

Joseph von Hammer, *History of the Ottoman Empire*, Volume 9 (1833)

Abstract

Joseph von Hammer (1774–1856, from 1835 von Hammer-Purgstall) was one of the major Orientalist scholars in Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century. He trained in Near Eastern languages in Vienna before entering the Habsburg diplomatic service in 1799 as a translator in Istanbul. The author of numerous works on the literature and history of the Middle East and the Islamic world, he was also a prolific translator, above all of works in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish into German, but also of, for example, Marcus Aurelius into Persian. Hammer's translation of the Divan of the fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafiz (1812–13) most famously provided the inspiration for Goethe's late lyrical cycle the *West-östlicher Divan* (1819). Hammer also gained recognition as one of the early European historians of the Ottoman Empire to use manuscript and government archival sources as the basis for narrative accounts. In the following passages, taken from his ninth and final volume of *The History of the Ottoman Empire, Largely from Hitherto Unused Manuscripts and Archives* [*Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches, gressentheils aus bisher unbenützten Handschriften und Archiven*], Hammer reflects on the nature of historical writing and the problems of researching contemporary history. He also signals his views on Turkish and Islamic governance, political thought, and culture. Hammer ultimately offers a balanced assessment of Ottoman achievements, transmitting some stereotypes about Turks and Islam but also providing a more differentiated portrayal, above all of the secular dimensions of Ottoman politics and culture.

Source

[...]

Epilogue.

Those readers who may be wondering why this history already ends with the Treaty of Kainarji, why it does not extend at least to the Treaty of Sistow or Jassy, if not to the Treaty of Adrianopole, and why it does not continue up to the Greek popular uprising and the abolition of the Janissaries, or at least to the new arrangements under the government of S. Selim III, deserve the following answer and accounting, which—thanks be to God!—finally brings this long and laborious work to a close. The same motive that prevented the author from beginning to write this work for thirty years forbids him to continue it if only for thirty years, i.e., up to the Egyptian campaign in which he participated, and the same reason that caused him to take up his pen so late was also the same one, by and large, that made him lay it down so early, namely, the failure to completely gather the necessary sources, especially the native sources. While he previously succeeded in expanding the bibliographical knowledge then present in Europe from some 20 native sources for Ottoman history to 200, and had acquired them with a great expenditure of time and money, his many years of constant effort, renewed with every Turkish post, to acquire the complete series of Ottoman historians and other sources known to him from the government of S. Abdulhamid to that of S. Mahmud II proved unsuccessful. Some of them, which he did manage to purchase, served only to render the lack of the others all the more palpable, and, at most, through the contrast of the later with the earlier, to better illuminate the former. The continuation of this history could therefore only have been quite defective, in comparison to the preceding 72 volumes and with regard to the use of the original sources, and it was more advisable to take my hand from the slate than to write more books that would, by the nature of things, have been less complete and also less impartial.

The political entanglements and cabals of Russian ministers immediately following the Treaty of Kainarji and the events of the Austrian war against the Turks would have offered subjects difficult to capture; half-truths, faint cues, timid hints, understandable only to those who already know something of the matter, tempered terminology, such as those demanded and brought to light by the political daily papers, have always appeared to the author unworthy of a historian's quill; but even without considering such obstacles, which arise from the particular situation and conditions, full and free historical writing, the desirable completeness and impartiality, remains unattainable for anyone recording the events of his own time. The sources of contemporary history, like those of the earth, long flow hidden under the surface before breaking through to the light; the divining rods set to find them do not always succeed, and the smoke of armies and political reflections in the water often obscure the view outside. To be sure, Xenophon and Caesar, Thucydides and Tacitus have recorded for posterity the history of their times, of which their lives were a great part; but in order to properly appreciate the truth we lack the accounts of the historians of the Persian Empire, the British bards and the Gallic Druids. Aware of the abovementioned difficulties, the three great English historians and Johannes v. Müller have chosen the earlier period as the subject of their histories, and Karamsin carries his work only up to the beginning of the reign of the current dynasty. Those who are the lever or witness of remarkable occurrences may record them as memorable events; it is left to posterity to write an impartial history based upon them. Guided by this perspective, the author, even without the insurmountable obstacle of gathering the complete sources, could not close his history more appropriately than with the epoch of the Treaty of Kainarji, which proved so decisive for the Ottoman Empire, and which falls in the year of his birth.

Aside from the fact that not all of the original sources of Ottoman history from the Treaty of Kainarji on, with which the previously published volumes of the present volume end, are available yet, from this period onward the heretofore richly flowing sources in archives become less abundant; not because the reports of the Venetian and Austrian ambassadors are less open for users than those of earlier times, but for a different, twofold reason: first, the content of the Venetian accounts diminishes to the degree that Venice's power waned, and that the baili were no longer the effective agents of an energetic, potent border power of the first water, which intervened decisively in war and peace, but merely the quiet observers of a republic mired in the lagoons of aristocratism. Second, the time of the Treaty of Kainarji, or rather already of the Congress of Focsani, already saw a weakening of the ties of warmest agreement between Austria and Russia, which ever since the holy alliance with Peter the Great, and still more since the military alliance of 1726 between the two courts at the Sublime Porte, which was renewed twenty years later, led to shared interests and also common steps and the plainspoken communication of the most important events. This political closeness was interrupted only briefly during the reign of Peter II but was renewed at the approach of the Russo-Turkish war in 1768 and further cemented by the partition of Poland. In the half century between the Treaty of Kainarji and that of Adrianople, however, whose events fill the subsequent period of Ottoman history, the intimate relations between the two powers, based on shared interests, continued only during the jointly conducted Turkish and French War. In order to describe the Ottoman history of the previous half century with equal knowledge of the most important events and diplomatic negotiations at the Sublime Porte, the continuer of this history would need access no less to the Austrian and Russian archives, since only they can shed light on much that remains obscure in the most recent Ottoman history. Until the holy alliance before the Peace of Carlowitz, Austria and Venice were the two foremost defenders of Christendom against Islam, and Poland and Russia, albeit also border powers, had less influence. In the course of the eighteenth century, Poland retreated into the background to the degree that Russia stepped forward and the Ottoman Empire sank. The first partition of the former may be regarded as the forerunner to the final partition of the last. From the Treaty of Kainarji until that of Adrianople, Russia set the tone of diplomatic negotiations at the Sublime Porte, initiated war and peace and arbitrated the most important affairs of the empire; with the exception of the Egyptian war and the traversing of the Dardanelles, France and England, like Holland in the past and later Prussia, only intervened effectively as intermediaries and for certain moments. Austria limited itself to maintaining the restored peace and offering friendly advice; from the Treaty of Kainarji to

that of Adrianople, Russia alone has trodden the Ottoman Empire with dictatorial feet. In the future, any attempt to write the Ottoman history of the past half century, from the Treaty of Kainarji to that of Adrianople, as completely as that of the earlier period from the Peace of Carlowitz to the Treaty of Belgrade, and from that era to the Peace of Kainarji, which has been described in this history, can only be based on the Ottoman Empire histories and documents in the Russian archives.

After this, as I hope, sufficient accounting of why this book ends with the Treaty of Kainarji, please allow me to review the spirit and content of the completed work of history. The types of historical writing are as varied as the standpoints from which the inner connections among curious world events can be viewed, and it would be a foolish waste of effort to expect to meet the demands placed upon the different types of historical writing in a single work. A reader and brief overview have different aims from a comprehensive history, as do philosophical reflections upon history or a pragmatic portrayal. The author aimed to provide a detailed pragmatic history of the Ottoman Empire based on the as yet untapped sources of imperial histories and diplomatic archives, and he believes he has attained this objective like no other historian of the Ottoman Empire before him.

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The appellation *Turk* is an epithet, in the mouths of both Europeans and Ottomans, and, on closer consideration, for the same reason. For the Ottoman, a Turk is a crude son of the steppes, devoid of all culture and manners, and for the European an Asiatic barbarian trapped in outmoded forms of politics and religion. The Ottoman looks askance at the rough Turkmen, the Europeans at the Ottoman *Turk*. In this sense the word Turk suffers a further expansion, from the Bosphorus to the Gaditan Straits. If the Ottoman Empire today is no longer a conquering one, and long since bounded by the borders of the Danube and the Kuban in the North, the shores of Egypt in the South and the Euphrates and the Tigris in the East, then the reason is none other than that it did not move forward but stood still, like the vibrant river does when it ceases to flow and becomes a swamp, in a word, because the Turks are Turks.

The statement that the Turks are Turks should not, however, lead us to unjustly judge the character of a people, who, in the Ottoman Empire less than anywhere else, should be held responsible for the corruption of the government; nor should it lead us to an unfair assessment of the government itself, as long as it was in a position to uphold the old imperial constitution with full force. To judge the Turk fairly from a historical perspective, let us not forget that he bears the shackles of Islam, which, according to the spirit of its laws, as the least tolerant of all religions, strives for world domination and consequently for constant conquest.^[1] The fatwa of the Cypriot and Persian war loudly proclaims the legitimacy of breaching the peace as soon as it proves advantageous. For four centuries, the Ottomans granted the infidels mere surrender and not permanent peace, and there was so much resistance to the perpetuation of the peace because it was expressly against the meaning of the law. Viewed from this standpoint, the Ottomans far surpassed the Persians and even the Arabs through their first establishment of standing armies, perfect military discipline and, notably, through the blood tax of the Janissary recruits, in the refined but inhumane statecraft of Islamic despotism, which their Montesquieu, *Ibn Chaldun*, rightfully accused of having fickle state institutions. The ship of state was rarely steered by native-born Turks but usually Christian boys, Greeks, Illyrians, Albanians, Serbs, Croats, and also Hungarians and Germans, chosen by the blood tax as recruits and pages, as blind instruments of domination, and removed from all the ties of blood and the faith of their fathers. Under Suleiman Kanuni the rule of law flourished along with the power of the empire. Statecraft is known in Turkish, Persian and Arabic as *riaset*,^[2] i.e., the ship's officers, from the natural image of the steering of the ship of state through the waves of the people and time, but this appears incomplete to these three peoples without the deployment of the necessary severity known as *siaset*, after the Arabic word derived from the handling of horses.^[3] The instrument and aims of this double art of safely steering the ship of state and keeping tight reins on the people's horse is the observation of the law, so that here, too, as in any well-organized state, its highest aim, the

victory of law, becomes attainable. The concept of political liberty is alien to the Near Easterner, who knows only the civic freedom of the freed or freeborn slave. The Persian knew the religious freedom of Zarathustra's doctrine, whose symbols were the free cypress and the free lily; the Arab knows only the freedom of the Bedouin, i.e., of the raw natural state of the savage, his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; the Ottoman, when forced in the middle of the eighteenth century to make acquaintance with the freedom of the Poles and the independence of the Crimean Tatars, found no other word for it than *head-wrapped*^[4] because the slave is denied the right to wrap his head, just as in ancient Rome only freemen were allowed to wear hats. Less alien to the Ottomans are the terms *humanity* and *polity*; the word *republic* can even be found in the official title of the viziers. The most exemplary of all Ottoman state institutions is doubtless the hierarchy of the Ulema, founded by S. Mohammed II and perfected by S. Suleiman I, that aristocratic guild of scholars and judges that, as a kind of legislative body, maintained the equilibrium of the legions of troops, and kept even despotism in check; not a hereditary nobility but a chamber of the meritocracy of jurisprudence, an aristocracy of theologians and jurists, of judges and professors, whose constancy it mainly was that rescued the ship of state from the many storms of despotism and anarchy that threatened to engulf it. The professors in Turkey are better paid and more highly respected than those in Germany and other countries, excepting England and France. Although the lucrative positions of the muderris (i.e. religious scholar) and the judge, the court physician and court astronomer, which lead to the dignities of qadi and the highest, that of the mufti, are restricted exclusively to the two branches of the science of the law, theology and jurisprudence, in which a legion of Ulema made their names, these earnest fields of study nevertheless did not hinder but rather furthered the development of higher education through ethical, historical, philological, medical and mathematic studies and via the fine arts allowed by law, namely, poetry, music, rhetoric, architecture and calligraphy; only painting and sculpture went empty-handed, since they were forbidden, while so many of the mechanical arts flourished, whose materials and colors were the envy and prize of the Occident: the many-colored silken stuffs of Haleb, the velvet pillows of Brusa, the shalloons of Angora, the shaggy white coats of the Barbary Coast, and the black sailor's caps of Smyrna, the damask, the fine red woolen fabric, the soap and rose oil of Adrianople, the shirts of the archipelago (once the garments of coa vestis), the shaggy hand towels and swimming aprons, the embroidered handkerchiefs and headscarves, the imitated shawls of Baghdad, the work of the gold wire-drawers and seal engravers of Constantinople etc.; all European armies have adopted Turkish military music, just as they have adopted mining equipment from the Turkish sieges. The masterpieces of Ottoman architecture (the architects were mainly Greeks, however) astonish Europeans in the mosques of Constantinople and Adrianople, on the banks of the Bosporos and the Dschemna. In the art of calligraphy, notably in the *taalik*, undoubtedly the most beautiful, brilliant and delicate of all Occidental and Oriental scripts, the Ottomans vied with the Persians, the first masters of this art. The *Humajunname*, the renowned translation of the so-called fables of Bidpai, far surpasses the Arabic and Persian model in rhetorical splendor and ornamentation, a veritable masterpiece of vividly colorful Oriental eloquence; their poetry attained still greater heights.

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NOTES

[1] As Raffles, who is well known for his services in the British Far East as both a statesman and an author, very correctly speaks of "the merit of plundering [and massacring] the infidels; an abominable tenet, which has tended more than all the rest of the Alcoran to the propagation of this robber-religion." *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Thomas Stanford Raffles* (London, 1830), p. 78. Similarly, Mackintosh writes in his history of "the avowed principle of all Mahometans that they are intitled to universal monarchy." p. 123. (In English in original source)

[2] *Reis*, that is, the head, generally refers to a ship's captain.

[3] *Seis*, the groom or stableman.

[4] *Serbestiyet*.

Source: Joseph von Hammer, *Geschichte des Osmanischen Reiches, grossentheils aus bisher unbenützten Handschriften und Archiven*, vol. 9: *Schlussrede und Übersichten I–X*. Pest: C.A. Hartleben, 1833, pp. v–xliii.

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