

*Partners of the Empire: The Crisis of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions.* By Ali Yaycioglu. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016. 364 pp.

“Backed by a few reformist bureaucrats, a petty ayan in the small Balkan city of Hazergard launched a coup, deposed the sultan and enthroned a new one, in short order becoming grand vizier with extraordinary powers” (p.189). This story is about a provincial notable (ayan), Mustafa Bayraktar, in the early 1800s Ottoman Empire. He then orchestrated an agreement, known as Deed of Alliance, with the new sultan in September 1808. How this could have happened and what it means in world history are the central problems of *Partners of the Empire: The Crisis of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions*, the new book by Ali Yaycioglu, professor of Ottoman history at Stanford University.

Yaycioglu inserts the extraordinary chain of events of 1807–1808 and the Nizam-i Cedid (“New Order”) reforms that preceded them into two large historical frameworks: the regional context of the transformation of the Ottoman provincial power structure in the eighteenth century and the global context, encompassing the American War of Independence, the French Revolution, and Napoleonic Europe.

The great conceptual challenge of this grand analysis and deep microhistory is the idea of popular sovereignty. Can we detect the rise of (a type of) popular sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire in the late 1700s? Whose representative is Bayraktar, a notable? This is a question that has occupied professional Turkish and non-Turkish historians of the Ottoman Empire since at least the 1950s, as Yaycioglu underlines (p.234).

In order to answer this question, Yaycioglu returns to the classic theme of provincial notables in the Ottoman Empire of the late eighteenth century. Joining—and also challenging—revisions of Ottoman political history, such as those by Ariel Salzmann, Baki Tezcan, Frederick Anscombe, and Karen Barkey, Yaycioglu argues that defeats and weak central structure transformed “the vertical empire [...] to a horizontal and participatory one” (p.2), and that the reform that was enforced by the sultan resulted first in a counter-revolt and then in a “constitutional synthesis” of provincial notables (p.4)—the Deed of Alliance, signed in September 1808 in Istanbul by the new sultan, Mahmud II, and the notables. Here, three alternative modes of reform come together: what Yaycioglu calls the “order of the empire” (top-down reform), the “order of

the notables” (partnership), and the “order of communities” (participation of the public). He notes the “oligarchic character” of the Deed and argues that it carried a new conception of the state as a “collective enterprise” of provincial notables and the dynasty (pp.234–36). Thus, “the partners of empire” are the notables, and this book is, in essence, an analysis of the conditions that produced this partnership.

The first conventional point Yaycioglu challenges is the interpretation of the janissaries. Borrowing the idea of Cemal Kafadar, who suggests looking at janissaries as having become a social movement or at least a social-urban network by the seventeenth century, Yaycioglu considers them as claiming representation on behalf of the larger population in the early 1800s (p.162) (French revolutionaries, who sided with the janissaries, certainly looked on them in this way [p.56]). This assumption transforms the image of the janissaries as “reactionary forces” into a complex social phenomenon that was well integrated into urban society. In Chapter 1, Yaycioglu shows that Sultan Selim III’s reforms (the New Order) excluded the janissaries from the new imperial vision by establishing new, reformed army units—which were “only” army units (p.41), as opposed to the urban/civilian networks of the janissaries.

For someone like the author of this review, who is specialized in the history of the later decades of the nineteenth century, Chapter 2 brings important historical material and arguments. Continuing a historiographical tradition of researching provincial notable families (for Arabists, Albert Hourani first announced their importance in the 1960s), Yaycioglu highlights them as “natural leaders” of local communities turned state-appointed “managers.” The argument, based on extensive archival evidence, is that there was a “localization,” a “monetization,” and a general “vernacularization” of imperial governance in the provinces in the late eighteenth century (pp.79 and 89). This is a closer look on what Karen Barkey theorized as an ayan “protomodernity” highlighting the transformation in Ottoman property relations. An informal system emerged parallel to the formal imperial structure, and it empowered local strongmen to negotiate with the center (Yaycioglu uses the idea of “bidding”) and thus to see the empire as “an enterprise,” but—and this is a serious but—this system was never institutionalized (pp.113–4).

Although Yaycioglu promises in Chapter 3 to show that “communities are active participants” in politics (p.117), in fact, this part of the book unearths the relationship between local communities and their notables. Despite great insights (for example, that the kadi court was a space and institution in which “the

community speaks to the empire” [p.115]), this chapter is a continuation of the notable theme. Yaycioglu shows that in the 1770s, “ayanship” became an office (thus the original Arabic plural a‘yan [notables] in the Ottoman administrative language became a noun in the singular, such as in the phrase “Ismail, the ayan of Ruse”), and this state office was on and off in the 1780s–1790s (p.127, pp.135–38). This part of the book is the weakest point of the otherwise elegantly constructed general argument. The author uses the local “election” of the ayan as evidence of collective participation in politics in the late eighteenth century. This would mean that communities participated in imperial politics through the ayan. The author thus almost entirely identifies politics with the person of the ayan. Second, the political idea conveyed by the English terms “election” and “elected persons,” used by Yaycioglu throughout, does not adequately describe the Ottoman *ihtiyar eyledikleri* (p.135), which is perhaps closer to the original Arabic meaning of “the chosen/preferred ones” from the verb, “being chosen.” The question of representation certainly opens many avenues for further research.

The last two chapters are eminent microhistorical reconstructions of the events of 1807–1808 and a magnificent analysis of the Deed of Alliance, with attention duly paid to perception of the Deed in later historiography in Turkey and outside it. Here, the great insight is the causal explanation of change: first, a coalition of janissaries and notables against the New Order (May–June 1807); then a new coalition of notables with New Order partisans (fall 1807–summer 1808); and, finally, the janissaries and urban Istanbulite’s counter-reaction (November 1808), possibly sanctified by the new sultan’s tacit agreement. There are two less exposed actors in the background: “the urban crowd”—the people of Istanbul, who appear mostly in their association with the janissaries—and the Russians, who try to realize their interests in both Wallachia/Moldavia and in the imperial capital itself. This complex crisis culminates in late September 1808, when some groups of notables and their top figure, Mustafa Bayraktar, convene to sign the Deed of Alliance with the young Mahmud II. However, the Deed, which secures the “partnership” of notables, does not protect Bayraktar, who soon dies during the violent revolt by the janissaries and the urban population in November 1808 (pp.198–199).

In its use of archival sources and its conceptual framework, *Partners of the Empire* embodies superb scholarship. It speaks to fundamental questions—popular sovereignty and the commensurability of European political developments. The emphasis on the Ottoman figure—the provincial ayan—and

his imagined “partnership” in the empire is a significant contribution to our knowledge. At last, we now have a detailed exploration of their world.

Still, there are limitations. Although Yaycioglu does his best occasionally to point to Damascus, Mosul, and Cairo, his story is a story of Ottoman notables in Anatolia and what is today Bulgaria/Romania/Greece, the provinces that were close to the imperial capital. There are statements to be questioned, for instance, the claim that Mehmed Ali Pasha in the Egyptian province was ethnically Albanian, even though there is no evidence for this widespread myth; and in general, we are offered no explanation as to why the 1807–1808 events in Istanbul were largely effects of the provincial situation in the European parts of the empire. Perhaps the Russian connection is more important than we thought. The emphasis on differing regional trajectories is somewhat missing.

Finally, as any good book does, *Partners of the Empire* leaves the reader with additional questions. Does the notable “partnership” truly reflect un-institutionalized popular sovereignty? Does this conceptual framework, somewhat echoing new British imperial studies (empire as corporation), adequately describe the case of the Ottomans in the Napoleonic age? From a longue durée perspective, what other ways would be available to reframe this age in a non-Western conceptual vocabulary?

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