Köse, Yavuz, Kučera, Petr and Völker, Tobias (eds). 2024. *Becoming Ottoman: Converts, Renegades and Competing Loyalties in the Early Modern and Modern Ages*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. 272 pages. ISBN: 9780755641017 (e-Book).

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'He was a Pole by origin, fluent in many languages; he looked like a Muslim, but what his actual religion was, only God knows.' (p. 95) With these words, François Mesgnien Meninski (1623–1698), a prominent 17th-century French-Polish orientalist, diplomat, and linguist, refers to Polish convert Wojciech Bobowski (Ali Ufki Bey). Meninski's observation captures the layered identity of many Europeans who entered Ottoman service, and whose lives crossed confessional, linguistic, and cultural boundaries.

What did it mean to be an Ottoman who originated from 'Christian Europe' and converted to Islam? Did being an Ottoman necessarily entail becoming Muslim and breaking away from one's inherited ethno-religious, cultural and linguistic identity? The book explores the complex experiences of individuals of 'Christian European' origin who lived in or migrated to the Ottoman Empire between the 16th and 19th centuries and underwent varying degrees of 'Ottomanization.' Through a series of case studies, it examines how individuals – from diplomats and merchants to scholars, soldiers, and their families – converted to Islam, adopted Ottoman elite cultural norms, or affirmed their loyalty to the Ottoman state. The volume also demonstrates how such transformations were perceived by the individuals' contemporaries in Europe and how these cases were documented and interpreted in a variety of sources, including memoirs, diplomatic reports, and personal writings. By tracing these narratives, it sheds light on the shifting meanings of cultural adaptation, religious conversion, and political allegiance within the broader context of Ottoman–European encounters.

The volume moves beyond the narrow regional and temporal boundaries and highlights the broader social, cultural, and political dimensions of 'becoming Ottoman.' It argues that while religious conversion is an important marker of identity transformation, it is only one facet of a broader and more complex process of cultural adaptation, which the authors refer to as 'acculturation.' The volume explores how these individuals navigated a multidimensional reorientation of values, behaviours, and social affiliations. Most micro histories in this volume demonstrate that 'acculturation' was not about complete assimilation, but rather 'integration' – a selective and dynamic engagement with Ottoman culture that reconfigures original identities instead of abandoning them. In addition to conversion, successful 'Ottomanization' often involved adopting elite cultural symbols (such as dress or etiquette), mastering the Ottoman Turkish language and literary forms, and achieving status through professional rank or familial ties (p. 3).

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One of the strengths of this volume lies in its nuanced approach to identity and integration. Rather than treating 'Ottomanization' as a total rupture with one's past, the authors acknowledge that identity formation is a complex, layered, and ongoing process. The case studies demonstrate that individuals often preserved ties to their homelands and built networks with others who shared similar cultural backgrounds. The volume approaches to identity as something shaped by acts of identification - both how people see themselves and how others label them. As such, 'Ottomanization' is defined broadly as the process by which individuals, rooted in their original language, religion, and culture, gradually made the Ottoman Empire their home and were either recognised as Ottomans or came to see themselves as such. This flexible definition allows the book to explore a wide spectrum of personal experiences and to challenge rigid boundaries between self and empire.

The volume is organized chronologically, dividing history into two clearly defined periods: the early modern period (16th–18th centuries) and the modern period (from the late 18th century onwards). Through this chronological division, the authors effectively trace how key concepts such as identity, allegiance, subjecthood, and citizenship changed in response to changing imperial strategies and geopolitical dynamics.

The first part of volume demonstrates how by the late 15th and 16th centuries the older ethnic notion of 'Turkic' was replaced by a more inclusive and status-oriented concept of *Osmanlı* (Ottoman) while the Ottoman Empire expanded into non-Turkic and non-Muslim territories. This new identity was layered, shaped by multiple civilisational influences: Byzantine (Roman), Turkic, Persian, and Islamic. In this context, being Ottoman was not limited to being ethnically Turkic or being born into a Muslim family. Instead, it referred to a socio-cultural and political identity, particularly associated with the ruling elite (*askeri* class). This identity transcended ethnic, linguistic, and even religious boundary. For newcomers, becoming Ottoman meant adopting Sunni Islam, Ottoman Turkish language, and elite cultural norms (*Edeb-i Osmani*) (p. 6).

The volume opens with an essay by Robyn Dora Radway. Drawing on Hungarian and German sources, the author investigates the motivations for individuals in the empire's Hungarian borderlands to adopt an Ottoman identity. She emphasises that these choices were often influenced more by practical considerations, such as economic opportunity and social mobility, than by ideological betrayal. By examining the individual experiences of converts, Radway demonstrates that conversion to Islam, whether among women or men, often occurred as a strategic decision aimed at achieving social advancement and integration into the Ottoman ruling elite, which far surpassed the opportunities available in their countries of origin (p. 33).

Through the lens of patronage networks and kinship rhetoric, she illustrates that political loyalty often transcended confessional and geographic boundaries, highlighting the significance of cultural familiarity and regional ties in shaping individuals' affiliations with the empire.

János Szabados presents a comparative study of German renegades from the 16th to the 18th century, focusing on their conversions and careers in the Ottoman Empire. He highlights how the type of conversion, career paths, and identity influenced their integration.

The essay underscores the paradoxical hierarchy of access to power. It argues that voluntary converts, despite their aspirations for upward mobility, were often excluded from elite positions. In contrast, individuals who entered through slavery, particularly via institutionalised channels such as *devşirme*, could attain high ranks. Moreover, the essay emphasises that career advancement was not solely determined by one's origin or former social status but often depended on the roles renegades could perform (such as interpreters, involvement in espionage) and their access to patronage networks. János Szabados concludes that the identities of renegades were highly fluid. Some retained unconscious markers of their former lives, while others strategically manipulated their identity for political advantage.

Vanessa R. de Obaldia presents a compelling case study in her analysis of a 1667 court document detailing the conversion of Dominican friar Urbano Pinginella to Islam. Rather than questioning the motivation of his decision, de Obaldia portrays the story as a deeply human episode that enriches the broader narrative of conversion in the Ottoman Empire. She illustrates that while the jurisprudential norms for becoming Muslim were straightforward, requiring neither instruction nor an investigation into intent, Islamic legal opinion (*fatwā*) permitted flexibility, accommodating various social and political contexts. This chapter emphasises that although conversion was legally uncomplicated, it was influenced by broader structural factors, and individuals like Pinginella might have navigated these complexities for both spiritual and material reasons.

Continuing the volume's exploration of individual trajectories of Ottomanization, Agnieszka Aysen Kaim's contribution focuses on the multifaceted identity of seventeenth-century Polish convert Wojciech Bobowski (Ali Ufki Bey). Her analysis highlights his fluid movement across religious, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, portraying him as a transcultural figure whose life and works embody a complex, hybrid identity.

Building upon the insights presented by previous contributors to this volume, this essay further explores how, in the early modern Ottoman context, the transition to an Ottoman identity often involved conversion to Islam along with the adoption of a new language, name, dress, and ritual behaviour. Thus, conversion itself becomes a form of social transgression, marking a break from the converts' past identity while opening access to new roles. Rather than presenting his identity transformation as a complete replacement of his former self, the study argues that Bobowski's acculturation followed a layered model, where new identities were added without erasing older ones, resulting in a composite, multidimensional identity.

Unlike the earlier instances of Ottomanization through forced or voluntary conversions, Alptuğ Güney's essay explores the complex identity of Moldavian prince Dimitrie Cantemir. While remaining Orthodox, Cantemir became deeply integrated into the Ottoman cultural elite during his time in Istanbul from 1687 to 1710.

The essay demonstrates that within an imperial context, identity can be shaped by imperial, cultural, and political affiliations rather than rigid ethno-religious ties. Dimitrie Cantemir's life and career illustrate how one could engage deeply in Ottoman cultural and intellectual life, mastering the language, music, and social networks with-

out entirely renouncing former allegiances. Cantemir embodied both Moldavian and Ottoman identities, reflecting the hybrid and dynamic nature of identity within the Ottoman imperial system, particularly among the elites of vassal states. This case highlights that Ottoman identity was not solely defined by ethnicity or religion but could also be formed through cultural participation, political service, and imperial patronage.

Petr Kučera analyses the writings of Václav Budovec of Budov, a Protestant envoy to the Ottoman court in the late 16th century. Through his treatise *Antialkoran* and various letters, Kučera uncovers Budovec's role as a 'religious broker,' revealing both his resistance to conversion and his engagement in theological dialogue with Muslims and Christian converts in Istanbul. While some converts may have sought spiritual truth, Budovec noted a troubling trend of pragmatic conversions, where individuals renounced their faith not out of conviction, but for political or material gain. This contribution adds an important dimension to the volume by highlighting how the presence of a powerful religious 'Other' could unsettle not only political boundaries but also theological certainties.

The second part of the book highlights how perceptions of Ottoman identity changed in the 19th century in response to shifts in the international balance of power. It identifies three key areas of transformation.

The first area is the evolving meaning and ideological framing of religious conversion, which began to take on new political and cultural contexts. The volume argues that, during the age of rising ethnic nationalism, conversion acquired new significance as religious and national identities increasingly intertwined. Conversion was no longer viewed merely as a spiritual or legal shift. Instead, it began to represent a form of 'de-nationalization.' The book demonstrates that, in the 19th century, conversion became a deeply contested act that symbolised broader tensions between personal agency, communal loyalty, and state authority. Secondly, conversion became entangled not only in internal social debates but also in international diplomacy.

Finally, the book examines the changing legal definitions and discourses surrounding Ottoman subjecthood. The state aimed to reconsider its relationship with its increasingly diverse population. It shows how the state employed legal reforms to reassert sovereignty and reshape imperial identity. This analysis provides insight into how legal codification intersected with questions of identity, loyalty, and governance in the late Ottoman context. The essays in the second part of the volume demonstrate that within this framework, the Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876) promoted Ottomanism as a unifying identity capable of bridging ethno-religious divides and reinforcing loyalty to the state. However, the book emphasises that, as in the pre-modern period, Ottomanism in the modern period also was not a fixed or monolithic ideology. Rather, it was interpreted and utilised by various intellectual and social groups in ways that reflected their own experiences and goals. In many cases, public expressions of support for Ottomanism served as a strategic display of loyalty to imperial modernisation - even when local, religious, or cultural identities remained unchanged.

The second section of the volume opens with Heléna Tóth's nuanced study, which focuses on the reinterpretation of the figure of the renegade in nineteenth-century Hungary, in the contexts of political exile, romantic nationalism, and shifting historical

narratives. The essay explores how the long-standing, complex relationship between Hungary and the Ottoman Empire evolved from enmity to a pragmatic alliance, particularly during and after the failed Hungarian War of Independence in 1849.

Tóth argues that the archetype of the renegade underwent significant transformation during the 19th century. Once regarded as the ultimate traitor to Christendom and national unity, the renegade was reimagined as a liminal character whose conversion could signify either shameful betrayal or noble perseverance. The author underscores how historiography shifts its approach to apostasy, seeing conversion not as a betrayal but as a contribution to Ottoman modernisation, thus integrating converts into national history as agents of Westernisation rather than as religious or political traitors. The essay effectively demonstrates how this ambiguity reflects Hungary's own attempts to navigate its dual historical legacy of resistance and collaboration with the Ottoman Empire.

Furthering the discussion on the Ottomanization of Hungarian and Polish refugees in Constantinople, Aleksandar Zlatanov examines the dramatic journey of Michał Czajkowski (Mehmed Sadık Pasha) through his political and religious transformations. He interprets Czajkowski's Ottomanization and subsequent de-Ottomanization as closely linked to pragmatic choices, shifting ideological loyalties, and the broader geopolitical context of the 19th century. The essays delve into how, in specific historical circumstances, becoming a subject of the sultan could provide political and social opportunities. This illustrates the complex dynamics of identity formation at the intersection of imperial realpolitik, national ideology, and personal ambitions.

Yavuz Köse sheds light on the lesser-known experiences of lower-middle-class German migrants, particularly women, who converted to Islam and became Ottoman subjects between 1844 and 1862. Drawing on Prussian diplomatic correspondence, newspapers, and Ottoman archival records, Köse reveals how these personal transformations provoked intense emotional responses among German officials and contributed to ongoing debates about subjecthood and identity in the years leading up to the Ottoman Nationality Law of 1869. The author argues that, in the case of foreign women, Ottomanization began with conversion to Islam, driven by the desire for protection and improved social status. However, the author concludes that 'even becoming Ottoman was not enough to secure one's future' (p. 197).

In his essay, Tobias Volker examines the case of Andreas David Mordtmann, a former European diplomat who became fully integrated into the Ottoman civil bureaucracy and intellectual circles without conversion to Islam. Volker's analysis focuses on the legal, professional, and intellectual dimensions of Mordtmann's service, particularly his role within Istanbul's emerging scientific community. Through this case study, the essay illustrates that joining the Ottoman imperial elite was a complex process of cultural and political adaptation, shaped by both personal networks and institutional transformations. Volker concludes that Ottomanization should be understood as a multilayered dynamic and ongoing process.

In the final essay that concludes the monograph, Gülfem Alici explores the rarely studied process of de-Ottomanization through the case of Mullah Muhammad Shukri Efendi (Johannes Avetaranian), a Protestant convert from Erzurum. Drawing on Aveta-

ranian's autobiography, the essay traces the stages of his personal and religious transformation, shedding light on what it meant to renounce Ottoman identity. Alici's analysis also provides important insights into the responses of the Muslim community and Ottoman authorities, providing important insights into the boundaries of imperial belonging and the political and social consequences of apostasy in the late Ottoman context.

A reviewer can hardly find a major point to criticize in the *Becoming Ottoman*. One of limitation of volume can be narrow regional scope in the selection of case studies. While the inclusion of Hungarian, Polish, and German individuals provides valuable insight into the interactions between Central Europe and the Ottoman world, other regions, such as the Balkans, and the Caucasus, receive less attention, despite their central role in Ottoman imperial governance and diversity. A more balanced regional representation could have strengthened the volume's comparative dimension.

Nevertheless, this collection stands out for its careful scholarship, multilingual scope, and methodological diversity. It offers a nuanced, comparative, and human-centred interpretation of imperial integration. The volume will be of strong interest to scholars across multiple fields. Historians of the Ottoman Empire and modern Europe, specialists in migration and exile studies, political theorists concerned with subjecthood and citizenship, as well as researchers of religious and cultural transformation, will all find valuable insights in this volume.