A SUBTERRANEAN HISTORY: PAUL WITTEK (1894–1978)
AND THE EARLY OTTOMAN STATE

BY

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“... my work covers only ... Ottoman studies and ... I am rather a historian than a linguist”.
Paul Wittek

I.

In the extensive literature which has appeared in recent years on the work of refugee or self-exiled German-speaking historians during the Emigration, little attention appears to have been paid to those who concerned themselves with what may be termed, in the broadest sense, oriental history. This is equally the case for German-speaking historians born within the boundaries of the Dual Monarchy, as for that greater number who were by origin subjects of the German Empire and its post-war successors. Thus, for example, Catherine Epstein’s recently published and otherwise admirable prosopographic study of German-speaking refugee historians in the United States makes no mention of the Vienna-born Islamicist and medieval historian Gustave E. von Grunebaum, who had a

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1 Wittek to Professor Ralph Turner, Brussels, 6 March 1948. Autograph Letter. SOAS.
3 Epstein, *op. cit.*

Equally overlooked has been the noted Sinologist Wolfram Eberhard (1909–1989), who has some claim at least to be recognised as a historian as much as a social anthropologist. Eberhard, like many Austrian and German refugees from Nazism, first found refuge in Turkey, teaching at the University of Ankara before migrating to the United States in the postwar years.\footnote{H. Widmann, Exil und Bildungshilfe. Die deutschsprachige akademische Emigration in die Türkei nach 1933, (Bern 1973), 259–260.} A number of his most important publications on the history of early medieval China were thus written in Turkish, which has perhaps contributed to the undeserved oblivion to which his work has been largely but not entirely consigned.

Eberhard apart, the Turkish connection in German-speaking refugee historical scholarship has been little explored outside of the specialist literature. The present paper represents an attempt to open up for discussion by an audience wider than that of professional Ottoman historians the career and writings of Paul Wittek, one of the most significant but overlooked Austrian historians of the Diaspora, who ended his professional career, from 1949 to his retirement in 1961, as the first holder of the Chair of Turkish in the University of London. Wittek was born in the outer Viennese suburb of Baden bei Wien in 1894; he died in the outer London suburb of Eastcote in 1978. His life spanned and in its external course was moulded by the tragedies of his time, for he belonged to that lost Austrian generation concerning which his friend the writer Herbert Cysarz remarked that “it was not [political] systems, states and armies that lost wars, but particularly age-groups, those of the 1890s who went straight from the school bench or the university to the battlefield and who, if they returned, were anaesthe-