PART ONE

PERSPECTIVES ON OTTOMAN HISTORY
Few historical periods have been depicted in a more multifaceted, polarized and contradictory way in scholarly discourse than the Young Turk era of the Ottoman history. In the years 1908–1918, traditionalism met with modernity, decentralisation with centralisation, imperial Ottomanism with Turkish and other nationalisms, secularism with a religious revival, liberal reformism with conservative autocratic or revolutionary totalitarian rule, and attempts at socio-political integration with the most horrendous massacres of ethnic minorities. As an overdetermining factor in many scholarly works, the Tripolitanian War against Italy 1911–1912, the Balkan wars 1912–1913 and the First World War 1914–1918, or rather the continuing military disasters of the Ottoman forces in these wars, enter the historical scene as deus ex machina to strike a conclusive blow in the Ottoman struggle between these extremes.

No doubt, the Ottoman wars in general and the First World War in particular left their strong marks on the Young Turk decade in power, as did further territorial losses in Europe already before the wars: in 1908, Bulgaria declared itself independent, supported by Russia, at the same time as Austria annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in 1910–1912, Albania revolted. Lost was the Rumelian heartland, a European territory that had belonged to the Ottoman Empire for centuries, had given it much of its multinational character, and had been of utmost economic and political importance. Long-range social and economic reconstruction work had to be pushed into the background by more urgent tasks to handle the war crisis and to hold together the disintegrating empire. Consequently, open constitutional processes had to give way to closed sessions within a Young Turk military oligarchy, and, from 1913, to a military dictatorship. Liberal, constitutional ideas are obviously much easier to transform into political practice in peace than in war, and the rise of an aggressive Turkish nationalism can be regarded as a more or less natural corollary of the strained war situation and tendencies of disintegration. As has been stated by an early observer of