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"Kadim oldur ki evvelin kimesne bilmeye"

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ABSTRACT

Darin N. Stephanov's first monograph examines how the late Ottoman dynasty's image-management policies influenced their non-elite subjects, particularly Bulgarian-speaking Christians. Stephanov argues that Ottoman regimes manipulated "ruler visibility" to encourage subjects to identify with and invest in the future of the empire and that these practices paradoxically paved the way for Ottoman Bulgars to conceive of themselves in ethnonational terms. The book thus makes a convincing case for the importance of monarchies in bridging late imperial and early national contexts.

Keywords: Late Ottoman History, Ottoman Dynasty, Ottoman Christians, Ruler Visibility, Ethnonationalism.

ÖZ

Darin N. Stephanov'un bu ilk monografisi geç dönem Osmanlı hanedanının imaj yönetimi çalışmalarının tebaası, bilhassa da Bulgarca konuşan Hristiyan tebaası üzerindeki etkisini inceliyor. Stephanov Osmanlı rejiminin tebaanın imparatorluğun geleceği ile aidiyet tesis etmesini ve benimsemesini teşvik etmek üzere "hükümdarın görünürlüğü"nü kullanırken bu yöndeki tedbirlerin paradoksal olarak Osmanlı Bulgarlarının kendilerini etnik ve milli bir çerçevede tasavvur etmelerinin yolunu hazırladığını iddia ediyor. Eser, monarşilerin geç imparatorluk ve erken milli devlet bağlamları arasında bir köprü vazifesi gördüğünü ikna edici bir biçimde ortaya koyuyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Geç Osmanlı Tarihi, Osmanlı Hanedanı, Osmanlı Hristiyanları, Hükümdarın Görünürlüğü, Etnik Milliyetçilik.

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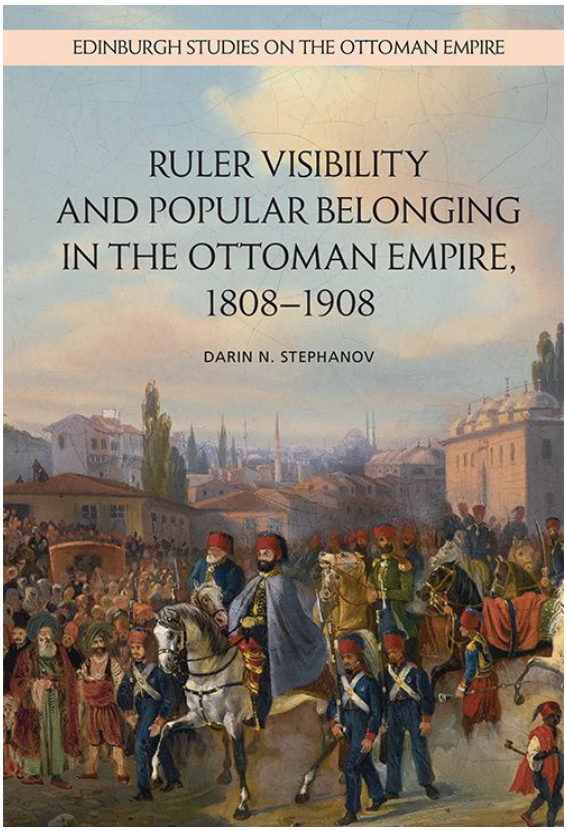

Darin N. Stephanov's *Ruler Visibility and Popular Belonging in the Ottoman Empire, 1808-1908* is the first book-length study of the Ottoman dynasty's image-management politics in the last Ottoman century that approaches the topic with specific attention to the ways in which the dynasty's public-facing self-presentation influenced non-elite segments of the population, particularly Bulgarian-speaking Christians. Drawing on a substantial base of narrative, poetic, archival, and musical materials in [Ottoman] Turkish and Bulgarian, as well as a variety of sources in Modern Turkish, Russian, English, French, German, and Hebrew, Stephanov argues that Ottoman regimes of the period wielded the visibility of regnant emperors as a means to encourage the empire's subject populations to identify with and invest in the future of the empire throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, he contends that while "ruler visibility"—either "direct" (as embodied by the sultan himself) or "indirect" (as embodied by the sultan symbolically *in absentia*)—was intended to centralize subject allegiances across confessional lines, in practice it paved the way for Ottoman Bulgars to conceive of themselves primarily in ethnonational terms that worked against the ruler-centered imperial patriotism (a.k.a. "Ottomanism") propagated by these regimes.

Methodologically speaking, the framework employed in Stephanov's book is informed by a variety of historical subfields including ceremonial studies, court studies, nationalism studies, and micro-history. More specifically, he practices a form of cultural-historical analysis premised on philology and close readings of textual discourse. Like other works on the "culture" and symbolic effect of rulership, however, the book is primarily concerned with examining issues of image-management, political legitimacy, and the more abstract ceremonial and performative dimensions of "soft power." Stephanov also professes an interest in contributing to the body of work of Ottomanist historian Selim Deringil (p. 30, n5),whose 1999 monograph *The Well-Protected Domains* has inspired generations of scholars to attend to the cultural-historical dimensions of late Ottoman dynastic politics. His monograph is a unique addition to the "Deringilian" tradition of scholarship for (at least) two reasons: The first is its focus on Ottoman Christians, a decision very much in line with what we know

about the confessional makeup of late Ottoman society but somewhat against the grain of modern Ottoman studies which has long underprivileged the representation of non-Muslims in scholarship. The second point of note here is the book's attempt to describe the ways in which the degree and quality of ruler visibility played a role in the (ethnonational) self-concept of "average Ottomans," an enterprise virtually uncharted in Ottomanist historiography.

Chapter 1 addresses the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808-39) in the context of what Stephanov calls "the first shift in (modern) ruler visibility." Based on a reading of travel accounts, newspapers, and Ottoman archival documents, Stephanov argues that the later reign of this sultan saw the Ottoman government break with past practice and carefully instrumentalize direct ruler visibility as a mechanism of rule in the form of painting displays, the distribution of honorary medals, conspicuous outdoor ceremonies, tours of nearby provinces, and multilocal celebrations of the sultan's birthday and accession day. For Stephanov, these initiatives are evidence of a precocious *Tanzimat* project seeking to centralize subject loyalties on a patriarchal monarch who symbolized an inclusive, multiethnic, and multireligious "fatherland." However, in spite of the universalism of the regime's message, Stephanov argues that they nevertheless created a discursive space for local communal engagement with the central Ottoman government that led, in the long term, to an ethnonational, trans-regional sense of belonging among Ottoman religious minorities, and therefore to a fragmentation of subject allegiances in the late Ottoman context. In short, imperial attempts to cultivate identification with the Ottoman emperor—and by extension, the empire he represented—created channels for Bulgars to conceive of themselves as a united group, albeit one increasingly united by terms unfavorable to the tenets of Ottomanism.

Chapter 2 presents the long reign of Sultan Abdülmecid (r. 1839-61) as a period of elaboration on his father's template for ruler visibility during which the regime's strategic use of honorary medals, portraits, annual ruler celebrations, and provincial tours—a central focus of this chapter—are significantly expanded in their distribution and practice. By analyzing an extensive array of Bulgar memoir entries, songs, speeches, newspaper articles, and poems composed either in Bulgarian or [Ottoman] Turkish (at times in Cyrillic script) alongside Ottoman archival documents and other texts, Stephanov is able to demonstrate the ways in which the regime's efforts to cultivate the image of a highly visible and accessible emperor resounded in some registers of Bulgar discourse on communal identity. He succeeds here both in highlighting instances where the regime appears to have been particularly interested in courting Bulgar support for Ottomanism as well as the emergence of what he calls a "trope of love" through which Bulgar authors expressed the nature of the relationship between ruler and ruled in terms of an increasingly intimate and sacralised devotional mood. While scholars have long accepted that late Ottoman governments created distinct cultural-linguistic registers through which to communicate with the empire's diverse subject populations, here Stephanov sheds light on the other side of the equation with specific examples.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the ongoing growth of monarchical devotion among Ottoman Bulgars during the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz (r. 1861-76), whose regime appears to have largely followed in the footsteps of Abdülmecid in terms of ruler visibility. According to an analysis of a similar range of materials employed in the previous chapter, Stephanov argues that it was during these years that imperial birth and accession day ceremonies saw their greatest degree

of standardization and Bulgar subject participation. At the same time, he notes that evidence of weakening Bulgar loyalties to sultan, dynasty, and imperial "fatherland" was already visible during this reign even as devotional discourses and practices reached their ostensible peak. He cites restrictive government policies, the appeal of trans-imperial pan-Slavic sentiment, and the growing tenability of an ethnonational identity oriented around an abstract "Bulgaria" as factors that contributed to an evolution in communal consciousness from a sense of being "subjects united in service to sultan and imperial fatherland" to being "Bulgars united by a Bulgarian motherland."

Chapter 4 is the longest and most detailed section of the book by a considerable margin. It delves at length into the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909), the emperor whose regime reversed the model of accessible rulership instigated by Mahmud II and instead resorted to a more abstracted mode of indirect visibility whereby the sultan's public appearances were carefully circumscribed and symbolic markers representing the ruler *in absentia* became prolific. The chapter is thus focused on explicating this "second shift in (modern) ruler visibility" using perhaps the largest range of sources from among the book's four main chapters including newspapers, archives, memoirs, and twenty-eight of the book's thirty-seven images. This said, the preponderance of evidence is derived more from official [Ottoman] Turkish sources than local Bulgar ones. Indeed, as there are relatively few references to the Bulgars in the chapter, it reads more like an in-depth examination of the complex symbolic politics of Abdülhamid II's regime than an analysis of the Bulgars' cultural-historical relationship with the House of Osman. Disjunctive as the chapter may seem when viewed in this light, Stephanov's analysis is nevertheless a very nuanced addition to the historiography of what is often termed "the Hamidian regime" (after Deringil), arguing that it was largely this administration which, after half a century of ceremonial innovation, created the first true "personality cult" in the Ottoman context.

While *Ruler Visibility and Popular Belonging* is assuredly an important intervention into the field of late Ottoman history for all the reasons stated above, there are some analytical considerations worth discussing here. One such issue is the aforementioned disconnect between the fourth chapter and the rest of the book that is caused by this section's comparative focus on an imperial regime's legitimation projects without significant reference to the internalization of those projects by Ottoman Bulgars. To be sure, this disconnect is readily acknowledged by the author, who states that an analysis of how the late Ottoman shift back towards indirect ruler visibility influenced Bulgar communal feeling is beyond the analytical purview of the book (p. 204). However, the fact that escalating Bulgar investment in ruler celebration is an important part of each preceding chapter invites a certain degree of ambiguity regarding Stephanov's source base: for example, it is unclear whether there are few pertinent Bulgar sources for this period or whether the author has chosen not to discuss them. The relative absence of Bulgar voices in this final substantive chapter—the book's narrative culmination—also makes readers wonder whether the Ottoman Bulgars were already disillusioned with Ottomanism by this point such that the shift toward indirect ruler visibility under Abdülhamid II thus had little effect on their community.

Furthermore, while it is understandable that Stephanov pays relatively short shrift to the nature of Ottoman ruler visibility before 1808 and after 1908, the tenability of his arguments

about the novelty and fate of "modern" ruler visibility is arguably connected to a discernable contrast with earlier and later eras. As such, although it is unreasonable to expect a detailed survey of ruler visibility throughout all of Ottoman history, the fact that most, if not all of the regimes of the late sixteenth through the late eighteenth century still remain underrepresented in scholarship makes this reader reticent to accept Stephanov's claim that ruler visibility was largely uniform in this period with few exceptions such as the reign of Sultan Ahmed III (r. 1703-30) (p. 13).

Finally, it is at times unclear from Stephanov's analysis as to whether the weight of evidence permits us to identify if the project of manipulating ruler visibility as a strategy of legitimation and centralization of allegiance was spearheaded in each case primarily by regnant sultans, a broader ruling group, or some complex combination of the two. While Stephanov frequently presents individual cultural products or entire patterns of subject engagement as connected to an individual emperor's agency,[1] the contributions of individual bureaucrats or administrators are rarely reconciled with this "ruler-centered" (as opposed to "regime-centered") approach in a comprehensive fashion.[2] Hence, a more concerted in-text treatment of who exactly served as the architect(s) of ruler visibility and its shifts, or at least a discussion of what inferences and/or conclusions his source base suggests, would help to bolster Stephanov's arguments about the intentionality behind this phenomenon as a political stratagem.

These points aside, Stephanov makes a very convincing case for the importance of monarchical institutions in bridging late imperial and early national contexts through the application of a highly original approach to the study of the Ottoman dynasty. Instead of focusing on the institution itself for its own sake, his goal is to shed light on "the people's monarchy" as experienced by subjects outside of the ruling group. Though his research agenda has yet to be comprehensively explored beyond the late Ottoman case, future studies of Ottoman or other late imperial contexts would do well to follow his lead. Indeed, Stephanov's contention that monarchical image politics "trained" imperial subjects for association with the nation and national citizenship is in keeping with recent works in court studies that present nineteenth-century monarchies not as anachronisms that impeded the development of nation states and the "Modernity" they have come to represent, but rather as institutions very much entangled in histories of state building.

1 See for example p. 12, 57, and 130.

2 This said, there are nevertheless instances where the work of these officials is discussed in detail. See p. 176-183.