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Turkey 1908–1914: Biographical Approaches

Conference at the University of Zurich, 13–15 November 2008

Program: www.hist.uzh.ch/lehre/neuzeit/kieser/tagung2008.html.

To say that the period between 1908 and 1914 represents the “best of times and the worst of times” in the history of the Ottoman Empire would be neither hyperbole or melodramatic. These critical years that preceded the establishment of the Republic of Turkey do represent, simultaneously, a time of unparalleled optimism and crisis in the evolution of the Ottoman state. The Young Turk Revolution, which was consummated on 24 July 1908, ushered in a powerful wave of rising expectations and hope for both large sections of the empire’s political elite and broad swaths of the population. With the reinstatement of the constitution of 1876, notables and commoners alike anticipated the materialization of the sort of political and social reforms they as individuals or as members of larger collectives had been denied under the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II. It is against this historical backdrop that the participants of met.

Over the course of the three-day conference *Turkey 1908–1914: Biographical Approaches*, scholars based in Europe, Turkey and North America presented a variety of perspectives on the men and women who helped shape and interpret the events that transpired during this critical period in Ottoman history. The goal of these proceedings, in the words of the organizer, Hans-Lukas Kieser, was to address “the hopes, fears, trends, doctrines, fraternizations and polarizations expressed against the backdrop of the crucial quest for the Ottoman Near Eastern future”. Participants of the conference introduced multiple figures representing a broad range of experiences, professions and cultures befitting the diversity of the Ottoman Empire. Through this smattering of historical voices, ranging from religious figures, ideologues, revolutionaries, parliamentarians, journalists, novelists and assassins, the conference underscored the connection between the sheer multiplicity of conflicting view points during these years of revolution and the

intense violence and upheaval that would mark the end of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the modern Middle East.

The core thread that bound all the papers presented in Zurich was the dissonance between representation, understanding and reality among the participants and observers of the post-revolutionary period. As one turns towards the inner leadership and those who would become the most vocal advocates for revolutionary reform, it seems clear that personal and corporatist interests were paramount in determining the perceptions and implications of the Young Turk movement. The leaders of the Young Turk movement, representing a new vanguard of state-centered interests, set forth a program after July 1908 that would comprise a series of top-down reforms aimed at centralizing and revitalizing Istanbul's sway over its troubled empire. This authoritarian approach would ultimately come at the expense of notables and activists residing in the provinces. For many of these provincial leaders, the revolution was seen as an opportunity to specifically address localist crises and concerns. By 1914, war and occupation would put an end to any form of participation in the revolution as these one-time imperial notables found themselves members of newly established nation-states (for example Albania) or European colonies (for example Libya and Egypt). For those who remained in the Ottoman lands after the outbreak of the First World War, provincial notables were presented with a crushing choice between unquestioned support for the Young Turk regime or increasingly fruitless negotiation over the meaning of a new revolutionary order.

Many noted Armenian personalities had embraced the revolution as an opportunity to establish a partnership with the new regime in the hopes of both addressing the future of the Ottoman state and the welfare of the empire's Armenians. But for them and other former backers of the Young Turk order, there was simply no choice to be had despite even the most sincere commitment to the Ottoman state. For Ottoman Armenians in particular, who were seen by the Young Turk regime as incurably disloyal to the revolutionary order, the onset of the First World War would result in their near total removal and liquidation. In surveying not only the establishment of the Kemalist regime but also the twists and turns that the Turkish Republic would take in the decades following Atatürk's death, it would appear that the authoritarianism, secrecy and violence associated with the Young Turk ascendancy has had the most lasting imprint upon Anatolia. This conclusion appears in part natural since the primary engineers and retainers of the Young Turk period would come to populate and shape the early Republican administration.

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