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Ottoman Impact on Europe

The Ottoman Impact on Europe, Paul Coles, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.

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There is much evidence that during the 15th and 16th centuries the peasant populations of the Balkans and central Hungary often welcomed and frequently assisted the Ottoman advance. The explanation lies in the more primitive and less exacting character of Turkish feudalism in comparison with its European counterpart. The methods and attitudes of the hereditary gentry and nobility of Serbia, Bosnia and Croatia in the 15th century and of Hungary in the 16th were distinguished from those current in central and western Europe only by a greater degree of brutality. Ottoman feudalism, in contrast, was based on the social institution of the timar, an uninheritable fief made over to the sipahi, the mounted warrior, in return for his services in war. From the point of view of the peasants the advantages of this system were considerable....

The uninheritable character of the timar,...made the Ottoman sipahi far less interested than his Christian counterpart in making increased provision for his descendants by such practices as rackrenting.

There was therefore less opportunity and incentive for landlords to practice extreme exploitation than in European feudalism. They were further inhibited, at least until the seventeenth century, by the absence of manorial courts on the western model. Judicial administration was monopolized by a watchful and omnipotent central government whose agents at all levels were usually slaves of Balkan origin who retained a residual loyalty to and compassion for the village societies from which they sprang...

Certainly the child tribute exacted from the remote regions of the western Balkans, which maintained the manpower of the imperial household and the janissary corps from the 15th century until its discontinuation in 1638, occasioned comparatively little resentment. This is understandable if we contrast the conditions and opportunities of life in the royal training establishments of Constantinople with the miseries and privations of Bosnian and Albanian village existence.

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If the condition of the peasantry in the Turkish-occupied Balkan and Danubian lands deteriorated in the course of the 16th century, it probably remained--with the exception of central Hungary, which was exposed to particular afflictions--superior to that of the serfs in most Christian states of eastern and central Europe.

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Especially notable, when contrasted with the missionary passion and sectarian intolerance of contemporary Europe, was the very high degree of religious toleration accorded to their alien subjects. Islamization proceeded slowly in the Balkans, where the process of conversion

seems to have been linked much more closely to the considerations of private social or economic advantage--particularly the anticipation of freedom for the convert from certain forms of taxation or obligatory government service-- than to any strenuous proselytizing policy followed by the Ottoman administrators. On the other hand, the very absence of an energetic policy of conversion perpetuated a gulf in religious sensibility and practice between Christian subjects and Moslem rulers. This fundamental lack of sympathy and contact between the two groups, 'who met', according to one historian, 'only in vice', was to prove in the long run, fatal to the Turkish prospects of establishing their power permanently in south-eastern Europe.

Visions, which may still be current in popular imagination, of the Christian peoples of the Balkans languishing in total and hopeless subjection to bloodthirsty conquerors are the products either of the propaganda put out at the time by the spokesmen for 'crusading' interests, notably the Hapsburgs and the papacy, or of a modern tendency to impose on the sixteenth century a picture of the situation derived from the very different conditions of the nineteenth, when the dying Ottoman Empire was desperately seeking to stamp out the flames of Balkan nationalism. These are grotesque caricatures of the truth. Yet recent historians, rightly searching for a more balanced verdict, have perhaps allowed themselves to be over-impressed by the evidence that in many areas the Turks were welcomed as liberators rather than feared as aggressors.

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The impression of the Turks current among the sixteenth-century Europeans varied from class to class and from country to country. We have seen how the Turks were frequently welcomed as liberators by Balkan peasants and GREEK ISLANDERS. But these were populations belonging to cultures which were already half-eastern in character, habituated over generations to the proximity of the Ottoman empire and subject to severe economic exploitation by their European masters. Echoes of their readiness to accept Ottoman rule were heard in some towns in mainland Italy, in Ancona in 1480 and in Ravenna during the early sixteenth century, when a deputy from the city told Cardinal Giulio Medici, the papal legate: "Monsignore, if the Turk comes to Ragusa we will put ourselves in his hands.' This was a desperate final resort of medieval communal patriotism in the face of the centralizing policy of the Renaissance popes.

In general, as one moved westwards into the heartlands of European society the Ottomans became increasingly the object of loathing and fear. The apparently irresistible progress of their arms contributed to the profound and superstitious pessimism which marked the popular psychology of the age...

It was, indeed, as a crowning tribulation willed by a wrathful God upon backsliding Christian peoples that Martin Luther, who knew better than most how to play on the fears and bewilderment of a mass audience, pictured the Turks in his War Sermon of 1529....

The reaction of many influential and articulate men was equally emotional. Authors and clerics revived and refurbished the diatribes against the infidel which had characterized the period of the Crusades. The Turks, it was argued, were beyond the pale, not merely of Christianity but of civilization itself. Cardinal Bessarion, writing to the doge of Venice after the fall of Constantinople, set the tone for a century of abuse:

A city which was so flourishing...the splendour and glory of the East... the refuge of all good things, has been captured, despoiled, ravaged and completely sacked by the

most inhuman barbarians...by the fiercest of wild beasts..Much danger threatens Italy, not to mention other lands, if the violent assaults of the most ferocious barbarians are not checked.

The tradition was maintained and extended to a popular audience during the sixteenth century by the crude war propaganda of Bartholomew Georgievich of Croatia, whose best-selling 'Miseries and Tribulations of the Christians held in Tribute and Slavery by the Turks' (1544) appeared in many editions and numerous languages....

Medieval writers had been able, with no sense of absurdity, to envisage 'the World's Debate' as a conflict between Islam on the one hand and the 'common corps of Christendom' on the other. 'Christendom', had always been a term more expressive of ideals and aspirations than of realities. The political and religious developments of the 15th and 16th centuries finally drained it of significance. Not only was the term empty; worse, it was embarrassing.....

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This transition from 'Christendom' to 'Europe' from a religious to a secular term of identification, did not involve the elimination of the Christian element. Profession of the Christian element was still a necessary--and in the eyes of the most people much the most important--part of being European. The real extent of the change can perhaps best be conveyed by recalling the title of the first volume in the series of which this book forms a part. Professor Trevor-Roper's theme was 'The Rise of Christian Europe'. Turkish pressure during the late 15th and 16th centuries stimulated a process of self-examination which led members of the societies concerned increasingly to identify themselves and to distinguish themselves from the Ottoman enemy by reference to the second rather than the first term of Professor Trevor-Roper's equation.

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A small number of level-headed commentators refused to join in the general chorus of European denunciation of the Turks. Most of these were diplomats who had crossed the frontiers of the Ottoman world and had seen for themselves, or scholars capable of making a dispassionate study of the development and structure of the Turkish empire. Notable among them was Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Imperial ambassador at Constantinople from 1554 to 1562, who wrote with open admiration of the Ottoman military and administrative system:

It is by merit that men rise in the service, a system which ensures that posts should be assigned only to the competent.. Those who receive the highest offices from the Sultan are for the most part the sons of shepherds or herdsmen, and so far from being ashamed of their parentage, they actually glory in it, and consider it a matter of boasting that they owe nothing to the accident of birth; for they do not believe that high qualities are either natural or hereditary, nor do they think that they can be handed down from father to son, but that they are partly the gift of God, and partly the result of good training, great industry, and unwearied zeal...Among the Turks, therefore, honours, high posts, and judgements are the rewards of great ability and good service...

This is the reason that they are successful in their undertakings, that they lord it over others, and are daily extending the bounds of their empire. These are not our ideas, with us there is no opening left for merit; birth is the standard for everything; the prestige of birth is the sole key to advancement in the public service.

Machievelli had accustomed Europeans to regard war as a natural relationship between states and to venerate the martial practices of the ancients. His humanist successors singled out the Ottoman military arrangements for special praise. Paolo Giovio in his 'Turcicarum Rerum Commentarius' of 1539 wrote: 'Their military discipline has such justice and severity as easily to surpass the ancient Greeks and Romans.'

In contrast, it was the quality of Ottoman civil administration which impressed the French diplomat, Phillipe du Fresne-Canaye....

For Jean Bodin, whose 'Six Books of the Republic' (1576) was composed during the bitterest phase of the French Wars of Religion, toleration was the chief Turkish claim to admiration and respect:

The King of the Turks, who rules over a great part of Europe, safeguards the rites of religion as well as any prince in this world. Yet he constrains no one, but on the contrary permits everyone to live according as his conscience dictates. What is more, even in his seraglio at Pera he permits the practice of four diverse religions, that of the Jews, the Christian according to the Roman rite, and according to the Greek rite, and that of Islam.

There are elements of exaggeration and misinformation in these panegyrics. Commentators like Busbecq and Bodin were perhaps more concerned to promote reforms at home than to provide a wholly accurate picture of Ottoman customs. They represented nevertheless an important section of minority opinion which refused to be stamped into conventional hysterical abuse.....

All empires are to some extent plunder machines, but few have matched the thoroughness and deliberation with which the Ottomans pursued this objective. And in none has the assimilation and employment of alien manpower been carried to such lengths.....

Khurrem, the favorite wife of Suleiman the Magnificent and mother of Selim II, was a south Russian. Selim II's favorite consort came from a Greek family of Corfu....

Note: I am including Coles' negative comments so that the readers do get an idea as to the tone of the book.

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The Turks practiced a high degree of religious toleration, whereas European governments did not. The Turkish military and economic systems provided men of obscure origin with avenues of rapid social and political advancement, whereas Europe did not. The Ottoman empire was a lavish provider of booty for daring and resourceful employees. This attractive power was recognized and understood by European contemporaries....

In 1573 a French nobleman, Phillipe du Fresne-Canaye, accompanied the ambassador, Francois de Noailles, to Constantinople...Du Fresne was present at a review of the new fleet before its departure to action stations in the Aegean. From his account it is evident that the master planner was the Grand Vizier, Mehemet Sokolli, himself a slave of Bosnian Christian origins. The details of constructing, provisioning and manning the galleys were entrusted to the newly appointed Grand Admiral or 'Pasha of the Sea', Ucchiali, sometime viceroy of Algiers. When the armada sailed it was commanded by Piali, the 'Second Pasha'. The rearguard squadron was commanded by Hassan Agha, treasurer and paymaster of the fleet.

Ucchiali was a Calabrian, Piali a Hungarian and Hassan a Venetian renegade....

To 'turn Turk' did not necessarily mean the end of all friendly contact with one's homeland. The correspondence, preserved in the State Archives of Genoa, of Battista Ferrari, 'agent' of the republic in Constantinople from 1562 to 1567, includes for the year 1564 alone detailed reports on Ottoman diplomatic activity and naval preparations from 'Mocat Aga', 'Mostaffa Rais', and 'Ferrato Beij', all three renegade Genoese in the sultan's service. Some renegades returned to Europe after a period in Ottoman pay....

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Refugees provided a second stream of European emigration into Turkish society. The moriscos, the forcibly converted Moorish New Christians of Spain, fled in considerable numbers to the North African pirate kingdoms. But the most important refugee group was that of the Iberian Jews. The career of one of these, Joseph Nasi, is worth following in some detail...

The religious bigotry of the Iberian powers found expression during the late 15th century in a policy of expulsion and enforced conversion. Joseph Nasi was born about 1520 into a family of Jewish merchants and physicians who were expelled from Spain in 1492 and underwent forcible conversion in Lisbon in 1497. The establishment of the Inquisition in Portugal...decided the widowed matriarch Gracia Nasi to remove...Joseph to Antwerp. Joseph became a wealthy and respected businessman...He was knighted by Charles V and befriended by Charles' nephew, the future Emperor Maximilian II. A revival of racial prejudice and increasing suspicion that the Christian professions of the Nasi family were more formal than sincere obliged them to migrate to Venice in 1544....to Constantinople in 1553. Joseph joined them.. and immediately declared himself a convert to Judaism. In the years which followed he became famous as a merchant specializing in the wine trade, as a trusted diplomatic advisor to the Ottoman government and a lavish patron of Hebrew literary circles in Constantinople and Salonika...A period of considerable influence and power opened with the accession of his friend and patron Selim II to the throne in 1566. Selim named him the Duke of Naxos, a fief which comprised a cluster of a dozen Aegean islands of considerable commercial and some strategic importance. He built up a network of diplomatic and commercial contacts in Poland, Moldavia and Wallachia. Selim later granted him the monopoly of wine imports to Constantinople. At court he was a prominent member of the war party which maintained the tradition of Khairaddin Barbarossa, preaching ceaseless hostility against all Catholic Mediterranean powers. He aspired to the throne of Cyprus when Ottoman forces invaded the island in 1570.

Joseph Nasi's influence waned after the conclusion of peace with Venice in 1573 and the death of Selim in 1574, when he retired... His role of courtier, businessman and foreign policy adviser was promptly assumed by another Jew, a refugee of German origin, Solomon Nathan Ashkenazi, Allaman Oglu to Turkish chroniclers. But the tide of Ottoman favor was running out for European Jewish refugees...Their ascendancy had depended on two advantages which they brought with them to Constantinople; continuing contacts with friends, relations and commercial agents..and possession of certain technical and financial skills...

As the years passed, the closeness of their European contacts and hence the accuracy and reliability of their information deteriorated. Simultaneously, in the great towns and the agricultural supply centres of the empire Greek merchants of Orthodox Christian faith challenged and during the 17th century overthrew the Jewish monopoly of banking and money-lending. The Jewish community declined into subordinate status as craftsmen,

shopkeepers, pawnbrokers and quack doctors. The subject peoples of the Balkans were acquiring for themselves the skills which had enabled the refugees of European origin to perform in the Ottoman empire....

Ottomans created the modern civilization of religious tolerance and multi-ethnic, multi-religious societies and saved Europe from the narrowminded intolerant barbarity of the Middle Ages.

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THE CAUSES OF THE DECLINE

..no analysis of the temporary incapacity for further European conquest which overtook the formidable Turkish war machine and imperial system from the death of Suleiman the Magnificent to the middle of the 17th century can entirely neglect the evident decline in the personal qualities of the line of Ottoman sultans....

In Europe, the growth of bureaucracy enabled many a state of the 17th and 18th centuries to survive without serious consequences the worst eccentricities of kings who were madmen or minors....

The central importance of slavery in the Ottoman military and administrative system placed enormous powers and responsibilities of decision-making in the monarch's hands. The strongest Grand Vizier was still a creature of the sultan....

In 1569 a Turkish expeditionary force penetrated as far as Astrakhan and began to construct a canal connecting the Don with the Volga. But Russian resistance at Astrakhan, the reluctance of the Crimean Tartars to cooperate with Ottoman troops in an enterprise which, if successful, would have hemmed in the wide ranging Tartars as never before, and the deserted countryside itself, which made living off the land impracticable, combined to inflict a heavy defeat on the Turks. Of the 30,000 men who sailed from Constantinople in 1569 only 7,000 returned next spring...

The year 1570 signifies the temporary exhaustion of Ottoman capacity for expansion both in Danubian and Pontic Europe....Expansion on these eastern borders did not cease....even more impressive were the Turkish conquests in Azerbaijan and Georgia....Azerbaijan was already Moslem and the local landowners and tribal chieftains were not superseded; while Georgia remained under its Christian rulers in a condition of suzerainty analogous to that of the principality of Transylvania.....

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Under Selim II (1566-74) a quota was established for admission of janissaries' sons to the muster rolls; and in 1638 Sultan Murad IV finally abolished the traditional method of recruitment to the imperial slave household through child tribute exacted from the villages of the western Balkans. This enactment gave legal recognition to an already accomplished fact. The sons of office holders had for a long time been seeping into the privileged ranks of the royal household; all available posts could be filled without the necessity of recourse to forcible recruitment from remote Balkan villages.

This evolution of Ottoman institutions conspicuously favoured urban populations at the expense of the peasants in the heartlands of the empire. While a majority of the ruling caste was drawn from enslaved village boys vestigial sympathy for the peasant population from which they sprang held townsmen and the landlord class in check. No such charitable

sentiments affected the conduct of officials who had grown up in towns and entered the royal slave household through family influence or the purchase of office....

A wide gap thus opened between town and country. Village populations became alienated from the Ottoman establishment....

The strain imposed upon Ottoman institutions by the cessation of territorial expansion and the decline in booty income produced a long series of disturbances and palace revolution in Constantinople, usually inspired by the janissaries and other household troops or by the students and officials of the religious establishments of the city.

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The earliest sign of a reviving appetite for wars of aggression against Europeans came in the Mediterranean in 1645, when the Ottomans invaded Crete, one of the most jealously guarded remaining outposts of the republic of Venice. Turkish troops quickly cleared the Venetians from the island, but their failure to take the citadel of Candia entangled both sides in a long and painful siege war. The unimpressive military performance of the Ottoman forces in the early stages of the Cretan campaign has diverted the attention of most historians from one incidental development of far-reaching importance. Resistance was offered only by the Venetian garrison, which was supplied and reinforced from the mother-city. The Greek islanders at first welcomed the Turks as liberators from the oppressive rule of Roman Catholic Italians; then in succeeding years, they began to undergo conversion to Islam in substantial numbers.

This was a startling reversal of Ottoman experience during the sixteenth century. With the exception of the forcible conversion of Balkan slave boys recruited to staff the imperial household, the Ottomans had shown little interest during the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent and his immediate successors in spreading their religion among the conquered peoples of eastern Europe. The rigid Sunnite orthodoxy which was espoused by the government, while enjoining toleration of Christianity upon true believers, emphasized the difference between Moslem belief and that of other religions; and the proscription of fringe groups of dervish heterodoxy suppressed one of the means by which adherents of other faiths had traditionally been coaxed into acceptance of Islam.

All ecclesiastical systems experience rhythmic alternations of puritanical orthodoxy with eclectic, heterodox attitudes....

The Cretan conversions suggested that certain remote and poverty-stricken communities among the subject Christian peoples of the empire might respond to the opportunities inherent in this changed situation... This possibility was confirmed as mass conversions among the Albanian and Montenegrin mountaineers and among the Bulgars of the Rhodope mountains gathered momentum throughout the remainder of the century.

Albanian converts were destined to play a crucial role in the revival of the Ottoman empire. Avenues of advancement still lay open in the Ottoman army and administration to thrusting and capable careerists of humble peasant origin. Albanians swarmed down from their mountains in the middle of the 17th century to undertake functions which had been fulfilled during the 16th century by Bosnian and Serbian slaves.....

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Seventeenth-century Ottoman rulers in common with their counterparts in Moscow, Cracow and Vienna, had no choice but to replace plunder by regular taxes as their essential source of

supply....

...developments were the fruits of collaboration between merchants-- in Turkish Europe generally Greeks, Jews, Armenians and Serbs, with Greeks predominating in the 17th century--and enterprising landlords or local officials, and dated back to the Middle Ages in geographically fortunate and accesible regions....

The fundamental weakness of 17th century Ottoman society lay in the complete failure of mutual understanding between the governing class on the one hand and commercial and financial interests on the other, especially when measured against the societies of western Europe, where government and capital, force and money, entered into a more equable alliance based on shared values and goals which were almost totally lacking in Turkey.

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...and from 1716 Ottoman officials were making sporadic efforts to recreate Turkish armies on European models. But for more than a century the adamant conservatism of the janissaries and the ulema made every such project abortive. Changes initiated by a reforming sultan or Grand Vizier were repeatedly undone by popular riots or janissary mutinies. Recurrent rebellion at home and continued disasters in war against European powers distracted the sultans from the effort needed to strengthen their military establishment...The vast majority of Moslems were in a state of catalepsy, unable to cope either intellectually or in practice with the new conditions created by European military and cultural superiority. A blind conservatism, clinging to the crumbling landmarks of a vanishing social order, dominated the Ottoman world until well past the middle of the 19th century.