INTRODUCTION

I am delighted to offer this volume of my articles and papers — all of which were published or presented previously — as the fifth contribution to a series sponsored by the Isis Press. The intent of the series is to make available scholarly contributions that have appeared in widely scattered and often-quite-inaccessible formats. These five volumes summarize the international development of Ottoman historical studies and trace the intellectual evolution of the first numerically-large group of Ottoman specialists, one that emerged in the post-1970 period.

Collectively, the volumes published to date reflect the preponderance of economic history in the field of Ottoman studies. Ottoman historical writing has shown a very considerable expansion and maturation since 1970, when I began my Ph.D. dissertation research on nineteenth century Ottoman agriculture. At that time, even the most general outlines of Ottoman economic and social history were unknown. Since then, the researches of my cohort and our successors have filled in, however crudely, many of the unknown spaces. There are still vast stretches of terra incognita but, like 1990s explorers of the Antarctic continent, we have a pretty good idea of where we are and where we are going.

The articles and papers published in the following pages reflect, in many respects, the interests of my generation and the strengths and weaknesses of the field of Ottoman studies. Broadly speaking, my research often (and in recent years, increasingly) has sought to offer a history from below, an approach that is present in Ottoman studies but is more visible in other fields of historical specialization, for example, French, German, East Asian and American history. History from below was born of the confluence of two forces. The first was the democratization of the university that brought the children of diversified backgrounds and gender into the realms of higher learning in far greater numbers than ever before. The second force, one relating more directly to developments in the United States, was the concern for social justice during the 1960s that gave rise to the civil rights movement and, in part, the anti-Vietnam War protests. Many apprentice historians turned to the study of the oppressed and the weak and sought to tell the story of their lives.

In Ottoman studies, however, history from below still remains unusual. The focus on economic history, for its part, has produced fine studies about commerce, agriculture and, to a lesser extent, manufacturing and mining. But there has been little concern for the individuals and groups working in those sectors. Merchants have received some attention but peasants, artisans, miners and others have not. Ottoman history is inhabited by few representatives of the popular classes while the Ottoman state itself continues to be the central object of study. The narratives of Ottoman history, moreover, largely are devoid of conflict in social relations.

A number of factors help account for this state of affairs. The first two are more general issues, ones that Ottoman history from below shares with other fields; the others seem more particular to Ottoman historical studies. Let me begin with the well-known fact that history from below concerns persons and groups who leave few written records about themselves and their lives. Common sources for much of that history — state and company archives and the observations of the literate classes in general — often are hostile or indifferent to peasants, workers and miners. These class barriers, by definition, make the task of writing history from below more difficult than, for example, that of a literate bureaucrat and intellectual such as Mustafa Âli. The achievements of, for example, *Alltagsgeschichte* in German history, however, demonstrate that the obstacles to good history from below can be breached with considerable success.[1]

The second related and general factor concerns the cultural differences between the European authors who prepared reports about the Ottoman Empire and the objects of their concern. Diplomatic correspondents of the various European governements as well as Levant Company agents viewed the Ottoman Empire chiefly through the prism of their own particular interests, as a backdrop against which those interests were played out. They held Ottoman subjects at one remove, at a distance and had their own, different, concerns and culture. Thus, Ottoman historians examining those from below and using materials generated by a different class and culture find the research task doubly difficult.

Another factor is the documentation available in the Ottoman archives, that is, the Prime Ministry Archives. It was, in truth, the presence of these archival materials that attracted me and many others to the field. The study of these numerous documents remains very exciting. But they are the creation of government officials and uncritical use of the documents helps to perpetuate a statist perspective on the Ottoman past. This is because Ottoman bureaucratic and military officials wrote about what concerned them and their state. They were

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[1] For a summary, see Geoff Eley, "Labor History, Social History, *Alltagsgeschichte:* Experience, Culture and the Politics of the Everyday — a New Direction of German Social History?" *Journal of Modern History* (June 1989), 297-343.

not seeking to capture the totality of their world, a task that we historians collectively are seeking to achieve. The state document writers usually discussed peasants as objects, producers of wealth, and rarely as agents with everyday lives beyond those as taxpayers. Only recently have some Ottoman historians recognized that the inherent nature of state-generated sources presents only one view of the past, that of a government elite. However valuable, this viewpoint nonetheless is an elite one from above, a perspective that the historian studying those from below must take into account. Also, the sheer quantity of Ottoman archive documents often entrapped scholars, causing them to ignore relevant evidence located elsewhere. And lastly, for certain periods of Ottoman history, there are few alternative collections of documents that have been cataloged and are accessible.

The problem of the sources has been compounded by the manner in which we have carried out our craft. In the past few decades, inquirers into the Ottoman past generally have belonged to two groups. (1) Scholars with strong theoretical backgrounds (usually sociologists and political scientists) who study Ottoman history but without the benefit of archival research. (2) Those, usually self-identified as historians, who aimed at archival research from the outset of their careers. Some of the first group remain unwilling to enter the archives, mistakenly believing that therein is little of significance for understanding the Ottoman past. For them, theory applied to secondary sources is sufficient and the development of the skills needed for archival research unnecessary. Others were denied the necessary government permission, for political reasons, to enter the archives. Turning to the second group, we find that, alas, most of them were better trained as paleographers and/or philologists than as historians. In part, this is because language training in the United States is extremely poor and American Ottomanists typically acquire their language skills late in their careers, in graduate school, at the expense of historical training. But many Ottomanists of other nationalities living between London and Ankara similarly translate more often than analyze. Too many Ottoman historians approach the archives as neo-Rankeians, asking few questions of the documents except the literal meaning of the words written down on the paper. They continue to hold that the words themselves contain the truth and seem to believe that if we translate all the words of all the documents in the archives, then we will have uncovered the evolving totality of Ottoman society. In their zeal to exhaust the supply of unexamined documents, Ottoman historians often merely regurgitate rather than analyze the documents. Many researchers are archivists not historians. My shelves are full of dissertations, books and other publications that are scarcely more than translations (however ably done) of Ottoman documents. These may be informative but they are not good history. Still worse, this is a self-perpetuating cycle in which skilled readers of documents who are poor historians train the next generation of scholars, who unsurprisingly, in their turn, emerge as poor historians, albeit with superlative paleographic skills. The emphasis remains on

documents as collections of interesting words or as samples of difficult scripts or exciting types of governmental decrees.

The archivist character of Ottoman historians has much to do with the marginality of Ottoman studies in the United States and elsewhere. The field of Ottoman studies remains isolated. Most of our colleagues in other fields of specialization wrongly consider Ottoman history to be an exotic field unlinked to European, American or other histories. Given the key importance of Ottoman history to early modern and modern European and global history, this is an extraordinary state of affairs! Practices such as the interminable use of untranslated Ottoman words and phrases keep at bay the intrepid historian from another field who seeks insights into Ottoman history. Archivism is a serious problem for Ottoman historical writing in general. But it is deadly for the uncovering of history from below, since that enterprise requires scholars to tease from documents a story that their scribal authors did not intend to write, a history of living peasants and artisans and not merely of rural and urban taxpayers.

In sum, documentary abundance combined with the scholars' lack of historical method and imagination creates a deadly paralysis. We have followed the path of least resistance, reproducing the official mind, the state's view of history. There are no easy escapes from this situation. Greater familiarity with work written outside of Ottoman history could provide insights from more advanced fields of study.[2] We need to clearly address the issue of why Ottoman history is important and how it fits into more general patterns of European and global history.

Another factor that inhibits the maturation of Ottoman history in general and impedes the writing of Ottoman history from below is the inability of the various successor states to deal with their Ottoman past. I am most familiar with the example of the modern Turkish state, the nature and evolution of which powerfully has shaped Ottoman historiography. In the process of its formation during the early decades of the twentieth century, the emerging Turkish republic essentially excluded popular participation. It restricted political activity to a small elite, crushed labor movements and made them illegal and kept peasants out of the political process. Government and elite suspicion of the popular classes was exacerbated because of the new Turkey's proximity to the Soviet Union, self-proclaimed standard bearer for the workers and peasants of the world. Worker and peasant demands and activities inside Turkey too easily were labeled as communism and thus dismissed out of hand as traitorous and dangerous to the state. An effective censorship and self-censorship came to prevail in Ottoman

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[2]For a recent effort, see Zafer Toprak, "Sosyal Tarihin Alanı ve Türkiye Gerçeği," *Toplum ve Bilim* 54/55 (Yaz/Güz 1991), 77-88.

historical studies, and not only among Turkish nationals. Ottoman society and economy appeared in an odd light, discussed (nearly) solely in reference to the state, which each docilely served. Ottoman peasants were seen through the prism of Turkish peasants who, in the republican Turkish elite world view, were (passive) repositories of core national values. Ottoman peasants were important because they were the base on which the state rested, but not as a class or group with independent interests and concerns. Ottoman workers similarly became an example of elaborate governmental control systems and little more, just as workers in Turkey were carefully monitored and overseen. An Ottomanist equivalent to Eric Hobsbawm's *Lives of Labor,* in my view, literally was unthinkable until very recently. Is the study of workers still a vaguely illegitimate academic enterprise among Ottomanists? Peasants and artisans out of control, i.e., seeking to promote their own interests, were seen as lawless persons, like the Janissaries, operating beyond the bounds of law and order and worthy of extermination.

In the other successor states we find that Syrian, Romanian, Greek, Iraqi, Bulgarian and Egyptian historians generally have been too willing to denounce the Ottoman legacy as degenerate, destructive and, oddly enough, also irrelevant. That is, the writing of Ottoman history in these countries, as in Turkey, repeatedly has been bent to serve the agenda of the state. While this tendency obviously is not unique to Ottoman history writing, our situation does seem somewhat worse because, until very recently, there has been little acknowledgement that such is the case.[3]

Many of the publications in this volume demonstrate the difficulties in constructing a view from below in Ottoman history that truly is from the perspective of peasants, craft and service sector workers and miners. For example, the "Agricultural Trends" article, appearing in 1981, was an outgrowth of my dissertation that, for its part, I originally intended as a study of the Anatolian peasants themselves. As I confronted, in 1970, hundreds of archival documents about state policies towards peasants and few about the peasants themselves, the dissertation inexorably shifted its focus away from a history of the peasants to a history of agricultural policy. Thus, in "Agricultural Trends," there are macroeconomic patterns and government policies but no peasants. Ten years later, the "Rural Unrest" article appeared, seeking to focus tightly on peasant actions. But, the peasants remain shadowy and elusive figures; basically they are objects rather than actors. In this article, there is no texture, no rich detail, of the

[3] An interesting effort to place history writing in Turkey in its historical context is Halil Berktay, "The Search for the Peasant in Western and Turkish History/Historiography," in Halil Berktay and Suraiya Faroqhi, eds., *New Approaches to State and Peasant in Ottoman History,* Special Issue of *The Journal of Peasant Studies,* (April-July 1991), 110-184, esp. 137ff.

peasants' lives. Emmanuel Ladurie need not fear this writer as a rival nor, for that matter, any among the current generations of those writing on Ottoman peasants.

Is an achievement such as that of Ladurie a matter of individual genius; does the absence of a counterpart among Ottoman historians indicate that something fundamental is missing in Ottoman history? Is it our methodology or lack thereof, our sources, and/or the absence of large numbers of researchers? In part, yes! It certainly is true that Middle East and Ottoman studies have presented very few methodological innovations to any discipline. The one exception that comes to mind is Edward Said's *Orientalism*, that did change the way that many scholars outside of the Middle East field think about their respective areas of study. There are problems with our sources, at least those presently available. But Sherry Vatter's innovative article on the journeymen of 19th century Damascus is a hopeful sign that good history from below can be done.[4] The very paucity of researchers does inhibit us as well. It is on the shoulders of the cadres of American and French scholars scouring local archives, after all, that the great historians of those fields make their contributions. And here, the relative underdevelopment of archive management and preservation play a negative role as well. How many fabulous records lie rotting in the scores of local and regional repositories scattered across the Ottoman world?

Several of the articles herein — "Machine Breaking" and "Ottoman Workers and the State" — may be useful for their suggestions on ways to combine sources in order to offer a history of the popular classes from the bottom up. They begin to present workers for their own sake with their own agendas and concerns. Both articles are rooted in rich Ottoman archival documents — the first a set of telegrams, dated 1908, about riots and the second a series of 19th century-artisanal petitions to state officials. But the success of these articles also derives from the combination of archival materials with a wide variety of information culled from other sources. These range from travel books to a published work by a union leader to European primary sources. A great advantage to their use is the partial escape that they offer from the perspective of the Ottoman state. These kinds of materials are common in the later Ottoman period but too often have been ignored, a sacrifice on the altar of the archives.

Let me attempt to bring together some of the arguments that I presented above. To begin: Ottoman documents, by themselves, often do not provide a sufficient basis for understanding Ottoman history and should be used in conjunction with a variety of other sources whenever possible. A fuller mix of sources will help to remove the Ottoman state from the center of the historian's

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[4]Sherry Vatter, "Journeymen Textile Weavers in Nineteenth Century Damascus: A Collective Biography," in Edmund Burke, III, ed., *Struggle and Survival in the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1993), 75-90.

analysis and facilitate a clearer focus on the non-elite groups, such as the peasants and workers. Having said that, I am hopeful about the new kinds of Ottoman primary sources becoming available, both in the Ottoman archives and elsewhere. But we need to have a critical sense when using these materials, including the court records and pious foundation collections that hold so much promise for Ottoman history from below. The court records, for example, are state documents of a path of legal recourse that was more available to the urban as well as to the better off in Ottoman society. They thus exclude many of the persons of interest to us. Also, we need to redefine our goals to include objectives beyond deciphering yet another previously-unread document. The problem often is not so much a lack of information — although this still can be a serious problem — as a lack of analysis of the material already unearthed. We need to better utilize the vast numbers of documents uncovered by others that are available to us, and ask better questions. Often we eagerly leap directly into the archival materials and do not build sufficiently on already-completed studies.

Furthermore, we are refusing to engage in scholarly debate with one another. Generally, we act as if there are no differences of interpretation among us (there are exceptions such as the debate around the Ottomans' origins or, less recently, the nature of the Celali rebellions). Take, for example, my two 1979 articles on the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. Whatever their merit, they did seek to offer a different way of thinking about this important event. Was it a coup afterall or, as I suggested, might it have been an effort to prevent social revolution? To my knowledge, not one line of print has ever appeared attacking my argument, although there are many who disagreed. Rifa'at 'Ali Abou-El-Haj's book, *Formation of the Modern State* recently has appeared and should generate considerable discussion. Some of his propositions are controversial or speculative. They are seriously put forward, by a historian committed to his field, and are entitled to scholarly debate on the issues presented. There is nothing wrong with argumentation nor anything disrespectful about disagreement. The journals of most fields are full of scholarly arguments on important questions.

In sum, we rework tired themes and ask few questions. Our work frequently is heavily encoded in secret languages and is unintelligible to non-specialists who thus are encouraged to shun Ottoman history as irrelevant. We cling to official sources and remain unwilling to venture very far from these data, to exercise imagination. We either breathe the thin ether of theory unsupported by research or are choking on undiluted empiricism. Too much of the historical writing about the Ottoman past is deadly dull. This is a great disservice to a vibrant, exciting and important story.