

3-“Frightening Turks, Barbaric Muscovites”: Notes on the image(s) of the Ottoman Turks and the Muscovites in the sixteenth-century Europe

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Abstract

Neither the Ottoman Turks nor the Muscovites in the sixteenth century described their manners, customs, administrative, military, and civil institutions as the authors of the European *Turcica* and *Muscovitica* did. On the other hand, the sixteenth-century European accounts on the Ottoman Turks and the Muscovites were mainly composed to motivate the masses for political and religious reasons and inspire those who sought adventure and trade options in distant lands. In most cases, the views of the European authors were shaped by their personal biases and the official stances of their ruling elites. This short study, which compares and contrasts selected European descriptions of the Ottoman Turks and the Muscovites in the given period, argues that the sixteenth century saw the revival of the ancient concepts of tyranny and despotism in European thought to define the “others.” It suggests that a diverse group of people, including diplomats, clergy, travelers, merchants, missionaries, and intellectuals who had different motives and motivations, helped create this image.

Keywords: The Ottoman Turks, the Muscovites, sixteenth century, Europe, oriental despotism

“Korkunç Türkler, Barbar Moskoflar”: On altıncı yüzyıl Avrupa’sında Osmanlı Türkleri ve Moskof imge(leri) üzerine notlar

Öz

On altıncı yüzyılda *Turcica* ve *Muscovitica* literatürünü oluřturan Avrupa yazarların aksine ne Osmanlı Türkleri ne de Moskoflar kendi âdet ve geleneklerini, idari, askeri ve sivil kurumlarını betimlemişlerdir. Öte yandan, Osmanlı Türkleri ve Moskoflar hakkında yazan on altıncı yüzyıl Avrupalılar eserlerini esasen kitleleri siyasi ve dini amaçlara uygun şekilde motive etmek ve uzak coğrafyalarda macera ve ticarî imkânlar arayanlara ilham vermek için kaleme almışlardır. Çoğu kez, Avrupalı yazarların görüşleri kişisel önyargıları ve yönetici seçkinlerin resmi duruşları etrafında şekillenmiştir. Söz konusu dönemde Osmanlı Türkleri ile Moskofların belli-başlı Avrupalı tasvirlerini karşılařtıran elinizdeki bu kısa çalıřma, tiranlık ve despotizm kavramlarının on altıncı yüzyıl Avrupa düşüncesinde “ötekileri” tanımlamak için yeniden gündeme geldiğini iddia etmektedir. Bu imgenin oluřumuna diplomatlar, din adamları, gezginler, tüccarlar, misyonerler ve entelektüeller gibi farklı motivasyonlara sahip insanlar katkıda bulunmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Osmanlı Türkleri, Moskoflar, on altıncı yüzyıl, Avrupa, Şark despotizmi

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*Let us believe that every people, even if different from us, can have
a genuine worth, laws, usages, and reasonable opinions.*

A. H. Anquetil-Duperron, *Législation Orientale*, 1778

In his *Législation Orientale*, Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731-1805), the first serious scholar of the Indo-Iranian cultures and societies in western Europe, tried to repudiate the general European tendency to label “others” as barbarians. His work was a response to Montesquieu’s famous “oriental despotism” thesis in which the French philosopher revived the ancient cultural divide between “Europe” and “Asia” and reaffirmed the classical belief on the superiority of western liberty and lawful government. Anquetil-Duperron, who used his observations and translations of legal texts when he described and discussed oriental cultures, argued that Montesquieu constructed his work on literary sources, mostly travelers’ reports, which, in his view, were the “products of fantasy, special interest, and ignorance of primary documents, especially religious sources.” Montesquieu, Anquetil-Duperron claimed, developed a coherent “system of despotism” out of scattered impressions to “accentuate European readers the value of the European political tradition and inculcate an appreciation of Western institutions.” Montesquieu’s formulation was to support the rising imperialism with its “ideological function of justifying incipient Western empires in Asia” (Whelan, 2009).

Inspired by the critiques of and recent comments on Anquetil-Duperron, this short study aims to compare and contrast European descriptions of non-western governments and societies in general, the Ottoman Turks and the Muscovites in particular, in the sixteenth century. It argues that while the growing powers of the Ottoman Empire and the Tsardom of Muscovy in the earlier periods inspired a variety of opinions for European writers, the sixteenth century saw the revival of the ancient concepts of tyranny and despotism in European thought to define these political entities (Koebner, 1951, p. 284). This study suggests that a diverse group of people, including diplomats, clergy, travelers, merchants, missionaries, and intellectuals who had different motives and motivations, helped create this image.

-I-

The accounts of diplomats, travelers, missionaries, soldiers, adventurers, and merchants had significantly contributed to the growing Christian consciousness towards Islam. During the time of Islam-Arab conquests of the Arab Peninsula, Transaxonia, Northern Africa, and Spain between the seventh and ninth centuries, numerous works were composed in Europe to explain Islam’s rapid spread. These accounts were mostly theological, commenting on Islam as 1) the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham and his son Ishmael in the Old Testament, 2) God’s judgment to Christians who accepted the Council of Chalcedon’s decisions in 451 A.D., and 3) a Christian heresy. Continuing military and political conflicts transformed the nature of this theological debate into a harsh polemic (Goddard, 2001). The aggressive tone resonated in the Christian accounts for a long time, particularly during the age of the Crusades from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries, to create various forms of social and political mobilization. The Ottoman Turks replaced the Arabs as the central focus in the prevailing political, intellectual, and public debates in Europe in the following centuries (Rouillard, 1938; Bohnstedt, 1968; St. Clair, 1973; İnalçık, 1974; Beck, 1987; Rodinson, 1987).

Starting with the establishment of the European embassies (the first one in 1479 by the Venetians) in the Ottoman capital, perpetual observations, and anecdotes about the Sultans (or “Grand Seigneurs”) and their policies began to flow to Europe for political and intellectual consumption. The Ottoman Turks, who had become a part of international politics and diplomacy after their victories in the Balkans,

Central Europe, and the Mediterranean in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, played an essential role in the European balance of power and thus echoed differently in the political, religious, and cultural accounts of the period.

Frightening and inspiring, the Ottoman Turks drew the attention of many. In the political and religious spheres, the theme of “terror of Turks” became instrumental for rulers and clergy who needed to justify their successes and failures in the eyes of their followers. In the cultural sphere, the Ottomans’ image as recurring characters in plays, bales, and operas kept the intellectual and public awareness alive (And, 1999). During the Renaissance period, several humanists showed a tendency to interpret the military achievements of the Ottomans in an analogy drawn by Herodotus. While the ancient Greeks and the European nations represented the civilized world, the Persians and the Muslim Turks, who -according to them- had Trojan origins, were the barbaric Easterners.

It was also during this period that many fortune-seekers, soldiers, and artisans, who were encouraged with the orient’s mystified image, moved to the Ottoman capital. A Venetian ambassador, possibly considering the risks of losing his talented countrymen to the Ottoman Turks, attempted to warn the Venetian authorities not to allow boys under sixteen to board a ship since they would not know how to “withstand the temptation to become a Turk” (Valensi, 1993, p. 35). This warning was legitimate if one considers the significant number of *rinnegati* (converts to Islam to be in the service of the Ottomans) in the sixteenth century. According to some historians, the number of the *rinnegati* who perceived the conversion to Islam to improve their social and economic conditions in sixteenth-century Italy was around three hundred thousand (Soykut, 2001, p. 11).

It is also important to note that the Venetian ambassadors found the political system of the Ottoman Turks captivating. In her study based on the Venetian ambassadorial reports (*relazioni*), Lucette Valensi demonstrated that according to the Venetian ambassadors, the Ottomans had such a political order that “every part was subordinate to the center in a relation of mutual tension, a structure that united all the levels of the hierarchy while making each of them dependent on the top.” Citing reports written at different periods (Minio, 1522; De Ludovisi, 1534; Erizzo, 1557; Barbarigo, 1558; Barbarigo, 1564), Valensi stated that “in the eyes of the Venetians, the submission of those who are in the emperor’s service is ‘incredible’ and ‘unaccountable,’ in that it is voluntary and not imposed. And this is as true for the simplest foot soldier as it is for the grand vizier” (1993, p. 36-37).

The submission of the imperial officials and soldiers, either voluntary or not, to the sultan found an echo in several politico-philosophical accounts of the period, including Niccolò Machiavelli’s famous work, *The Prince* (1513). Machiavelli referred to the Ottoman government as an absolute monarchy dependent on slavery and a standing army. This characteristic of the Ottoman system enabled its rulers to have a strong and unified force to govern efficiently. Machiavelli wrote that “no prince today possess professional troops entrenched in the government and administration of the provinces... The Turk... always keeps around him twelve thousand infantry and fifteenth thousand horse, on whom depend the security and strength of his kingdom; and it is necessary, postponing every other concern, that the Lord keeps them friendly” (1980, pp. 26, 120). The Ottoman system was not arbitrary but pragmatic and flexible, particularly in the newly conquered lands. Machiavelli praised the Ottoman practice as a working governmental system in which the highest administrative positions were open to men of talents without a noble background (1965, pp. 14, 21). While he put forward such positive perspectives and claims, Machiavelli believed that the autocratic Ottoman system had no place in Europe (1980, p. 120; Anderson, 1974, p. 398). According to Perry Anderson, Machiavelli was the first theorist to use the

Ottoman Empire as the antithesis of European monarchies. Anderson argued that Machiavell’s perspectives on the Ottomans “constitute one of the first implicit approaches to a self-definition of ‘Europe’” (1974, p. 398).

In addition to these diplomatic and politico-philosophical accounts, one can find lengthy discussions of the Ottoman Turks in European religious literature. To give a few examples, Thomas More (d. 1535) described the Turks, i.e., the Muslims, as a malaise for the Christendom in his *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (1534) where he set the famous dialogue between young Vincent and aged Anthony in Hungary on the eve of Sultan Süleyman I (r. 1520-1566)’s conquests. In one part of this dialogue, Antony commented on the advancement of the Turks and urged the Christians to stand firm and united:

Greece feared no the Turk when that I was born; and within a while after, that whole empire was his. The great sultan of Syria thought himself more than his match; and long since you were born hath he that empire too. Then hath he taken Belgrade, the fortress of this realm, and since hath he destroyed our noble young goodly king. And now strive there twain [John Zapolya of Transylvania and Ferdinand of Austria] for us. Our Lord send the grace that the third dog [Süleyman I] carry not away the bone from them both... The Turk is in few years wonderfully increased, and Christendom on the other side very sore decayed. And all this worketh our wickedness, with which God is not content (1966, p. 8).

Leland Miles, who studied More’s writings, pointed out that More allegorically used the Turk as a frightening figure for the Christians in England. He suggested that “More needed an allegorical smokescreen behind which to attack Henry VIII, and behind which to offer comfort to English Catholics, who at that time stood in great danger of persecution by Henry... Then, we can safely pronounce the Grand Turk Süleyman to be a symbol for Henry VIII” (More, 1966, p. xxii.) In another passage in the *Dialogue*, when Vincent inquired whether or not a wealthy Christian ruler should sign a capitulation with the Turks as a tactic to help the Christian cause, Antony replied:

Nay, nay, my Lord, Christ hath not so great need of your lordship as rather than to lose your service. He would fall at such covenants with you to take your service at halves to serve Him and His enemy both... And this I say, though the Turk would make such an appointment with you as you speak of, and would when he had made it keep it. Whereas he would not, I warrant you, leave you so when he had once brought you so far forth, but would little and little after ere he left you make you deny Christ altogether and take Mahomet in His stead. And so doth he in the beginning when he will not have you believe him [Mahomet] to be God. For surely if he were not God he was no good man neither, while he plainly said he was God (1966, pp. 18-19).

It is feasible to read this argument by More as a response to Martin Luther (d. 1546), who advised his followers not to resist the rising Ottoman power. Criticizing the practices of the Popes who used “the Turkish war as a cover for their game and robbed Germany of money by means of indulgences whenever they took the notion,” Luther interpreted the unlawful attacks on the Turks as “God’s rob and devil’s servant[s],” as a deserved divine punishment (Luther, 2003, p. 126), but not as the final Antichrist since Islam was too gross and irrational for this mighty role. According to Luther, the real and final Antichrist must come from within the Church; and he was none other than the Pope himself (Goddard, 2001).

Nicolas de Nicolay (d. 1583), a French traveler, soldier, and statesman, called for a new Crusade against the *Turkie* where he could not see a civilized human life but “a life of brute beasts.” Conversion and the enslavements of the Christians seem to be the reason for such harsh criticism of the author and his call for a new crusade:

[Christians] are also constrained to giue and deliuer their owne children into bodily seruitude & eternal perdition of their soules, a tyrannie I say again, most cruell & lamentable & which ought to bee a great consideration & compassion unto all true Christian princes for to stir & prouoke them

unto a good peace & christian unities & to apply their forces jointly, to deliuer the children of their Christian brethren out of the miserable seruitude of these infidels (Nicolay, 1585, p. 69).

Not surprisingly, such critiques and comments contributed to awaken an intellectual interest in the Ottoman Turks and their history and culture. A few decades before the publication of the first German translation of an Ottoman chronicle by C. von Spiegel, Philipp Melanchthon (d. 1560) wrote the following lines in 1537 to explain the reasons for this kind of scholarly inquiry: “Since in this era a war has broken out in which we must fight the Turks, not only in defense of liberty, laws, and other refinements of civilization, but also for our religion, altars, and homes, it is of the greatest importance for our princes to get a thorough understanding of Turkish affairs” (Setton, 1962, p. 162).

-II-

In his seminal study on the Russian image in early modern Europe, Marshall T. Poe pointed out that there was a similarity in the depictions of the Muscovites in the European accounts written between 1486 and 1526: “Muscovy is commonly depicted as a rich northern country, ruled by a powerful prince, and peopled by Christians of the Greek rite” (Poe, 2000, p. 26). However, this general picture echoed in different tones and forms, and sometimes in the opposite direction. Christian Bomhover, a Livonian who served as an official of the *Curia* during the crusades against pagans in the Baltic region and Orthodox Muscovites at the beginning of the sixteenth century, described the Muscovites in his *Fine History* (1508) as “not Christians, but heathens; they are barbaric and cruel; their master, Ivan III, is a tyrant; and worst of all, they have secretly covenanted with the Tatars and the Turks to lay Christendom low” (Poe, 2000, pp. 18-19). This book, which Bomhover wrote at the behest of the Teutonic Knights and distributed with the Papacy’s permission, was a propaganda work that contributed to the author’s efforts to seek foreign aid for Livonia in its war against the Muscovy.

Similarly, Jacob Piso, who was sent to Sigismund camp in Orsha in 1514 to make peace between Sigismund and Vasili III to unite their forces against the Turks, published the first account depicting the Muscovite government as tyrannical. Although he had never been in Muscovy, Piso wrote in his letter that the Catholics in Muscovy were “oppressed by the most cruel laws -all [were] born to this condition, all grow to it, and all [were] reduced to it,” and they were suffering for their belief at the hands of the grand prince. The reason why Piso wrote in this anti-Muscovite tone was palpable: he failed in his papal mission and blamed the Muscovite regime (Poe, 2000, p. 21).

In the same vein as these anti-Muscovite accounts, Francesco Da Collo, an Italian who was sent by Emperor Maximilian to Muscovy to end the hostilities between the Poles and the Muscovites in 1518 but also failed in this mission, accentuated the power of the Russian ruler: “The grand prince is the sole proprietor in the realm; the Russians have no written law, only the prince’s will, no subject may travel outside the realm without express permission of the ruler... [He] controls a cavalry host of 400,000 men armed like Turks” (Poe, 2000, pp. 21-22). The Dutch Albert Campensé, another official of the *Curia*, wrote in 1524 about the Russians’ possible conversion into Catholicism and its practical benefits for the Papacy to have an ally against the Turks and Lutherans. The absolute power of the grand prince would be helpful for the conversion of the whole society since “no one could hold a living without his wit, leave Russia without his allowance, or contradict him anyway.” With their high morality and piety, the Russians, according to Campensé, were ready to convert to Catholicism (Poe, 2000, p. 23).

Following these anti-Muscovite discourses, Maciej Miechowita, a geographer, medical doctor, and historian from Poland, underlined the tyrannical rule of the grand prince in his *Account of the Two*

Sarmatias, Asian and European (Cracow, 1517), comparing them with the Ottoman Turks: “In the Muscovite state, as in the lands of the Turks, people are thrown from place to place and from province to province for colonization, and to replace [those who have departed] they send and settle others” (Poe, 2000, p. 29). He implied that the Grand Prince, as the Ottoman Sultan, treated his subjects like slaves by having a free hand to move them against their wills. The account of Miechowita became influential on the following German descriptions of Muscovy. William Pirckheimer’s work entitled *Germany Described from Various Sources* (Nuremberg, 1530), an account that many in the following generations repeated its claims, also drew a gloomy picture of the Muscovite society:

This nation is rude and completely barbarous, and moreover, they are subject to extreme servitude, such that, as among the Turks, all property is accounted as belonging to the rulers. And the prince of Muscovia holds everything to be his property: he relinquishes only profit and use [of his property] to his subjects, and not for longer than his desires (Poe, 2000, p. 31).

Politics and religion were not always the main concerns of the visitors to Muscovy. Contarini, a Venetian diplomat and merchant credited as the first European to travel to Muscovy, wrote in 1476 that the country was abundant with natural resources. He did not call the grand prince a tyrant, the Russian people barbarians, or the Orthodox Church apostate in his account. Instead, by paying close attention to the fur trade, he noted that not his countrymen but the Germans and Poles exploit the wealth resources available in these lands (Poe, 2000, p. 17).

-III-

The sixteenth-century European accounts on the Ottoman Turks and the Muscovites were composed to motivate the masses for political and religious reasons and inspire those who sought adventure and trade options. In most cases, the views of the authors were shaped by their attitudes and the official stances of their ruling elites. While the Ottomans’ centralized government fascinated the Venetian ambassadors, the Ottomans’ religion was the central theme for European clergymen to produce religious and political propaganda. Likewise, the “tyrannical” image of the Muscovites was created by the publicist Livonians, the Poles, and others (none of whom had been to Muscovy) in the first half of the sixteenth century and utilized by the Livonian and German propaganda machines during the reign of Ivan IV (1547-1575).

Neither the Ottoman Turks nor the Muscovites in the sixteenth century were in the habit of describing their manners, customs, administrative, military, and civil institutions as the authors of European *Turcica* and *Muscovitica* did. Thus, it is hard for a modern researcher to downplay the importance of the early modern European accounts to discuss the Ottoman and Russian political and social structures. For a comparative study, it is best not to pour the material at our disposal into a single mold. Likewise, to avoid a teleological reading, researchers should not pull these sources out of their political and intellectual contexts as the way the political philosophers, such as Montesquieu, did to make them signposts of a linear history of ideas. Moreover, the “otherness” of non-western states and societies should not be discussed within the colonial and the Cold War discourses (Goldfrank, 2001). Instead, one needs to analyze the available primary sources by closely reading the aims and motives of their writers and by understanding the varying expectations of their audiences.

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