On the morning of 12 June 1826, a handful of Ottoman troops, dressed in the smart blue European-style pants and tunic of the reformed army of Sultan Mahmud II (1809-39), demonstrated their new regimental drills before a select assembly of Ottoman officers and members of the religious class in Istanbul. Within two days, this deliberate demonstration orchestrated by the Sultan provoked a massive rebellion of the traditional army, the Janissaries, who assembled to protest the imposition of the new discipline and uniforms. By the afternoon of 15 June, the rebellion was over. Well prepared beforehand, disgusted city residents and loyal combat-ready artillery troops combined to trap the remnants of the once proud organization in their barracks and mow them down. The event was publicized thereafter as the “Blessed Affair” or the “Auspicious Occasion.” Incredibly, by 1828, Sultan Mahmud II had eliminated the last of the Janissaries, and mustered thirty to forty thousand young conscripts, marching them to battle Tsar Nicholas I at the mouth of the Danube. While European observers remarked on their youth, they were even more impressed with the new disciplinary environment. These new and raw recruits defended the mountain passes to Istanbul.

This crisis of 1826-28 will serve here as a global moment to illustrate the friction, both external and internal and centre and periphery, in the Ottoman encounters with modernity and other empires. In the process, the Ottoman Empire moves from imperial power to semi-colonized client state. During this moment of severe crisis, the Ottoman dynasty

chapter 4

Ottoman Military and Social Transformations, 1826-28: Engagement and Resistance in a Moment of Global Imperialism

Virginia H. Aksan
hovered on complete collapse, eliminated an obsolete army, fought a civil war on the streets of Istanbul, and confronted the reality of enemies within, who were stimulated by the revolutionary nationalism of Greece and Serbia. Reorganizing defensive frontiers and diplomatic practice, increasing the visibility of the Sultan, reordering provincial government, and clarifying loyalty to the empire along ethno-religious lines were all new tactics for an Ottoman sovereign under siege. Such initiatives altered the dynasty’s premise of rule, and it reconfigured the social and spatial map of empire in ways that presaged or facilitated the emergence of republican Turkey after the First World War.

Inserting the Ottomans into this larger global narrative of modernity and change has proven to be an elusive task, for, as Tim Brook discusses in this volume, in the Hegelian temporal worldview that informs the writing of history, there is no room for spatial, or “timeless,” empires such as those of China, India, or the Middle East. Meaningful history, for Hegel, was that which moved towards “empires in which people could genuinely engage in the secular political life that produces real change in consciousness.”\(^2\) Hegel did not envisage a space for Asian societies, because historical authority belonged with Europe. Hence, the Ottoman Empire has remained largely undifferentiated in imperial stories, except to the extent that it is seen to have been transformed by the friction arising from encounters with European military and political ascendancy.

Many scholars, consciously or unconsciously, reformulate the progressive (liberal) nationalist narrative even as they try to interrogate it. In the Ottoman case, this might be called the “empire to nation-state” or “Ottoman to Turk” story, which each generation has massaged and formulated around the question of the liberalization and secularization of individual rights while ignoring the frictional encounters that arose in the spread of modernity.\(^3\) Ottoman sovereignty after 1800 was clearly challenged not only by continuing external threats to state security but also by internal constitutional impulses that challenged the Sultan’s right to rule. That trajectory of events has been much belaboured, but missing from the story is a better definition of the indigenous voices of discontent and their expressions of alternative paths to the modern state.

The focus here is on the ideologies of modern state organization; that is, new systems of order and discipline introduced by Mahmud II. For the sake of argument, order and discipline may be assumed to be two obligations primary to the sustainability (and survival) of empires and nation-states alike.\(^4\) Mahmud II reorganized the geography of his empire
literally and figuratively through new defensive strategies on the northern tier; he restored order after confronting, in Istanbul from 1808 to 1809, the most significant rebellion of the entire span of empire; and, after the destruction of the traditional army, he disciplined not only his new troops but also society at large. Along the way, new spaces for expressions of collective autonomy emerged along with new sources of friction, which were much contested. Ulf Hedetoft’s observation in this volume that “ideational hegemony cannot be politically ordered, imposed, or manipulated at will” because “it challenges deeply held beliefs in the benefits of ethnic, national, and local cultural autonomy” applies especially to the Ottoman population, which is deeply divided along cultural and religious lines yet remains loosely gathered under the imperial umbrella and pervasive culture of Mediterranean Islam.

The Sultan’s initiatives described here represented radical departures from the normal behaviour of the dynasty and resulted in a new understanding of Ottoman imperial space in a globalizing world. Interventions into individual lives, such as conscription, registration systems, property laws, and municipal government, are all components of Mahmud II’s transformation, which was continued by his successors. No sphere remained untouched. Examining this particular set of initiatives allows the interrogation of several autonomies: state sovereignty primarily, but also local ethno-religious communities and individuals compelled to serve in the new military. What was different about this Ottoman moment? Can that difference elucidate the dynamic of imperial autonomy in the face of the overwhelming frictions that arose from inclusion in a global economy and reconstruction of an imperial worldview?5

A Brief Rehearsal

The period from 1760 to 1841 was one of immense crisis and upheaval within the Ottoman territories. These years bracket the era when Britain cast its imperial net worldwide, though haphazardly, and begin and end with the defeat of its rival, France, the loss of the American colonies, but not the Caribbean, and the extension of control over India. The new British order, built out of a unique blend of military and industrial capitalist adventures, was underwritten by an extraordinary confidence in the legal and moral imagination of a virtuous society on a mission to improve the world. This was also the same period of the great revolutions that changed the social and political discourse of the world. All had an
impact on the impetus for reform that became an imperative for Ottoman survival.

French and British rivalries moved into the Middle East after 1750. Between 1798, when Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Alexandria, Egypt, and 1841, when the Treaty of London was signed, the French lost out to the British in the contest for control of Middle Eastern markets. After 1841 British consuls dominated their French counterparts in all the ports of the Arab world, which was drawn into the British trading system of the Indian Ocean. The wildcard of the period was Russia, whose expansionism shocked western European thinking about the future of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans fought four separate wars with the Russians in 1768–74, 1787–92, 1806–12, and 1828–29. By 1829 Russia was nominally in charge of the northern banks of the Danube, had annexed the Crimea and the northern Black Sea coast, and occupied and annexed large parts of the Caucasus. Russia had thus absorbed large and disparate communities of Christians and Muslims and achieved what it took to be protectorate status over the remaining Orthodox Christians of the empire. In the same period, Greece and Serbia gained independence, and three successive sultans were challenged by rebellious warlords in Janina (Greece), Vidin (Bulgaria), Acre (Syria), Sinop (Eastern Turkey/Caucasus), and, most significantly, Egypt, which was under Mehmed Ali from 1805 to 1848. In 1826 the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II eliminated his traditional army; in 1827 his allies, Britain and France, “accidentally” sank his (and Mehmed Ali’s) entire fleet at Navarino; in 1828 the Sultan declared a jihad and went to war against Russia with forty thousand hastily assembled new-style conscripts; and, by 1833, Russian ships and troops were in Istanbul to protect Mahmud II against his own subject, Mehmed Ali, whose son Ibrahim invaded Anatolia in 1831 and challenged Istanbul itself from 1833 to 1841. British warships, supporting the Ottomans, fired on Beirut in 1841 to bring an end to the challenge of Mehmed Ali.

**The Ottomans before 1826**

The evolution from a highly centralized to a federative military environment, the economic and military collapse that resulted, and the rebirth of the centralized army after 1826 characterize the period under discussion. Prior to 1800, Ottoman society was organized as a series of discrete orders, or loosely defined classes, such as the army, the *ulema* (scholars), and the peasantry. At the apex of the society stood the highly privileged,
centralized Janissary army, originally formed of Christian children from conquered territories, who were brought to Istanbul, raised Muslim, and became the nucleus of the ruling elite and formed the ranks of the Ottoman infantry. They were never the only Ottoman army, however. The sipahis, largely cavalrymen who were provincially based, received land in return for military service. They added roughly eighty thousand men for large campaigns. Provincial governors were appointed from the ruling elite in Istanbul; provincial judges (kadis) guaranteed that the system operated according to Muslim law, as ameliorated by sultanic prerogative, or kanun. The Sultan and his deputy, the grand vizier, stood at the apex of the system, with the Sultan, God’s representative on Earth, representing justice at the Gate of Felicity, as his court was called in the capital Istanbul. The right of appeal by the lowliest subject was repeatedly demonstrated during the Sultan’s weekly Friday procession to prayers, when he accepted petitions from one and all.

The Ottoman worldview generally divided subjects into two categories: rulers, who were untaxed (askeri, also meaning “soldier,” presumably Muslim), and ruled, who were taxed (reaya, often translated as “peasant” or “flock,” both Muslim and non-Muslim, but by nineteenth century quite often referring to just non-Muslims). Tax differentiations of the ruled were determined by religion: non-Muslims paid an additional poll tax but, it should be emphasized, were exempt from military service; or, if they served, it was as auxiliaries with tax exemptions.

By 1800 the traditional Ottoman military organization, especially the highly privileged and caste-like Janissary army, had run its effective course. Related developments contributed to the conditions: large and costly campaigns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries tended to mobilize large parts of the population of warrior communities; these communities, in turn, were not adequately reintroduced into the countryside economy. These trends led increasingly to uncontrolled, semi-nomadized fringe populations on the peripheries of empire. For self-protection, cities and outlying suburbs hired private armies. Janissaries dispatched to the provinces to restore order often merged into the countryside and competed for land and tax rights with native families. The Sultan and his bureaucrats lost control over tax revenues and developed ruinous means of financing the dynastic continuance by devaluing currency, confiscating estates of “disloyal” statesmen, and selling offices. Janissary demands in the capital were exorbitant, especially in the change of sultan, when they requested an accession price for loyalty. The palace
was increasingly isolated and insulated from both its own public and the larger, non-Muslim world. The Sultan himself, having abandoned campaigning altogether by this period, was invisible to anyone outside Istanbul. Campaigns were led by the grand vizier.

By 1800 the central government had lost control over the muster rolls of its standing army, and it had no idea as to the size of an effective force. Janissary entitlements (pay/ration certificates) were sold publicly and traded on the open market, much like the stock exchange, to whomever had the wherewithal to invest. By one estimate, some 400,000 entitlements were in circulation, but barely one in ten men could be mustered. The concentration of resources and manpower on the northern frontier to confront the Russians loosened the imperial bonds even further with the southern Arab tier of the empire. This reorientation had an impact on sources of manpower and on revenue generation. It also allowed the Arab and Kurdish dominated provinces of the empire to develop considerable autonomy, and it permitted the growth of a particular kind of centrifugal governance that would challenge the capital of the empire itself under Mehmed Ali and his son Ibrahim.

The armies fielded by the Ottomans had become largely nomadic, multi-religious and multi-ethnic warrior bands, a confederative military symbiosis that arose out of the disintegration of the janissary and sipahi organizations across the empire. The challenge to the dynasty lay in re-organizing such a federative force and sharing power, while replacing a paper army with actual troops to confront the Russians. On the northern frontier itself, the Ottoman sultans had to rely on regional armies, which were enlarged and consolidated precisely because of their usefulness against the Russians. They were organized by a series of provincial governors, essentially independent warlords, who often had forced the Sultan to appoint them into their positions.

The radical transformation enacted by Mahmud II included deploying new defensive and diplomatic techniques, going “public,” radically and violently realigning politics in both the core and periphery, and “turning Turk.” He began a process that responded to western European and Russian pressures on his military and ideological autonomy but led, as a consequence, to a radical reconfiguration of the relation between sultan and subject.
Defending the Borders and Rallying Ottoman Subjects

Imagine the Danube as defining a northern boundary arc, stretching from Belgrade to Kars in the Caucasus (besieged first in 1828, and contested thereafter till the end of the empire). After 1768 this line became the killing grounds for the Russians and Ottomans alike. The formidable Ottoman Danube fortress line fell bit by bit. Ochakov and Ismail garrisons were slaughtered by Russian troops in 1788 and 1791, respectively, while Ruschuk town and fortress were completely demolished in 1810. By 1828 Russian troops had been present (and often in occupation) in most of Moldavia and good parts of Wallachia for close to forty years.

Protracted negotiations between Ottomans and Russians from 1774 to 1829 indicate an obsession with the persistent Russian incursions into the Caucasus. Mahmud II proved particularly obdurate about surrendering further autonomy to Moldavia and Wallachia (present-day Romania and Moldova), and about the concession of any of the eastern Black Sea ports. In spite of the humiliating state of the Ottoman army, Mahmud II adamantly refused to cede those territories. He was particularly sensitive about the eastern Black Sea littoral on the Asian frontier. The two years of war, 1828 and 1829, and the Russian invasion and occupation of Kars (and Adrianople, present-day Edirne) finally forced Mahmud II to give up his ferocious diplomatic defence of the northern and eastern frontiers.

After 1828 the four fortresses of the mouth of the Danube — Varna, Ruschuk, Silistre, and Shumla — became the focus of the Sultan’s defensive strategy. Less than two years before Mahmud II’s death in 1837, he and the young Prussian officer Helmuth von Moltke toured the mouth of the Danube, starting out by steamship and continuing overland on a tour of the towns mentioned above. The purpose of the journey appears to have been largely to survey fortifications under reconstruction, but on several occasions Mahmud II also made public appearances. The Sultan reviewed the new provincial militias and addressed all the religious communities as one — as his subjects. He gave presents to the assembled schoolchildren of all the Muslim and non-Muslim schools. This public performance of sovereignty, combined with a military surveillance tour, was completely novel. He made five different trips after the 1829 treaty. Previous tours included surveys of the fortresses of the Dardanelles and all of the Gallipoli Peninsula.7
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These trips represented an effort to reincorporate territories that had just suffered extensive warfare and continued to be in danger of being lost to the empire. It was the first time a sultan had left the capital in over a hundred years, and it was unprecedented in terms of public assemblies outside Istanbul. Mahmud II provided his subjects with new public spaces, and along the way he redrew what would become the final frontier of Ottoman Europe. He embarked on extensive rebuilding on a very large scale for a nearly bankrupt empire, legitimated the work with his presence, and, by doing so, reconceptualized Ottoman public discourse and territorial boundaries. Except for speculations that his model may have been Europe, very little is known about the reasons for the initiatives or what influenced Mahmud II’s thinking in this regard.

Centre-Periphery Frictions

Public initiatives like Mahmud II’s were, however, part of a larger effort to bring disparate and highly autonomous provinces back into the imperial fold. *Fitne* (rebellion, disorder, or sedition), while deplored by the Ottoman dynasty (and by all Muslims who follow Qur’anic teaching), figured as an endemic aspect of its history. Hence *nizam* (order) was considered an obligation of sultanic rule. Many contemporary histories exhort the sultans to restore *nizam*, expressed as a return to an older, idyllic, orderly age. Sultan Selim III (1789–1807) introduced *Nizâm-ı Cedid*, or New Order, which tapped into that discourse. Janissaries, loyal servants of the Sultan, served as arbiters of his justice and, hence, of sultanic legitimacy. By the 1790s the army and police (i.e., the Janissaries) had become the locus of *fitne*. Their demands usually centred on questions of salary payment, currency debasement, and entitlement. Latterly, they protested marching to war at all, especially in the Caucasus and Iran. Their revolts in Istanbul became a regime-weakening method of restoring the balance of the traditional order, an essential check that the Janissaries made to sultanic rapacity.

The rebellions against the regimes of Selim III and Mahmud II, by contrast, resemble a civil war for the soul of the empire, fomented by the military and economic transformations underway. After the revolt, which ended in the removal of Sultan Selim III, the Danube fortress of Ruschuk became the centre of refugees from Istanbul reform circles. The refugees managed to persuade Ruschuk Governor Alemdar Mustafa of the advantage of reinstalling Selim III, by force if necessary. Alemdar
Mustafa joined Grand Vizier Çelebi Mustafa in Adrianople, and in mid-July 1808 he and the grand vizier marched on Istanbul with fifteen thousand troops, restored order to the city, and eliminated much of the opposition. This event was completely novel in Ottoman annals. Revolts were endemic to the city, but relief by a combined imperial and provincial army was previously unknown. Selim III died in the events, but Alemdar Mustafa enthroned Mahmud II and made himself grand vizier.⁸

What is striking in this unprecedented coalition is the evident independence of the provincial warlords, made wealthy and powerful precisely because of the centre’s lack of control over the military system. Such local autonomy was traditionally unacceptable to the Ottoman dynastic view, and especially odious to Mahmud II. The chiefs of many of the great houses of Anatolia and some from the Balkans, accompanied by perhaps as many as seventy thousand of their own troops, convened in Istanbul in order to convince the new sultan to take the steps they considered necessary to reform the empire at large. In effect, the notables who gathered in 1808 represented the major regional forces whose territories would make up the empire by the end of the nineteenth century: that is, the parts of Europe described above and Anatolia, heartland of republican Turkey. Twenty-five of them signed a Deed of Agreement (Sened-i İttifak), outlining the relationship and obligations between the Sultan and his notables. Article 2 committed the signatories to cooperate in the provision of state troops (devlet askeri) for the benefit of the survival of the empire, and to assist the Sultan against foreign and domestic enemies when required. Article 5 regulated the relationships among the warlords, the Sultan, and the central bureaucracy on the basis of mutual guarantees. In return, the warlords were confirmed in the possession of their lands and the rights of their heirs.⁹

Never truly enacted, the Sened is still an extraordinary document, sometimes called the Ottoman Magna Carta and elsewhere described as the origin of public law in modern Turkey. It was innovative in striking a balance between the Sultan and his notable, provincial subjects. Real opposition to the document came from the Sultan himself, who found his power proscribed by an agreement negotiated between the grand vizier and the warlords.¹⁰

In early November Istanbul erupted in resistance to the new military organization established by Alemdar Mustafa. The grand vizier had envisioned a new army of 100 regiments of 1,600 men each, or 160,000 men, organized in units called sekbans. In the end, he likely had only twenty-
five thousand men to resist the revolt instigated by Janissaries who refused to enrol in the new disciplined forces, were struck off the rolls, and denied their livelihood and privilege.\(^{11}\) The initial rebellion turned into a general riot, which left six hundred sekbans, and perhaps as many as five thousand rebels, dead. Continued disorder forced the Sultan to reach an accommodation with the Janissary commanders, who were ready to pledge obedience if the sekban corps was dissolved and reformers who had escaped were punished. At least one contemporary account, probably an exaggeration, estimated as many as fifty thousand deaths from the events of November 1808.\(^ {12}\) Nominally, it appears the Janissaries restored order, as they understood it. The ancient order, as it turned out, had been broken forever. The new element in 1808 was the coalition of provincial forces that offered the Sultan the opportunity to recover and reorganize his empire. It is possible, in drawing a line from the agreement of 1808 to significant new regulations for the Ottoman reformed army of 1828, to see a number of crucial changes as the empire sought to engage with modernity on its own terms: an empire-wide construction of a new military force based on universal conscription, the establishment of a national militia in 1834, and military reorganizations that required the cooperation of the provincial power brokers and re-empowered notable local families. The descendants of these families were to serve Turkey and the successors Arab states in the early years after the Ottoman collapse in 1918.

**Disciplining Subjects: The New Ottoman Army**

After 1812 Mahmud II tamed provincial warlords who threatened his power by having his chief henchmen and advisor, Halet Efendi, appoint individuals who would be loyal to him and amenable to the new disciplinary universe. This development, too, looks much like what Europe was undergoing as standing armies and police forces emerged, only the results were less satisfying in Ottoman territories, where that kind of pressure from Istanbul often had adverse effects. For example, the suppression of the famous “Lion of Janina,” Ali Pasha, in 1821, which is credited with precipitating the Greek revolt and bringing down Halet Efendi himself, must be counted a setback for Ottoman state building. Mahmud II earned the sobriquet “infidel sultan” because his armies proved to be more effective at putting down Muslim rebellions than they did protecting the borders of empire.
Military discipline had long since been abandoned by the Janissaries. Traditional punishments for infractions involved the bastinado (*falaka*, a stick or cudgel), which was used to inflict blows on the soles of the feet. Investigation and punishment were controlled internally, not by sultanic law but by two supreme military judges (*kaziaskers*), and administered by the hierarchy of Janissary commanders. In the guild-like corporatism of the latter-day Janissaries, ordinary discipline and punishment proved unenforceable. Such a lapse of disciplinary controls occurred in an age when systematic mobilization and severe discipline were being applied in other parts of the globe: the punishing drill, the nation under arms, or the citizen’s army of France, and the notorious use of the gauntlet for the smallest infractions. It was precisely that kind of systemic discipline that Mahmud II wished to instill into his unruly army.

The Ottoman military reforms of 1827 introduced radical forms of discipline, punishment, and categories of crimes for both officers and enlisted men, with repeated exhortations that the hierarchies of command be maintained, punishment equitable, and the laws enforced by a new military bureaucracy controlled by the palace, not the Janissaries themselves. Absence at roll call, drills, and firearm practice were all punishable infractions, as was misbehaviour both in and outside the barracks. The new troops on the Danube in 1828 impressed von Moltke and others with their docility and enthusiasm for drilling and artillery. New forms of discipline were needed if other global empires, themselves newly disciplined, were to be engaged.

These regulations have not been systematically compared to any European counterpart, but the innovations are consistent with historical accounts of European armies, especially those of Napoleon. In the post-Napoleonic era, demobilized officers of all European armies became officers-for-hire, but Mahmud II was notoriously stingy with foreign advisors (unlike his Egyptian rival, Mehmed Ali). He declined the services of most, except for the young Prussian von Moltke, who, it must be noted, never asked for, or was offered officer rank in the new army. Mehmed Ali astutely refused to obey Mahmud II’s command to send him his experienced French officers. British military missions to Istanbul always foundered on the question of command. The few foreigners of any note were junior officers with little impact on the reform climate. The first few commanders-in-chief of the new army, came, not from abroad or the provinces, but from within the Sultan’s court. Paranoia, insularity, and lack of funds crippled the development of a proper officer corps for
another two decades. In that context, the transformation of the enlisted man seems all the more remarkable.

The army that Mahmud II sent from Istanbul to the Danube in 1828 was also repeatedly identified as Turkic and Muslim, partly because of the lack of time for systematic recruitment, partly because of geopolitics (Muslims were loyal, and Turks were nearby), and partly because of the poor census information that was available to army recruiters. Internal and external pressures on the capital and the Sultan, however, also drove Mahmud II to restrict enrolment in his new army to born Muslims and “loyal Turkish lads.” He rejected all non-Muslims and converts, and specifically Greeks and Albanians, who were considered both treasonous and unruly.

After 1800 Ottoman legitimacy was challenged from many directions. By 1821 the empire was embroiled in both Greek and Serbian revolts. In the decade or so between 1826, when Mahmud II eliminated the Janissary corps, and 1839, when he died, Mahmud II was challenged by a plethora of Muslim voices resisting his reforms. Russian expansionism and emerging nationalisms combined to force Muslim populations to relocate into the heart of empire. Strident views, which included accusations that the Ottomans were no longer legitimate Muslim rulers, forced Mahmud II to address not just the Janissary problem but also the ideological direction of the empire.

After successfully eliminating the last Janissary revolt, Mahmud II assembled a great council to formally abolish the traditional corps and replace it with the Muallem Asakir-i Mansure-yi Muhammadiye (Trained, Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad). An edict was read in public by Esad Efendi, Ottoman historian and ideologue of the new order. He reported that he “kissed the precious banner of the Prophet with trembling lips, retired respectfully a few steps down the pulpit staircase, faced the immense crowd of Muslims and read aloud the order ordaining the destruction of the Janissary corps … whose existence had desecrated the temple of Islam for too long a period.” The edict continued,

Today, they are nothing more than a useless and insubordinate body which has become the asylum of the spirit of unrest and seditions in which the number of evil men have outgrown the number of good ones … Among those who have just been executed were found some Janissaries who bore tattooed on their arm … the cross of the infidels. This simply proves that traitors, parading in
the disguise of Muslims, have for a long time been using the Janissary corps to further their own nefarious ends by spreading false rumors. Hence, let all the congregation of Muslim people, and the small and great officials of Islam and the ulema, and members of other military formations, and all the common folk be of one body. Let them look upon each other as brethren in faith.\textsuperscript{18}

This edict is a clear reassertion of an Ottoman-Muslim universalism, however fictitious, and quite emblematic of the ideologies expressed as part of military reform throughout the Middle East of the period.\textsuperscript{19} The edict clarifies a line, a point of friction, between loyal, disciplined (and thus modern) subjects and disloyal subjects. By 1826 the Janissary corps had come to include Muslim, non-Muslim, and foreigners of all stripes, such as Baron François de Tott and other foreign adventurers.\textsuperscript{20} The army had become notionally Muslim, so the edict abolishing the corps should be read as a re-imposition of the “Muslimness” of the Ottoman military as asserted in its very name — Trained, Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad. But Mahmud II went one step further by declaring a jihad and issuing a general call to arms against the Russians in 1828, partially to reassure his subjects, but also in the hope of expanding the volunteer base. The initial fervour wore off rather quickly, and the thirty to forty thousand youngsters of the 1828–29 campaigns were all the volunteers that could be secured. Mahmud II then had to turn to a conscription system as his enthusiastic pool of volunteers dried up. In order to beef up the forces for impending confrontations, orders were once again sent to Anatolia and the Balkans to enrol available manpower. Much of the assembled force came from the handpicked “conscripts” of the provincial governors, while the rank and file were drawn from the Anatolian, Turkish peasantry.

\textbf{Turning Turk}

Nationalist revolts led the Sultan to harden the line on ethnic categories, which, prior to the period under discussion, had served little purpose in court circles other than as epithets, as in “unruly Albanians,” or “loyal Turks,” or, increasingly in this era, “traitorous Rum” (Orthodox Greeks). The point here is that ethnography, or ethnic profiling, as a tool in the imperial kit, originated in this period of transition, when Europeans pressed for recognition of the rights of their preferred religio-ethnic
group. Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, to mention the most prominent, lived side by side with Muslims in both urban and rural settings. In many instances, non-Muslims of all ethnic persuasions outnumbered Muslims. After 1841, in particular, missionaries poured into the empire, intensifying religious strife and forcing the crisis over religious ownership of Jerusalem, which would be one cause of the Crimean War (1853-56). Confessionalism became political licence, precisely as the dynasty had begun the transformation to a constitutional regime, which guaranteed equality of citizenship. Such engagements with modern concepts gave rise to external and internal sources of friction that, in turn, forced the Sultan to turn to the Turk.

One of the constant themes of the Ottoman Empire throughout its history was the loyalty and steadfastness of the soldier “Turk.” Beyond the military sphere, however, it never meant more than “rube” or “hick.” Even as late as the end of the nineteenth century, to ask a resident of Ottoman territories if he or she was a Turk was to offend, and, like as not, Muslims, non-Muslims, or Turks would answer that they were Ottoman. In the challenges to sovereignty here described, the term Turk began to acquire an ideological content for the Ottomans. Mahmud II’s recruiters found it practically impossible to enrol Bosnians, loyal (Muslim) warriors, or Arabs (Muslims or otherwise) into the new army, unless they were under the aegis of one of their local lords and guaranteed their ancient privileges. So, time after time, Mahmud II found himself turning to the “Turkic” populations of Anatolia and the Balkans, who were situated close to Istanbul and the Caucasus frontiers; these populations had experienced the era of reforms most intensely and had proved amenable to the new disciplinary regime. After a decade of less than successful voluntary, and sometimes brutally enforced, recruitment tactics, Mahmud and his commanders understood that they were exhausting the region by continuing to recruit Muslims, a minority in many of the territories of the late empire until after 1850. From that date to 1918, some 5 to 7 million Muslims are estimated to have immigrated into remaining Ottoman lands from lost territories. Universal conscription failed, as non-Muslims (and probably just as many Muslims) found ways to buy their way out legally or otherwise avoid army service. Further regulations about military mobilization followed in 1843 and again in 1848, when a true conscription system based on a census of eligible young men was enacted. It proved unworkable. In 1870, when the Prussian military model was introduced, the conscription system was
completely overhauled. The Committee of Union and Progress (known as the Young Turks) seized power and decreed universal conscription in 1909, the only time it was actually enforced across the Muslim and non-Muslim divide of the empire.25

Contested Ottomanism

The tragedy of ethnic and religious nationalism as it unfolded in the last century of the Ottoman Empire has a complicated script. Within a decade after the elimination of the Janissaries, Mahmud II’s speeches on his public tours began to articulate a more inclusive definition of Ottoman subjecthood: “It is our wish to ensure the peace and security of all inhabitants of our God-protected great states, both Muslim and raya,” he reportedly said to mixed Muslim and non-Muslim audiences in the Balkans.26 On another occasion, he was heard to refer to his subjects as his children, whom he treated equally, “the only difference perceived among them being of a purely religious nature.”27 At Shumla he declared: “Your faith is different, but all of you equally guard the law and my Emperor’s will. Pay the taxes I charge you with; they are employed to ensure your safety and welfare.”28 Such language anticipated the promulgation of equality of citizenship following Mahmud II’s death in July 1839.

Mahmud II’s sixteen-year-old son and successor, Sultan Abdülmecid I (1839–61), asked his advisors what to focus on as he ascended the throne. The response of his ministers was that he should enumerate “full guarantees for soul and property and for the preservation of the honour and dignity — to extend to all the Sultan’s subjects, Muslim as well as non-Muslim.” They advised that taxes should be fixed according to the wealth and means of each subject, and that there should be an “even distribution of the burden of military service according to the size of the population in each province.” The last is a tacit acknowledgment of the necessity of conscripting soldiers from the entire population, not just from the Muslim, the loyal, and the reliable. The official text included a paragraph in which the Sultan “pledged to take an oath in the hall of the sacred relics, not to act contrary to its stipulations, and that the senior ulema and state functionaries take a similar oath, an action no Ottoman sultan before Abdülmecid had ever undertaken.”29

The substance of the Gülhane decree of November 1839 referred to equality of citizenship and the equation of the burden of taxation and military conscription as described above. European observers (and most
historians since) have hailed the edict as inaugurating the new (secularized) Ottoman order, but the text seems just as likely to have reflected an adjustment of sovereignty to the realities of a war-torn, ideologically fractured society, which was still bound by shari’a law.  

What the Gülhane decree delineated was a hybrid “Ottomanism,” which became the central source of friction of Ottoman rule during the Tanzimat period from 1839 to 1876. Major legislation altered property laws, attempted land reform, introduced municipal councils, privileged both Muslim and non-Muslim religious organizations and leaders, created mixed Muslim-non-Muslim tribunals, and repeatedly introduced conscription as described above, but it did not address the inconsistencies in shari’a law and modern constitutionalism. The historian Carter Findley once described the ideological mix expressed in such documents as so “mutually incompatible … that one gropes for ballistic metaphors to give an idea of their explosive potentials.”  

The new Ottoman citizens in Istanbul and the empire’s major cities were divided by conflicting loyalties: an elite, increasingly impoverished Muslim class, which ran the government as officers, administrators, and provincial officials; and a wealthy commercial class made up of Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, who often acquired extraterritorial privileges from the major powers and maintained separate schools and religious organizations.  

The attempt at universality unintentionally bifurcated a society already rocked by national separatist movements.  

Sultan Abdül Mecid’s new Ottoman-Muslim absolutism promoted imperial civilization, equality of citizenship, and the rule of law. It took most of the rest of the nineteenth century for Ottoman intellectuals to make sense of the merging of Ottoman-Islamic political traditions and European thought. Ottoman Tanzimat statesmen had access to Vienna, London, Paris, and Berlin, where a similar and vigorous debate over alternative systems of law was underway. The international scope of the debates was reflected in the discussion that began among Ottoman intellectuals of the 1840s. They sought to situate the Ottoman Empire among civilizations and assert its civilizing mission over rebellious nomads and tribes: Druze, Arab Bedouin, Kurd, Albanian mountaineers, and, latterly, Yemenites. In particular, the conquest of Yemen was explicitly argued for on the model of British India. In effect, the Ottomans had joined the putative pantheon of European empires.
The Ottomans in the Face of Friction: Success or Failure?

In 1800 the territories of the Ottoman Empire still included most of what we today call the Middle East, with the addition of the Balkans, the northern shores of the Black Sea, and large parts of the Caucasus. By 1841, Greece, Serbia, Moldavia, and Wallachia had broken free; Egypt, Syria, Crete, and Arabia were up in arms. The Russians had acquired Crimea, Bessarabia, and large parts of the Caucasus. Bosnia, Albania, and Tripoli obeyed Istanbul in name only, and the Russians passed the Balkan range to threaten Istanbul itself. The Treaty of London in 1841, signed by the great powers and the Ottomans, confirmed a regime of international free trade and free passage of the Dardanelles and Bosphorous into the Black Sea, which essentially drew the Ottomans into the emerging global trading system. The British established a semi-colonial regime in most of the Arab provinces, secured the routes to India, and occupied Egypt by 1882. The Ottoman Empire was reduced to Anatolia (present-day Turkey), Bulgaria, Thrace, and the Arab provinces of the Levant and Iraq. British consuls were found in every major port city of the Arab southern tier of the empire, where they had not been before. Foreign powers, in effect, established an informal colonial rule over a large part of the Ottoman territories and found themselves contesting the territory with a rival, but fragile, colonial power, the Ottomans themselves.34

Mahmud II laid the groundwork for an army that made a good showing in later conflicts, such as in the Balkans in 1853-54 and even in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. He secured a circumscribed autonomy for the Ottomans while he sketched a social space, at least its putative boundaries, for them, and he identified a preferred (Turkic) ethnicity for the future Turkish (Muslim) Republic. He guaranteed its economic collapse by signing the Anglo-Ottoman Convention. The Ottomans began to look decidedly European, but such a reorientation ultimately destroyed them, as was ruefully acknowledged by reform-minded minister Fuad Pasha, who told a European visitor: “Our state is the strongest state, for you are trying to cause its collapse from without, and we from within, but still it does not collapse.”35 It took decades of internal strife, external provocation, and enormous human costs to finally tear it apart. Some of the continuities from the nineteenth to the twentieth century may be obvious. With his definition of the final frontier of the Danubian-Caucasus arc, his public journeys around the Balkans, his increasing reliance on his loyal “Turkic” citizens, Mahmud II defended and
re-imagined the very territories and the nationality that was to emerge. This re-imagination culminated in Mustafa Kemal Atatürk establishing the republic in the National Pact of 1920, when he drew the borders of present-day Turkey and proclaimed that everyone inside the borders was a “Turk.”

What was different about the Ottoman modern turn in the global crisis, and in the frictions of 1826-28 prompted by this engagement, may well be the particular way in which the external and internal pressures restricted the full development of constitutionalism and economic autonomy. The costs of the top-down, radical modernization, or defensive developmentalism, by Mahmud II and his successors were considerable. The failure of the constitutional experiment and the inability to extend the rule of law across the empire led to the re-emergence of sultanic absolutism in 1876 under Abdülhamid II (1876-1909). Official bankruptcy followed in 1881, when the Public Debt Administration was created by France and Britain. The final collapse came during the First World War.

The crisis at the imperial hub in 1826-28 offers us a glimpse into a society in extremis, where a web of contradictions, contestations for autonomy, and competing world forces effected a transformation that has universal implications. Although the resulting loss of autonomy and its reconstitution in the nation-state form took its own path, other empires in Britain, France, and China also emerged transformed in their own engagements with the universals of modernity.