

**PRISONS IN THE LATE OTTOMAN EMPIRE: MICROCOSMS OF MODERNITY**  
**KENT F. SCHULL**

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The literature on crime, punishment and prisons has been center of attention in recent decades for scholars. Both historical and contemporary studies in local and global level have become prominent. Especially history of prisons constitutes a promising area to be discovered since it is also not an easily reachable field. Kent F. Schull's book titled "*Prisons in the Late Ottoman Empire: Microcosms of Modernity*" makes an important contribution to the field as being the first book written in English on Ottoman prisons.

The book opens a window to Ottoman modernization through a close look at Ottoman prisons and prison reforms. With the words of the author, the book "focuses on the transformation of the Ottoman criminal justice system, particularly prisons and incarceration, during the late Ottoman Empire (c. 1840–1922)" (p. 3). Schull argues that Ottoman prison reforms mean more than social control and discipline; rather prisons are microcosms of imperial transformation where Ottoman modernization takes place with an aim to centralize the state through adaptation of existing norms, institutions and practices to a new approach on governance, ideals of civilizational progress, and modern nation-state construction (pp. 195-196). Ottoman state's aim to centralize, rationalize and standardize its power within one hand is reflected in its criminal justice approach and consequently, it altered its policy and implementations of criminal justice system. Through several penal code reforms following the declaration of *Tanzimat*, the system is redefined "by the codification of Islamic criminal law, the establishment of criminal courts, and more intrusive policing and surveillance during the long 19<sup>th</sup> century" (p. 3).

Schull uses an approach considering both an imperial and local level by integrating top-down and bottom-up approaches through looking at the state center's programs and "recourse to the lived experiences of prisoners and local cadre in order to ascertain compliance, resistance, and augmentation to these reforms" (p. 4).

In his theoretical framework, Schull takes a socio-legal approach integrating with the Foucauldian analytical perspective. However, Schull notes that his study aims to move beyond Foucault's focus on social control and discipline and considers prisons as social institutions and social artifacts as David Garland conceptualizes in his book titled "*Punishment and Modern Society*". The author expresses his emphasis on "looking at normative laws, regulations, and reforms together with the actual lived experiences of both prison cadre and inmates" (p. 11).

One of the main themes of the book is the notion that considers Ottoman modernization "as one of transformation centered on continuity and change rather than a rupture imposed by the West" (p. 4).

Schull stresses that regulations and reforms undertaken by the Ottoman state during the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not aim to secularize or Westernize the state but to centralize, rationalize and standardize it. This transformation was “the empire’s appropriation, adaptation, and implementation of the assumptions of the modern world to its own imperial context” (p. 35). Thus, prison and criminal justice reforms were such efforts in Ottoman modernization.

In addition to the extensive use of Ottoman Archives, Schull delves into the British Archives, particularly in regards to the inspections and surveys penned by British officials. These inspection and surveys date back to the British Ambassador Stratford Canning’s investigation in 1851 and to the surveys issued by Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) in 1911-12 and the ones conducted by the Allied Forces in 1919-20. The surveys repeatedly showed the horrible conditions of the prisons that the inmates lived in overcrowded spaces, slept on the floor having very little light and fresh air with a constant risk of disease, despite many efforts by different agents at different times within this period.

In the first and second chapters, Schull gives a general framework regarding the punishment and crime in the eyes of the Ottoman state. In Chapter 1, he describes the transformation in Ottoman penal codes during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and how “these courts, new legal codes and procedures became the foundation upon which the empire built its criminal justice system” (p. 24). In Chapter 2, the book takes a closer look at programs and policies of prison reforms starting with Tanzimat that is marked by the abandonment of bodily punishment and adoption of the idea of rehabilitating and incarcerating it; continuing as a wider program with the 1880 Prison Regulation issued in the Hamidian era and reaching its peak with the establishment of Prison Administration by the CUP. Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 constitute the central area of his analysis since Schull puts a magnifying glass to prisons as the state did. In Chapter 3, CUP’s population engineering policies could be seen in the content of the prison surveys and questionnaires giving the statistical data on nationality, age and occupation of prisoners as well as Ottoman state’s increasing interest in people’s lives that shows itself as “nanny state” through the efforts to gain knowledge about prison population. Thus, the prison represents a micro level society for the reformers. The fourth chapter focuses on challenges faced in the attempts of rebuilding existing prisons, building new ones and introducing a new spatial organization in the prisons. With the centralization of prison administration, women, men and children were separated and confined in different buildings, in addition to categorizing inmates according to the type of their crime. In this chapter, Schull also brings a deeper analysis of women inmates both from the perspective of inmates and the state. This chapter also connects to the fifth and sixth chapters in which new spatial arrangements opens the way to a nuanced analysis on prison personnel and juvenile delinquents. The fifth chapter shows that an important difficulty in implementing the reforms was the lack of a professional prison cadre that was engaged in corruption and abuse of power. Reformers had a conflict on prison cadre since they had to rely on the personnel to implement the reforms but at the same time they were also fighting against their corrupt and abusive attitude. The sixth chapter demonstrates the Ottoman state’s changing point of view to the childhood especially in CUP’s approach seeing children as the future of the nation and their emphasis on rehabilitating juvenile delinquents through the introduction of *islahhanes* where prisoners under the age of fourteen were separately held and educated. Schull indicates that CUP was very successful at this since they achieved a significant drop in the number juvenile prisoners.

On the other hand, even though it is repeated in several points that the book intends to look at lived experiences of inmates, it is only possible to get little insight on the side of the prisoners, while the motives of the state regarding prison reform can be seen crystal clear. The book depicts terrible conditions of the prisoners in detail; however, it does not show how the inmates survived under these conditions and what kind of resistance mechanism they could use. Only in a couple of occasions the voice of the prisoners could be heard such as in the example where an inmate in Sinop penitentiary in 1912 criticizes new spatial arrangements of prisons during his questioning in the investigation of prisoner abuse and administrative corruption (p. 123). In addition, it is not also possible to see if any uprisings occurred in prisons against these conditions. As the author explained, the documents regarding prisons were usually from the standpoint of the state and the archives and records on prisons are not quite reachable and unsealed in terms of giving the voice of prisoners. However, Schull's emphasis on the examination of the experiences of prisoners at the beginning of the book creates an expectation on the issue but unfortunately the book does not meet this expectancy.

In conclusion, the book sheds light into an area which is not studied in this extent and with this focus before except several studies mostly concentrating the issue in a more local and micro level as the author underlines that there is a wide open area to be studied. Thus, the book stands as an outstanding example opening the way to raise further research.

