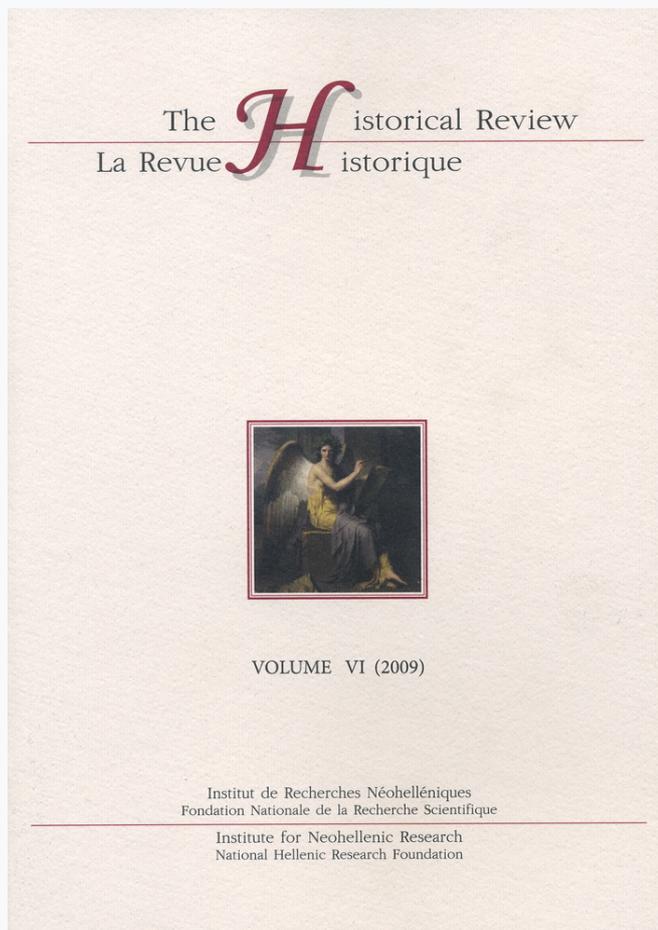


## The Historical Review/La Revue Historique

Vol 6 (2009)

The Relevance of the History of Modern Greek Society and Culture for Comparative and International History



### Greece and the Greeks in Ottoman History and Turkish Historiography

*Edhem Eldem*

doi: [10.12681/hr.238](https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.238)

#### To cite this article:

Eldem, E. (2010). Greece and the Greeks in Ottoman History and Turkish Historiography. *The Historical Review/La Revue Historique*, 6, 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hr.238>

GREECE AND THE GREEKS IN OTTOMAN HISTORY  
AND TURKISH HISTORIOGRAPHY

*Edhem Eldem*

---

ABSTRACT: Ottoman history has long suffered from the very problematic relationship it has had with the nationalist historiographies of Turkey and the successor states, including Greece. Today, Ottoman history suffers most from its inability to break free from a Turkish historiographical monopoly that reduces it to a mere caricature of the very complex object of study it deserves to be. This essay tries to analyze the potential contribution of Greek history to the emancipation of Ottoman history, while at the same time observing the difficulties created by the tendency of Greek historiography to reject Ottoman history as external or epiphenomenal to its own narrative.

---

The fiftieth anniversary of the National Hellenic Research Foundation was the occasion for a group of foreign scholars, historians to be precise, to reflect on the relevance of Modern Greek history from the perspective of their own field.<sup>1</sup> In my particular case, as an Ottoman historian or, so as to avoid any misunderstanding, as a historian of the Ottoman Empire, I would probably have to say that relevance is a serious understatement when describing the significance of Greek history to my field, whichever way I define it. Indeed, I find it impossible to even think of my area of study without referring to the multiple layers of Greek history that lie enmeshed in the fabric of late Ottoman history, and vice versa. This is something that distinguishes “my” field from other areas, especially Western history, in terms of proximity and interaction with the historical subject of Greece and Hellenic civilisation. Historians of the West can rightly claim all sorts of levels of involvement, from relevance to direct inheritance, to describe the relationship between their field and that of Greek history; none can claim, as I will, the kind of intimacy and total overlap that I find to be lying at the base of the complex relationship between Greek and Ottoman, or, why not, after all, Turkish, history.

My personal experience has shown me that Greek history is so completely embedded in what I consider to be a proper approach to nineteenth- and

---

<sup>1</sup> The present text is a rewritten version of a shorter paper read on this occasion. As such, and despite the fact that I have referenced and annotated it for publication, I consider it to be a somewhat subjective essay rather than a proper scholarly article.

twentieth-century Ottoman and Turkish history that I cannot allow myself to view it as “exterior” to my field. The commonalities, the overlaps, the crisscrossings, but also the tensions, the conflicts and the tragedies marking the two historical paths are so numerous and so intense that it becomes practically impossible to dissociate the one from the other. Just one example drawn from my personal research will probably help illustrate what I mean. I am presently working on a biography of an Ottoman high bureaucrat of the nineteenth century, Edhem Pasha (1818?-1893), who was apparently a very young survivor of the Chios massacre of 1822 – in a sense Victor Hugo’s *enfant grec* –<sup>2</sup> and who, through captivity and enslavement, eventually became one of the symbolic, if not prominent, figures of Ottoman modernisation from the 1850s on, managing to survive well into the Hamidian period.<sup>3</sup> His son, Osman Hamdi Bey (1842-1910), an intellectual and an artist, became the founding father and main promoter of “national” archaeology and museology in the Empire, with an understandable and rather predictable penchant for the Greek antiquities that had haunted the minds and fantasies of generations of European travellers, intellectuals and philhellenes. How could one treat the life and career of these two generations of Ottomans without trying to understand the relevance of the Greek component that traversed their lives in such different ways? How does one account for the fact that not a single “direct” document exists that would enable us to link the father to his Chian origins, or even allow us to ascertain that he spoke Greek, while the son was known to take some pride in his Greek ancestry and bragged about it in the educated circles of the city, among whom some local Greeks of some standing reported on this with no less satisfaction?<sup>4</sup>

This should not be taken as a simplistic and nostalgic lament for a lost world of ethnic communion and cultural synthesis. Already then, things were much more complicated, if one considers that Edhem Pasha seems to have made it a point to erase any possible trace that could lead people back to his

---

<sup>2</sup> “L’enfant”, Victor Hugo, *Les Orientales*, Paris: Gosselin et Bossange, 1829.

<sup>3</sup> My hope is to fill the noted absence of a proper biography of this Tanzimat bureaucrat. To this day, the best biographical account of his life and career is still İbnülemin Mahmud Kemal İnal’s “İbrahim Edhem Paşa”, *Osmanlı Devrinde Son Sadrazamlar*, Istanbul 1940-1953, Vol. II, pp. 600-635.

<sup>4</sup> George Zarifis, for example, noted that Osman Hamdi would tell the story of his father’s capture and claim that he was of Chian descent, more specifically from the Skaramanga family (George L. Zarifis, *Οι αναμνήσεις μου. Ένας κόσμος που έφυγε. Κωνσταντινούπολη, 1800-1920* [My memories: a lost world: Constantinople, 1800-1920], Athens: Trochalia, 2002, pp. 273-274).

origins. This was a rather naïve attempt to mask his identity, if one considers that not only European statesmen, travellers and journalists, but commoners in the streets of Istanbul knew perfectly well – or believed, considering we still do not have any hard evidence – who and what he was, to the point of nicknaming him *Deli Corci* (“Georgi the Fool”). Yet it was a significant move on his part to make sure that he provided the major biographical dictionary of the time, the “Vapereau”, with a birth date – “around 1823” – that was vague enough not to be an open lie, but that also conveniently bypassed the crucial date that would have linked him to Chios.<sup>5</sup> As to the son, Osman Hamdi, who seemed so eager to espouse the very identity his father was apparently trying to deny, it is more than likely that, rather than a desire to claim a common ancestry with millions of *Rum* subjects of the Empire, his was a romantic infatuation with an idealised vision of Hellenism, inherited from the long years he spent in Paris and, most of all, from his immersion into the world of European science and culture through his involvement in archaeology. A Greek subject of the Empire is turned into a captive and a slave through what was considered to be the rebellion of his people against authority; he is converted to Islam and transformed into a *bona fide* Ottoman bureaucrat, to the point of wanting to lose any trace of his origins; he gets an education in Paris that turns him into a fervent admirer of the West; once he starts a successful bureaucratic career, he in turn sends his own son to France to prepare him for a similar destiny; the son strays into the world of arts that eventually makes him a plausible candidate to run the nascent archaeological establishment of the Empire; not surprisingly, the son revisits his father’s origins through the lens of a Western intelligentsia enamoured with an idealised image of Hellenic civilisation...

Let me add to this confusion a reference to an interesting phenomenon observed in the correspondence between Théodore Macridy, delegated by the Imperial Museum to monitor foreign excavations on Ottoman territory, and his hierarchical superior, Halil Edhem Bey, who happened to be Osman Hamdi Bey’s brother and his deputy at the head of the Museum. This was a rather routine correspondence, consisting of informal reports on the situation in the digs he was visiting. A leitmotiv throughout this correspondence was particularly interesting and, I have to say, amusing: Macridy grabbed every occasion in his letters to make fun of a colleague back at the Museum, a

---

<sup>5</sup> “Edhem-pacha, homme politique ottoman, né vers 1823 [...]”, Gustave Vapereau, *Dictionnaire universel des contemporains, contenant toutes les personnes notables de la France et des pays étrangers*, Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1858, Vol. I, pp. 611-612.

certain Vasileios Mystakidis, who had the responsibility for the Museum library.<sup>6</sup> The joke always revolved around the fact that Mystakidis was a prude and a bigot: when Macridy found himself surrounded by Catholic priests in Baalbek, he teased that he was “competing with Mystakidis Eff. with his priests”;<sup>7</sup> writing from Sidon, he joked that Mystakidis would probably resent his sending a funerary inscription in honour of “ΟΦΕΜΙC, protector of young and light adolescents” for deciphering, as it could well “belong to an inhabitant from Sodom”;<sup>8</sup> at Boğazköy, he remarked that Mystakidis would have certainly demanded his excommunication because he had worked on Easter Sunday;<sup>9</sup> less than a month later, when he discovered a Hittite jar with a cross pattern, he wrote: “My friend Mystakidis would call it blasphemy to have a cross before Christ!”<sup>10</sup> Anecdotes and trivia, certainly, but what a way of displaying the multilayered complexity of a world that was all but trivial! A secular Greek mocking a pious Greek in his correspondence with a Turk, who happens to be the son of a “former” Greek, all of this in French, of course, and within the larger context of a civilising mission of science and history embedded in a museum which was in great part devoted to the study and display of the Hellenic heritage.

Which Turkish history – or for that matter, which Greek history – could – or would be willing to – account for such complexity? True, much of what I have described above belongs to a rather restricted world that is already marginalised with respect to the dominant political or ideological currents of the time. One other fascinating but marginal dimension of this complexity is that of the somewhat understudied currents of Helleno-Ottomanism or Byzantino-Ottomanism, represented by a small number of intellectuals and high bureaucrats who espoused one form or another of a utopian dream of togetherness and political cooperation as an ultimate, and somewhat desperate, effort at salvaging what was left of the Empire without falling for the “national” solutions advocated by most. Yet even at a much more mundane level, if one were to study the basic dynamics of Ottoman society in the nineteenth century, a more demotic form of coexistence – I dare not use the term cosmopolitanism – would necessarily emerge at practically every

---

<sup>6</sup> On Mystakidis, see N. Eleopoulos, “Βασίλειος Μυστακίδης” [Vasileios Mystakidis], *Δελτίον Μεγαλοσχολιτών Εκδιδόμενον υπό του Συνδέσμου Μεγαλοσχολιτών* (January 1940), pp. 50-55.

<sup>7</sup> Macridy to Halil Edhem, Baalbek, 1/14 August 1902. Author’s collection.

<sup>8</sup> Macridy to Halil Edhem, Sidon, 22 July 1904. Author’s collection.

<sup>9</sup> Macridy to Halil Edhem, Boğazköy, 27 May 1907. Author’s collection.

<sup>10</sup> Macridy to Halil Edhem, Boğazköy, 10/23 June 1907. Author’s collection.

level. This is probably most obvious in those cities and environments that are characterised by a relatively high degree of ethnic and religious diversity. Indeed, how can one even claim to be writing the history – social, economic, cultural... – of the Ottoman capital city without taking into account that, beyond the fact that at least one-fifth of its population was composed of Greeks, various forms of Greek language and culture were shared by an even greater proportion of Istanbul's population, regardless of their religious or ethnic background? I have tried earlier to qualify what population censuses presented as mere figures by focusing on specific social subgroups of the capital's population at the turn of the twentieth century. Thus, by using a large sample of customers of the Imperial Ottoman Bank who had invested in stocks and bonds, I was able to show that the economic weight of the Greek community of the city was much greater than its demographic weight. Against an actual presence of approximately 20% in the city's demographic makeup, Greeks constituted almost double that proportion in the "bourgeois" sample of the stock- and bond-holders I had studied; the reverse was true for Muslims, who, despite constituting half the population of the city, became a mere "minority" of less than one-fifth of the same sample.<sup>11</sup>

Did that make them any more Ottoman than we may have thought? Probably not, if we are to consider some of their cultural choices, as far as they permeate through the serial sources that are available. Again, on the basis of the same records kept by the Imperial Ottoman Bank, I have tried to "measure" some forms of cultural allegiance by looking at the script – Greek, Latin or other – that these same customers used when signing documents at the bank. The results were rather telling: only 43% of the customers signed in Greek, while 49% percent signed in the Latin script, using a Gallicised form of their name. Not a single one of them, however, signed in "Turkish", i.e. in the Arabic script. The only exceptions were a very limited number of illiterate women, who, unable to sign, used a seal that was carved in the Ottoman traditional format.<sup>12</sup> It was clear, then, that if the Greek community of the city was moving

---

<sup>11</sup> Edhem Eldem, "Istanbul, 1903-1918: A Quantitative Analysis of a Bourgeoisie", *Boğaziçi Journal: Review of Social, Economic and Administrative Studies* 11/1-2 (1997), *Istanbul Past and Present Special Issue*, pp. 53-98. For a Greek version of the same article, see *id.*, "Κωνσταντινούπολη, 1903-1918. Ποσοτική ανάλυση μίας αστικής τάξης", *Σύγχρονα Θέματα* 22/74-75 (December 2000), pp. 124-147.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*, "Signatures of Greek Clients of the Imperial Ottoman Bank: A Clue to Cultural Choices and Behaviour?", in Anna Frangoudaki and Çağlar Keyder (eds), *Ways to Modernity in Greece and Turkey: Encounters with Europe, 1850-1950*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007, pp. 60-90. For a Greek version of this article, see *id.*, "Υπογραφές

in the direction of some sort of acculturation and, eventually, a cosmopolitan direction, the reference was no longer Ottoman but rather European, most particularly French, when it came to cultural and intellectual choices.

Then again, looking at the lower side of the scale may reveal a much richer and in some ways unexpected diversity. The much understudied world of men and women of modest means, the urban poor, the rural populations and the marginal characters of port cities is likely to reveal very different forms of integration, of acculturation, of syncretism, or even of cosmopolitanism “from below”. Just browsing the pages of the impressively rich and fascinatingly unsystematic *Encyclopaedia of Istanbul* by Reşad Ekrem Koçu<sup>13</sup> reveals the existence of a whole underworld and subculture of sailors, artists, bums, prostitutes, criminals, poets and the like haunting the streets of Galata and the area of Istanbul’s harbour. Many of them were Greek – in the widest sense of the word – and much of the language that was spoken among these men and women was a mix of the local languages, among which Greek played a predominant role. True, one can hardly hope to get anywhere with this kind of impressionistic take on a world that generally escapes the gaze of the historian due to its marginality and to the fact that it is generally very poorly documented; nevertheless, I find it absolutely necessary to underline to what extent and with what ease the grand narratives of “national” history can, and in fact make it a point to, bypass such grey areas and identities that do not conform with, or fit, accepted and recognised categories.

What I have described up to this point is to a large extent an idealisation, a form of wishful thinking, too often contradicted by the harsh realities of national historiography, which relies heavily on exclusionism, exceptionalism and essentialism. Not surprisingly, although they may have totally opposite discourses, the Turkish and Greek national(ist) history-writing traditions have much more in common than their advocates would be willing and happy to admit. This common ground has to do with the most basic characteristics of the way in which these histories are perceived, in terms of their nature, their periodisation and their teleological construction. Indeed, both have in common their claim to represent the essence of their respective nations, and therefore to be essentially and exclusively Greek or Turkish. From the

---

ελλήνων πελατών της Αυτοκρατορικής Οθωμανικής Τράπεζας. Ένας μίτος για τις πολιτιστικές επιλογές και συμπεριφορές”, in Çağlar Keyder and Anna Frangoudaki (eds), *Ελλάδα και Τουρκία. Πορείες εκσυγχρονισμού οι αμφίσημες σχέσεις τους με την Ευρώπη, 1850-1950*, Athens: Alexandria, 2008, pp. 101-143.

<sup>13</sup> Reşad Ekrem Koçu, *İstanbul Ansiklopedisi*, Istanbul: Reşad Ekrem Koçu, 1944; 1958-1973.

perspective of their periodisation, too, they rely on a very similar structure, in that they are based on the idealisation of two distinctly separate destinies that intersect, in a violent way, of course, at three major points: 1453, 1821-1829 and 1919-1922. They thus manage to make sure that no real overlap exists between the two: Turkish history will make no case for Greeks between 1453 and 1821 – except for occasional references to Ottoman magnanimity towards the “minorities” – while Greek history will bypass the “dark age” of subjection to Ottoman rule under the telling term of *Τουρκοκρατία*.

The treatment that these major events gets in Turkish history is worth visiting through high school history textbooks. Of course, these supposed instruments of education and instruction are not to be mistaken with truly academic history writing or with most of the decent scholarship produced in Turkish universities. Nevertheless, I do believe that mediocre as it may be, the historical discourse of textbooks ends up being formative and/or representative of a popular understanding of national history and cannot be discarded as a mere epiphenomenon when compared to mainstream scholarly production. Moreover, one has to admit that even in the supposedly selective spheres of academic production, the remarkable persistence and longevity of some of the basic nationalist constructs allows for the reproduction of some of the crudest stereotypes, shortcuts and bypasses so typical of nationalist history writing.

To give concrete examples of this trend, one needs only to look at the most salient points of these momentous episodes of “contact” between “Turks” and “Greeks” to understand the underlying logic of the whole process. Some phenomena are extremely simple, straightforward and to a certain extent harmless. The systematic reference to “conquest” only and the absence of any relativist contextualisation to the fact that this was a “fall” to those who tried to hold the city is a very minor defect, which honestly cannot be held against the authors. So is the systematic use of the name Istanbul to describe the city, thus creating the rather naïve anachronism of giving the city a name it would acquire only *after* the conquest. True, part of the reason behind this misnomer is also the very concrete hatred felt by Republican historiography for the name Constantinople, although not with reference to its Byzantine usage, but rather to its use in European languages during the last century or so of the Ottoman Empire, in a context that was equated with the most exploitative phase of Western imperialism. It nevertheless remains true that the average Turkish high school student will see no logical fault in the use of the expression “conquest of Istanbul”, will never learn that the name Istanbul is, in fact, the phonetically deformed Greek expression “εις τὴν Πόλιν”, will

also ignore that the name Constantinople did survive as the official name of the city in the Arabic form of Kostantiniyye, and that the name Istanbul referred, until 1930, only to the central district of the whole agglomeration, the one quaintly referred to today as the “historic peninsula”.

Trivial details, which, of course are never totally innocent, but do not constitute a rewriting of history either. Interestingly enough, despite the obvious temptation to turn this into a direct confrontation between the two “nations”, 1453 in Turkish textbooks is not really as negative about the Greeks as one would perhaps expect. The reason for this is simple: in the grand scheme of things, the Greeks – the Byzantines – are the losers, and even the harshest nationalist discourse can afford to display some generosity towards the conquered. Thus, even though the narrative is full of glorifying references to Ottoman military prowess, technological versatility and to the genius of the young Sultan Mehmed II – always called Fatih (the Conqueror) – this is not generally done at the expense of the Byzantine Empire and the Greeks. In fact, quite interestingly, it appears that the real concern is not to degrade the image of the Greek, but rather to upgrade that of the Turk, which in itself is an implicit admission of a need to respond to some larger issues than the simple conflict between two nations.

The first such issue seems to be the desire to prove the humaneness of Ottoman conquest – and by extension, rule – a concern that is obviously triggered by a wish to react to the Western stereotype of the barbarian Turk. Thus a rather recent textbook devotes a whole paragraph of the section discussing the conquest to the following account:

Once the walls fell and the troops entered the city the population fled and took refuge in Hagia Sophia. Entering the city from the Cannon Gate, Mehmed II went to Hagia Sophia and said to the highest ranking priest: “I tell you and your friends and the people that from this day on you have no longer to fear my wrath with respect to your lives and freedom.” He thus gave the priority to ensuring the security of the people’s lives and goods. By granting the Orthodox the freedom of religion and faith, he obtained the support of the Christian people, while at the same time ensuring that the Orthodox did not unite with the Catholics.<sup>14</sup>

Evidently the point is to erase and oppose any kind of reference to the famous episode of the three days of plunder that followed the entry of the Ottoman army, contracting time in such a way as to present Mehmed II’s alleged order to end the sack as having taken place immediately upon his move into the city.

---

<sup>14</sup> Ahmet Başaran, Ali Sert and Lütfi İlgin, *Liseler için Osmanlı Tarihi*, Ankara: Özgün, 2007, p. 20. [My translation]

This defensive stand is indicative of a much deeper malaise than a simple antagonism between the Greek and Turkish nations and their historical narratives. One gets a clear sense that the real animosity, the one that counts most, comes from further West, from Europe, from the world that has created, developed, perfected – and is still often using – a negative portrayal of Gladstone’s “unspeakable Turk”. This narrative feeds on one of the most powerful driving forces in Turkish politics, the inferiority complex that dominates Turkish perceptions of the West. Ever since it embarked on the path of modernity through modernisation, the Ottoman Empire, soon followed by Turkey, has been constantly torn between the admiration felt for Western success and the hatred triggered by the haughty, scornful treatment they often received from Europe. For almost two centuries now, the Ottoman Empire and Turkey have thus been struggling with this uncomfortable feeling of being constantly criticised and rejected on grounds of a general incompatibility with civilisation, in general, and Europe, in particular. As a result, one can still feel the need – except for those who have decided to turn against Europe and the West – to counter criticism, clear a tarnished image, seek approval and, by and large, request acceptance and inclusion into the “civilized world”.

Not surprisingly then, the conquest of Constantinople systematically becomes an occasion to promote integration into Europe, by means of politics, culture, geography and simple chronology. The fact that this event marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the (Early) Modern Period is a typical leitmotiv, which, despite the fact that this kind of periodisation is no longer valued in Europe, gives the targeted audience the comforting impression that the Turks may have contributed to the course of world history. This would often go beyond simple chronology. The use of cannons was a signal of the collapse of feudalism; control over the entire region put pressure on the trade routes, causing Europeans to turn towards the Atlantic; and finally, the flight of Greek intellectuals to Italy was one of the prime movers behind the Renaissance...<sup>15</sup>

It takes a lot of will to come up with this kind of argument. This willingness to be included at any price – including that of being the “bad guy” – into the grand narrative of Western history is a rather telling example of this pathetic need for recognition by the West. Not surprisingly, this competition for Western favours is one of the major points of tension with Greece. The systematic way in which Greek civilisation has been viewed as the cradle of Western civilisation has

---

<sup>15</sup> Vicdan Cazgır, Servet Yavuz and Niyazi Ceyhun, *Lise Tarih 2*, Istanbul: Aykut Basım, 2008, p. 14.

always caused much resentment and envy among Turkish intellectual and political circles, especially under the Republic. Certain intellectuals, such as Cevat Şakir Kabaağaçlı – the famed “Fisherman from Halicarnassus” – tried to “hijack” this heritage by promoting an image of “Anatolia before Greece”, a stratagem that was taken up much later by Turgut Özal – or rather his ghost-writer – to promote the dubious argument that Turkey should be accepted in the European Union because Anatolia had preceded Greece...<sup>16</sup>

This also explains that the tone of the historical discourse should become more aggressive by the time of the Greek Revolt of 1821. Until then, the Greeks are rarely brought to the attention of the audience, except for some vague references to the magnanimity of Ottoman rule and the comfort enjoyed by all non-Muslim communities under Ottoman rule. In that sense, the Greeks will start to acquire a new identity, that of back-stabbing traitors trying to carve out a Greek state from the Ottoman domains with the help and complicity of the Great Powers. This last point is particularly important, since it illustrates perfectly the duplicity of the West, combined with the growing impact of philhellenism. The narrative of the decade or so is reduced to its essentials: the impact of the French Revolution on the birth of nationalist ideology; the efficiency of Greek propaganda in Europe and the Greeks’ close involvement in international trade; the rise of philhellenism in the West; the mobilisation of Russian diplomacy and military power in favour of Greece; the defeat of Navarino; and the dubious support provided by Mehmed Ali Pasha of Egypt.<sup>17</sup> Some textbooks give a detailed account of the consequences of this event, stretching the whole matter back and forth in time according to the needs of the discussion. One such case is particularly interesting for it devotes two whole pages to a refutation of the Greek identity of the Pontus Empire, followed by another two pages anticipating the conflicts that would oppose the Ottoman Empire to the newly founded Kingdom of Greece throughout the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth.<sup>18</sup>

I have no intention to engage in more of this masochistic and self-flagellating *mea culpa* of Turkish national (and nationalist) historiography. I know that the phenomenon has often enough been described and criticised both inside

---

<sup>16</sup> On this issue, see Étienne Copeaux, *Une vision turque du monde à travers les cartes de 1931 à nos jours*, Paris: CNRS, 2000; Edhem Eldem (with Feride Çiçekoğlu) *La Méditerranée turque*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2000; Turgut Özal, *La Turquie en Europe*, Paris: Plon, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmet Mumcu, *Yeni Programa Gore Liseler İçin Tarih III*, Istanbul: İnkılâp Kitabevi, 1992, pp. 142-144; Başaran *et al.*, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, pp. 105-106.

<sup>18</sup> Cazgır *et al.*, *Lise Tarih*, pp. 52-57.

and outside Turkey. I know also that many of my Greek colleagues would be eager to reciprocate by showing to what extent Greek national (and nationalist) historiography has often managed to transform Greek presence under Ottoman rule into a discourse of proto-national victimisation and martyrology, sometimes going as far as squeezing four centuries of history into the non-historical dark age of an undifferentiated and opaque *Τουρκοκρατία*. Nor do I have any real hope of seeing all these clichés and stereotypes disappear overnight; I find it rather naïve to hope that decades, if not centuries, of ignorance and exclusion can simply be wiped away by a positive and constructive political attitude. I think it is telling enough to observe that the rather successful political and cultural rapprochement of the past two decades between Greece and Turkey has been erected on a conscious focus and emphasis on common features and similarities between the two nations. Effective and efficient as this may be, this *shish kebab-souvlaki* policy of mutual empathy based on resemblance has the major defect of assuming implicitly that the “other” is acceptable only as long as s/he resembles you. One can perfectly understand the logic and even the legitimacy of this attitude, but historical research cannot afford to fall into the trap of such selective and falsely ecumenical tactics. Historians cannot avoid tackling sensitive or even painful issues alongside the evident necessity and advantages of investigating the sources and circumstances of a shared history. The nation-state is incapable of understanding the empire; indeed, I would even say that the nation-state is to a large extent based on the negation of the empire. One can hardly expect, then, that a nation alone could do justice to the complex historical fabric of an empire. That is precisely where alternative historical perspectives and narratives can hope to bring variety against uniformity, and sophistication against oversimplification.

Sophistication against oversimplification: that is exactly the line of thought I would like to try to explore through a rapid discussion of the most basic terminology that pertains to the domain and period I am concerned with. My article on the signatures of Greek clients of the Imperial Ottoman Bank, which I mentioned earlier, was based on a sample consisting exclusively of those clients who were of Greek cultural identity and of Ottoman nationality, in other words, those which the Ottoman jargon of the time would have called *Rum* in Turkish and *Ρομός* in Greek. Yet, as my article was written in English, those subtle differences were lost behind the rather flat term of “Greeks”, with the awkward possibility of calling my group “Ottoman Greeks”, in contradistinction to “Greek nationals”, “Greek subjects” or simply “Hellenes”. As a result, when this volume was published in Greek the following year, the term “Greek customers” in the title of my article was directly translated as “ελλήνων

πελατών”, which, obviously, does not really correspond to the identity of the group I was focusing on. There was no risk that this should have resulted from an overzealous attempt by the translator to “assimilate” Ottoman subjects into the Greek nation; quite the contrary, judging from the use made of *Ιστανμπούλ* in the text, it seems pretty clear that if there was any form of excess, it was clearly in the direction of political correctness toward a potentially touchy Turkish author... The whole confusion would have perhaps been avoided if I had written my article in Turkish and if the translator had been confronted by the word “*Rum*” instead of “Greek”. But in more general terms, this denotes the existence of a complex historical context, whose major categories and definitions are somewhat incompatible with those that have been created by a less sophisticated, more straightforward perception of reality. A complex set of sometimes overlapping identities have been literally bulldozed into national uniformity by the simplistic and pragmatic discourse of the nation-state.<sup>19</sup>

One has to admit that this problem is particularly present in the case of identities linked in one way or another to the Greek world. If Modern Greek narratives have a propensity, innocent or not, to collapse and drown other identities, including *Rum*, into a teleological construction of Hellenic identity, the exact reverse is true of the Turkish practice, which tends to extend its former imperial domination by expanding the use of the term *Rum* well beyond its original scope. The popular use of the term to describe all Greeks, its official usage for Greek Cypriots or the frequent qualification of the Greek language as *Rumca* instead of *Yunanca* are typical examples of the way in which Turkey exerts, sometimes unwittingly, but most of the time quite knowingly, its imperial semantics into the contemporary era. The same risk exists with respect to the amalgamation of Turkish with Muslim, but with much lesser consequences. In my work, I can easily avoid calling Ottoman Muslims Turks, even though many of them were likely to use that term when they spoke any Western language and conformed themselves to the nametags developed in Europe. But even if I did – as many Turkish or foreign historians do – call them Turks, the risk of confusion would be relatively low, since there was no entity called Turkey, other than the Empire itself in the European terminology of the time, that would really claim to have a “Turkish” population. What makes the Greek case particularly problematic but equally fascinating is the multiplicity of formal identities and of allegiances that such a name can evoke: Greeks of

---

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Dimitris Livanios, “The Quest for Hellenism: Religion, Nationalism and Collective Identities in Greece (1453-1913)”, *The Historical Review / La Revue Historique* 3 (2006), pp. 33-70, and particularly pp. 68-70 on “The Difficult Cohabitation of ‘Hellenism’ and ‘Romiosyne’”.

the Empire – *Rums* – by language, by creed, by culture (any or all of them) and Greeks of Greece – Hellenes – by the same criteria plus the novelty of citizenship, with all its political, cultural and ideological implications. Who belongs where? It is practically impossible to say, as allegiances or identities can be overlapping, as in the case of many *Rum* subjects of the Empire who obtained Greek citizenship. Does that put an end to their former identity and turn them overnight into Hellenic subjects? Are those who do not chose that option Greeks with a false consciousness, or Ottomans that view their relation to Hellenism in a different way? In a purely speculative perspective, should we think of the Greeks under Ottoman rule from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries as the ancestors of the Greeks who would break away from the Empire and liberate the Greek State, or as those of the Ottoman Greeks who decided to stay until they were exchanged in the 1920s?

Unfortunately, Turkish historical scholarship has little, if any, intention of answering these questions, not to mention its incapacity to handle the material that is likely to provide such an answer. And yet, we need to be able to address these complex issues beyond the oversimplification of national paradigms and historical constructs. In that respect, I do believe that Ottoman history is too serious a matter to be left to Turkish historians alone. I would have liked to be able to say that Turkish historians *cannot* write Ottoman history alone, but that would not be true, for the problem is precisely that they *have* been writing this history on their own when others just watched or simply did not really care. The correct way of putting it, therefore, would rather be to say that Turkish historians *should not be allowed* to write Ottoman history alone. The single-handed monopoly they have exerted over this domain has already done enough harm as it is; I believe it is about time somebody put an end to it. The complexity of the Ottoman past has too long remained unclaimed by those who could have turned it into something other than a glorified prelude to a unilinear and oversimplified narrative of the history of the Turkish nation, much like Greek historians have been prone to give Modern Greek history a post-colonial touch. Neglecting, ignoring or refuting the Ottoman past is not a solution anymore, now that the obsession with nation-building is – or should be – over and done with. What needs to be done is for non-Turks to reclaim their part of the heritage, their share of the Ottoman past, however painful this may be. At any rate there is no doubt that such a process would most of all cause a traumatic feeling of loss among those Turks who believe they have a rightful monopoly over what they have gradually and inexorably transformed into a “national” heritage.

I am not a nostalgic who dreams of bringing back, glorifying or simply rehabilitating the Ottoman Empire. I do believe, however, that the Empire is worth revisiting, and that a multiple take on Ottoman history, one that would reflect to some extent the complex diversity of its society and communities, would certainly help us save this legitimate object of historical study from the sterile uniformity that has been invading it since the Turks and Turkey decreed it to be their exclusive turf, while others, including Greece, chose to simply ignore and discard it as being unrelated and irrelevant to their own historical constructs. In doing so, that is in breaking the Turkish monopoly over Ottoman history, a major role falls onto the shoulders of Greek historians and researchers. The last decade or so has already shown that there is a strong tendency in this direction. Very serious examples of excellent scholarship with a direct focus on, and a precious contribution to, Ottoman history have been produced by a number of scholars, research centres and universities in Greece. For a number of reasons, Turkish scholarship seems to be lagging behind with respect to its capacity and willingness to abandon its very centralist perspective of Ottoman history, a phenomenon that can be felt with respect to the treatment of practically every peripheral region or population of the Empire. Recently, however, very encouraging signs indicate that this situation is changing thanks to the interest shown by a number of young scholars and doctoral candidates in revisiting Ottoman history through the lens of those very communities that were until then, at best, treated as a mere embodiment of imperial diversity. It would be naïve to expect these changes to have an immediate impact on mainstream historiography on either side of the divide, especially with respect to its most popular and populist expressions in the domains of public education and the mass media. Nevertheless, the new trends observed in some of the scholarly historical research and writing in Greece and Turkey seem to indicate that a serious, and hopefully irreversible, movement has started in the direction of the emancipation of Ottoman history from nationalist historiographies.

*Boğaziçi University*