

## [Neumeier on Christensen, 'Germany and the Ottoman Railways: Art, Empire, and Infrastructure'](#)

Review published on Tuesday, January 22, 2019

**Peter H. Christensen.** *Germany and the Ottoman Railways: Art, Empire, and Infrastructure*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. 204 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-22564-8.

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**Printable Version:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=52242>

For the past thirty years or so, there has been a proliferation of scholarship exploring how dramatic shifts in international politics and technological development—in a word, modernization—impacted the built environment of the late Ottoman Empire. Zeynep Çelik's *The Remaking of Istanbul* remains an important touchstone for these discussions, and more recent volumes on Damascus and Izmir have expanded our view to the provinces, where in the nineteenth century several cities around the Mediterranean flourished as cosmopolitan hubs in their own right.[1] In a departure from these studies, Peter Christensen's new book *Germany and the Ottoman Railways: Art, Empire, and Infrastructure* eschews the trend of the singular urban monograph in favor of a much wider investigation of the Ottoman railroad network. The lines of this major infrastructure project were gradually extended from one end of the empire to the other, connecting—and, as Christensen argues, reifying—many of these emergent urban centers. In the past decade, historians such as Sean McMeekin and Murat Özyüksel have seized upon the development of the Ottoman railroad as an effective backdrop to explain the geopolitical wrangling of the Great Powers in the Middle East in the years leading up to the first World War.[2] Significantly, the Ottoman railway, the crown jewel of the empire's modernization efforts, was largely financed and constructed with the support of German companies. Christensen takes on this popular subject and makes it his own by bringing the railroad itself and its people to the center of the narrative, offering an ambitious spatial, material, and cultural history of the eastern Mediterranean.

*Germany and the Ottoman Railways* opens with a full-page black-and-white map showing the different lines and major nodes of the railroad within the Ottoman Empire, and how this network was connected to the existing transit system in German lands. Unlabeled, the illustration speaks for itself: the map has been inverted, with north facing down, visually recalling medieval Islamic maps of the world, which subsequently informed Ottoman visual traditions.[3] Further, no political borders of any kind are represented, a sensible decision considering that these international frontiers were constantly in flux during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The only contours found on the map delineate the material fact of the railway itself, thus rejecting the fiction of geopolitical territories as hermetically sealed entities. This initial cartographic gesture subtly prepares the reader for what is to come in the following pages. Christensen acknowledges the power of infrastructure to create empires, but asserts that the German-made Ottoman railway “transcended the binary parasite-host relationship, and the vast gray zone between binary formations is the subject of this book” (p. 1). Primarily through the lens of art and architectural history, the author seeks to demonstrate that, in

this unique pseudocolonial encounter, both personal identities and the physical form of objects end up being more malleable, equivocal, or ambiguous than perhaps expected. The paradigm of ambiguity ultimately provides the theoretical underpinning of the book, arguing for the emancipatory potential of resisting simple dualistic interpretations for contexts “outside of conventional imperial or colonial conditions where someone’s sovereignty is abdicated or through the exponents of technology transfer” (p. 6). In other words, the author aims to offer a way out of the methodological straightjacket of terms like “hybrid” or “import” in architectural history, terms that suggest the existence of mutually exclusive cultures or stylistic traditions. The presumption of an underlying condition of ambiguity also compels Christensen to avoid a strict narrative of heroic authorship; this is not a chronicle of Great German Men Who Built Things Abroad. Rather, the thematic organization of its chapters allows for a roving eye that jumps from site to site, examining a wide variety of art-historical objects—and the definition of “art object” in this book is intentionally generous, lending equal weight to photographs, paintings, drawings, print media, maps, engineering projects, and architectural monuments as primary sources.

The volume’s eight main chapters are equally divided into two parts, a structure that connects the “construction of knowledge and the construction of form” (p. 6). Chapter 1, “Politics,” offers a fairly straightforward account of the overarching political circumstances that led to the development of the Ottoman railroad network from the second half of the nineteenth century through the First World War. German companies bankrolled three major projects, the so-called Anatolian, Baghdad, and Hejaz Railways. This chapter sets up a chronology and cast of historical characters that continuously reappear throughout the rest of the book. Chapter 2, “Geography,” surveys German and Ottoman accounts—both visual and textual—of the construction of the railway system. From the triumphant photographs of the well-known Abdülhamid II albums to the more romantic watercolors of Theodor Rocholl (under the sponsorship of Deutsche Bank), one gets the distinct impression of how the creation of what could be called a geographic body of knowledge surrounding the railroad was piecemeal and iterative. This is no doubt a reflection of the German involvement in Ottoman infrastructure, which was itself not part of any kind of grand plan but a fitful process of different companies vying for and winning project contracts. Chapter 3, “Topography,” draws on what Svetlana Alpers has famously described as the mapping impulse.[4] Central to this chapter is a careful analysis of a portfolio of maps produced by German engineer Wilhelm von Pressel, apparently commissioned by the Ottoman government as a proposal for the Baghdad Railway line. Christensen observes that, despite Pressel’s confident denotation of a hierarchy of cities along the route, this system was eventually amended by Porte administrators because he did not have a full grasp of the criteria that made a city important in the Ottoman realm: “His is ultimately the gaze of the engineer, not the historian or purveyor of cultural monuments” (p. 59). Chapter 4, “Archaeology,” documents the importance of the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft, founded in 1898, and how the development of the railroad ran parallel with the search for antiquities in the Ottoman Empire, a rich theme in and of itself that is currently garnering a good deal of attention from historians.

The second half of the book attends to the practical, physical results of the various German-Ottoman railroad projects. Chapter 5, “Construction,” looks at the full strata of people employed in the creation of the rail lines, from administrators and engineers to day laborers and prisoners of war. While the author highlights the diversity of these labor forces, he cautions against slipping into an “ethos of cosmopolitanism” as this view does not account for the “trenchant hierarchies, power imbalances, and intercultural strife” that can often be found on site (p. 82). Chapter 6, “*Hochbau*,”

explores the full built environment of the railroad, including bridges, tunnels, and stations. The concept of *Hochbau*, that is “the field of construction and planning related to any entity above the ground,” allows for a collapsing, or, ambiguation, of the role of architect and engineer (p. 96). Perhaps the most interesting discussion in this section is how the *Heimatstil*—think of a Swiss chalet—served as the prototype for the majority of Ottoman railroad stations (incredibly, 90 percent of these buildings were of German design by 1919), and yet the results are mutable according to the environment and the mediation of different workforces on the ground. Chapter 7, “Monuments,” examines both top-down rhetorics of power and the more “tactical” efforts of less-enfranchised communities to leave their mark on the railroad landscape. Finally, chapter 8 argues for an “Ottoman railway urbanism” that differed from urban conditions imposed by railways systems in Europe. Rather than integrating the railways into the existing fabric of a city, Ottoman rail stations tended to be located on the outside of town, connected to the city center with long, straight avenues.

Through a rigorous presentation of a variety of case studies, Christensen demonstrates that the German approach to Ottoman infrastructure does not neatly fall into the conventional lopsided orientalist-colonial framework, a notion of course raised by Said himself, who described Orientalism as a predominately British and French phenomenon.[5] Further, the volume presents a wealth of understudied material, demonstrating how close reading of nontraditional visual sources can be a productive exercise. The inclusion of an expansive array of art objects extends the author's argument about the ambiguous nature of German-Ottoman relations to a wider critique of art history for this period, calling for a destabilization of what “counts” as art and architecture. However, the complex structuring of the book itself, which no doubt was conceived in an effort to bring a sense of order to data that is inherently scattershot and “intractable,” can feel a bit overwhelming for a reader. Eight thematic sections, divided into two multiscalar parts, all governed by three overarching historical concerns of geopolitics, multiculturalism, and expertise: it is a lot to take in at first. Also, while the volume is gorgeously illustrated, there were a few instances that I was left wondering about the choice of images; why only show half of the façade of Sirkeci station (p. 107), for example, or such a distant view of the Medina terminus (p. 113) when paired with such a detailed discussion of the exterior decoration? That being said, this quibble emerges from what is perhaps the author's greatest strength, which is his ability to toggle swiftly between different scales of cultural production. Discussing a treatise on the Baghdad Railway, Christensen emphasizes that the text's author, the archaeologist Theodor Wiegand, dwells on the “importance of immersive observation and patience, noting that is not possible on the first or second reading of a site to truly understand it” (p. 153). Such a conclusion could also easily be drawn after reading this volume.

*Germany and the Ottoman Railways* is suitable for any scholar interested in exploring further the relationship between infrastructure and the built environment in the long nineteenth century. Its cross-disciplinary approach makes it relevant to a wide range of fields including art history, architecture and design, geography, and history. Due to the tight-knit structuring of the book, it is probably not ideal to assign individual chapters in an undergraduate course, but the volume would work well in graduate seminars on architecture and technology, colonialism, European architecture, and the history of the Ottoman Empire and modern Middle East, especially if read alongside some of the aforementioned studies.

## Notes

[1]. Zeynep Çelik, *The Remaking of Istanbul: Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986); Stefan Weber, *Damascus: Ottoman Modernity and Urban Transformation, 1808-1918* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2009); and Sibel Zandi-Sayek, *Ottoman Izmir: The Rise of a Cosmopolitan Port, 1840-1880* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

[2]. Sean McMeekin, *The Berlin-Baghdad Express: The Ottoman Empire and Germany's Bid for World Power* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010); Murat Özyüksel, *The Hejaz Railway and the Ottoman Empire: Modernity, Industrialisation, and Ottoman Decline* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014); and Murat Özyüksel, *The Berlin-Baghdad Railway and the Ottoman Empire: Industrialization, Imperial Germany, and the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

[3]. See Karen C. Pinto, *Medieval Islamic Maps: An Exploration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[4]. Svetlana Alpers, "The Mapping Impulse in Dutch Art," in *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 119-68.

[5]. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 19.

**Citation:** Emily Neumeier. Review of Christensen, Peter H., *Germany and the Ottoman Railways: Art, Empire, and Infrastructure*. H-AMCA, H-Net Reviews. January, 2019. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=52242>

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