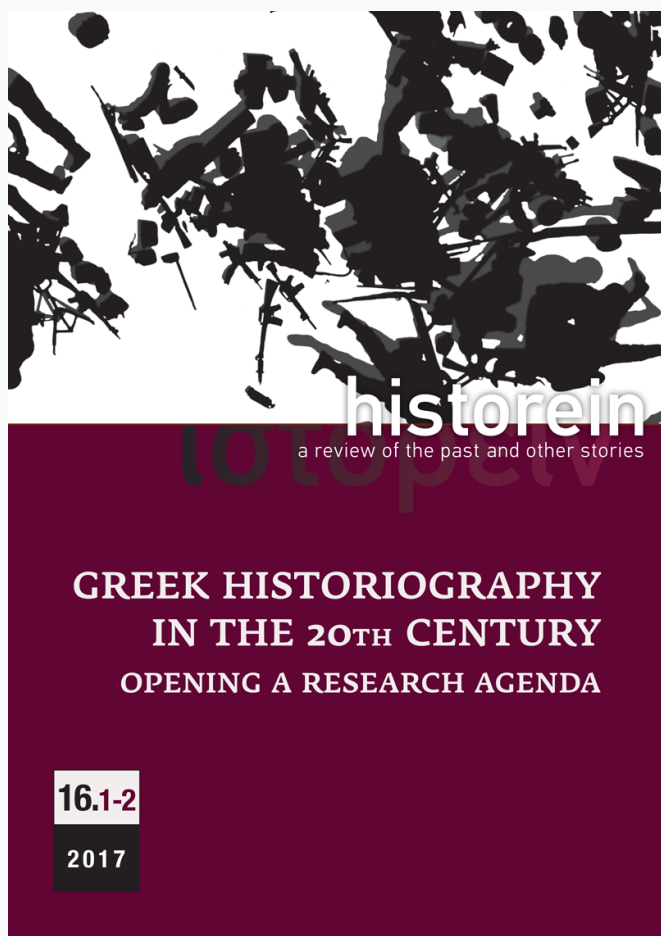


## Historein

Vol 16, No 1-2 (2017)

Greek Historiography in the 20th Century: Opening a Research Agenda



Review of Kevin Featherstone et al., Οι τελευταίοι Οθωμανοί: Η μουσουλμανική μειονότητα της Δυτικής Θράκης, 1940-1949 [The Last Ottomans: The Muslim Minority of Greece, 1940–1949]

*Leonidas Karakatsanis*

doi: [10.12681/historein.9224](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.9224)

Copyright © 2017, Leonidas Karakatsanis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Karakatsanis, L. (2017). Review of Kevin Featherstone et al., Οι τελευταίοι Οθωμανοί: Η μουσουλμανική μειονότητα της Δυτικής Θράκης, 1940-1949 [The Last Ottomans: The Muslim Minority of Greece, 1940–1949]. *Historein*, 16(1-2), 185–189. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.9224>

**Kevin Featherstone, Dimitris Papadimitriou, Argyris Mamarelis and Georgios Niarchos**

*Οι τελευταίοι Οθωμανοί:  
Η μουσουλμανική μειονότητα της  
Αντικής Θράκης 1940-1949*

*[The Last Ottomans: The Muslim  
Minority of Greece, 1940-1949]*

**Athens: Alexandria, 2013. 574 pp.**

**Leonidas Karakatsanis**

British Institute at Ankara

At the dawn of the 1940s, Western Thrace was a region where perhaps the most complex matrix of ethnic, religious, linguistic, social, ideological and political boundaries within the borders of Greece was at play. Passing from the Ottoman state to Bulgaria in 1912, to the Entente in 1919 and then to Greece in 1920 as part of its “new lands”, Western Thrace was exempted from the population exchange between Turkey and Greece, agreed to under the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. From then on, its Muslim population was *de jure* recognised as a “Muslim Minority” while at the same time the region became the recipient of a significant inflow of Orthodox Christian refugees who arrived from Turkey. As a result, during the interwar period, Western Thrace was a hub of dynamic diversity that contained all of the following: Greek Orthodox, Sephardic Jewish and Muslim indigenous populations sharing a linguistic garden of Greek, Ladino, Turkish, Pomakika (or Pomak language) and Romani; a culturally and linguistically diverse population of Christian Orthodox refugees from Asia Minor and the Black Sea that included Turkophones, Pontic-Greek speakers and Armenians; and a local administration

staffed largely by southern Greeks from the “old lands”. A sharp geographical and socio-economic contrast between the borderland rural territories of the Rhodope mountains and the urban centres of Xanthi, Komotini and Alexandroupoli was exacerbated by political dividing lines: the enduring conflict between Venizelists and anti-Venizelists as a defining factor of Greek politics, on the one hand, and, on the other, the deep strife that cut across the Muslim minority between the defenders of a traditional prenational Islam and the supporters of the secular, nationalist, Kemalist revolution.

The authors of *The Last Ottomans*<sup>1</sup> dive bravely into this regional complexity to shed light on the effects of a decade of violence and war that came to upset and reconfigure the sensitive and complex balances and boundaries of ethnic politics in the region. The convoluted map of differences presented above was exposed to significant challenges that included the entrance of Greece into the Second World War, the Axis occupation of Xanthi and Rhodope by Bulgarian forces, the emergence of the resistance and the Greek Civil War.

The book tries to penetrate this complexity through an overarching research question addressing what the authors see as a puzzle: the widespread passive reaction of the Muslim minority throughout the decade. As they document well throughout the book, the Muslim minority in its overwhelming majority abstained from either resisting or collaborating with the Bulgarian occupying forces, and tried to retain its distance from the clashing forces of the civil war: the communist Democratic Army of Greece (DSE) and the Greek National Army (EES). In other words, despite the opportunities for raising ethnic claims amid the upheaval of a decade of violence in the region (as was the case with ethnic minorities in the

Greek Macedonian region), the Muslim communities of Thrace remained largely passive.

The authors argue that the source of these attitudes should be sought in a number of factors. They include Turkey's focus on preserving its neutrality in the Second World War (a decision that restrained its active involvement as a protector of the minority during Bulgarian rule), the harshness of Bulgarian rule itself, which, combined with the unique geography of the region (squeezed between occupying forces), as well as the decision of the main Greek resistance organisations to avoid major action there, minimised the opportunities for such a development. Finally, despite the unavoidable but in most cases unwilling or even forced – as the book argues – participation of minority members in different fronts of the civil war,<sup>2</sup> this never became a war that was considered “their war”, a war *of* the minority.

The most substantial contribution of the book, though, does not stem directly from the exploration of this hypothesis, but derives from a research question regarding the effects of a decade of war on the ethnic map of the region and, more specifically, on the identity of the Muslim minority (44, 499). These effects, despite their regional or ethnic-specific character, bounced back into the main theatre of Greek national and international politics in the following decades.

Of such effects, the most significant evidenced in the book include, first, the establishment of a new ethnic map in Thrace. With the entirety of the Thracian Jewish community annihilated by the Holocaust and most of the Armenian community forced to migrate to the Soviet Union due to the widespread collaboration with the Bulgarian occupying forces, the Muslim minority and its ethno-linguistic groups became the sole actor of politics of difference in the region. The displacement of Muslim pop-

ulations, stimulated by a number of factors throughout the decade – the fear of Bulgarian rule, the effort to escape conflict areas, forced recruitment into the DSE or conscription to the EES, or the forced evacuation of rural villages by the EES – brought significant new dynamics and a new geography: the largely isolated rural Pomak population came into closer contact with the urban ethnic Turks, while the exodus of many members of the minority to Turkey created a significant Thracian diaspora in that country that played an influential role in minority politics after 1950.

At the political level, the events of the 1940s left permanent marks on the entirety of Greek society, but the effects on the politics of the Muslim minority and Western Thrace were also concrete. The consolidation of the hegemony of the modernist/nationalist Kemalist ideology over traditional Islam in the region was the first of them. At the end of the 1940s, this hegemony started steadily to expand beyond the urban or suburban Turkish-speaking Muslim communities and to have a gradual effect on the rural Pomak speakers and the suburban Roma Muslims. As the book documents, this was an outcome of the intense mobility caused by displacement, as argued above, but also a result of the key role that the Turkish consulate in Komotini played as the main point of reference or support for the entire Muslim population during Bulgarian occupation. The authors of the book also bring to light the deeply interesting history of the exposure of the rural traditional Pomak communities to the secular communist propaganda of the DSE, and the experience of rule under the National Liberation Front (EAM) in the region during the period immediately after the liberation from the Axis. It was then that a number of demands for secular-national (that is, Turkish) education and for the self-rule of the Muslim foundations were met for a short period. While the authors

themselves do not relate this development to the postwar hegemony of Kemalist ideology, it should be regarded as an experience that had its own effects on the minority.

Finally, at the end of the two wars, the Pomak-speaking Muslims had suffered the most severe conditions among the Thracian population, both during the Bulgarian occupation, when a harsh assimilation policy was directed against them, and also during the civil war, since their remote villages were in the conflict areas and became the main source of provisions and recruiting for the DSE. They therefore transformed into a group continuously caught up in a play between the politics of assimilation/proselytisation and the mistrust of almost all parties, including the Bulgarians, Greek state and DSE. The details of such practices provided in the book are very interesting, since such politics of assimilation and mistrust became a stable pattern for the Pomak-speaking population in the postwar period.

Still, in presenting the above effects, the authors are careful not to assert causality and argue for an uneven effect of the period's events on the minority. Because of the highly variable conditions across the different geographical, ethnic and class components of the population, different people were exposed to different challenges, experiences and degrees of oppression by the different forces at play. In this respect the authors document events that could potentially divide or unite populations. Among the noteworthy moments evidenced in the book is the unifying experience of all Thracian Greeks, Turkish, Pomak and Roma Muslims under Bulgarian occupation, which at that moment in time appeared to promise a future of cohabitation and mutual understanding between them.

The book overall is a really rich source of information about the 1940s in the region, drawing

from diverse archival sources (mainly Greek and British with the auxiliary use of Bulgarian and Turkish), over 60 oral testimonies of locals, and a successful effort to bring together the secondary literature written about the times in Greek, Bulgarian, Turkish and English, distilling from them valuable information about the situation in Western Thrace. Overall, the Greek translation of the book by Georgios Niarchos is of a very good standard and offers, as is the case with the English original, an engaging read. In only a few cases does the Greek translation deviate from the academic language style of the original (see, for instance, 175: "σαν να μην έφτανε αυτό") or uses some terms inconsistently (for instance, *loudaioi*/*Evraioi* for Jews [58]) without justifying the selection.

On a more critical note, though, while a really rich amount of contextual information and of primary and secondary sources are presented in the book, the authors do not manage to tame, through their analysis, the crux of the matter to which the book's title alludes; that is, the final step of the transition of the minority from a prenatal past to a context of "multiple modernities" governed by the logic of nation-state politics. While several effects of the decade of war are discussed throughout the book, the analysis seldom manages to penetrate the minority itself and whatever information there is usually remains superficial. For instance, the significant role of the Turkish consulate in Komotini, which acted, as the authors themselves admit, as a key ideological mechanism for the above transformation, only has seven pages of systematic analysis devoted to it and a few additional sporadic references, while it could well have been treated in a separate chapter. Furthermore, the authors do not manage to penetrate the debates that took place *within* the minority in regard to the different views of the ideological camps (Ke-

malists vs traditionalists), and do not gain access to the reason for the emergence of opposing strategies (the decision to migrate or to stay), or determine how ethnic and cultural elements played out on that ideological axis. The heavy reliance on Greek archival sources, and on a single newspaper of the minority with a clear ideological orientation (Kemalist and anticomunist), as well as the inability to include a wider overview of Turkish archives (the authors state that they were denied permission), has hampered their effort substantially.

There is also an uneven quality between chapters, with chapters two, three and six lacking the clarity and the more systematic juxtaposition of sources that one finds in chapters four and, especially, seven. In the latter two chapters, the contradiction between different sources or the suspected biases of some sources are carefully treated, while oral testimonies are used in combination to support the authors' findings. In the former three, circumstantial use of nonjuxtaposed sources reproduces in some cases biased arguments that have been challenged in existing literature (for example, regarding the British view on the Batak massacres as the worst bloodshed of twentieth century [75]), while in other cases significant contradictions between the sources presented are left pending. For instance, reading about the period of the EAM administration of Thrace between the liberation from the Axis and the implementation of the Varkiza agreement, the reader is exposed to conflicting narratives which, on the one hand, support the case that this was a very positive period for the Turkish minority (311–12) and, on the other hand, that it was a very oppressive one (317–18).

At the analytical level, one of the book's weak points is the lack of a framework to approach the concept of "minority". There are cases

where the term is used anachronistically (such as a reference to the Ottoman Pomaks as a "Muslim minority" [67]), and others where the term is treated narrowly as a product of the Lausanne treaty (499). While in some cases there is an attempt to juxtapose the text with literature in regards to other minorities in Europe, the efforts of the authors to explain the lack of a common or unified identity for the "Muslim minority" appears to address this normative vision as something that can be taken for granted (117–18, 499–506). In fact, the sustaining or challenging of such a normative vision is itself the outcome of a continuous complex battle for self-representation by the members of the minority themselves and interpellation by the surrounding "majorities" and the states involved (host and kin). In this respect, the conflict between Greece and Turkey for the definition of the minority as "Turkish" or "Muslim" should not be treated as a complexity that "is not helpful to analyse in the 1940s", as the authors argue (499) but, instead, as a reflection of the very nature of the minority phenomenon. The overreliance of the authors on an ethno-symbolic approach to ethnicity seems to obstruct them from adopting a subtler analysis of the issue.

Still, overall, *The Last Ottomans*, despite not reaching a depth of analysis that would justify its title, remains an indispensable source of information for a significant period characterised by shifting fidelities and crosscutting boundaries in times of war. The book and the information it brings to light is a significant resource for future research on the subject. Especially taking into account that the generation of those that lived through these events during the 1940s will gradually be gone, the documentation of their views and narratives as offered in the book represents an important link in a chain for understanding the past and present of minority politics in the region.

## NOTES

- 1 This is a review of the Greek translation, published in 2013, in juxtaposition with the original English edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). The page references are from the Greek translation.
- 2 This participation took the form of conscription as soldiers of the EES, members of the state-organised village guard system, suppliers of the DSE or members of its small Turkophone "Ottoman Brigade", led by legendary Turkish communist Mihri Belli.

**Trine Stauning Willert**

***New Voices in Greek Orthodox Thought: Untying the Bond between Nation and Religion***

**Burlington: Ashgate, 2014.  
viii + 197 pp.**

**Margarita Markoviti**

Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (Eliamep)

What should be the nature of church–state relations? And how can we conceptualise the current links between national and religious identity in Greece? How does the Greek Orthodox church, moreover, deal with the presence of “the other” in an increasingly pluralistic society? These very questions have been forcefully brought to the fore due to the unfolding of a chain of events and developments: the growing waves of migration of people of different religions (and origins), the implementation of austerity measures and the increasing levels of poverty in Greek society, and, lastly, the rise to power of the radical-left Syriza party, which purportedly bears a modernist agenda that is targeting some of the policy domains and institutions that have long defined church–state relations in Greece. Even though the largest part of her research was conducted in 2008–9, that is, before the advent of the economic crisis in Greece, Trine Stauning Willert, a modern Greek studies professor at the University of Copenhagen, critically unpacks these key questions in this book.

Willert’s book addresses the crucial issue of “religious innovation”, specifically within Greek Orthodox thought. It sheds light on a thus far unexamined and little known dimension of Orthodox theology in Greece: the theo-