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Review of Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World*

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To cite this article: Atçıl, Abdurrahman, review of Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), *New Middle Eastern Studies* 2 (2012), < <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archive/786>>.

To link to this article: <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archive/786>

Online Publication Date: 30 April 2012

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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World

Baki Tezcan

New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, 284 pp., \$99 / £60, Hardback

ISBN: 9780521519496

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For more than two decades, historians of the Ottoman Empire have deconstructed and undermined the decline paradigm. Generally speaking, that paradigm posited the period 1299-1600 as the classical age that saw the rise of the dynasty and imperial administration's political and moral power, and dismissed the subsequent history of the empire between 1600 and 1922 as an era of moral decadence and gradual decline in political might. Baki Tezcan's *The Second Ottoman Empire* proposes an alternative framework that enables him to synthesize the findings of recent scholarship and to define post-sixteenth-century Ottoman history according to its own attributes rather than by contrast to the previous period.

Tezcan argues that "the Ottoman polity underwent a major socioeconomic transformation in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This transformation is so profound that one is justified in arguing that a Second Empire replaced the patrimonial empire, the perfect form of which is associated so closely with the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent" (p. 10). Tezcan places the beginning of the Second Empire at 1580 with the death of Semiz Ahmed Pasha, the last vizier in the Imperial Council appointed under Süleyman, and ends it at 1826 when Mahmud II abolished the Janissary corps, which Tezcan argues was the primary political institution for the representation of commoners in the Second Empire. The rebellion and deposition of Mustafa II in 1703 divides the history of the Second Empire into two parts. The first part was distinguished by the struggle between supporters of royal absolutism and the constitutionalists who aspired to limit the royal prerogative, whereas the second part witnessed the development of a new understanding about the duties and rights of all political actors.

Tezcan thinks that, conceptualized in this way, the middle period of Ottoman history becomes part of the global early modern era. Two distinctive features of the early modern era – the "expansion of political nation" and the "limitation of royal authority" (p. 232) – can be observed in the Second Empire. Tezcan identifies the increase in the number of imperial soldiers in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the expansion of the political nation. Contrary to previous Ottoman practice, the *devşirme* (the levy of Christian children for employment in the Ottoman military and administration) was not the main source of salaried cavalry and infantry soldiers. Instead, Muslim subjects bought their entrance into the ranks of the imperial army. Many of the "soldiers" registered in this period were butchers, bakers and carpenters doing business in the Istanbul markets, or tax-collectors. For them, membership in the army meant prestige, availability of credit and immunity from regular court procedure. Both fighting and non-fighting members of the army were determined to protect their status and privileges. As such, they constituted a political corporation that opposed the absolutist policies of the dynasty and its supporters. According to Tezcan, this

corporation of army members can be compared to the English Parliament as an institution of representation.

In Tezcan's account, the Ottoman dynasty did not powerlessly observe the growing political participation of Muslim subjects and their role as a pressure group, but tried to reverse the tide and strengthen its hold on power. The dynasty attempted to control the entrance to the ranks of salaried soldiers and pointedly followed the policy of appointing palace graduates to key administrative positions. In addition, it cultivated the support of the lords of law (*mevali*) whose profile rose from the second half of the sixteenth century as the law they represented became more important due to the decline of the feudal regime and the monetization of the economy.

Tezcan interprets several rebellions of soldiers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as a struggle between the absolutist dynasty and constitutionalist soldiers. For him, the prime example of such a confrontation was the deposition and murder of Osman II in 1622. Analyzing the narrative and archival sources, Tezcan shows that, under the guise of pilgrimage to Mecca, Osman II intended to leave the capital in order to form a new mercenary army in the Levant by recruiting soldiers serving in the retinues of viziers, governors and local notables. He planned to come back to the capital at the head of this new army, enabling him to discipline the soldiers in the imperial army and abolish their privileges. Osman's insistence on leaving the capital provoked a military rebellion which resulted in his deposition and murder. The *mevali* supported the soldiers and provided legitimacy with their legal opinions.

Tezcan contends that these developments, suggesting the existence of a certain constitutional awareness on the part of the soldiers and *mevali*, occurred within the context of significant socioeconomic transformation in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. According to Tezcan, the patrimonial regime of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was based on the understanding that the whole empire was the patrimony of the ruler and that the imperial administration was an extension of his household. The monetization of the economy that had started in the second half of the fifteenth century reached a level in the late sixteenth century that made it impossible for the patrimonial administration to keep economic and financial resources under its control. Hence, influential men (usually tax-collectors and provincial governors) acquired the economic means to recruit private mercenary (*sekban*) armies in the provinces (Tezcan refutes the thesis that the Long War with the Habsburgs in 1593-1606 was the reason for the *sekban* phenomenon). In addition, the viziers sold positions in the imperial army to commoners. Having the privileges and support of the army, commoners gained economic and political protection and prestige. Thus, the distinction between the ruler and the ruled gradually blurred. The feudal law (*kanun*) that assumed a clear division between the ruler and the ruled and regulated the extraction of the economic surplus by the former from the latter became outmoded, and the jurisdiction of jurists' law (*fiqh*), which had "universal claims" and was derived from sources "outside the domain of political authorities," (p. 18) extended to include the public sphere.

With its broad scope, accessible language and comparative perspective, Tezcan's *The Second Ottoman Empire* deserves the attention of both specialists and non-specialists. Certain bold arguments of the book can serve a heuristic function and initiate a productive debate. For example, with the claim that prior to the Second Empire, the "political nation" was "the almost exclusive domain of the imperial slaves of mostly *devşirme* origin" (p. 17), Tezcan seems to deny religious scholars (whom he calls *mevali* or lords of the law) any political role in the previous period. But one could argue that in the sixteenth century the bureaucracy of religious scholars (the *ilmiye*), with its highly-developed hierarchical organization, members of mostly Muslim origin and openness to people from all walks of life, seems to have served a function comparable to the constitutional role of the military institution in the seventeenth

century. In addition, Tezcan emphasizes the role of jurists' law in limiting the absolutist powers of the dynasty. It is worthwhile to consider whether the *kanun* had a similar function in the sixteenth century.

The Second Ottoman Empire contributes new content to early seventeenth-century Ottoman history, offers a new synthesis of recent analytical scholarship and tells Ottoman history from the seventeenth century in its own terms and as part of early modern global history. As such, it fills a significant void in the field of Ottoman studies. Future Ottoman scholarship will refer again and again to this important study.