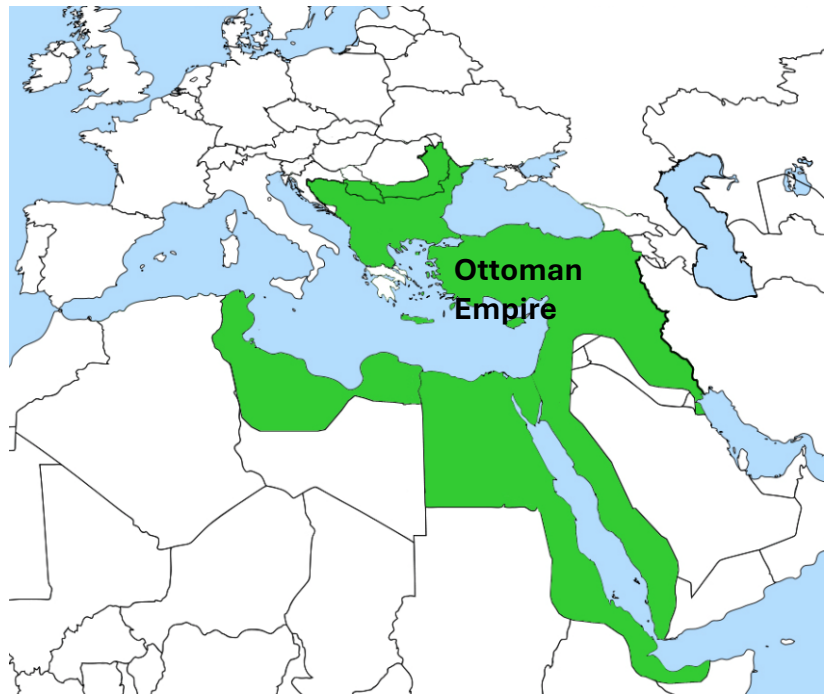


Young Ottomans – Can Humanism Save a Failing Empire?

In 1865 the Ottoman Empire was enormous, but widely viewed as on the verge of collapse. It was an absolute monarchy ruled by the Sultan in Constantinople.

The population was divided by religion and language. Moreover, the Empire was threatened by expanding European powers, especially Russia, which were happy to ally with the Empire's unhappy ethnic groups.



Ottoman Empire in 1865 (in green on modern borders)

In the summer of 1865, a group of six well-educated young Ottomans went on a picnic in the woods outside Constantinople. They were determined to fix the Empire, to transform it into a functioning democracy in which all religions and ethnic groups would live together in harmony. They were called the “Young Ottomans”.

How can six people transform an Empire? They started with journalism and theater, publishing newspapers and putting on plays. One of the group, Namik Kemal, developed the idea of “vatan”, an Arabic word meaning literally “birthplace”, although usually translated as “homeland” or “fatherland”. All people in the Ottoman Empire would be united by having a common “vatan”.

Turkish historian Serif Mardin explains:

Namik Kemal wrote his articles on “the fatherland” with a view to activating the individual’s allegiance to the vatan, i.e., to the territory contained within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Within this territory the great unifying force was to be the projected representative assembly itself...

The difficulty lay in that the Ottoman Empire was composed of people who spoke different languages, had various ethnic origins, believed in a number of religions,

and also belonged to many denominations. The number of possible combinations and permutations within these four basic categories is quite large and almost all of them were present in the empire as groups with separate personalities.

In 1872 Kemal had a huge hit with his play *Vatan Yahut Silistre* (Motherland or Silistre), a romantic story about a young woman who disguises herself as a man so she can be with her boyfriend defending the Bulgarian town of Silistre in 1854 during the Crimean War. The director of the play and most of the actors were ethnic Armenians. The play is mostly set in Bulgaria. It was a huge hit, leading to massive public demonstrations and the arrest of Kemal and many of his associates. The Young Ottomans had become national heroes.



Namik Kemal

In 1876 a revolution occurred which resulted in their ideas becoming the basis for a new constitution for the Ottoman Empire. The constitution kept the monarchy, established an elected legislature and outlawed religious discrimination.

Excerpts from the 1876 constitution. Official US translation from 1876:

All the subjects of the Empire are without distinction called Ottomans no matter what religion they profess. The quality of Ottoman is acquired or lost according to the causes specified in the law.

All the Ottomans enjoy individual liberty on condition of not attacking the liberty of other people.

Individual liberty is absolutely inviolable. Nobody can under any pretence suffer any penalty whatever except in the cases determined by law and according to the forms prescribed by it.

Islamism is the religion of the State. While maintaining this principle the state protects the free exercise of all the religions recognized in the Empire and accords the religious privileges granted to the different communities on condition that no offence is committed against public order or good morals.

The Press is free; within the limits traced by the law.

Instruction is free. Each Ottoman can give public or private courses of instruction on condition of conforming to the laws.

All schools are placed under the supervision of the State. Proper measures shall be taken for unifying and regularizing the instruction given to all Ottomans but no interference shall be made with the religious instruction of the various communities.

All Ottomans are equal before the law. They have the same rights and the same duties towards the country, without prejudice to religion.

All Ottomans are admitted to public office according to their aptitudes, their merit and capacity.

The domicile is inviolable. The authorities cannot forcibly enter the domicile of any person whatever except in cases determined by the law.

Torture in all its forms is completely and absolutely prohibited.

The constitution clearly reflected the Young Ottoman's concept of Ottoman identity, supplanting older identities based on religion or language. It also reflects their faith in education. The dream of universal, free, government-run, secular education for all Ottomans wasn't close to reality in 1876. But the dream was in the constitution.

One can't help but marvel at the audacity of the project. Suppose it has worked. Suppose the Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians, the Greeks, Turks, and Armenians, the Shia and Sunni of Arab world, the Muslims and Jews of Palestine, the Christians and Muslims of Lebanon had all accepted the idea that they shared one Ottoman homeland. So many wars would have been avoided. This was exactly what the Young Ottomans were thinking. For a moment in 1876 it looked like it might even work. The first parliament elected had 115 members, 69 Muslims and 46 non-Muslims, a fair representation of the Ottoman population.

It lasted two years. By 1878 the conservatives had restored the absolute monarchy. The decline continued. In 1908 the "Young Turks" came to power. As the name suggests, they rejected the broad tolerance of the "Ottoman" idea in favor of a narrower language-based nationalism, Turkey for the Turks! The Sultan was still in

power and things continued to go downhill, with the Ottoman Empire on the losing side of World War I.

The Young Turks were certainly nasty. During World War I they perpetrated the Armenian Genocide, killing ~1.5 million Armenian civilians. But they still lost.



The 1920 Treaty of Sevres, signed by the Sultan's government, reduced Ottoman control to only a part of central Anatolia (the pure yellow area in the map).

The Ottoman troops in Ankara revolted. Under the leadership of Mustapha Kemal (later Ataturk) they defeated the various forces supported by the Allies, establishing the current borders of Turkey. Over a million Greeks were forced to leave Anatolia, which had had a large Greek population since the time of Homer.

While the Young Ottomans had welcomed everyone born anywhere in the Empire as fellow "Ottomans", Ataturk was only interested in Turks, people who spoke Turkish. Except for his narrow nationalism, Ataturk shared many of the values of the Young Ottomans. He was even more hostile to all forms of religious authority. He placed enormous value on education. He dreamed of a Turkey where everyone could read and no one would be fooled by religious tradition.

His most dramatic reform was the creation of a new alphabet for the Turkish language. For centuries the Turkish language had been written in the Arabic alphabet, which is not well suited for Turkish. Saying, "This will either be done in three months or never." Ataturk forced a new alphabet into use in a few months in 1928. Ataturk poured resources into education and within a few years the literacy rate in the new alphabet was 20%, twice what it had ever been with the old alphabet.

Today Turkey has per capita income of about \$20,000 per year, about the same as Bulgaria, several times that of Iraq or Iran. While Turkey has continued Ataturk's ruthlessness in suppressing Kurdish rebels, it has not had large scale foreign or civil warfare for a century. Elections have been regular and free since the last coup in 1980. Literacy is universal. Life expectancy is 77.16. Many Turks give Ataturk a lot of credit.



Mustapha Kemal (Ataturk)

The current president, Erdogan, strongly disagrees with Ataturk's view of religion, but is publicly respectful of his accomplishments. Ataturk's picture is still on the money.

Ataturk quotes:

Our principles must never be equated with the dogmas of books supposed to have come down from heaven. We derive our inspiration, not from heaven, or from an unseen world, but directly from life. Our path is guided by the homeland we live in, the Turkish nation of which we are members, and the conclusions we have drawn from the history of nations, which records a thousand and one disasters and sufferings.

I once went through books and wanted to understand what philosophers said about life. Some of them saw everything as dark. "Since we are nothing and we will reach zero, there is no room for joy and happiness during our temporary life on earth," they said. I read other books, written by wiser men. They were saying: "Since the end is zero anyway, let us at least be joyful and cheerful as long as we live." For my own character I like the second view of life, but within these limits: A man who sees the existence of all mankind in his own person is pathetic.

Obviously that man will perish as an individual. What is necessary for any man to be satisfied and happy as long as he lives is not to work for himself, but for those who will come after him. Only in this way can a man of understanding act. Complete pleasure and happiness in life can only be found in working for the honor, existence and happiness of future generations.

Humankind is made up of two sexes, women and men. Is it possible for humankind to grow by the improvement of only one part while the other part is ignored? Is it possible that if half of a mass is tied to earth with chains that the other half can soar into skies?