None of the other synthetic histories of the late Ottoman Empire are as brief or succinctly worded as this one.

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## Omar Taufik says

This was a wonderful piece of work by the author ..

As per the title of the book, it is a "Brief" history of the "Late" Ottoman empire .. where the late Ottoman empire represents the period starting around the year 1789 and ending 1922/1924 ..

The author managed just that , covering this exceptional period in Ottoman history .. the longest century in Ottoman history .. in a comprehensive and unbiased manner, and with a different approach ..

The author analysis of the period events was based on context rather than the usual ideological approach in explaining the collapse of the empire along with the serious reform efforts more than a century prior to the final collapse ..

The book is full of interesting details and statistics along with valuable and thoughtful author analysis and opinions in each stage of the book regarding efforts covering reforming Sultans, Tanzimat statesmen and Young Turks revolutionaries ... The interpretation of each of Ottomanism as a means of saving the empire .. efforts that may have not saved the empire, but did have it's direct impact on the forming of the modern twentieth century Middle East and the Balkans with all the complicated heritage and unfortunate current struggles..

A high recommendation for readers interested in the subject especially if from a more different perspective ..

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## Paul says

M. Zükrü Hanioğlu's *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* is intended as a broad introductory text for its eponymous topic, but one that provides more than a mere recapitulation of the most recent secondary literature. Taking a critical approach and, at times, utilizing primary sources to present illustrative examples of his assertions, the author argues that late Ottoman history was not part of a teleological process and was more than a simple struggle between competing ideologies. He frames his work around four themes – “the persistent imperial ambition to centralize, the shifting socioeconomic context, the key challenge of forging an Ottoman response to modernity, and the need to integrate Ottoman history into world history” – and while it is difficult at times to see exactly how they guide his chronicle, overall they aid in building a narrative that goes beyond the superficial approach of works with a similar target audience.

Following a brief introduction, Hanioğlu begins with a chapter that contextualizes his topic by providing a summary of the situation in the Ottoman Empire immediately prior to the reign of Selim III. His next chapter engages “initial Ottoman responses to the challenge of modernity”, which begin in the military following a series of territorial losses. The failure of economic reform, which did not address “the deficiency of Ottoman production”, meant that transformations within the army were impossible, which in turn led to the empire’s inability to centralize and improve provincial administration. The beginnings of nationalism, meanwhile, detracted even further from these efforts, with the 1804 Serbian revolt becoming the first internal affair that was supported by outside powers. Mahmud II, who came to power in 1808, found more success with reform and centralization, but also empowered a Western-oriented bureaucracy that quickly rose to become a major political player.

The culmination of Mahmud II’s efforts was the Edict of Gülhane, announced in 1839, which, as the author argues, was designed to demonstrate to the west the Ottoman Empire’s commitment to westernizing its domestic policies. As such, the focus of his chapter on the *Tanzimat* reforms is not on their internal impact, but on international relations and foreign affairs. This is unexpected and somewhat jarring, as it privileges a high political approach to the topic that seems out of place with the rest of the work to this point. He does not ignore social developments completely, but this is the section where it becomes evident how eclectically they factor into his narrative. In summarizing the failures of the *Tanzimat* era, Hanioğlu argues that the reforms were not absorbed deeply enough into society to allow what was traditional to wither away, and that reformers were not sufficiently prepared to confront nationalist opposition.

The book next details the reign of Abdulhamid II, who drew power away from the bureaucracy and re-centralized it on the palace. The author’s argument is that, during this period, the sultan ruled in an authoritarian fashion under the veil of Islamic justice, yet still confronted the challenges of modernity by building up the bureaucracy, even if he simultaneously buttressed it with traditional structures and manipulated them to his advantage. Opposition coalesced around a group known as the Young Turks, who Hanioğlu portrays as conservative, since they wanted to restore, not destroy, the empire and promulgated one-party rule under a constitutional monarch. He proceeds to detail their time in power from 1908 through the end of World War I, which, despite covering the shortest period, ends up being the longest chapter in his book. The support of the army and the power of the printing press allowed them to eliminate all contesting sources of power, but their inability to secure the protection of another major European nation led to an alliance with Germany, which proved ultimately to be their downfall. This made it inevitable that they would become embroiled in World War I, despite their attempts to stay out of the conflict, which ended any chance that their protectionist “National Economics” program might have revived the economy, or that the relative intellectual freedom of the era might have produced ideologies that could have saved the empire. Overall, Hanioğlu asserts that there was more continuity than discontinuity between the reigns of Abdulhamid II

and the Young Turks, and that it was only the composition of the ruling elite that changed.

The author's framing themes are addressed explicitly only in the introduction and conclusion, which makes them feel disconnected from the rest of the work. He argues that there was not a struggle between modernizers at the center and reactionaries on the periphery, as has been suggested traditionally, but that these forces appeared in different places depending on circumstances. Furthermore, it was natural that modernity in the Ottoman Empire took a Western and imitative form at first, since the Ottomans entered this historical phase late, but eventually a distinctively Ottoman form did emerge. Europeans, for their part, were more focused on maintaining the status quo within the empire than on transforming it into an imitation of the west, and thus the author discards the concept of imposed westernization. He completes his narrative by rejecting the thesis of imperial decline, noting instead that the empire's absolute achievements were impressive and that, relative to the circumstances and in consideration of where it began, they were "truly remarkable". Overall, however, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire's* last minute attempt at engaging a revisionist perspective is insufficient to elevate the narrative above what it is at its core: a history of the late Ottoman Empire as a function of its relationship to the rest and an ill-defined, yet clearly Eurocentric, conceptualization of "modernity". Nonetheless, the book's critical approach, along with its use of primary-source examples and its accessibility to non-specialists, makes it an excellent text for those seeking a broad and intelligible introduction to this critically important, yet often forgotten, global empire.

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### **Carrie says**

This was a required reading for a course in Ottoman history. It was a good read overall, had a good narrative and flowed well. However, it was a bit short on some important issues/people like the Greek rebellion and Mehmed Ali to name a few and Hanioglu tended to make some sweeping generalizations, which can be problematic. Overall though I did learn a lot, it was well organized, and had a good narrative that really brought out the tumultuous history of the late Ottoman empire.

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### **Ali Unisen says**

great

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### **Pessoa says**

The book doesn't claim to be comprehensive yet it is an admirable effort that covers the history of the vast Ottoman Empire from 1798 to 1918. It achieves what it aims to be. If you want a solid introduction to the late Ottoman period, this is the best you can find.

However, I have several problems with it:

First, I understand that the author had to be selective to make it brief. But he had paid very uneven attention to different topics. More than two pages are given to a list of the worldly possessions of some Ottoman subjects to show that the population, even the middle classes, led a humble life - in other words, Ottoman society was poor. But a single sentence or paragraph would suffice to give the same information. After all, this is a brief history. Moreover, there is poem quoted that takes a whole page to show that Ottoman

intellectuals were very impressed by Western ideas and even wrote poems about it. Again, four-five lines would be enough to give the same idea.

On the other hand, the author dedicates a single paragraph to the events of 1915 which were devastating to the Armenian population of the empire.

Despite the fact that the reign of Abdulhamid II was long (between 1876 and 1908) and his rule transformed the empire radically in certain respects, the author bestows relatively little space to the events of his reign. Armenian revolts of the 1890s are noted only briefly. Abdulhamid's Hamidiye Corps aren't mentioned at all.

The work suffers from being pro-Turkish and compromises objectivity. The events of 1915, which Armenians believe is genocide, are named as deportation. Not even a forced mass deportation but just deportation as if Armenians were illegal immigrants, not people living in their own country. I wanted to read a work that was as objective as possible, not a defense of Ottoman officials.

During the 19th and most of the 20th centuries, the Ottomans were shown in bad light. The Orientalist bias against the Ottoman state is ubiquitous in the works of the period (both academic and other). In the last few decades, historians have started to pay more attention to the Ottoman side of the story, and have developed a better picture of the time. However, I observe that this time they are stressing more the similarities between Ottomans and the European histories and downplaying the differences.

Hanioglu believes that the Ottomans were European. "There was no getting around the fact that the Ottoman Empire was European," he writes in the conclusion. Well, he has a point. It covered most of southwestern Europe. But at the same time, it covered a larger part of Asia, so it could also be called Asian. The author's overemphasis reflects his desire to see his country as part of Europe. There is nothing wrong with that, Georgia wants to be Europe too. Even today's Armenia, although completely in Asia, would prefer to be European. In the last three centuries (mostly Western) Europe had shaped the entire world. It would help Turkish and Armenian nationalist sentiments to feel better if they believe that somewhat they are part of that past.

The book also suffers from the theoretical explain-it-all tendency of its author. Hanioglu stresses a lot the "struggle between center and periphery" in the Ottomans. This center-periphery distinction fails to frame anything meaningful in the sense that just simple down-to-earth words would do the exact same job: the capital was very weak and as a result, other regions didn't always listen to its orders and even successfully challenged it. The same thing happened to many weakened empires in many parts of the world and scholars didn't need that mysterious and rigid "center-periphery" dichotomy as a theoretical tool to express what was happening.

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## **Phoenix says**

### **Things Fall Apart; The Centre Cannot Hold**

An astonishingly well written informative book. Hanioglu gives us an inside view of the tensions between the centralized power of the Sultanate and that of the periphery. Superficially there was one law and one template for governance however large distances, poor lines of communication, local politics and customs lead to vast differences in implementation. In most cases, after the local warlords had taken their cut,

taxation remittances flowed from the periphery to the centre - the exception being the region of Mecca where tribute flowed the other way in order to maintain the support of the Sherifians and confer legitimacy on the Sultan as Calif as he was not a descendant of Mohammed.

Militarily from the late 1700s on Turkey had done poorly in its military engagements with Russia and turned towards Europe both for allies and for guidance in modernizing its armed forces. These changes are resented by the Janissaries and Sultan Selim III is slain in a coup in 1807. Selim's cousin Mahmud II is installed as his replacement and he manages a conservative rule for the next 3 decades. In this period there is also an interesting description of British ambassador Stratford Canning from 1810 to 1858, known as "the little Sultan", who was said to have wielded more influence than most Grand Viziers and foreign ministers.

In Egypt Mehmed Ali (an Albanian) amasses a large army and suppresses a Wahabist revolt in Arabia (1811-18) and the Greek rebellion (1824-27) and establishes a powerbase, nominally subservient to the empire. In 1832 he pushes further east into Palestine and Mahmud resorts to an alliance both with Russia to restore the status quo in return a promise to close the Bosphorus to Russia's adversaries in the event of war. Mahmud was not entirely successful as the net result was that Ali controlled the Egypt, the Sudan, Crete, Syria and Jeddah in Arabia. (pp66). In 1939 the Porte turns to an alliance with Britain and Austria to push Ali back in return for reduced taxation (capitulations). Its an intriguing turning point and my complaint here is that the coverage is too brief.

In order to reflect changing interests among the various classes Hanioglu takes the interesting approach of looking at the titles of personal libraries and notes a shift from mostly religious texts in the 19th century to secular and foreign books by the early 20th. He also examines the statement of personal effects in people's wills - thus tracking which objects different segments of society thought important enough to accumulate and pass on to others.

After the Crimean War the Tanzimat reformation, in part forced on the Ottomans by the European Powers, in part driven by the sentiment of the times towards modernization, moved the empire towards equal rights for minorities, resulting in gradual attempts to establish civil courts, land reform and the abolition the jizya tax against non-Muslim minorities. The image of the empire was shifting from a collection of religious and ethnic millets under the protection (per the "Pact of Umar") of a Muslim majority to that of an Ottoman citizen. The reforms were not easily accepted, even by Christians who in Greece mourned that "the state has made us equal with the Jews. We were satisfied with Muslim superiority." (pp76). Yet the modernization impulse seems to have taken hold, both in changes of styles of dress, uniform and in popular taste where the phrase "alla Franca" indicating progressiveness was touted over "alla Turca" which symbolized being old fashioned.

The Young Turk revolution of 1908 (Ch 5 & 6), possibly inspired by the Iranian revolution of 1905/06, was based largely of Muslims from Salonica allied with key elements of the military reduced the Sultanate to a figurehead. While the elections of 1908 were considered to be fair, Hanioglu compares its rule and subsequent elections to be the equivalent of a one party "people's republic" similar to that of Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional. (pp161) However in the West the empire's influence continued to fade. European immigration, trade, imperialism and administration reduced the connection to Istanbul to one in name only and revolution in Greece and the Balkans chipped away at much of the rest.

The final chapter examines the reasons for the Empire's involvement in WW I. Initially neutral Turkey might have remained so or allied itself with either side. The reasons it did not are largely viewed as a reaction to debt, a wish to free itself from the capitulations and a desire to prevent the dissolution of its remaining territories.

As excellent as Hanioglu's account is there are 3 areas could be improved on. When discussing the various power estates of the Ottoman Empire he mentions the Porte, the army and the ulemas (religious class) but leaves out the role of the various guilds (ref: Bernard Lewis) that controlled the economic reigns and in many cases impeded progress. A second problem is that the coverage of the massacres of the Armenians in the late 19th century and the Armenian genocide itself (not to mention the ethnic cleansing of other Christian groups) is treated as a blip rather than as massive rendering of an age old social contract. Even though I can understand the potential reasons, I was disappointed. Lastly the author could have supplied some additional maps, particularly in in the earlier section of the book to show the changes in divisions of the provinces and also with regard to conquests of Mehmed Ali.

In spite of these problems IMHO a rating of 5 is an understatement. I'd consider this essential reading for the history of the 19th century, the breakup of the empire and the formation of of the modern middle east. It does help to have some previous background as the amount of detail is a bit overwhelming, however if you are interested in a particular set of years each chapter stands well as a separate unit. Highly, highly, highly recommended!

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