Beilinson on Brisku, 'Political Reform in the Ottoman and Russian Empires: A Comparative Approach'

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Adrian Brisku’s Political Reform in the Ottoman and Russian Empires joins an increasingly robust body of historiography that aims to situate the Ottomans within their environs. Some scholars—like Karen Barkey (Empires of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective [2008]), Daniel Goffman (The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe [2002]), and Stephen F. Dale (The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals [2010])—cast their comparative net wide, reaching not only toward Austria-Hungary and Russia but also toward Byzantine, India, and Venice. Their efforts are mostly, by necessity, synthetic. Other scholars have made a more concrete comparison, as did Nader Sohrabi in Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran (2011), and yet others chose to illuminate multiple empires by writing transnational histories. Michael A. Reynolds (Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918 [2011]), Sabri Ateş (Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843-1914 [2013]), and Houri Berberian (Roving Revolutionaries: Armenians and the Connected Revolutions in the Russian, Iranian, and Ottoman Worlds [2019]), inter alia, have pushed our understanding of these borderlands forward in recent years. While the book under review does share Berberian’s attention to the Russian Empire, it is a work of the second category: by tracing the “mirror-like paths, efforts and destinies” of both empires “amidst a myriad of structural differences,” Brisku seeks to amend the “master narratives of westernization and modernization,” as well as that of decline, which were, and in many cases are, still prevalent in both historiographies (pp. 12, 9).

Focusing on the language of reform and specific reformers, the book comprises two parts that include two chapters each. Each part is chronological, each chapter is imperial. While the larger chronologies do not overlap perfectly, the first part locates a good starting point by focusing on Alexander I of Russia and the Ottoman sultan Mahmud II. Both head of states had ambitious reformers—Mikhail Speransky and Mustafa Reşid Pasha respectively—and both died before seeing the fruition of their efforts, as limited as these fruits were. He shows how in both reforms “a similar legal vocabulary ... as well as a shared idiom of political economy” were at play, even though they differed in their way of approaching Europe (p. 12). The Russian case had to reconcile the language of constitutionalism and the appeal to a religious duty in order to pave its way within the European sphere, whereas the Ottomans (who could not, for obvious reasons, emphasize their religion) had to adopt a constitutional vocabulary that built on the civilizational affinities between the Ottomans and Europe.
The second part of the book focuses on the aftermath of the Crimean War as well as the 1870s-80s. As previously, this part is decisively about Great Men: the Russian protagonists are Tsar Alexander II, noted by the author for putting Russia’s Great Power status as his highest priority, leading to "dangerous paths of change," and whose statements reassuring his commitment to liberation did not necessarily coalesce with the reforms envisioned by his bureaucrats; Nikolay Milyutin, the chief architect of the tsar’s Great Reforms; and Minister of Interior Pyotr A. Valuyev, who had to carry out these reforms with a keen sense of the relationship between economics and politics (p. 13). In the Ottoman case, the three pashas brought considerable successes between the Paris Treaty of 1856 and the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Overturning the work of their predecessors from the first part of the book, they cautiously avoided undermining the Islamic foundations of the empire. Most notably, it was in this period that the Ottoman generation of “enlightened bureaucrats,” to borrow W. Bruce Lincoln’s phrase in his study of the Russian Empire (In the Vanguard of Reform: Russia's Enlightened Bureaucrats, 1825-1861 [1986]), could participate for the first time in such initiatives of reform. This story is one well told before: how reform was the inevitable middle ground between revolution and the increasingly impossible stagnation, how its successes gave hope for change while its failures exposed its inadequacy, and how both Ottomans and Russians grappled with questions of identity within civilizational hierarchies in Europe. Brisku’s innovation is in the very act of putting together this clear and concise account of the common challenges and structural divergences, rather than similar paths to reform and a tragic collapse. To be sure, he touches on all the classical themes: bureaucracy and autocracy, ideology and its implementation, expectations and disappointments, westernization and modernization. For a newcomer to either field or a student, who need to acquaint themselves with the macro-level (read: political) narrative of these ambitious reform projects, it certainly does a good job.

To what extent, however, is this a successful comparison? A long theoretical introduction sets the theoretical thrust of the argument. It confronts Eric Hobsbawm’s explanation of imperial decline due to rising nationalisms with Michael A. Reynolds focus on geopolitics and shorter-term explanations; acknowledges the role of the decline thesis in Ottoman historiography and its similar contenders in the Russian case; delineates the major interpretation of prerevolutionary, Soviet, and Western historians of nineteenth-century Russia; and identifies a significant contrast in the interpretation of political reform in both historiographies. For historians of Russia, the state was “understood as acting independently of internal and external pressures” as opposed to the Ottoman historiography (p. 8). In presenting is argument, setting some presentist references aside, he further summons the work of Reinhart Koselleck, specifically Vergangene Zukunft (1983), and Quentin Skinner—neither of whom he employs in the body of the text itself.

The comparison is successful in being very well defined. Each part discusses a similar set of variables that the narrative consistently highlights. There is a price paid, however, in pursing such a narrow comparison. The emphasis on Great Men is understandable given the scope of the work but it seems to miss not just nuances but also reciprocity. The archival turn, specifically in Russian studies, has produced myriad works investigating the way reforms were perceived, an important part that the author largely misses in discussing their failure. Despite the series’ aim to “look at how notions like democracy, populism and totalitarianism can be intertwined,” populists are only mentioned in passing (pp. 140, 194). Moreover, there is very limited space given to discussing the actual language of reforms, despite a promising yet cursory paragraph on vocabulary on page 5. Perhaps most
unfortunate of all, given the interest and expertise of the author in Caucasian and Balkan history (see his *Bittersweet Europe: Albanian and Georgian Discourses on Europe, 1878-2008* [2013]), there is a lack of sensitivity to the role played by minorities in this process. At least in the Ottoman case, Michael Kreutz’s recent book *The Renaissance of the Levant: Arabic and Greek Discourses of Reform in the Age of Nationalism* (2019), admittedly published after the volume under review, serves to highlight in hindsight the opportunity missed. Heidemarie Doganalp-Votzi and Claudia Römer’s study of the political vocabulary of Ottoman reform in the era of the Tanzimat, *Herrschaft und Staat: Politische Terminologie des osmanischen Reiches der Tanzimatzeit* (2008), also highlights the extent to which the author could have further engaged with *language*, a designated focus of his study. While these points certainly belong to the traditional part of a review in which the reviewer suggests how the book in hand is not the book he would have written, they also point to the way historiography has developed in both fields.

Since this is a synthetic account, most scholars of the Ottoman and Russian Empires will be familiar with its bibliography. It is composed, in fact, of three layers. The oldest stratum is composed of nineteenth-century works, used both as primary and secondary sources. Then comes the widest stratum, which includes most of the mental checklist Ottomanists and Russianists have for canonical (that is, older) secondary sources and studies, including a fair number of textbooks. The newest stratum is more limited and seems to involve mostly synthetic and conceptual works. This all leads Brisku very far from the primary sources themselves, and he also seems to be rather far from Turkish sources and newer historiography produced in Russia. Indeed, the six Turkish works in the bibliography seem randomly chosen, and my impression is that they were cited indirectly. This can also explain the author’s abbreviation of *hatt-ı hümâyûn* as “the Hatti,” despite any grammatical logic in Turkish (p. 62).

To conclude, the book presents a highly readable comparative account of the ultimately unsuccessful trajectories of political reform in the Ottoman and Russian Empires. The parameters of investigation are clearly defined and thoroughly followed. While the book contains little new to specialists in either field, it is a good introduction to students and nonspecialists seeking to learn the basic narrative and gain some comparative insight into top-down reform projects in the nineteenth century. More than anything, the book shows that valuable work is still left to be done in the comparative field, and Brisku is to be commended for his valuable contribution.


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