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Prisons in the Late Ottoman Empire

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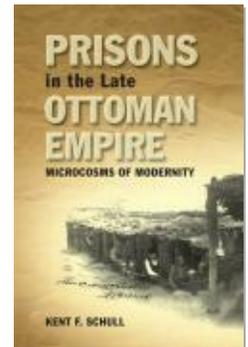
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Preface

When I tell people that I research Ottoman prisons, or better yet, ‘Turkish prisons’, their horrified response is normally along the lines of, ‘Have you seen the movie *Midnight Express*?’ and often, ‘Have you ever spent time in a Turkish prison?’ The truthful answer to both queries is, ‘Yes.’ It was my first-hand experience in an Ottoman prison that led me to this book. In 2002, I spent a few days in Istanbul in the company of a Turkish friend. He suggested that we sit and drink tea in one of the poshest hotels in the world, the Four Seasons. As we sat, drank, and chatted in the hotel’s courtyard, my friend informed me that the hotel was nothing other than a former Ottoman imperial prison. I was flabbergasted. As I looked around the courtyard, I noticed the still discernible prison architecture, such as its high walls, turrets, and enclosed courtyard. I wondered what the reaction of the guests would be if they found out the history of this edifice. Incidentally, the Four Seasons Hotel stands on *Tevkifhane Sokak* or ‘Jail Road’ in the former imperial centre of Ottoman Istanbul, right between the Blue Mosque, Aya Sofya (Hagia Sophia), and the Topkapı Sarayı.

Upon learning the former life of this hotel my interest was immediately peaked. I had recently finished Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and I knew that the historiography for prisons in North America and Europe was robust, but I had no idea what the current state of the scholarship was for the Ottoman Empire. I quickly found out that it was sorely underdeveloped and included only a few short articles on related topics and a couple of MA theses, all in Turkish.

While researching in the Imperial Ottoman Archives in Istanbul I found a treasure trove of untapped documents related to penal institutions and prison reform in the late Ottoman Empire. I quickly realised how integral criminal justice reforms, including prisons, were to Ottoman plans to restructure the empire comprehensively. I also recognised that prisons were intrinsic to many facets of Ottoman modernity and nation-state construction during the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

Similar to Foucault’s assessment of French prisons, I argue that various late Ottoman administrations utilised prisons as important instruments of social control and discipline. The primary purpose of penal institutions is

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to control and discipline the population, specifically those portions of the population deemed threats to regime security. My argument, however, goes far beyond Foucault's. Not only were they important instruments of social control and discipline, but prisons became microcosms of Ottoman modernity. It was within the walls of Ottoman prisons that many of the pressing questions of Ottoman modernity played out, such as administrative reform and centralisation, the role of punishment in the rehabilitation of prisoners, economic reform and industrialisation, issues of gender and childhood, the implementation of modern concepts of time and space, identity, social engineering, the rationalisation and standardisation of Islamic criminal law, and the role of the state in caring for its population. These are all in addition to social control and discipline. Prisons, therefore, possess the unique ability to act as windows into the process of Ottoman modernity and provide clear insights into broader socio-economic, political, cultural, and ideological issues and developments occurring in late Ottoman history throughout its entire empire. In the end, this is not a book about 'Turkish' prisons, but a book concerned with a prison system that encompassed all the territories of the former Ottoman Empire during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries: from Yemen to the Balkans and from Van to Beirut.

While this work utilises prisons as a window into Ottoman modernity, it also juxtaposes reform and intention with the reality of incarceration from the points of view of inmates and local prison personnel. Too much of Ottoman history is written and conceptualised from the perspective of the central state. This history tempers the grand transformational designs of Tanzimat, Hamidian, and Second Constitutional Period reformers with the realities of prison life. In other words, it discusses the intended reforms, investigates their implementation, and discusses the acceptance, success, failure, resistance, and augmentation they faced through the stories and experiences of prison guards and prisoners.

As I delved deeper into my research on Ottoman prisons I realised just how intertwined prisons were with larger issues of crime, policing, courts, legal reform, and criminal justice in the empire. Unfortunately, this study is neither comprehensive, nor exhaustive. In the end, I have only scratched the surface of the rich sources available for the study of Ottoman criminal justice. Excellent work is being done on other facets of this subject that need to be integrated into a more comprehensive picture. My work is simply an initial interpretive foray into this vast and understudied topic in Ottoman and Middle East history. My hope is that this work spurs fruitful discussion, constructive criticism, and further enquiry.

An earlier version of portions of Chapter 3 was presented as a paper,

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entitled ‘Conceptualizing Difference during the Second Constitutional Period: New Sources, Old Challenges’, at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul and published in *Religion, Ethnicity and Contested Nationhood in the Former Ottoman Space*, edited by Jorgen Nielsen (2012). Another small portion of Chapter 3 was published as an article, entitled ‘Identity in the Ottoman Prison Surveys of 1912 and 1914’, in *IJMES*, volume 41 (2009). A third portion of Chapter 3 was presented as a paper, entitled ‘Counting the Incarcerated: Young Turk Attempts to Systematically Collect Prison Statistics and their Effects of Prison Reform, 1911–1918’ at Boğazici University in Istanbul and was published in Turkish as ‘Tutuklu Sayımı: Jön Türklerin Sistematik Bir şekilde Hapishane İstatistikleri Toplama Çalışmaları ve Bunların 1911–1918 Hapishane Reformu Üzerine Etkileri’ in *Osmanlı’da Asayiş, Suç ve Ceza: 18.–20. Yüzyıllar*, edited by Noémi Lévy and Alexandre Toumarkine (2007). Portions of the discussion on theoretical approaches to the study of penal institutions found in the Introduction to this book were also published in Turkish, entitled ‘Hapishaneler ve Cezalandırmaya İlişkin Yaklaşımlara Eleştirel Bir Bakış’, in the same volume edited by Noémi Lévy and Alexandre Toumarkine (2007).

The generous permission policy of the Office of the Prime Minister’s Ottoman Archives (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri) has allowed me to use the images found on the book cover and in Figures 3.1, 3.2, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to many people and institutions for their assistance in the development and completion of this book. I am overwhelmed by the generosity of so many. They have truly had an effect on my life and I only wish this effort could better reflect their attention, care, assistance, support, and friendship.

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To my wonderful friends and former colleagues at Brigham Young University and the University of Memphis I owe an enormous debt of gratitude for their collegiality, guidance, support, and critique of various

chapters of this work. I am also very grateful to my new colleagues and friends at Binghamton University who have provided me with a supportive and intellectually stimulating environment in which to write, revise, and finish this book. The staff at the Office of the Prime Minister's Ottoman Archives in Istanbul, Turkey deserves special thanks for their wonderful help, warmth, kindness, patience, and hospitality as they steered me through the intricacies and complexities of the Ottoman archives.

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