

Introduction

This volume emerges from a symposium held in Istanbul in September 2006, under the title “The First Ottoman Experiment in Democracy: an Attempt for a New Approach.” The ten papers presented at the symposium were reworked, and two more articles were added in the compilation of this book.

The symposium and its preparations coincided with the commemoration of the 130th anniversary of the year of the three Sultans. 1876 witnessed the last days of Abdülaziz, the short reign of Murat V, and Abdülhamit II girding the sword of Osman. It was also marked by tense negotiations in the process of drafting the constitution (*kanun-ı esasi*), an essential and necessary precursor of the first parliament (*meclis-i meb’usan*). The intense and dramatic events of this period have received more attention in the historiography than the ephemeral parliament that followed in its suit.

The first Ottoman parliament convened in two terms between March 1877 and February 1878. On February 13, 1878, it was suspended indefinitely, but not formally abrogated by Sultan Abdülhamid II. Short-lived this parliament certainly was. However, it was also one of the pioneering experiments in democracy. Frequently it has been perceived as an unsuccessful experiment that lacked achievements and did not leave any impression on the political scene of the Empire. The parliament was suspended; but it is difficult to imagine that concepts, ideas and experiences could be cancelled with the strike of a pen or a verbal order.

The parliament was remembered by the deputies who had been elected to it and had participated in its deliberations; they outlived their institution. Another reminder of the parliament was a number of laws that were deliberated and amended by its members. These laws remained in force and were never abrogated. In 1906 the significance of that institution became more apparent and calls for its restoration more pressing, due to the constitutional movements taking place in Russia and Iran. Parliamentary government was recommended as an antidote to the deadly malaise of despotism which was causing the decline and disintegration of the Empire, as *al-Manâr* and *al-Muqattam* newspapers in Cairo stated.¹ As evidence of the parliament’s success and a reminder of its existence and achievements, a book was published in 1907 by an anonymous author under the title *Türkiye’de Meclis-i Meb’usan*.² In 1909 the photographs of 20 senators and 104 deputies from the first parliament were published in the Ottoman illustrated journal *Resimli Kitab* as physical evidence and in reminiscence of that pioneer institution.³

¹ *Al-Muqattam*, October 15, 1906 referring to an article in *al-Manâr*.

² M. Q. (penname), *Türkiye’de Meclis-i Meb’usan* (Cairo 1907).

³ *Resimli Kitab*, January 17, 1909, 308-313 and 316-321.

Whether it is meaningful and legitimate to describe the first parliament as “the first Ottoman experiment in democracy” remains an open question. Therefore, it is imperative for us to state that we understand the first Ottoman experiment in democracy to be groundwork, a learning experience for all participants characterized by trial and error. We do not attempt an anachronistic reading, which might draw parallels to what is now considered an established democracy with all the conditions, institutions, laws, electoral practices, checks and balances that are essential components of such a political system. However, the concepts of having representation, defending the interests of a constituency, negotiating taxation, interpellating the government and attempting to control the budget of the state were very well established and highly developed by the deputies of the first Ottoman parliament. They were aware of these political notions and tried to apply them as their participation in the parliament shows. Similar political ideas, which are considered decisive in establishing the English parliamentary democracy, were expressed by English parliamentarians during the Restoration period and the Glorious Revolution. The historian Enver Ziya Karal came to the conclusion that “the parliament was to attempt the greatest democratic experiment in history. This was the first time that representatives from three continents, Asia, Africa, and Europe, from Janina to Basra, and from Van to Tripoli of Libya, and members of different religious communities and different races all came together.”⁴ Karal’s fervor, substantiated by parallels from European parliamentary history encouraged us to retain for this book the original title of our symposium.

The parliament of 1877-1878 is legitimately entitled to the primogeniture rank not only in the Ottoman Empire but in many of its successor states as well. Whether exclusively depicting it as the beginning of a democratic tradition in a nation state, or completely repudiating it in a nationalistic discourse, both approaches come at the cost of losing sight of the fact that the parliament was not Turkish but truly Ottoman.

In general, the parliament was neglected and almost slipped into oblivion in the post-Ottoman period. The remarkable two-volume compilation work of Hakkı Tarık Us and Robert Devereux’s monograph, which relies on diplomatic correspondence and makes excellent use of Us’s compendium, are marked exceptions to the general rule.⁵ Understandably there was certain interest in the first Ottoman parliament in the Republic of Turkey, due to the official language of the institution and the geographical location of its seat, Istanbul. In a history of the Turkish parliament (TBMM), the first Ottoman parliament is considered as a

⁴ Enver Ziya Karal, “Non-muslim Representatives in the First Constitutional Assembly, 1876-1877,” in: Braude, Benjamin and Lewis, Bernard, eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire* (London, New York: Holes & Meier, 1982), 1:395.

⁵ Hakkı Tarık Us, ed., *Medis-i Meb’usan 1293-1877 Zabıt Ceridesi*, 2 vols. (Istanbul: Vakıf Matbaası) 1939 and 1954; Robert Devereux, *The First Ottoman Constitutional Period. A Study of the Midhat Constitution and Parliament* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1963).

forerunner of its current Turkish counterpart.⁶ The 90th and the centennial anniversaries of the first constitution were also commemorated in a number of specialized publications in Turkey.⁷ It is noteworthy that this important institution did not receive its due attention in the other successor states of the Ottoman Empire. This fact is discussed in a number of articles in this collection. The editors of this volume deem it long overdue for the first Ottoman parliament to receive its fair share of attention and thorough investigation.

The restoration of the constitution in July 1908 and the parliaments elected thereafter received more attention and were subject to study. Some of these studies investigated the role and the political significance of the parliaments and the parliamentarians of the second constitutional period in different regions of the empire.⁸ However, the first parliament was never investigated along such lines, and the long period of disinterest makes such a task extremely difficult, for only a bare minimum of information about these deputies survives.

This leads us to the issue of the sources, primary and secondary, and their limitations. It has so far been established by many historians that the original minutes of the first parliament were lost in the Çırağan palace fire in 1911. Thus, the work of Us becomes an indispensable text for this institution even though its primary source, the official Ottoman government newspaper (*Takvim-i Vekayi*), was subject to censorship. This fact made some deputies protest against curtailing the press, which they considered an illegal act.⁹ The primary and secondary sources that contain some information on the deputies are available in a wide array of literatures and languages. The sources include local chronicles, biographical dictionaries, the press, documents from the central Ottoman administration preserved in the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi in Istanbul, consular reports and autobiographies. They are written in Albanian, Arabic, Armenian, Bulgarian, Greek, Serbo-Croatian, Slavonic, Turkish, Ottoman-Turkish and many Western European lan-

⁶ İhsan Güneş, *Türk parlamento Tarihi*, vols. 1 and 2 (Ankara: TBMM Vakfı Yayınları, 1997.)

⁷ Bahri Savcı, "Osmanlı Türk reformlarının (işlahat hareketlerinin bir batı demokrasisi doğurma çabaları)," in: *Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Dergisi*, xxi/1 (1966), pp. 118-24; Sina Akşın, "Birinci Meşrutiyet Meclis-i Mebusani," in: *Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Dergisi*, xxv/1 (1970), pp. 19-39 and xxv/2 (1970), pp. 101-22; A. Gündüz, "Osmanlı Meclis-i Meb'usanda Bağdat demiryolu imtiyazı üzerine yapılan tartışmalar," in: *Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Dergisi*, xxv/2 (1970), pp. 15-56; A. Kapucu, *Birinci meşrutiyeti ihaneti*, Konya 1976; *Siyasi İlimler Türk Derneği, Türk parlamentoluculuğun ilk yüzyılı 1876-1976*, Ankara n.d. [1977]; and Ankara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi, *Armağan-Kanun-u esasi'nin 100. yılı*, Ankara 1978.

⁸ Sabine Prätör, *Der arabische Faktor in der jungtürkischen Politik. Eine Studie zum osmanischen Parlament der II. Konstitution (1908-1918)* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1993); Taha Niyazi Karaca, *Meclis-i Mebusan'dan Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi'ne geçiş sürecinde Son Osmanlı Meclis-i Mebusan seçimleri* (Ankara: TTK 2004); and 'İsmat 'Abd-al-Qādir, *Da'wat al-Nurwāb al-'arab fī majlis al-mab'ūthān al-'uthmānī 1908-1914*, Beirut 2006.

⁹ Devereux, *The First Ottoman Constitutional Period*, 182.

guages. The foregoing is but an incomplete list of the source languages used in the articles of this volume. Going through such a variety of source material, let alone studying and scrutinizing it, is definitely a task beyond the capability of any single historian. Cooperation was the original idea of this symposium, which produced a collection of articles that used all of the above-mentioned sources and languages, now presented in this volume.

This volume may be loosely divided into two parts: the first concentrates on analyzing the political terminology and the perspective from the center of the empire; the second gives more attention to the margins of the empire, following a prosopographical approach. This approach intends to identify and study the largest possible number of to date little-known parliamentarians as a group within their specific historical and cultural context. This work comprises the biographies of 45 deputies who actually participated in the parliamentary procedures, as well as of some who decided to resign. All of them hailed from the provinces of the empire, or belonged to minorities in it. Their origins lie in peripheries that were in theory distant from the centers of power and decision-making in the empire. The articles show that due to the limitations of the sources, only fragmentary pictures were amenable to reconstruction. The biographies collected in this volume are far from comprehensive; for example, the biographies of some deputies from the Anatolian provinces, the Hijaz and Libya are not covered. The uncharted terrain of the first parliament cannot be covered by a single volume. Therefore, we are hopeful that this work will inspire further research in this field. The prosopographical part of the present volume launches a start that was long overdue.

Johann Strauss' contribution on the translation of the Ottoman *kanun-i esasi* into the minority languages covers new ground in the analysis of the development and modernization of Ottoman political and administrative terminology. It also serves as an important reminder that intellectual and political life in the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century is not adequately definable in terms of a historiography that more often implicitly rather than explicitly remains tied to the discourse of the modern nation state by either limiting its scope to the dominant Muslim Turkish tradition or by telling the history of the Ottoman minorities ex-post facto from the perspective of nation building in the process of the dismembering of the Ottoman Empire.

Abdulhamit Kırmızı's contribution discusses two writings of Ahmed Midhat. The first is a passage of his famous *Üss-i inkılab*, the second a small treatise entitled *Tavzih-i kelam ve tasrih-i meram*, written a few years later. Kırmızı extracts the complex and self-contradictory political concept employed by Ahmed Midhat in his effort to reconcile and synthesize the concepts of absolutism and constitutionalism. In the end, for Ahmed Midhat the rule of law is embodied in the authority of the sultan. This political utopia comprises also a strong element that is both deeply romantic and pre-modern in that it believes in the possibility of establish-

ing a direct link between the ruler and the ruled by circumventing and neutralizing the apparatus of the state bureaucracy.

A. Teyfur Erdoğan argues in his article that the Ottoman constitutionalism of the mid 1870s was a child born out of the idea to secure British support against the Russian threat of a partition of the Empire and did not outlive this political purpose. He disputes that the parliament exerted any significant political influence on the process of political decision-making within in the Ottoman administrative elite and claims that it was not designed to do so and that its legislative control over the budgetary process did not change the overall picture. He characterizes the Ottoman parliament as a mainly advisory body and the functional equivalent of a relief valve that reduced pressure within the Ottoman political system.

Nurullah Ardiç in his contribution analyzes the relationship between religion and politics in the 1876 Constitution and various other texts of Ottoman-Turkish modernization, including the Reform Decree of 1839, the Reform Edict of 1856 and the Constitutions of 1921 and 1924. Using the perspective of Foucauldian discourse analysis, he argues that Islam played an important role in modernizing the state and society in Turkey, and that the discourse of modernization did not take the form of an outright attack on religion, but was rather based on the re-definition of the role of Islam in the public sphere.

Milena B. Methodieva's contribution takes a new perspective on the backwash of the first Ottoman constitutional experiment after its termination in public debate by presenting the discussion of parliamentarism in three major newspapers of the Muslim press in Bulgaria at the height of the Hamidian period. As the Muslim press in the autonomous yet de jure still Ottoman principality remained largely unaffected by Hamidian censorship, the resulting debate allowed for a much broader spectrum of political opinion about questions of constitutionalism and parliamentarism than did the curtailed press in the Ottoman capital or the anti-Hamidian pamphletism exhibited by some exile Young Turk publications in Europe and Egypt.

Selçuk Akşin Somel presents in his article an elaborate biography of Mustafa Bey of Radoviş, the deputy of Salonika in the second session of the parliament. Somel gathered his information from a combination of sources, such as *Sicill-i ahval*, official reports presented to the ministry of education, and, most importantly, the rarely used private Ottoman-Turkish newspapers of Salonika *Zaman* and *Rumeli*. Mustafa Bey was the founder and editor-in-chief of both papers. Somel was able to reconstruct the political ideas of Mustafa Bey from the editorials and articles he published in the above mentioned newspapers. He brought to light the empathy of Mustafa Bey toward the most important personalities of the Young Ottoman movement and their political and journalistic ideas. The article follows the career of Mustafa Bey until the end of his life, more than fifteen years after the

first parliament was suspended. His article demonstrates what could be achieved with a careful use of various Ottoman sources, once they are available to researchers.

Bülent Bilmez and Nathalie Clayer conduct an extensive research of local Albanian source material and a wide range of secondary literature in order to reconstruct the biographies of eleven ‘Albanian’ deputies. They clearly indicate that due to the lack of researched archival material concerning that region of the Ottoman Empire, the secondary literature, in spite of its indispensability at the moment, shows clear biases and is influenced by nationalistic and ideological ideas. Their careful study brings to light three deputies from Yanya who were so far ignored by Robert Devereux and Hakkı Tarık Us.

Elke Hartmann’s article provides a wide-ranging coverage of the Armenian deputies in the first Ottoman parliament. In order to show their network and their involvement in their community, Hartmann added to her long list of deputies further biographical information on members in the upper house and in the constitution drafting commission. Her article includes 16 biographies of deputies, seven of which are elaborate and detailed and the rest of which are of varying sizes due to the restrictions presented by the nature of the primary source material and the later Armenian historiography. She also includes in her article an analysis of the secondary literature in an attempt to explain its limitations concerning the Armenian deputies. In her article, she relies on a broad range of secondary literature and, most importantly, on the contemporary newspaper *Masis* that was published in Istanbul in the Armenian language.

Philippe Gelez describes in his article the electoral procedure in the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He also provides a comprehensive bio-bibliographical study of all the deputies representing the provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the first session of the parliament, and of those who represented the reorganized province of Bosnia in the second session. He relies on a broad variety of primary source material, which included local and foreign archives, contemporary newspapers and secondary literature printed in Sarajevo in the 20th century. In his article Gelez presents the continuity or the change that happened in the socio-political careers of these deputies after the province became practically subject to Austro-Hungarian suzerainty. The meticulous research of Gelez and his use of new source material shows that the lists of parliamentarians provided in the authoritative works of Us and Devereux need to be amended and completed.

Johannes Zimmermann presents in his article the tension that accompanied the Cretan elections and the preparations preceding it. He studies the Greek attitude toward the elections and the parliament. His article contains a discussion of both the perception and the reception of the parliament as well as a thorough bio-bibliographical study of the two members that were elected to represent Crete in

the capital Istanbul. He also analyzes both the reasons that led to, and the discourses that surrounded, the resignation of Stephanos Nikolaides Efendi, the elected Greek member. Zimmermann tries successfully to provide a revisionist reading of the events concerning the resignation of the elected Greek member, as he treads a middle path between the different ways in which Crete's historiographies are written.

Christoph Herzog provides biographical notes on four deputies representing the province of Baghdad in the two sessions of the first parliament. He also includes the biography of Bağdadlı Mehmet Emin Efendi, a member of the upper house (*medis-i ayan*) who hailed from Baghdad. Herzog uses a combination of available sources, which included local histories of Iraq, consular correspondence and documents from the Ministry of the Interior in the capital of the empire, namely *Sicill-i ahval*. He also attempts an assessment of a proposal by the deputy of Baghdad, Abdürrahman Şerifzade, to establish a mixed committee entrusted with the task of reforming taxation in Iraq.

Malek Sharif's article attempts to present portraits of seven deputies from the provinces of Aleppo and Syria as well as the mutasarrıflık of Jerusalem. He relies in his research partly on contemporary biographical dictionaries as well as the Arabic press published in Beirut. British and Ottoman archival materials provide background information on some of the deputies he portrays. Five of the deputies in his study were Ottoman civil servants; consequently, the archival classifications of the Ministry of the Interior were an important source to tap. Five records concerning an equal number of deputies were retrieved from the *Sicill-i ahval* and are used in his study for the first time in combination with local sources. His article includes some concluding notes for the volume as a whole.

Christoph Herzog, Bamberg

Malek Sharif, Beirut