Pt.II: Colonialism, Nationalism, the Harem 19th-20th centuries”

Week 7: Middle East – end of Ottoman Empire
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- History of the Harem in Ottoman lands 19th – early 20th C. must be understood in context of:
  - Changing relationships between ‘Porte’ and West
  - Increased influence Western European ideas, politics
  - Rapid loss territories: independence movements, unsuccessful wars (especially against Russia)
  - Domestic political challenges, moves towards revolution (which succeeded 1908-1909)
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• Changing Relationships between ‘Porte’ and ‘West’:
  • Economic: already in 18th C. French diplomat referred to Ottomans as ‘colony of France’ – reference to trade relations
  • 19th C: growing ‘dependency’ on foreign (European) trade for manufactured goods, arms
  • ‘modernization’ [see Tanzimat below]: borrowing extensively for infrastructure building, modernizing cities, industry, transport
  • Crimean War: indebtedness to degree that European Council took charge government finances
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Increased influence Western ideas, politics:
  - Education: importance of learning foreign languages (especially French, also German, English)
  - Establishment of ‘Translation Bureau’, foreign embassies
  - Western philosophy, political tracts: impressing new generation ambitious young men
  - Western power (economic, military): suggested forms of ‘modernization’ needed
  - Need for reform recognized: Tanzimat Reforms 1839 [more below]
Ottoman Empire 19\textsuperscript{th} – 20\textsuperscript{th} C.

- Loss Territories: independence movements, unsuccessful wars:
  - 19\textsuperscript{th} century characterized by both
  - Some argue ‘nationalism’ (Western influence), others political opportunism: ‘European’ Ottoman provinces sought, won independence through bloody wars, rise ‘ethnic nationalism’ (began with Greece 1820s)
  - Russia instigated, supported secession movements: goal to destabilize, weaken empire, retake Ottoman territories
  - Ottomans lost Crimea, control Black Sea by 1870
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Domestic Political Challenges: ultimately led to revolution
  - Combination of issues (above): led to political articulation for reform
  - Tanzimat first: series of reforms from 1839
  - Controversial, divisive: opposed by older regime who saw them as contrary to Ottoman, Muslim society
  - Did not go far enough for ‘Young Ottomans’: pushed for first Constitution 1876
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Domestic Political Challenges: ultimately led to revolution
  - Sultan Abdulhamid II: accepted constitution, seen to be ‘reformer’
  - 1878: suspended constitution, dismissed parliament, instituted repressive controls on public speech, newspapers, argued for more ‘Islamic’ identity
  - Response: new generation resistance ‘Young Turks’, military leaders – many in exile
  - Expedient ‘unification’ led to forced deposing Sultan, new constitution 1908-1909
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- History of the Harem shaped by:
  - Ability of West to exert influence (economic dependence) AND interest by new generations in Western ideas, modernization (greater access to West through travel, publications) articulated in arguments for ABOLITION
  - Tanzimat Reforms addressed questions of slavery and slave trade, ‘Tanzimat Era’ changed society
  - Russian military successes drove 1000s Circassians into empire 1860s – 1870s; treaty of Berlin 1878 led to new expulsions
  - ‘Revolution’ allowed for pressures to be put on Sultans re: slavery and the harem
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Slavery, the Slave Trade and the Harem:
  - 19th c. difficult to differentiate between reality and rhetoric because of ‘abolitionism’
  
  - British presenting abolition of the slave trades and of slavery as part of ‘modernization’, civilization, ‘westernization’ – assumed to be ‘good’

- Political pressure on Sultan increased throughout century

- Some of ‘new generation’ saw support of abolition as part of struggle to overthrow ‘tradition’ and backwardness of state that was clearly weakening ‘being Ottoman’: part of larger political struggle
Ottoman Empire 19\textsuperscript{th} – 20\textsuperscript{th} C.

• Slavery, the Slave Trade and the Harem:

  • Same logic applied to those who opposed reform, Tanzimat as being ‘forced’ upon them by the west: abolition was part of process, therefore they must reject it

  • Another response which became the predominant one embraced those of various political stances: ‘we understand why you oppose the slavery of the Americas – it is cruel and barbarous – BUT OUR SLAVERY IS DIFFERENT’
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• Slavery, the Slave Trade and the Harem: ‘our slavery is different…’

  • Islam provides for the ownership of slaves in order that they can be taught religion; it also provides several routes to manumission – one of the most important being concubinage

  • While enslaved, slaves can expect fair treatment from masters; when freed, slaves can expect help and support

  • Most slaves are part of elite households: men and women part of ‘harem’ -- ‘kul/harem slave system’ [Toledano]
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Ottomans argued that elite/imperial system of slave administrators, military personnel, concubines, servants provided avenues of ‘upward’ mobility:
  
  - Harem integral to Ottoman life [ambiguity of what was meant by ‘harem’ deliberate]

  - Subsumed all slavery into ‘kul/harem’ slavery: agricultural labourers, slaves (men and women) in less affluent homes ‘disappeared’ into the benign and generous world of the harem
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Defining slavery in Ottoman empire as ‘synonymous’ with harem system [Erdem]:
  - became important Ottoman argument for not pushing forward abolition laws (or, as we will see, resisting implementation)
  - BUT was also an argument that resonated with Europeans who accepted the harem as the symbol of the exotic Orient and had (especially in the 18th c) represented the harem in paintings, literature as being littered with ‘sexual slaves’ (concubines) protected by ‘non-sexual slaves’ (eunuchs)
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• For example: Sir Henry Elliot (British Ambassador to Istanbul 1867-77)
  • Convinced slavery could never be abolished
  • Saw ‘harem system’ as integral to Muslim societies (like the Ottomans)
  • Argued ‘the harem system keeps slavery alive’
“… as long as the detestable social system which is part of the Mahommedan religion continues, female slavery must remain in connection with it…

The difficulty of dispensing with female slaves in the harems necessarily existing in Mahommedan countries, appears … to make it impossible to sweep the atrocious institution away.”

(Elliot, n.d.)
“Persuaded by the apologists…, many believed that slavery was a necessity under the domestic arrangements of the Muslims. There would be slavery as long as the Harem System lived, .. Abolition would require and impose profound changes on the social organization of the Muslims.”

(Erdem, p.85)
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• To speak of slavery in abolitionist climate of 19th was, in large part, to speak of the harem (or ‘kul/harem) system

• Abolition began with trade

• Ironically, Europeans interpreted Ottoman prohibition of slave trade to Egypt (declared 1793, renewed several times – last evidence from early 1850s) as ‘early abolition’

• Was in fact attempt (largely successful) to reduce Mamluk power: initially men and women (significant); later just men
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• ‘Real’ abolitionist attempts generally date to Tanzimat and Sultan Abdulmecit:
  • ‘justified’ actions in terms of cruelty to slaves: significant
  • Carefully arguing that reforms were NOT in response to Western, Christian criticisms of ‘Oriental’, Muslim slavery BUT to treatment that was contrary to Islamic law, morality
  • “… shameful and barbarous practice for rational beings to buy and sell their fellow creatures … Are not these poor creatures our equals before God? Why then should they be assimilated to animals?”
  • Istanbul’s slave market was closed in 1846
Istanbul Slave Market

Drawing (left, bottom) special ‘Women’s’ slave market
Above ‘romanticized’ drawing, painting rather than ‘illustration’
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- In the Gulf trade, slaves were treated in ways “harsh and bereft of mercy”: the trade was suppressed in 1847

- Citing the appalling mortality of the trans-Saharan trade, he prohibited it in 1849 – at the same time affirming that “our holy law permits slavery”

- In 1854: “selling people as animals, or articles of furniture, is contrary to the will of the sovereign creator”, decrees outlawed the Caucasus trade 1854-5, exports from Libya 1855

- Entire African trade (source of eunuchs) in 1857; use of eunuchs already prohibited but not enforced
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• Sultan Abdulmecit and Tanzimat ‘great hope’ for Reformers and British Anti-Slavery Society:
  • Ultimately, not prepared to challenge Islam and ulama who spoke vociferously against laws on religious grounds
  • Death in 1861: end of support for abolition
  • Led to accusations that all had been ‘simulated’ in order to appease Britain, retain western investment, trade
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• Tanzimat reforms continued on political front with Young Ottomans but abolition no longer so central:
  • Reports from 1869: African imports increasing (opening Suez canal)
  • Imports from Caucasus allowed (argued sultan had declared suppression ‘under duress’)
  • 1864: Circassian parents permitted (again) to sell their children [will return to Circassian situation, below]
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• Abdulhamid II came to throne 1876:
  • liberal chief minister Midhat Pasha tried to insert commitment to gradual abolition in throne speech: reflected ongoing ambiguity between Islamic emphasis on certain kinds of manumission and effort to ‘speak the language’ of the West
  • Frequently cited as ‘attempt to abolish slavery that was rejected by new Sultan’ (among other changes to draft speech) [source, his son writing in 1899]
  • More ambiguous and politically significant than that [discussion below]
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- The Circassian Crisis: from 1860s through 1870s
  - Refugees began arriving in mid 1850s, consequence Crimean War
  - 1859: first reports in international newspapers of ‘crisis’
  - observers from Europe and Middle East continued to document forced migration from Caucasus
  - many ended up as slaves in Egypt and Ottoman Empire (e.g. Huda Sha’arwi, next week’s reading, Trout Powell (excerpts below))
Expulsions of Circassians
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

“The Russian Government has given the Mussulman population of those parts a choice of removal to Siberia or emigration hither. They have chosen the latter. . .

The result is that the vessels are crammed to suffocation with the exiles, who endure on the voyage to the Bosphorus all the horrors of another “middle passage.” During the past stormy season in the Black Sea above a dozen wrecks of these emigrant vessels occurred, hurrying many hundreds of these miserable creatures to death. Of those who made good the passage, thousands landed in every stage of disease and physical suffering, without a dollar to supply even their most immediate wants, and dependent entirely on the charity of the Government. To do the Porte justice, this was neither laggingly nor stingily given.”

Editor Levant Herald, in letter to Times of London, 1859
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• Situation worsened as Russia expanded into eastern Caucasus:
  • arrivals ‘nothing but skin and bone dying at the rate of 20 a day’
  • Turkish officials taken some as ‘servants’, rest sent to interior to work on farms
  • Immigrants continued until late 1870s: servants, workers turned into slaves
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Observers comparing experience to Atlantic Slave trade:
  - Movement into Ottoman lands across Black Sea compared to Atlantic Slave Trade ‘Middle Passage’
  - Traumatic, high death rate
  - ‘enslavement’ at other end
  - Seen as ‘burgeoning network of slavery’ [Trout Powell]
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Circassian crisis led to resurgence of Harem System:
  - Not unknown for poor parents to ‘sell’ children into slavery hoping for better lives (for them and family)
  - Became extensive in context of Circassian forced immigration
  - ‘Justified’ in Ottoman terms as ‘foreign custom’ (selling Muslims into slavery forbidden)
  - Otherwise assumed children were slaves
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Circassian crisis led to resurgence of Harem System:
  - Confusion during chaos 1860s, 1870s: merchant had to provide ‘certificate’ that children were from slaves and not free parents
  - Ottoman restriction on Circassians selling ‘their’ children loosened 1864: argument being that if they did so (sold free children) ‘Allah’ would punish them
  - Recognition that many ‘sales’ were with conscious intent to improve opportunities for children (females)
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• 1869: British Diplomat

  • “Monstrous and unnatural as this is, the parents are right in believing that it ensures for their children a position far above their own in the social scale; they generally receive the best education that is given to Turkish girls and become eligible as wives not only for the greatest Pashas but the Sultan himself.”

- None of the sources comments on obvious comparison with former devshirme in terms of process and ‘attraction’ (from family perspective)
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Possibility of ‘upward mobility key to longevity of system: also explains ‘self-enslavement’

- Same source notes:

  “distinction between the sale of children and self enslavement is blurred where the offspring is willing to be sold”
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• 1880: British Foreign Office expressed frustration at continuing situation…

• “The white slave in the majority of cases is a willing victim and among Circassian and Georgian girls the height of their ambition is to enter the Harem of a Turkish Pacha or gentleman. …”

[The Turks are desirous, the girls willing…] “the parents of the girls think it is an honour thus to dispose of their children and have a strong pecuniary interest in doing so…”
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• Personal accounts:
  • 1878: British ‘Lady’ living in Provinces encountered some of the recently settled immigrants (from Caucusus)

  • Young girl begged to be taken into service: “I am perishing in this dreadful place without hope of being sold or rescued and taken to Istanbul”

  • In response to Lady’s ‘simply demand to be sold’, she responded: “None now dares to buy Cherkess girls belonging to the emigrants”
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- C. 1890: another female British observer remarked on impact of Ottoman policies to discourage [in fact to ‘prohibit’] sale of slaves by Circassians

- “enforced liberty is much resented by the girls themselves, who considered that they had been deprived of the change which might otherwise have been theirs of entering, if not the Imperial Seraglio, at least the harem of some pasha, and there acquiring position and fortune”
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Situation complicated by cultural differences between Circassian and Ottoman Muslims:
  - Circassions knew permanent, hereditary slave caste
  - Source of political and ‘real’ wealth for chiefs: Ottomans wanted to undermine that power
  - Cultural comfort with ‘selling’ children into this caste where they were assured of better life
  - Parallel ‘comfort’ for children who enter into life of ‘slavery’ for both their own and family’s betterment
Ottoman Empire 19\(^{th}\) – 20\(^{th}\) C.

- Ottoman preference for Circassians benefitted from/exploited this situation:

- See here clearest connection between ‘domestic/household’ and Imperial harems:

  *perspective of parents of potential harem ‘slaves’ and of potential ‘slaves’ themselves*
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• Question of perspective: Leila Hanoun

• Internal observation confirms ‘outsider’ interpretations ['Leyla Hanun’ in Trout Powell]

• Commented that girls came to Istanbul in search of a better life as voluntary slaves and there were even girls of ‘aristocratic origin’ among them [see ‘Concubine, Princess and Teacher’ – memoir of ‘Princess’]

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Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• Question of perspective: Ottoman Foreign Minister Ali Padha:

  • Drew on practice of self enslavement with regard to the ‘white slave trade’ as understood in society to argue (to British Embassy) in 1857: “so-called slaves are no slaves” [note prior to crisis of Circassian expulsions]

  • Self enslavement was not addressed by either sharia or kanun: therefore was not prohibited

  • Circassian girls (of all classes) arrived with professional slave dealers: their placement followed rules and conditions of ‘slave profession’ [those who bought, sold, placed, controlled slaves commercially]
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Erdem notes: self-enslavement ‘risky’ for owner precisely because of its lack of legitimacy

- Scam developed whereby slaves and dealers ‘colluded’: former was sold, then proclaimed she had been illegally sold and was freed with purchase price

- She shared that with ‘her’ dealer

- Prior to Tanzimat era and evolving Ottoman ‘abolition’ policy – scam would have been impossible as money would have been reimbursed to the buyer
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• The Egyptian Question: ban on slave trade from Istanbul to Egypt – 1860s-1870s clearly circumvented
  • Women, especially children arriving anyway
  • Ottoman’s ‘overwhelmed’ by crisis, unable to absorb huge numbers refugees
  • Difficult to control when traders claim children to be their own
Ottoman Empire 19\textsuperscript{th} – 20\textsuperscript{th} C.

- Major controversy: British Embassy ‘intermediary’
  - Khedive Ismail (Cairo) and Ali Pasha ‘Grand Vizier’ (Istanbul): each accused the other of benefitting from ‘white slave trade’

  - Khedive argued ’80% Pashas made money purchasing and reselling white slaves; upper class women training, selling Circassian girls – personally bought slaves from Ali Pasha

  - Ali Pasha: ‘almost the totality of the white slaves going to Egypt are females and are destined for the Harem of the Khedive’; he and his mother possessed more than 400

  - Whatever the truth: clear that system of supplying and buying Circassians for upper class harems well developed
• Abdulhamid II, Midhat Pasha (Chief Minister) and ‘Abolition’: was there really an attempt to abolish slavery in 1876?

  • Said that ‘liberal reformers’ represented by Midhat Pasha, chief minister

  • wrote a commitment to abolish slavery into throne speech of Abdulhamid II

  • ‘betrayed’ when Abdulhamid II excised that part of speech: critical ‘moment’ in Ottoman modernisation

  • But: how do we know this?
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• Work of Midhat Pasha’s son: joined Young Turks 1899, published English text 1903

• Established his father as ‘abolitionist’ who “desired to abolish the slave trade, which he considered a scandal and a disgrace to the empire, and incompatible with its pretenses to a high place in the ranks of civilized nations…”

• According to this text, Midhat Pasha had written the following into Abdulhamid’s speech…
• “The buying and selling of slaves being contrary to the prescriptions of the sacred law, We herby enfranchise the slaves and Eunuchs of Our Palace, and declare that henceforth all trade in slaves, whether for purchase or sale, is hereby formally forbidden in Our Empire, and a date will be fixed for the gradual emancipation of all existing slaves, and special measures will be adopted to prevent any return to slavery”
Ottoman Empire 19\textsuperscript{th} – 20\textsuperscript{th} C.

- An Ottoman text was published 1906: text notably different

  - “The trade in slaves \textit{whose origins are dubious} is not permitted by the Sharia as it is incompatible with the requirements of civilization and humanity”

  - The intention was “to abolish \textit{the system of slavery}” (meaning the harem system)

  - No reference to ‘preventing the return of slavery’
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• How to interpret the Ottoman text (what was ‘really’ written)?
  • Reference to ‘dubious origins’ in line with Islamic proscription against purchasing Muslims: if in doubt, do not buy – NOT challenging status quo

• African and Circassian slave trades were already officially illegal

• System of ‘self-purchase’ manumission (mukatebe) already widespread: slave/master agreed to ‘price’ – slave either worked independently for wage-paying employer or ‘worked off’ price with master
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Key phrase was abolition of *the system of slavery*
  - This was not slavery per se
  - What was actually proposed was emancipation of the female slaves and eunuchs of the palace: *the harem*
  - Intent: to have Sultan ‘provide an example’ by freeing the Imperial Harem with ‘harem system’ (‘the system of slavery’) in general being goal

But as it was presented, based on English text, Abdulhamid II was ‘personally’ responsible for keeping slavery alive
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Significance of the so-called betrayal revealed in politics of reform turn-of-century (the Young Turks): by creating abolitionist of Midhat Pasha and reactionary ‘anti-abolitionist’ of Abdulhamid II in English work – Midhat Pasha’s son contributed to the international profile of the movement seeking to overthrow the Ottoman government

  - Issue of ‘slavery and abolition’ was one that would engage western support

  - Also ensured role of Midhat Pasha’s son in Young Turk movement
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- The ‘Young Turks’, the CUP (Committee of Union and Progress), and the Revolution of 1908-1909
  
  - Young Turk Manifesto 1900: supported Crown Prince Reshad (to replace Abdulhamid II if plans to overthrow were successful)
  
  - Proclaimed he would disperse the ‘parasites’ of the Palace who would be replaced by ‘officials similar to those who serve in the palaces of the European Kings’
  
  - Employment of Eunuchs at court identified as particularly reprehensible, a custom that was “backward, uncivilized and un-European’
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

• Abolition of Kul/Harem System: symbol of political resistance and reform

  • 1908 Abdulhamid forced to restore Constitution 1876

  • CUP immediately attempted to use important Pasha (of Circassian origin) to intervene with Sultan “to rescue the hundreds of Circassian girls who were in the Palace and to send them away to their villages”

  • He refused on grounds that they would be worse off ‘back in their villages’ than in the Palace
• Counter Revolution backing Abdulhamid II (1909): quickly put down, Abdulhamid II deposed
  • With household, some slaves: sent into exile
  • Dispersal of Harem began:
    • Palace eunuchs imprisoned, one accused of involvement in counter revolution executed
    • Females sent to Topkapi, later many (about 2/3) dispatched with ‘relatives’ from eastern Anatolia (back to their villages)
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- CUP claimed credentials as ‘progressives’: observers saw ‘new spirit’ in Turkey with this political disapproval of ‘servitude and the eunuch system’

- One might conclude that in the ‘spirit’ of Midhat Pasha, the successors to the Young Turks finally achieved their goal

- However, this would be to overlook the fact that only Abdulhamid II’s harem was dispersed

- His successor (Sultan Seshad – see ‘Concubine, Princess and Teacher’) and the rest of the Ottoman dynasty, elites retained their harems
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

Royal Eunuch 1912

Circassian Woman (n.d.)
Ottoman Empire 19th – 20th C.

- Harem system only ended with declaration of Republic of Turkey, 1923
  - Royal family exiled
  - ‘harem’ (those of servile origin) permitted to stay
Republic of Turkey c. 1933

Harem Women Celebrating “Liberation”

(photo of Ataturk)