FORMULATING AND REFORMULATING OTTOMANISM

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Although the term “Ottomanism” is widely used in studies on nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ottoman and Balkan studies, relatively little has been written about Ottomanism as a problem in its own right compared to the impressive bibliographies on different national movements and nationalisms, as well as those on Islamism and Pan-Turkism. In addition, the interpretations of the term in various studies are contradictory and mutually exclusive. Some see Ottomanism as an attempt to meld all subjects of the empire into “one single Ottoman nation,” which in most cases is condemned as an assimilationist policy. Some authors opt for labels like “political,” “civic” or “non-ethnocentric” nation, and this is seen as a well-intended though not necessarily feasible project. Finally, many scholars describe Ottomanism in milder terms, as an attempt to forge a common feeling of belonging to the Ottoman state despite religious and other differences.

Surprisingly, all these diverging interpretations can be supported with evidence in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century texts. At that time some wrote about the melding of all peoples of the Ottoman Empire into “one single nation,” while others explained at length that there was no such goal. Those who discussed what this “Ottoman nation” was had different views, and the term “Ottoman(s)” itself was often used with

supplementary explanations about its meaning. Official propaganda was not only inconsistent but also used intentionally vague language when addressing identity issues.

A comparison between original texts in Ottoman Turkish and their translations into the various languages spoken in the empire—particularly for bilingual editions—demonstrates that the common “Ottoman” identity was understood and expressed in a different way within different communities.4 Foreigners and non-Muslims in the empire persisted in translating “Muslims,” and in many cases also “Ottomans,” simply as “Turks”; the “Ottoman state” was translated as “Turkey”; and so on. But Ottoman-Turkish intellectuals also used the terms “Ottoman,” “Turk” and even “Muslim” as synonyms during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.5 Even until the last days of the empire, ordinary peasants in Anatolia regarded only members of the elite as “Ottomans.” In general, studies dealing with problems of identity in the late Ottoman Empire point out the inconsistent and even contradictory use of key words in the identity discourse (such as millet, nation, race or the preference for the term “Ottoman” or “Turkish”) in Ottoman Turkish, even by the same person.6 Even at the lexicographical level the term “Ottomanism” could not be reduced to one single meaning. In his famous dictionary of the Turkish language, Şemseddin Sami defined Osmanlılık as “belonging to the Ottoman “people and race” or as “being a subject of the Ottoman state” (Osmanlı kavim ve cinsine mensubiyet veya Devlet-i Osmaniye’ye tabi’yet . . .). The same author could define “Ottoman” identity and “Ottomanism” in different ways, depending on the context of the discussion and his opponents’ views.7 In fact the identity policies of the state authorities were also an answer to specific problems or pressures and therefore changed considerably over time.

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7 Nathalie Clayer, Aux origines du nationalisme albanais. La naissance d’une nation majoritairement musulmane en Europe (Paris: Karthala, 2007), 383; Türesay, Étre intellectuel.