



## WHAT'S READING AT ASPEN

■ It is common knowledge that the Kemalist revolution, which began with the founding of the Turkish secular republic in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, represented a momentous break with the Ottoman Empire. Yet in the annals of the “Sublime Porte”, which ruled over a territory that extended from Algiers to the Persian Gulf in the south and to Budapest in the north, many significant events took place before that date. For example, in 1908 (and hence before the advent of Kemalism), the revolution of the so-called Young Turks had radically modernized the country, steering it towards a constitutional monarchy. Even prior to that episode, the Ottoman Empire (1299-1923) had undergone other profound changes and important transformations during the reigns of several sultans. Mahmud II, a sultan from the early 1800s, for example, stands out in this respect. Well before the Young Turks, he had begun to carry out structural, political and cultural reforms that left their mark on Turkish history.

The merit of a new book by **Maurizio Costanza – The crescent bent: the Ottoman Empire on the brink of modernity** – lies in its analysis of the different aspects of these reforms within their broader historical, cultural and religious context. The author, who was born in Libya and graduated in Turkish Language and Literature in Rome, begins by examining the background context to Mahmud II’s rise to power. He considers Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt (at the time, one of the most important and populous provinces of the Ottoman Empire), but he also analyzes the efforts in Egypt of the “first Muslim monarch to embark decisively on a course of Westernization of institutions”: namely, Muhammad Ali, who delivered a “rude shock to the mindset and traditions that had held sway in the country for centuries.” After many victories and challenges against the European powers and against Sultan Mahmud II, however, Muhammad Ali eventually abandoned his bid for independence from Constantinople, due to external pressures. Even more important, by the reckoning of the author, was the military and political crisis that the Sublime Porte underwent during Mahmud II’s accession to the throne. In this respect, one cannot help but consider the pivotal role played by the Janissaries,

a powerful reactionary corps totally opposed to any military reform. At the time, the Ottoman Empire, which in the past had gloriously demonstrated its great Euro-Mediterranean might, was in deep crisis, as evidenced by the derogatory epithet used by Europeans to describe it: *homme malade*. In 1826, Mahmud II succeeded in destroying the Janissary corps and in creating a modernized army. This radical rebuilding of the military was undoubtedly one of the most important reforms accomplished by the sultan. It was no mean feat to dismantle the powerful Janissaries.

As Costanza notes in his book, the Janissaries had already risen up once in response to the establishment of a separate military force, annihilating it. Costanza describes the sultan's decisive battle against the Janissaries: exploiting the religious connotations of the battle, Mahmud II succeeded in winning the people over to his side (he was also aided by the fact that the population was already hostile towards the Janissaries). Just two days after thoroughly destroying the corps, the sultan replaced it with a completely new army. Costanza's book also describes some of the consequences of the decimation of the corps, such as the suppression of the Bektāşi Brotherhood, which was linked to the Janissaries but better-regarded by the population.

**158** In the meantime, Europe had not just been standing idly by: industrialization had been marching ahead, the economy was developing rapidly and the Ottoman Empire was not keeping pace. Ottoman trade hinged on the state, guilds and merchants. Mahmud II pressed for the liberalization of the rigid commercial structure of the guilds that benefited the merchants. Costanza highlights both the positive and negative consequences of this economic reform. The effect was very beneficial for European states and Greek traders, but Ottoman merchants had to contend with stiff competition within the empire. It is perhaps also for this reason that there was hostility and even atrocious violence against Westerners: for example, in Pera, an affluent European district of Constantinople, thousands of houses were burned down. Nevertheless, despite such incidents, the author rightly notes that one of the strengths of the Ottoman Empire was in fact its multiethnic and multicultural make-up: citizens were treated equally regardless of their ethnicity, religion or social class, thanks to Mahmud II's ideals of justice. The book also deals with various aspects of administrative reform under the sultan, a process that would continue even after his death and would, by 1900, culminate in a vast bureaucratic apparatus, with 35,000 salaried employees.

Containing many splendid color images, the book addresses all facets of the reign of Mahmud II, from its respect for tradition to its modernizing spirit. The sultan, "the last of the great Ottoman absolute sovereigns," is described right from the preface as

acting as a “bridge between a long and glorious past and a modernity whose afterglow can still be discerned.”

In the last and most extensive chapter, the author focuses his attention on the notion of a culture teetering between tradition and Westernization. This section of the book deals with the development of science, the receptiveness to scientific discoveries made in European countries, the development of Western medicine, and the establishment of an academy for military officers, as, all the while, Western languages became synonymous with modernity, and Turkish youths were sent abroad to study.

The author describes in detail the influence Mahmud II had on Constantinople’s architecture, a field of endeavor in which the sultan was extremely active during his long reign: he built numerous bridges and palaces along the Bosphorus, as well as many other buildings and fountains throughout the city. In terms of painting, Mahmud II, like his predecessor Selim III, helped breathe new life into the art form and the manner in which it was employed. For instance, Mahmud II chose not only to have his portrait painted (which several predecessors had also done), but ordered his image to be distributed among influential figures and displayed in public places. This, the author observes, was tantamount to a revolution. “The clerics and the people rose up in protest and Mahmud’s impudence was taxed with blasphemy,” notes Costanza. The author, however, also recognizes Mahmud’s contribution to “satisfying the emerging need for identity and ‘mirroring’ among that swathe of society desirous of affirming the values of the newly-reformed empire.” Finally, the author also thoroughly examines the development of literature and music at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The book is erudite and explores various – even novel – facets of Ottoman society under the rule of Mahmud II. There are, however, quite important aspects of the period – such as the Greeks’ battle against the sultan for independence – that are only mentioned in passing. Perhaps that might be considered an unfortunate lapse, but then again, the author’s intention is to focus on the reforms carried out by the sultan: in that respect, the work is exhaustive. **Maarten van Aalderen** ■

Maurizio Costanza, *La mezzaluna sul filo: la riforma ottomana di Mahmud II (1808-1839)*, Marcianum Press, 2010.

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## reader's notes

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