PART 3

Responding to an Age of Challenge
Introduction to Part 3

In the long nineteenth century, as Jürgen Osterhammel has remarked, states all over the globe were engaging in processes of reform on a scale unprecedented in previous centuries. As far as historical scholarship on the Ottoman Empire in this period is concerned, the story of the “rise of the West” and the consequent need for the “rest” to catch up is intimately connected to the so-called “Eastern Question,” “the question of what should become of the Ottoman Empire then in decline.” This conceptual framework has influenced the historical narrative of the Ottoman Empire's long nineteenth century and its relations with other powers to such a degree that, according to Virginia Aksan, “anything written about the Ottoman Empire after 1760 peeks out from behind the Eastern Question curtain.” Yet, the familiar concepts of “the rise of the West” and the “Eastern Question” are highly problematic because they privilege a Eurocentric perspective and imply the dual teleology of the West’s global dominance as well as the unstoppable and irreversible weakening of the Ottoman state. Indeed, the Eurocentric and “orientalist” explanation of technological as well as political and social change in places outside Europe conceptualizes “extra-European” agency as more or less willingly, and consequently more or less gratefully, but always passively, accepting the gift of “progress” from the West.

Unsurprisingly, this metanarrative has elicited strong reactions from revisionist historians who, in their attempts to restore the agency of non-Western states and peoples, have occasionally gone to the opposite extreme and affirmed that all initiatives for reform were merely responses to the internal problems of Ottoman society and hence were conceived within the Ottoman Empire itself, independently of outside influence. This view is no less problematic than its

3 Virginia Aksan, Ottoman Wars 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged (Harlow, 2007), 129.