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Mert Ozbay   April 8, 2022

The Last Generation:
Harem Eunuchs in the Late Ottoman Empire and Early Republican Turkey

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An abstract of
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Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies

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Abstract

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By virtue of their proximity to the Sultan, personal relationships with the royal family, and their intermediary position between the private and public areas of the palace, Ottoman harem eunuchs occupied a unique place and wielded significant political power in the Ottoman Empire. Comprehensive modernization efforts, which the Ottoman Empire undertook throughout the 19th century and the Turkish Republic continued in the first half of the 20th, drastically affected virtually every aspect of Ottoman and Turkish life. Naturally, this process also changed the political and social lives of harem eunuchs. This thesis focuses on and highlights three parts of this multi-faceted phenomenon—the slave trade, political-bureaucratic reform, and the rise of the new Turkish nation—that correspond to three different life stages of harem eunuchs that lived during this period of history. Examining personal accounts and contemporary news articles in addition to the secondary scholarship, I find that the modernization process disrupted the traditional life trajectory of Ottoman harem eunuchs. It severed relationships and connections which had served to define and empower them. Eunuchs were not mere passive witnesses of this transformation and adapted to changing circumstances by forging new connections despite the uncertainty of the modern world.

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Introduction

It is nearly impossible to think of a eunuch in Islamic history except in relation to the people and places around him. Even the word *hadım*, the word for a eunuch in Turkish, comes from the Arabic word for servant and has been the common way to refer to eunuchs for centuries in Islamic civilization in Turkish and non-Turkish speaking societies alike.[1] The use of this term places their very existence in the realm of service to others.

What called for their castration, in contrast to other slave-servants, was their occupation within private, secluded, sacred, and domestic spaces. Eunuchs themselves were not considered to violate the sanctity of the inner space and served as its guardians, ensuring its moral and spiritual sanctity and preventing the breakout of disorder in doing so.[2] Again, there is a relationship, namely the relationship between inside, outside, and the eunuch, that defined his purpose to such a fundamental level that his body was mutilated, in most cases without the eunuch having much of a say in it. In this capacity, eunuchs served as neutral mediators in elite households, imperial palaces, and the tomb of the Prophet.

As we can see, far from inventing this concept, the Ottomans were adopting a deeply rooted and also pervasive tradition. They were major inheritors of not just Islamic civilization but also the Eastern Roman Empire in their adoption of the eunuch institution.[3] Along with the practice, they adopted the assumption of eunuch liminality, and in their liminal position, Ottoman harem eunuchs came to possess a great deal of power for a considerable portion of

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[1] David Ayalon, *Eunuchs, Caliphs and Sultans: A Study in Power Relationships* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1999), 6.

[2] Shaun Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 7-12.

[3] Jane Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem: From African Slave to Power-Broker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press UK, 2020), 40-43.

Ottoman history. In their closeness to the otherwise remote Ottoman sultan and his empire's

most inaccessible corner, the harem, they inhabited a formidable position.[4] In his court, taking

part in imperial governance, they occupied the "boundary between officialdom and dynasty, with

privileged access to both."[5] And in retirement, many of them relocated to Madina (before this

connection was lost with the fall of the Ottoman Empire), where they would be attending to the

Prophet's tomb, and served once again as mediating guards of sanctity. As if in anticipation of

this final residence, the highest ranking harem eunuch, *Darüssaade ağası*, supervised the pious

endowments (*evkaf*) of Mecca and Madina, another position of tremendous power and

influence.[6] As relations shaped eunuch existence, they also empowered them.

It should be noted that not all eunuchs of the Ottoman palace were harem eunuchs.

Topkapı Palace, the main residence of the Sultan from roughly mid-15th century until mid-19th

century, was constructed in sections with increasing exclusivity as one entered further into the

palace. After the first courtyard, which was accessible to the public, was the second section of

the palace, where administrative and diplomatic business of the empire took place. In the next

section, no male of age outside of the sultan's household was admitted. Guarding the entry to this

section was a group of eunuchs headed by *Babüssaade Ağası* (the Agha of the Gate of Felicity).

Historically, these eunuchs were almost exclusively White—slaves from the Balkans and

Caucasus.[7] This thesis does not focus on White eunuchs. They came from a different origin,

occupied a nearby but different part of the Ottoman palace, and constituted a different center in

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[4] Leslie Penn Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

[5] Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 104.

[6] Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem*, 9-10.

[7] Ahmet Nezihi Turan, "Mahremiyetin Muhafızları Darüssaade Ağaları ," *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 19 (June 1999): pp. 123-148, https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/oa/issue/10959/131015, 129; Abdulhamit Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs and the Transing of Gender and Race," *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): pp. 116-136, https://doi.org/10.1353/jem.2019.0040, 119-20.

political life when compared to harem eunuchs. Furthermore, they had almost completely

disappeared by the mid-1840s as modern institutions ate away at palace positions[8] and therefore

largely fall outside of the historical scope of this thesis.

Guarding and overseeing the inner parts of this section of the palace, including the family

harem, was the other group, harem eunuchs, the highest-ranking of whom was the *Darüssaade*

Ağası (the Agha of the Abode of Felicity). These eunuchs were almost always African in origin.

Therefore, the two groups of eunuchs were racially segregated. There is no clearly articulated

reasoning for this policy of segregation. Their perceived ugliness relative to White eunuchs

might have served as an extra measure to prevent "improper" actions taking place between the

eunuchs and the women of the harem, or there might have been a racial hierarchy at play.[9]

Thinking about connections and relationships, however, another possibility also comes up: Many

White slaves in the Ottoman Empire were able to reestablish contact with their homes and

families, whereas this was not a possibility for Black slaves.[10] Loyalty was of utmost importance

for a servant of the Ottoman royal family, and making sure eunuchs had no ability to reestablish

connections, in addition to their inability to form their own families in the first place, would have

guaranteed the absolute loyalty of harem eunuchs, who occupied the most sacred part of the

palace. Their "natal alienation," to borrow Orland Patterson's description, mostly eliminated the

possibility for a eunuch to relate to people or places in his own terms outside the

imperial/political context.[11]

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[8] Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem*, 236.
[9] Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs," 120.
[10] Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem*, 244.
[11] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.library.emory.edu/2027/heb.03237, 5.

If relationships and connections were so important in defining, employing, and empowering eunuchs, what happened to them, then, as these deeply rooted relationships disappeared? In roughly the last century of the Ottoman Empire, say, between 1800 and 1922 specifically, the process of modernization significantly altered most, if not all, aspects of Ottoman life. After the empire's downfall, the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 was in some ways a continuation or even outcome of the arc of modernization while in other ways it signified an entirely new direction. It is not surprising in any way that harem eunuchs were also caught up in this volatile phenomenon, and the stakes for them were existential. In the timeline of Ottoman modernization and the emergence of the Republic of Turkey, the processes and relationships that necessitated and enabled the existence and power of harem eunuchs were disrupted. I intend to explore this change in the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic and tell the story of what ended up being the last generation of Ottoman harem eunuchs.

Previous Scholarship on Ottoman Harem Eunuchs

There already exists considerable scholarship on Ottoman harem eunuchs, but these works usually focus on the Early Modern period which preceded Ottoman modernization efforts and when harem eunuchs were much powerful and overt political actors. One case in point is that many of these works focused on the position of *Darüssaade Ağası,* the most powerful and prominent Ottoman eunuch until the 19th century. The most exemplary work of previous scholarship is Jane Hathaway's book *The Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem: From African Slave to Power-Broker* published in 2018. In her work, Hathaway follows the emergence of the eunuch institution in the Ottoman Empire and the power of the office of *Darüssaade Ağası* through Ottoman history. It is largely a work of political history that sheds light on not just

harem eunuchs but also the empire's development.[12] The other book-length academic work on

the issue is George Junne's *The Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire: Networks of Power in*

the Courts of the Sultan from 2016. Junne's book also focuses largely on the *Darüssaade Ağası*,

but his work has the larger goal of situating harem eunuchs within the larger fields of African

studies and the study of slavery.[13] As a quick and simple example that contrasts the focuses of

these two works, the English translations Hathaway and Junne use for *Darüssaade Ağası* are "the

Chief Harem Eunuch" and "the Chief Black Eunuch," respectively.

    Both authors focus principally on the most powerful harem eunuch and cover a timeline

that starts well before the period of reform in the Ottoman Empire. As a result, harem eunuchs in

the late modern period, though featured in Hathaway and Junne's—as well as other—works,

mostly appear as an afterthought. The picture we have of the Ottoman harem eunuch institution

in these works is largely one of dissolution, decay, and disappearance of the old structure without

a self-standing framework or perspective articulated for harem eunuchs in the late Ottoman and

early Republican periods. My work is a humble attempt at addressing this gap in scholarship.

This period deserves study not only because it has been largely unaddressed in existing literature

but also because it is exceptional in Ottoman/Turkish history in terms of political, economic, and

military turmoil as well the pace of change. As stated above, this change and turmoil caused a

major disruption in the lives of eunuchs compared to previous periods. They eventually

disappeared from the Turkish state, which inherited a significant portion of the Ottoman

heartland, including the imperial capital of Istanbul. However, I do not present the story of this

last generation as a story of the absence of previous structures and gradual disappearance; rather,

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[12] Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem*, 2-4.

[13] George H. Junne, *The Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire: Networks of Power in the Court of the Sultan*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 1-6.

I intend to present this period as a discrete chapter in the history of harem eunuchs with its own dynamics informed by the modernization process. I try to show the ways in which later harem eunuchs wielded power in the late Ottoman Empire and their attempts at integration into the new Turkish society after the empire's demise and the abolition of the very institution for which their body was shaped.

<u>Modernization</u>

Due to its historical focus, modernization is a major underlying theme of this thesis. It is not feasible to comprehensively describe such a multi-faceted phenomenon as modernity or the entirety of what the process of modernization entails, however. Some aspects of modernization that were certainly not unique to the Ottoman Empire but hallmarks of the phenomenon universally were the imposition of a legal-rational law system which treated all citizens equally, at least in principle, the establishment of a modern bureaucracy to regulate and enforce such a system as well as to procure the resources needed for such an endeavor (e.g., tax collection), and the spread of ideas such as nationalism and liberalism.[14] This is certainly not a comprehensive list but rather important themes that emerge in this thesis. There are also characteristics of the late modern period that were particular to the Ottoman Empire or at least were not universal. One is increasing Western involvement in Ottoman politics and Western domination in the empire's economy to the point that many of the changes that took place in the 19th and 20th centuries were forced upon the Ottomans by the West or emerged in response to the threat of domination by the West.[15] Another is the empire's ultimate failure to reform itself to avoid decline and

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[14] Betty S. Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East: Rulers, Rebels, and Rogues* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 59-60.
[15] Erik Jan Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye'nin Tarihi*, trans. Yasemin Saner (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016), 14-15.

collapse, giving rise to several nation-states, including the Republic of Turkey. I follow Erik Jan Zürcher's steps and adopt a historiographic lens that perceives modernization as a continuous process between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic.[16] There were certainly points of rupture in the Turkish Republic, very much so in the case of eunuchs, but these points do not falsify the historical trend, and I will also talk about the differences when relevant.

It is possible to call the topic of this thesis "eunuchs in modernity," although I do not simply examine eunuchs in a specific time period and historical context. This thesis also presents how the changes brought about by modernity affected a specific group of people. One cannot cover every facet of this change, so I will focus on and describe three phenomena as they relate to eunuchs: (1) slave trade suppression, (2) political-administrative reform, (3) the founding of the Turkish Republic and the construction of a Turkish national identity.

Afro-Turks

This work is also a humble contribution to the emerging field of the study of Afro-Turks. The term Afro-Turk refers to Turks of African origin and is used most often in the context of describing the descendants of African slaves brought to the Ottoman Empire who currently reside in Turkey.[17] The activism of Mustafa Olpak, who passed away in 2016, succeeded in bringing attention to this issue. The exciting works of young scholars such as Zavier Wingham, Müge Akpınar, and Ayşegül Kayagil, which provide the historical Ottoman context and shed light on the current realities of the existence of this community and their relationship to the wider Turkish society, hopefully signal a new chapter in this field as well as an end to the silence and

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[16] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 16-18.
[17] Ayşegül Kayagil, "Vocabularies of (In)Visibilities: (Re)Making the Afro-Turk Identity," *Antropologia* 7, no. 1 (April 2020): pp. 45-66, https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.14672/ada2020162445-66, 45-46.

invisibility surrounding this community in academia.[18] Another scholar whom we can put in the same category is Özgül Özdemir. Her recent Master's thesis *African Slaves in the 19th-Century Ottoman Empire* is a strong rebuttal of any remaining claims on the benevolence of Ottoman slavery. Her work even features a harem eunuch whom we will meet later, Nadir Ağa, and she argues that even elite slaves who enjoyed a higher standard of living strongly experienced the negative outcomes of slavery.[19]

It is therefore logical and even necessary to consider this last generation of Ottoman harem eunuchs a part of the Afro-Turkish community. A large portion of their lives and experience of slavery was different from the rest of the Afro-Turkish community due to their status as elite slaves. Also, they were not closely connected to the larger communities of Afro-Turks in the Ottoman Empire and later the Turkish Republic. Nevertheless, some of the formative experiences of their lives and some of the major challenges they faced were shared. The Africans' Cultural and Solidarity Organization (*Afrikalılar Kültür, Dayanışma ve Yardımlaşma Derneği*) offers this definition of Afro-Turk: "a struggle for existence, tracing a complex centuries-long historical network. Trailing the story of the rhythm that never falls silent. A short story from the history of becoming human."[20] Starting from this definition, the story of the last generation of Ottoman harem eunuchs I present here defines them precisely as Afro-Turks. Their experience of trafficking and slavery, unique story enmeshed in Ottoman history,

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[18] Zavier Wingham, "Arap Bacı'Nın Ara Muhaveresi: Under the Shadow of the Ottoman Empire and Its Study," *YILLIK: Annual of Istanbul Studies* 3 (2021): pp. 177-183, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.53979/yillik.2021.11; Müge Akpınar, "Afro-Türkler: Temsiliyet, Gelenek Ve Kimlik," *Uluslararası Kıbrıs Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi*, 2020, pp. 73-86, https://doi.org/10.22559/folklor.1163; Kayagil, "Vocabularies of (In)Visibilities," 45-66.
[19] Özgül Özdemir, "African Slaves in the 19th Century Ottoman Empire," Master's thesis, (Boğaziçi University, 2017).
[20] "*Afro-Türk demek tüm bu karmaşık yüzyıllar boyunca süre giden tarihsel ağın izinde devam eden bir varoluş mücadelesi demektir. Susmayan ritmin hikâyesini sürmek demektir. İnsanlaşma tarihinden kısa bir hikâyedir,*" my translation, "Hakkımızda," Afrikalılar Kültür, Dayanışma ve Yadımlaşma Derneği, accessed March 22, 2022, http://afroturkler.com/hakkimizda/.

and efforts to form new bonds and reassert their humanity make their narrative a welcome addition to the growing literature on Afro-Turks.

A Note on Gender

Eunuchs certainly occupied a peculiar place with regards to gender. They were castrated male slaves that occupied private places, such as harems, that no man except the owner of the space—for example, head of a household—was allowed to enter. Since gender categories are socially constructed and vary through time and space, there is not a strict consensus on the gender of Ottoman eunuchs. Turkish famously has no grammatical gender, so the sources I used also provided no evidence of grammatical nature. Abdulhamit Arvas argues eunuchs can be considered trans figures since their castration involved "the movement across a socially imposed boundary." Arvas goes on to argue that this challenges the binary understanding of gender in the Ottoman realm and that eunuchs can be considered a separate, nonbinary, gender category.[21]

However, it is dismissive to this easily exclude eunuchs from the male gender category. The title *Ağa* is explicitly masculine, and visual documentation from the time period of this research depicts eunuchs wearing men's clothing. It seems that eunuchs embodied a certain kind of "tempered masculinity," where parts of masculinity that threaten the sanctity of the harem were eliminated. This refers specifically to the removal of reproductive capabilities. The concept of tempered masculinity also overlaps greatly with Hathaway's view that eunuchs "comprised not so much a third gender as an arrested male gender, much as if they were young boys, with all the androgyny that young boys can exhibit."[22] The link here is the connection between sexual

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[21] Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs," 117-18.
[22] Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem*, 8.

maturity (or capability) and adulthood. With this consideration and following the example set by Hathaway and Junne, I use "he/him/his" pronouns when referring to Ottoman harem eunuchs.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis describes the gradual breakdown of institutions, practices, and structures that formed and defined the relationships that constructed the harem eunuch experience in the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic. It also shows, in the same timeframe, the eunuchs' efforts at constructing new relationships of power and belonging, painting them as agents who can adapt to change rather than passive observers that faded into oblivion. To present this picture, I highlight three different areas, each its own chapter, that witnessed significant change due to Ottoman and Turkish modernization and in turn dramatically transformed the harem eunuch experience. These chapters also conveniently coincide with the three different stages of the lives of these eunuchs, forming a life story of their last generation. To give voice to harem eunuchs while writing their history, I use the limited firsthand accounts, as well as contemporary journalistic work, as my main primary sources.

The first chapter focuses on efforts to suppress Ottoman slave trade in Africa. To this end, I use the seminal works of Ehud Toledano and Hakan Erdem on the Ottoman slave trade in the 19th century. I point to the pressure from the British Empire as the main driving force of this change and follow the gradual steps taken by the central government to eradicate slave trade originating from Africa. I also show the shortcomings of these efforts, as they failed to conclusively end the trade but rather pushed it underground. The sensibility that considered slavery to be inhumane and archaic and demanded the end of its trade around the world was a new one in many societies of the modern age. Furthermore, the British ability to influence the

Ottoman government to this end, a testament to the growing power of Western powers over the Ottomans, was a new reality that the Ottomans had to face. This chapter also corresponds to the first part of the lives of African eunuchs: their childhood, *heimat*, and first experience of freedom. They were later abducted, lost contact with their families, and were brutally castrated. They navigated slave trade routes, often dodging regulations, and ended up at the palace of the sultan either directly or indirectly through service in the households of other notables.

The second chapter outlines the administrative reforms in the late Ottoman Empire as they concerned harem eunuchs. As the political arrangement of the empire was the principal structure that empowered eunuchs to shape Ottoman history, how much power eunuchs wielded and how they obtained it throughout this period is an equally salient and inseparable focus of this chapter. I use the works of Carter Findley and Şükrü Hanioğlu as my main sources, but also make extensive use of Betty Anderson's and Erik Jan Zürcher's works. I show that the administrative reforms of the late Ottoman Empire sought to establish a modern bureaucracy, which largely displaced old institutions, including harem eunuchs. This change, in turn, inevitably created a new elite class of bureaucrats that came to wield power. I mark Abdülhamid II's reign as an exceptional time period when the circumstances of his rule made harem eunuchs political actors again, even though they did not possess the tremendous power of the *Darüssaade Ağası* in the institution's heyday. The corresponding life stage is the harem eunuch's time in the imperial harem and his political career.

The third and final chapter aims to provide a critical perspective on the birth of the new Turkish nation. The founding of the new republic was not the simple replacement of one state with another (and several others, if we include other inheritors of the Ottoman Empire). A new Turkish nation had to be constructed, both discursively and literally through the founding of new

institutions that would produce, disseminate, and instill this new discursive construction. Quite expectedly, nationalism is an important focus of this chapter, and I use the foundational works of Benedict Anderson, John Breuilly, and Ernest Gellner to lay out important aspects of nationalism. I also use several works that describe Ottoman and Turkish sentiments on race and ethnicity to provide a picture of how harem eunuchs, who visibly looked different and came from a different part of the world, were perceived by Turkish society and where they fit in the new definition of the Turkish nation: were they Turkish? In the life history of harem eunuchs, this chapter symbolizes their life after the palace and their second freedom. With the end of legal slavery and the sultanate, the eunuchs were free, but since the chains that bound them also served to define them, they had to forge a new kind of relationship with the society they inhabited. I seek to show their engagement in civic life, interactions with their communities, and even their active role in building the new nation, all of which helped to build a new relationship of belonging.

<u>Belonging</u>

While writing this thesis, I also realized that "belonging" was a major underlying yet quite indiscernible thread that runs throughout this inquiry. Whenever I mentioned to other Turkish people that I was writing about eunuchs in the Turkish Republic, not just the Ottoman Empire, I received a reaction of surprise. However, these people were not surprised to hear that there were eunuchs in the early Turkish Republic. The eunuchs obviously did not vanish into thin air the moment the republic was founded or the sultanate was abolished. Indeed, many Turks with whom I spoke about this thesis were surprised that they had never thought of such a self-

evident thing. Serendipitously, I came across Ayşegül Kayagil discussing a very similar experience about her research on Afro-Turks:

> "Who are the Afro-Turks?" has been the most common response I got from my friends and family back home in Turkey, who were puzzled to hear that my doctoral research concerned the experiences of the Afro-Turk community. I would explain to them that the Afro-Turks are the descendants of enslaved Africans who were brought to the Ottoman Empire over a period of 400 years and this brief introduction helped them *recall*. After a short conversation, their initial puzzlement gave way to reminiscence: they started to *remember* either specific Afro-Turks who had been their schoolmates, or did military service with them, or who were their neighbors some decades ago. Sometimes they *remembered* a famous Afro-Turk singer from the 1970s, a football player, or some black characters from Turkish novels. Only at that moment did my research topic start to make sense to them.[23]

The wondrous selectivity of our minds somehow keeps pushing Turkish eunuchs out of their confines. There is an unarticulated, unexplored yet pervasive sentiment that these harem eunuchs somehow do not "belong" in the modern Turkish society that we imagine came to existence after 1923, so we do not think about them. But this was not the case: we have examples of harem eunuchs who went on to live engaged lives and make an impression on the society; they managed to forge belonging. Therefore, another purpose of my research is to shed light on this belonging and *recall* it back into existence, adopting Kayagil's words. Belonging is a rather vague and subjective word. To unpack this term, I use several proxies in my thesis, such as citizenship, membership, agency, and the attitude of society towards the eunuchs. I also want to provide another definition: the ability to secure a life in the place, the community, and the society in which you live. It describes what it means to establish a life somewhere, even under extreme circumstances, even with very visible markers and realities of difference. Ottoman harem eunuchs were dealt an exceptional hand, yet they managed to survive and form relationships at every stop, showcasing the exceptional adaptability of the human condition.

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[23] Kayagil, "Vocabularies of (In)Visibilities," 45.

Chapter 1: Slave Trade & Separation

Ottoman slavery was by no means limited to the capture, trade, and employment of eunuchs. As a matter of fact, eunuchs were only a tiny sliver of the Ottoman slave trade, which included slaves from many origins, ranging from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe to the Caucasus, and many different occupations, such as military enslavement, domestic labor, and even agricultural slavery at times.[24] Although some of these experiences differ wildly from that of a harem Eunuch, the slaves still passed through the same trade networks, and furthermore, were all subject to the changes brought about by the British drive throughout the 19th century to eradicate slave trade. Studying changes to the slave trade in the 19th century, especially its latter half, will provide us with a better understanding of the early lives of harem eunuchs. In this chapter, I will first take a distant look at the slave trade by examining the changing conditions of Ottoman slave trade. Then, I will complement this view with the autobiographical accounts of Nadir Ağa and Tahsin Nejat Bey, who were both eunuchs who served in the Ottoman harem.

<u>The Rise of African Slave Trade</u>

Ehud Toledano, in his work examining changes to the Ottoman slave trade in the Early Modern period, notes that Ottoman interest in the African slave trade increased dramatically in the last decades of the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th. The reason for such a shift, according to Toledano, is that the end of the Ottoman age of conquests meant that European populations could not be enslaved with war efforts and that trade was the new means to acquire

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[24] Ehud R. Toledano, "Shifting Patterns of Ottoman Enslavement in the Early Modern Period," *Critical Readings on Global Slavery (4 Vols.)*, 2017, pp. 895-914, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004346611_030, 896-98.

slaves for the labor needs of the Empire.[25] While Western powers intended to exploit African slaves for agricultural production and sought African men to enslave for the most part, Ottoman slave trade involved the trafficking of African women in large numbers, who were often used as domestic servants.[26] Not only elites purchased slaves, as other members of urban society who could afford slaves also had African slaves for menial labor.[27] Under such conditions, there was a large movement of people from Africa to population centers across the Empire.

George Junne cites another reason for the increasing African slave trade. As the Russian Empire expanded and conquered more territory in the Caucasus, the availability of white slaves from the region declined.[28] However, Russian expansion caused people from the region, especially Circassians, to migrate to the Ottoman Empire and even bring their slaves and slavery customs, including agricultural slavery. Under these conditions, the Ottoman Empire had access to a bigger pool of slaves, not smaller.[29] Thus, this does not seem to be a major cause of increasing traffic in the African slave trade routes.

Another development that increased the African slave trade in the region took place in 1820s after the Egyptian militarily took over Sudan. Muhammad Ali, the governor of Egypt who was nominally under Ottoman rule, had the intention of supplying the Egyptian army with a large number of enslaved soldiers from Sudan, but later changed course on this decision. However, the garrisons of the Egyptian army in Sudan did ultimately depend on Sudanese slaves to fill up its ranks and procured slaves through raids — called *ghazwas* — to meet the continuous

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[25] Toledano, "Shifting Patterns," 902.
[26] Toledano, "Shifting Patterns," 902.
[27] Junne, *The black eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire*, 95.
[28] Junne, *The black eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire*, 99.
[29] Hakan Y. Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise: 1800-1909* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1996), 114, 125; Ehud R. Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression: 1840-1890* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 273.

demand.[30] Soon after, the abducted slaves were not solely employed in the garrisons but were traded as well, and the Sudanese slave market became an important supplier of the slave trade in the region. This process of raiding and trading became its own economic endeavor, and the capturing of slaves continued even after the government-organized *ghazwas* ceased.[31] While many of these slaves remained in Sudan, some were traded to other places, including the Ottoman realm, through the Nile Valley and the Red Sea trade networks.[32]

While we can talk about African slave trade in the Ottoman Empire as a single phenomenon, it is also important to note that slaves came from various homelands and passed through different routes to ultimately arrive in Ottoman lands. Toledano notes that the inherently commercial journey of the slaves sold into the Empire "took place in a fairly uniform economy, with its common pricing system, and under relatively unvariegated administrative practices, with common registration and taxation methods" and qualifies this trade network as a "system."[33] Within this system, he identifies four main routes: (1) a trans-Saharan route with the region around Lake Chad at its starting point and a Mediterranean Sea connection between North African port cities and urban centers on the other side of the sea, (2) a Red Sea route with Ethiopian highlands as well as the White and Blue Nile basins as its origin connected to the Arabian Peninsula through Red Sea port cities such as Massawa, Sawakin, Tajura, Jidda, and Hudaida, (3) a western Indian Ocean route that transferred slaves sold in Zanzibar to cities around the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden, and finally (4) the Circassian/Georgian route (which was clearly not part of the African slave trade) that traffics slaves from Circassia and

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[30] Janet J. Ewald, "The Nile Valley System and the Red Sea Slave Trade 1820–1880," *Slavery & Abolition* 9, no. 3 (1988): pp. 71-92, https://doi.org/10.1080/01440398808574963, 71-73.
[31] Ewald, "The Nile Valley," 73-4.
[32] Ewald, "The Nile Valley," 71, 74.
[33] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade*, 14.

Georgia to the port cities of the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean.[34] The existence of

these routes of slave trade with varying levels of traffic over the 19th century means a large

population of slaves have been transferred to the Ottoman center.
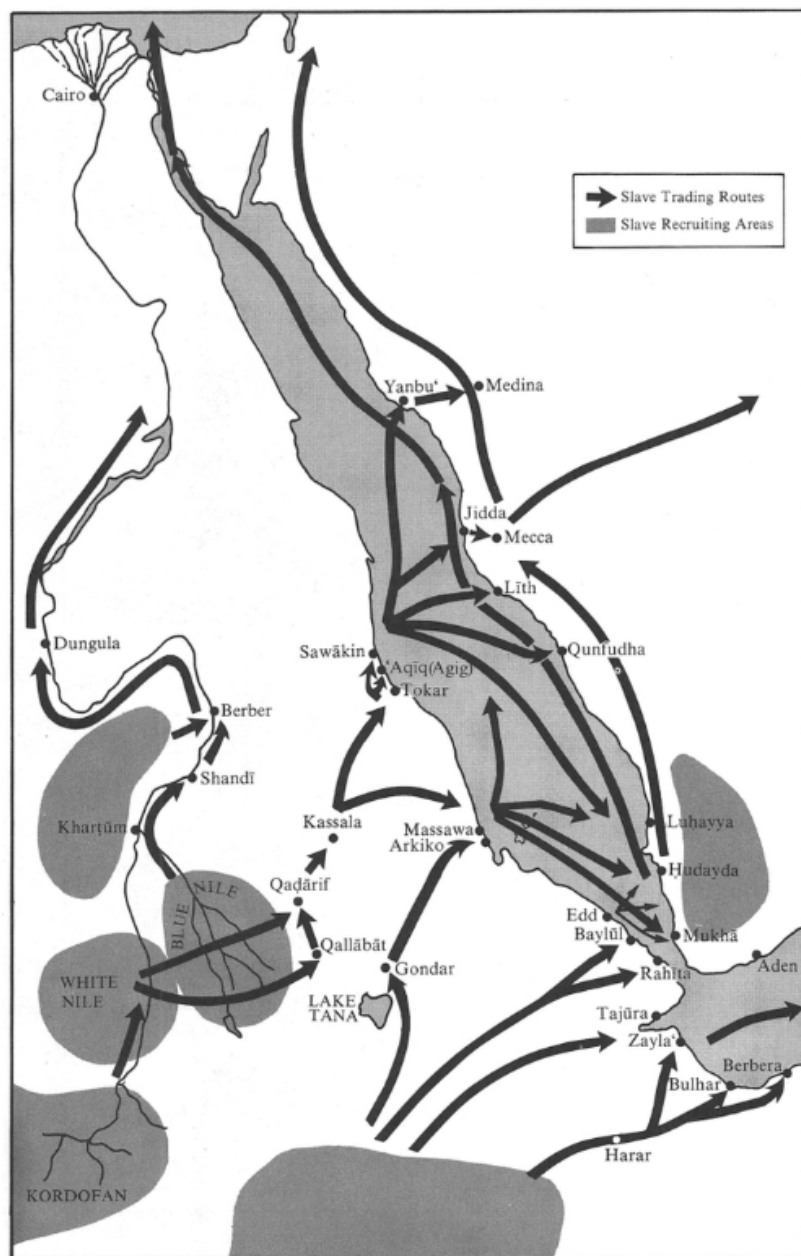
Fig. 1: Slave trade routes of the Red Sea and the Nile Valley. (In The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its
Suppression: 1840-1890. By Ehud Toledano. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014, 24.)

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[34] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade,* 21-28.

One testament to the high number of enslaved arrivals is the emergence of local African communities, namely lodges intended for solidarity among the currently enslaved and recently freed Africans. Toledano provides us with a glimpse of a well-established community in Istanbul as early as 1827. His account tells the story of seven women who headed such lodges. These lodge leaders, also referred to as *kolbaşıs*, were arrested for performing a traditional African ceremony and were exiled to Varna.[35] Istanbul was not unique in having such a vibrant African community: Africans must have populated many of the coastal towns where slaves were brought, and one of the biggest of such communities was located in Khania, Crete.[36] Such large-scale slave trade was alarming to the British, who had taken up the mission to eradicate the slave trade.

Anti-Slave Trade Measures

Following the abolition of slave trade in the British Empire in 1807 and slavery in 1833, both the government and civil society in Britain worked to eliminate slavery and its trade in other regions of the world. With its active slave trade routes and its increasing reliance on Britain, the Ottoman Empire was among the states where British pressure on this issue was most apparent. As a result, a great majority of the anti-slave trade measures in the Ottoman Empire were enacted thanks to British diplomatic efforts.[37] The first initiative by the British in this regard happened in 1840 and had early success when the Tunisian governor, who was nominally an Ottoman subject, abolished the slave trade and eventually slavery itself.[38] Making progress in the rest of the empire, however, proved to be a much bigger challenge, and different British officials had

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[35] Toledano, "Shifting Patterns," 904, 907.
[36] Junne, *The black eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire*, 81.
[37] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 67.
[38] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 48.

differing opinions on how abolition could ultimately be achieved, considering the particularities

of the Ottoman Empire.

British views on how the abolition of Ottoman slavery could be achieved fell into two

general groups, and the main disagreement between them was whether the slave trade or slavery

should be banned to end slavery in the Empire. The first group advocated for the full abolition of

slavery, arguing that this would effectively end all demand and terminate the slave trade. This

was obviously a more interventionist stance as the legality of slavery was a domestic matter,

unlike slave trade, which spanned international waters and borders. Erdem observes that British

officials residing in Ottoman coastal towns where slaves were imported or exported to other parts

of the empire more commonly held this view, as they witnessed the passage of many slaves

through these routes and considered the demand for slaves in other parts of the Ottoman Empire

the main issue to be addressed.[39]

The second group, on the other hand, held the opposing view that the abolition of slave

trade, not slavery, was the reasonable approach to eradicating slavery. If the channels that

provided a steady supply of slaves to meet demand were cut off, then slavery in the empire

would effectively end over time without going through the trouble of ending slavery legally.

Many of the British officials from the places where the slaves ended up — places which Erdem

refers to as "slave-consuming," such as the capital Istanbul — advocated for this view.[40] Even

though the more staunchly abolitionist camp accused this side of being apologetic on the issue of

Ottoman slavery, both sides had the ultimate goal of ending slavery. The officials in the "slave-

consuming" population centers of the empire saw how deeply-rooted slavery had become in

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[39] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 79.
[40] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 80.

these places and considered direct abolition an impossibility.[41] They were not alone in this judgment. Lord Palmerston, a British statesman who served as the foreign minister as well as prime minister and therefore played a crucial role in British-Ottoman relations, regarded slavery as an integral part of Ottoman society.[42] This belief prevailed among many British officials dealing with the Ottoman Empire, and it might explain why this approach — as opposed to the hard-line abolitionist view — remained the official British policy regardless of the debate going on behind it.[43] Starting in 1840 and throughout the 19th century, the British pressed for the abolition of slave trade, of which the African slave trade was a major part, with hopes of bringing an end to the practice of slavery in the Ottoman Empire.

British pressure on this issue was principally diplomatic. The main actor, especially in communications with the central authority, was the Foreign Office of the UK, and their primary addressee was the Ottoman Porte — the office of the Grand Vizier and ministries. The Foreign Office mostly followed a "softer" approach and usually refrained from making assertive demands.[44] When more aggressive actions took place, such as the seizure of ships and subjugation of its crew, the British Navy was involved, and the Foreign Office apologized in cases of mistreatment.[45]

Except for the banning of slave trade to Egypt in 1786 — which was intended to weaken the Ottoman Mamluks rather than to further anti-slavery aspirations — the first Ottoman Sultan to start implementing anti-slave trade measures was Abdülmecid (r. 1839-1861). Starting with his rule in 1839, Ottoman sultans and statesmen had to find the balance between catering to the

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[41] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 81-82.
[42] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 71.
[43] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 82.
[44] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade,* 250-1.
[45] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade,* 257-59.

anti-slave trade demands of the British and maintaining the supply of slaves for Ottomans, mainly the elite class of which they were also a part.[46] As Hakan Erdem puts it: "Their main concern was to ensure the continuation of slavery which, as practised in the Empire, was almost totally dependent on the acquisition of new stock … One way of finding a solution to the above problem was to limit the measures … either to time or to place, or both, and to avoid blanket decisions."[47] Erdem observed this process closely by using a plethora of original documents from the period.

The first measure the Ottomans took was to close down the slave market in Istanbul in 1846, citing ill treatment of the slaves. Both Erdem and Toledano agree that this was an Ottoman initiative without British involvement, but it is also possible that pleasing the British was one of the underlying intentions.[48] The peculiar thing about this measure is that having this central market was intended to minimize abuses in the first place, and closing down the market dispersed the slave trade to different corners of the city, making it harder to regulate and tax, a problem which would become more apparent after further measures were enacted.[49] The next step came in 1847 with the prohibition of slave trade in the Persian/Arabian Gulf. This was part of a larger British effort that involved other powers in the region such as the Omani Empire, which took an active part in the trade and use of slaves, and the Ottomans cooperated without much resistance. The reason for this seems to be the fact that Gulf trade was less significant for the Ottoman Empire when it came to supplying slaves.[50] This is a clear example of the

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[46] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 99.
[47] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 99.
[48] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 95-97; Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 107-8.
[49] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 95.
[50] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade,* 107; William Gervase Clarence-Smith, "The Economics of the Indian Ocean and Red Sea Slave Trades in the 19th Century: An Overview," *Slavery & Abolition* 9, no. 3 (1988): pp. 1-20, https://doi.org/10.1080/01440398808574959, 4-7.

aforementioned nature of Ottoman anti-slave trade efforts of the time, as the government addressed British concerns without actually making slaves more inaccessible.

The other major action by Abdülmecid — regarding the African slave trade specifically — was his *ferman,* or Sultan's decree, which prohibited the slave trade of Africans, at least on paper. The decree was issued in 1857 and was forwarded to the corners of the empire where slave trade took place. Not surprisingly, this development was again the result of British pressure, as British officials had found out about several instances of infringement of the previous prohibitions.[51] This decree meant that while the bondage of the current slaves would continue, those who were found out to be enslaved and trafficked subsequent to the issuing of the decree would be manumitted.[52] Still, this decree was largely insufficient in bringing an end to the practice of slavery. Firstly, the prohibition did not apply to the Hijaz region, where slave trade constituted a significant part of the economy. Furthermore, it had loopholes that could be abused to continue the trade in an underhanded way.[53] While Abdülmecid can be considered a reformer Sultan who also took the first steps in curbing the slave trade, the measures taken during his rule were insufficient for its cessation.

Abdülhamid II's ascension to the Ottoman throne (r. 1876-1902) marked the beginning of the First Constitutional Era, and with this development, modern ideas such as liberty and equality under the law that the reformist factions in the Empire supported seemed even closer to becoming reality.[54] Midhat Pasha, a high-ranking Ottoman bureaucrat and one of the chief architects of the Constitution (*Kanun-i Esasi*), supported the end of slave trade and even eventual emancipation based on his conviction that such practices do not have a place in civilized

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[51] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 107-8.
[52] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 109.
[53] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 109, 112.
[54] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 125.

society.[55] However, his ideas did not come to fruition, as Abdülhamid quickly revealed his authoritarian side, and Midhat Paşa was exiled. His exile was not directly related to his stance on slavery but to his constitutionalist, progressive stance at large. Over the period of his long rule, Abdülhamid II never opposed the idea of ending the slave trade but always dragged his feet when it came to implementing reforms. Furthermore, the complete abolition of slavery, although an idea championed by many Ottoman reformists, never became a reality, as the practice of slavery was such an integral part of the Ottoman society.

The first step Abdülhamid took to end the slave trade was a *ferman* he issued in 1877. A decree banning the trade of enslaved Africans had already been issued by Sultan Abdülmecid in 1857, and Abdülhamid's decree was a reiteration of it.[56] Comparable to the previous decree, slave markets would be closed, and any individual enslaved from that point on would not legally be a slave and could be immediately manumitted. The Council of State (*Şura-yı Devlet*), the high court at the time, pushed for an even bigger reform that "seemed to be proposing action tantamount to the abolition of slavery."[57] The Sultan did not follow through with the Council, and the decree he issued ended up being largely similar to the one from 1857 with the addition of language of freedom that appealed to the zeitgeist.[58]

Such measures were largely ineffective at preventing the slave trade. Even if public slave markets were closed, slave traders continued their transactions in private houses. George Junne points out the shortcoming of such limited measures, at times making use of the accounts of many Western travelers who witnessed and wrote about the slave markets of Istanbul. One such traveler was Frederick Milligen, who wrote to the Anthropological Society of London in 1869.

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[55] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 126-27.
[56] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 128.
[57] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 129.
[58] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 130.

According to his report, while the imperial slave market where the trade of slaves in Istanbul took place 20 years ago had been closed, the trade still took place in the "unofficial markets" that popped up.[59] While the report predates Abdülhamid II's 1877 decree, it showcases the ineffectiveness of the 1857 decree, which was largely the same. Toledano counts the neighborhoods of Fatih, Galata, and Tophane among places where slave trade continued underground.[60] Junne states that such private transactions took place up until the Great War.[61]

One major reason the decrees of 1857 and 1877 were ineffective was that their enforcement fell on the Ottoman government, which did not always show the willingness to enforce them strictly. The British solution to this problem was to have bilateral agreements, as these would allow the British to enforce the terms.[62] The British turned their attention to the *Khedive*, the ruler of Egypt, before the Sultan and the Grand Vizier in Istanbul. The Khedive had just obtained significant administrative and diplomatic powers, and the British saw this as an opportunity to pen a bilateral treaty with the Egyptian government. Thus, in 1877, *the Anglo-Egyptian Convention for the Suppression of the Slave Trade* was signed.[63] This convention gave the British government the authority to search and seize ships engaging in the African slave trade in the Red Sea as well as in Egyptian waters. The Ottoman government objected to the terms of this treaty on grounds that the Khedive lacked the authority to grant the British such power.[64] Therefore, while having made a crucial step towards ending the African slave trade, the British government, along with the Egyptian Khedive, had to address Ottoman objections, which still held at least nominal authority over the Egyptian government.

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[59] Junne, *The black eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire*, 91.
[60] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade,* 53.
[61] Junne, *The black eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire*, 89.
[62] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade,* 224.
[63] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade*, 224-26.
[64] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade*, 226-27.

What the British did in response to this situation was to take the next logical step and work towards signing an agreement with the Ottoman government.[65] Although the Grand Vizier as well as the ministers showed a willingness to go ahead with this process, Sultan Abdülhamid was much more reluctant and careful in the steps he was taking. He voiced several concerns and made specific demands, such as the need for the terms of the agreement to be in accordance with sharia law and the importance of handing the African slaves seized by the British, most of whom were Muslim, back to Ottoman or other local Muslim authorities. After some correspondences, modifications to the terms, and assurances to the Sultan, *the Anglo-Ottoman Convention for the Suppression of the Black Slave Trade* was signed and ratified in 1880.[66] One important detail about the convention is that it concerns the African slave trade in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden but not in the Mediterranean, even though the latter also hosted a significant portion of the slave traffic. Erdem makes the point that it was not the Ottoman side but rather the British that excluded the Mediterranean from the convention, as the bilateral nature of the convention would give both sides the authority to search the other's carriers and enforce the rules, and the Ottomans had a considerably larger presence in the Mediterranean.[67] This shows us that while the efforts to end the slave trade stemmed from noble and morally justifiable principles, they were also always intertwined with the political and military objectives of the British.

After the signing of the convention, government officials sought to supplement it by passing an actual law that would be codified by the Council of State— as opposed to a Sultan's decree. The first draft law to be proposed in this process was much more ambitious. It would effectively make it possible for all slaves to be emancipated, including not just Africans but also

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[65] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade*, 227-28.
[66] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 133-35.
[67] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 136.

White — mainly Circassian — slaves.[68] This law drafted in 1882 was never approved by the sultan. Erdem states that while the British encouraged the passing of a law to accompany the Convention of 1880, this first draft law reflected the initiative of the Ottoman officials.[69] After the first attempt failed to materialize, the British started pressuring the Ottoman government to pass a law regarding the issue, and a second bill was drafted in 1883 according to the British demands, but this draft law was much more toothless and failed to advance emancipation.[70]

Still, it would take years before Sultan Abdülhamid could be pressured to endorse this draft law. The change came about in the year 1889, due to the Brussels Anti-Slavery Conference taking place from late-1889 to 1890. The British government used this conference as a chance to coerce the Ottomans (or more precisely, Sultan Abdülhamid) to take action against slavery by signing the 1883 draft law, as this would show other nations participating in the conference the sincerity of the Ottoman anti-slave trade efforts and prevent the issue from becoming an international one by drawing the ire of other world powers.[71] Under such circumstances, the Sultan signed the draft into law. The conference and the *Brussels Conference Act of 1890* signed at its conclusion further cemented the commitments of the Ottoman Empire in front of the international community even though the conference did not result in any other changes to law in the Ottoman Empire. The Sultan again took his time before ratifying the agreement but did ratify it in 1891.[72] After these developments, no further laws were passed that prohibited slave trade or slavery of Africans in the Ottoman Empire.

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[68] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 137-38.
[69] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 140.
[70] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 141.
[71] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 143-44.
[72] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 144-46.

New efforts to curb the slave trade came after 1908, which saw the rise of the reformist Young Turks to power and the beginning of the Second Constitutional Era, during which a parliament was set up with the Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*), or CUP, being the most visible and powerful political faction among the Young Turks at that time. Shortly after, in 1909, Abdülhamid II was deposed, and the position of the Sultan was largely reduced to a figurehead. CUP members, like other reformists, regarded slavery as archaic and incompatible with their modernizing worldview and emancipated a large portion of the slaves from the former sultan's harem. However, they did not force other members of the royal household to follow suit.[73] Furthermore, reformists banned the trade of slaves — this time White slaves — and made it easier for slaves to seek emancipation through legal means.[74] However, even with the slave trade banned (and with people in power who genuinely intended to abolish slavery), the legality of slavery persisted until the end of the Ottoman Empire.

Eunuchs as a Part of the African Slave Trade

Of concern to us is how these reforms affected the trade of African eunuchs. Ehud Toledano's analysis of the *Register of the Biographies of the Imperial African Eunuchs*, which is a record of the eunuchs employed by the Ottoman palace beginning the second half of the 19th century until 1903, provides us an important perspective, as the royal household owned the largest number of eunuchs. The most surprising finding is that the number of eunuchs in the palace increased drastically in the later part of the century, as more than 100 of the 194 eunuchs were recruited between 1893-1903.[75] This sharply contrasts with any picture one might have of

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[73] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 148-49.
[74] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 150-1.
[75] Ehud R. Toledano, "The Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul: From Africa to the Heart of Islam," *Middle Eastern Studies* 20, no. 3 (1984): pp. 379-390, https://doi.org/10.1080/00263208408700591, 385.

the Ottoman palace taking steps to end the African slave trade. It is important to note, however, that many of these eunuchs were gifts to the Ottoman household and not bought directly from a slave trader,[76] meaning the enslavement of at least some of these eunuchs might have preceded the decrees and laws passed. It is necessary to situate the concept of gifting slaves in its historical context. Toledano states, gift giving was "an important legitimate means of securing the goodwill and concomitant co-operation or intercession of powerful persons and of people with access to such persons."[77] Eunuchs were difficult to come by and afford, and they therefore made for ideal gifts to the Ottoman family from other Ottoman elites.[78] The high price and rarity of eunuchs can be attributed to the high mortality rate of the castration procedure,[79] but the anti-slave trade measures throughout the second half of the 19th century must have made eunuchs even more difficult to acquire and even more precious.

Another interesting piece of evidence the record of palace eunuchs provides us is information about where they were before arriving at the palace. Unfortunately, there are no records indicating where these eunuchs were born or were abducted from, but the record tells us the province they were in before being sold by a trader or gifted by a notable person. The provinces of Hijaz, Yemen, and Egypt stand out for providing an overwhelming majority of the eunuchs. Toledano rightfully makes the point that this is due to the fact that the slave trade was most active in these regions.[80] This can also help to explain the British focus on the Red Sea in their efforts to abolish the slave trade. However, it also speaks to the limitations of such efforts, as these places continued being hotspots for slave trade in spite of British efforts.

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[76] Toledano, "The Imperial Eunuchs," 386.
[77] Toledano, "The Imperial Eunuchs," 386.
[78] Toledano, "The Imperial Eunuchs," 386.
[79] Junne, *The black eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire*, 36.
[80] Toledano, "The Imperial Eunuchs," 386.

Shortcomings of Prohibition

Even though the late period of the Ottoman Empire witnessed the enactment of anti-slave trade measures of increasing potency starting as early as the middle of the 19th century, the slave trade never seems to have completely stopped. Slave traders and sailboat (and later steamer) operators found ways to work around these prohibitions. Especially in the case of the Red Sea, smuggling slaves was not a big challenge. Since the journey across the Red Sea was a rather short one, there wasn't a large need of supplies to feed and maintain the slaves, and there mostly were no ships that specialized specifically in transporting slaves. Shipowners could carry a modest number of slaves alongside the other goods they were transporting and make the relatively short trip from the African coast to the Hijaz or Yemen.[81] When regulations didn't allow the traders and shipowners to embark/disembark slaves in the ports, they came up with solutions such as anchoring in creeks near the cities, conducting their operations in the dark of the night, and using smaller boats to approach and board a ship once it left the port.[82] These tactics were not limited to the Red Sea and meant that the slave trade could continue to be a viable economic activity for people taking part in and standing to benefit from it.

The introduction of steamers changed the conditions but not the reality of slave trade. Steamers made previously long maritime journeys much shorter, which made it easier to traffick slaves from coastal African towns to the Ottoman heartland. However, unlike simpler and smaller sailboats, steamers were owned and operated by governments and corporations, so engaging in illicit trade required even more secrecy and planning.[83] Tactics that slave traders

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[81] Ewald, "The Nile Valley," 80.
[82] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade*, 37-41.
[83] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade*, 41-42.

used include presenting slaves transported to be sold in markets as domestic slaves who already

had slavekeepers — which worked because not slavery but only the slave trade was prohibited

— or embarking the slaves with manumission papers which were then taken away and destroyed

after disembarking.[84] Even the British failed to foil the plans of slave traffickers, as the number

of slaves crossing the Mediterranean sea via British-controlled Malta became an

embarrassment.[85] Although the use of steamers made enforcement of rules easier, traders

managed to dodge regulations.

While the above explanations might help us understand how slave trade was able to

continue in spite of prohibitions, it does not explain why it remained a profitable endeavor. The

major reason that slave trade continued is the fact that slavery itself remained legal, which

enabled the demand for enslaved people that made their trade a profitable, and persisting,

business. First and foremost, sharia, or Islamic law, provided grounds for a legal justification of

slavery. Even though the Ottoman Empire had a centuries-long tradition of secular law that

complemented religious law,[86] sharia still reigned supreme. Erdem notes that even when the

Şeyhülislam, the chief religious jurist, supported the Young Turks' prohibition of the White slave

trade in his consultation, he still asserted that slavery itself remained legal.[87] No matter what

conventions were signed, decrees issues, or bills passed, the slave trade could continue, at least

in the black market, so long as one could legally argue for the ownership of slaves.

Another major factor is the household system which structured Ottoman society. The

17th century witnessed the rise of "the Ottoman-local household, which served as the social,

economic, political, and even cultural unit that facilitated and promoted Ottoman-local

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[84] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade*, 44-45.
[85] Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade*, 264.
[86] Junne, *The black eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire*, 46-47.
[87] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 150.

integration."[88] This was not a household in the modern sense we might imagine that is most often nuclear and based on biological kinship. In fact, for Ottoman society, it preceded the concept of the modern family as a social unit with its "hierarchy determined by proximity to the leader and an internal division of labor and responsibility."[89] Slavery was one of the main ways of introducing new members to the household, which Toledano argues created a consistent demand for new slaves.[90] Thus, the social arrangement of Ottoman society also played a big role in the continuance of the slave trade, including African slave trade.

The most important household in the Empire, of course, was the Ottoman sultan's household. Both Junne and Toledano state that other elite households sought to replicate the structure of the sultan's household.[91] One striking example is the case of aforementioned Midhat Pasha, who himself had shown an active interest in abolishing slavery as early as the inaugural days of the first constitutional era; in spite of his abolitionist stance, he gifted two slaves to a provincial notable, which seems to have surprised the British too when they found out about it in 1879.[92] As long as slaves were an integral part of the royal abode, other households would also purchase new slaves, keeping this trade network alive in spite of the efforts to quash it. And as long as the eunuchs occupied the same key position, navigating between the highly exclusive parts of the palace and outside world as well as serving the royalty as companions, they would remain among the African slaves who were deprived of their freedom and transported through this network.

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[88] Toledano, "Shifting Patterns," 910-1.
[89] Dror Ze'evi, *Producing Desire Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 75.
[90] Toledano, "Shifting Patterns," 913-14.
[91] Toledano, "Shifting Patterns," 914; Junne, *The black eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire,* 47.
[92] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,* 131-32.

Personal Accounts

      While the scholarly work which uses Ottoman and British state archives provides an informative perspective on the actions and intentions of the decision makers of these empires on the issue of slave trade, the voices of the slaves themselves, and specifically of the eunuchs in the case of this thesis, is largely missing. As Özgul Özdemir points out in her thesis that focuses on African slavery in the 19th-century Ottoman Empire, there has been an increasing effort by many scholars to uncover the voices of these enslaved individuals by way of using new approaches and incorporating new sources into historical inquiry.[93] To this end, I read Nadir Ağa's and Tahsin Nejat Bey's personal accounts which appeared in a few magazines in memoir and newspaper column formats at the time of the Turkish Republic. The former, Nadir Ağa, was a prominent *musahib*, companion, of Abdülhamid II, and his accounts cover many different places from his homeland in Ethiopia to the sultan's harem as well as different time periods from late 1800s to the Republican Era. Tahsin Nejat Bey was a eunuch who served in numerous households before arriving at the Ottoman harem. He later became a high school teacher. In this chapter, I will take a look at the parts that describe their lives before entering the royal palace in order to not only examine them as a case study of the scholarship I have used so far but also to complement this scholarship by using the "bottom-up" approach to the study of Ottoman slavery promoted by Özdemir and others.

      One part of Nadir Ağa's account that greatly adds to the discussion is his description of his early life and abduction. Since these took place outside of the Ottoman realm, it is much more difficult to learn about them through Ottoman documents. While his two autobiographical

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[93] Özdemir, "African Slaves."

accounts give two different names for his hometown, it is agreed upon that he was from the region of Oromia in Ethiopia, which is populated by the Oromo people.[94] His childhood was markedly harsh with poor living conditions, raids on his village, and the loss of people in his family. Nadir was abducted two times by slave traders within a period of one and a half years, as he was able to escape the first abduction attempt by running back to his village but was unable to escape in the second. Considering there must have been many villages like Nadir's, we can infer that such abduction attempts by slavers were quite common. Furthermore, the caravan trafficking Nadir Ağa contained many other children, both boys and girls. He recalled the number of trafficked Africans to be 200.[95] While not all of these children would have ended up as eunuchs in the Ottoman palace or elite households, all of the ones who survived the journey would have ended up as domestic slaves one way or another.

Traveling with his caravan, Nadir passed through the jungle and a salt lake, which Özdemir identifies as Lake Abbe on the Ethiopia-Djibouti border.[96] Later, they reached the coast, most likely Djibouti, and set sail to the vicinity of the port city of Jidda on the other side of the Red Sea.[97] They landed close to Jidda and traveled to Jidda during the night and afterwards to Mecca, where the slave market was. One interesting detail is that the slave traders were much more relaxed after arriving at the road for Mecca.[98] The contrast here is between the Red Sea and Jidda, where the British could catch the illicit slave trade taking place and bother the Ottoman officials, and Mecca, where it was up to the Ottoman Empire to enforce the rules. It is hard to determine exactly when Nadir Ağa was abducted from his home and brought to the Meccan

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[94] Hasan Ferit Ertuğ, "Musahib-i Sani-i Hazret-i Şehr-Yari Nadir Ağa'Nın Hatıratı-I," *Toplumsal Tarih*, January 1998, pp. 7-15, 7; "Nadir Ağa…", *Hayat*, November 1957, pp. 6-7, 6.
[95] Ertuğ, "Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-I," 7, 9-10; "Nadir Ağa," 6.
[96] Özdemir, "African Slaves," 77.
[97] Ertuğ, "Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-I," 11; "Nadir Ağa," 6.
[98] Ertuğ, "Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-I," 11.

slave market, but, based on his life accounts and his year of entry to the Ottoman palace, we can estimate that these events took place sometime between 1875-1880.[99] Therefore, it is not possible to know if Abdülhamid had already issued his *ferman* of 1877 or whether the Anglo-Ottoman Convention of 1880 had been signed. Based on Nadir Ağa's accounts, however, we can conclude there were at least some measures in place to prevent slave trade in the Red Sea.

For a while, the slave traders had a hard time selling Nadir, as he appeared too thin. Eventually, Seyyare Hanim, the wife of a Meccan notable, purchased him. She was also the person who named him Nadir, after a previous slave she had had. In this household, Nadir learned Arabic and how to pray, and he started wearing Turkish attire. After a few years, the household was informed that Sultan Abdülhamid II was replacing some of the eunuchs in his harem and looking for new ones, so they sent Nadir Ağa to the Ottoman heartland of Istanbul, along with several other eunuchs, a separation that broke both Seyyare Hanım's and Nadir Ağa's hearts.[100] This event supports Toledano's assertions about elite gift giving and the value of eunuchs as special gifts to the Ottoman royal family.[101] Even though Nadir Ağa was a beloved member of his Meccan elite household, he once more became a commodity for exchange the second an opportunity for a beneficial transaction between the royal family and his previous household arose. Also, we can observe the special place Hijaz had when it came to supplying slaves, eunuchs in this case, to the center of the Ottoman Empire.

The sources describing Tahsin Nejat Bey's early life are more limited. However, an article by Naci Sadullah in the *Yarım Ay* magazine from September 1938 provides a firsthand account of Tahsin Nejat Bey's abduction and enslavement. In it, he describes slavers abducting

[99] Özdemir, "African Slaves," 76, 80; Ertuğ, "Musahib," 7-9.
[100] Ertuğ, "Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-I," 11-13.
[101] Toledano, "The Imperial Eunuchs," 386.

him and his younger brother when he and his family were traveling from one village to another during nighttime. While running away with the two children, the slavers encountered wolves. They decided to abandon one of the children to the wolves so that they could escape with the other. Tahsin Nejat Bey tells us that they chose to keep him because he was heavier and his thin brother would be more difficult to sell.[102] This gruesome account shows how quickly Tahsin Nejat Bey and his brother were reduced from individuals with personal bonds to mere commodities. Furthermore, assuming the details of his account are accurate, the fact that he could understand the conversation between the slavers suggests that these people were natives as opposed to traders of Arabic or other Ottoman origin.

Tahsin Nejat Bey recalls being bought and sold numerous times, starting from Ethiopia and traveling to various places such as Hejaz, Tunisia, and Algeria. One time, he recounts, after no customer showed interest in him in the market, he was castrated, which he describes as being brutally painful. After this event, he was priced at a much higher value. He was eventually purchased at Hudaida by an Ottoman notable named Celal Pasha and brought to Istanbul. After Celal Pasha's death, he moved on to the Ottoman palace.[103] Tahsin Nejat Bey's tragic experiences reveal a vast network of slave trade in the later part of the 19th century despite anti-slave trade measures as well as the market conditions that treat eunuchs as expensive elite commodities.

The state archives, which Erdem and Toledano use, and firsthand autobiographical accounts provide us the opportunity to look at the phenomenon of 19th century African slave trade to the Ottoman Empire from both sides. These perspectives are complementary: it is not only interesting to see how the large-scale developments and measures described by the literature

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[102] Naci Sadullah, "Nasıl Hadım Edildim?," *Yarım Ay*, September 15, 1938, pp. 4-7, 6-7.
[103] Sadullah, "Nasıl," 6-7.

are reflected in Nadir Ağa's and Tahsin Nejat Bey's very personal accounts; these accounts also serve to fill in the gaps in parts where the other primary sources fail to account for the experience of the voiceless. These complementary perspectives show us both the increasingly comprehensive measures the Empire took to eradicate the African slave trade, taken mostly under British pressure, and also the shortcomings of these prohibitions since the Sultan, the ministers, and later, the parliament never took the ultimate step of abolition. With slavery still legal, the specific social conditions of the Ottoman society ensured that the diminishing yet lucrative trade networks profiting from African slavery would persist. Harem eunuchs, all of them African, passed through this network one way or another, and they were subject to the changes and conditions described in this chapter.

Chapter 2: Palace & Political Power

Harem eunuchs spent a significant portion of their lives employed by the palace. This did not change in the era of Ottoman modernization even though the world around them changed rapidly. It is well established that harem eunuchs, especially the Chief Black Eunuch who sat on top of the harem eunuch hierarchy, wielded immense amounts of political capital in the time period ranging from late 16th century to mid-18th century, thanks to their proximity to the Sultan. Modernization efforts brought about the bureaucratization and regularization of administrative processes in the empire, which drastically affected the political standing of harem eunuchs. Center of government shifted away from the palace to the emerging civil-bureaucracy, most prominently to the Sublime Porte (*Bab-ı Âli*), a designation used to describe the Ottoman government that over time referred specifically to the main administrative agencies, namely the grand vizier, and later, the significant ministries.[104] However, the march towards modern bureaucracy was not constant, and Abdülhamid II's long rule, a period in which personal loyalty and proximity to the authoritarian Sultan offered immense political agency, stands out as a time when harem eunuchs served as political operatives. In this chapter, I will present the modernization process of the Ottoman Empire as it relates to the eunuchs, Abdülhamid II's authoritarianism, and his fall from grace against the rising Young Turks, and I will use Nadir Ağa's personal accounts as well as reporting from the time period to gain a much closer perspective on how eunuchs operated in this political realm.

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[104] Carter V. Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire the Sublime Porte, 1789-1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 5.

The Old Order

But first, understanding the political structure of Ottoman governance prior to modernization will give us a point of comparison and a better understanding of the change in the status of eunuchs. Findley describes the political structure predating the emergence of civil bureaucracy as a patrimonial state. The sultan was the head of the royal Ottoman dynasty, and he ruled over the vast territory of the empire as the main sovereign. The society was composed of a relatively small ruling class and the subjects to whom the sovereign was tasked with providing safety and just governance.[105] With the exception of the educated jurists—the *ulema* — the ruling class around the sultan comprised of slaves of non-Muslim origin, a "servile elite," but more and more subjects of Muslim origin gained access over time.[106] Entry to this class and the political capital that came with it relied fundamentally on the sultan's will. By nature, access was highly volatile. Individuals could quickly rise up in power by making a good impression on the sultan or on somebody whom he trusted. Similarly, an individual could quickly lose favors and be dismissed. Findley aptly described this configuration as "wheel-of fortune mobility."[107] This system differs considerably from modern bureaucratic governance in which individuals usually rise to positions through defined hierarchies or trajectories, usually have undergone a specific education, and lose their positions in cases of extraordinary circumstances or at the end of clearly articulated term limits.

Tezcan complicates this picture in his book *The Second Empire*. He defines the period between 1580 and 1826 as the Second Empire, which stood between the earlier patrimonial state and the later modern(izing) government.[108] In the Second Empire, political authority of the

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[105] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 6-7.
[106] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 14.
[107] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 37.
[108] Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire*, 195.

Sultan was considerably more limited than the preceding patrimonial arrangement. Janissaries—

elite soldiers—and *ulema* served as checks on the sultan's authority and bridged the gap between

the ruling class and the ruled. Increasingly more viziers came from Muslim, non-slave origins

and accrued more power through the sultan's delegation of power, in the process building up

their own households in wealth as well as membership.[109] It is in this context, Tezcan points out,

that the sultan tried to delegate duties to and bestow power on other members of his court (as

opposed to the grand vizier), which included eunuchs.[110]

The royal Ottoman harem, which employed a significant portion of the empire's Black

eunuchs, also participated in politics and was far from a simple, private space in which the

Sultan's family resided. It was a political arena. Peirce underlines the political significance of the

Ottoman harem in her work that examines royal women's power. The sultan's remoteness and

inaccessibility to his subjects were directly linked to his elevated position, and the sanctity of the

most private chamber of his palace, the harem, seamlessly merged with its inviolability and

exclusivity in the Ottoman political imagination. Consequently, relationships in the harem were

greatly informed by political dynamics.[111] As Peirce puts it, "[o]ne consequence of the

sovereign's remoteness was that the potential for enormous power lay in the hands of those who

were intermediaries, formal and informal, between the sultan and those who governed in his

name on the outside."[112] Tezcan also highlights the power of intermediaries when he visualizes

the structure of political power in the Second Empire as a spider web instead of a pyramid, "with

the monarch at the center but not on top of anyone else."[113] The picture we have of the Ottoman

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[109] Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire,* 10-1, 93-95, 193.
[110] Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire,* 100.
[111] Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, 3-10.
[112] Peirce, *The Imperial Harem,* 11.
[113] Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire,* 193.

political structure before modernization places harem eunuchs at a vital position within this web. As power diffused through the web and limited the authority of the sultan at the center, individuals proximate to the center retained a large share of power and the ability to shape the empire, with harem eunuchs occupying prime position in this rearranged hierarchy.

The most significant example of this shift is Murad III's (r. 1574-1595) elevation of the Chief Black Eunuch. As previously stated, when viziers became powerful enough to concern the sultan, he responded by creating other power centers at his court. Tezcan argues that this was the dynamic behind Murad III's promotion (or possibly even creation) of the Chief Black Eunuch title in 1575, with the significant upside that eunuchs could not form competing households of their own due to their castration.[114] A highly consequential authority which Murad III delegated to the Chief Black Eunuch was management of the pious endowments (*evkaf*) for the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, granting him control over not only a significant amount of resources but also access to a network that spanned the imperial capital, Cairo, and the two holy cities.[115] The Chief Black Eunuch held this privilege from 1575 until the 1930s, and the standing of harem eunuchs in the ruling class was thus consolidated. Several titles and positions for harem eunuchs, intertwined with the very architecture and day-to-day of Topkapı Palace's harem, emerged with a hierarchical arrangement between them.[116] It is not possible to enumerate all of the harem eunuchs who rose up in this system and acted as significant power brokers, but one remarkable example is Haci Besir Aga. He served as the Chief Black Eunuch between 1717 and 1746, an exceptional tenure of nearly 30 years. Over this interval that spanned the reign of two sultans, he acted as what Hathaway describes as a "vizier maker," influencing the sultans' vizier

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[114] Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire,* 100-1.
[115] Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire,* 102-3; Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem*, 9-11.
[116] Turan, "Mahremiyetin Muhafızları Darüssaade Ağaları ," 131-32.

appointments and ultimately shaping the course of the empire.[117] The political structure of the Ottoman Empire, before modernity, provided ample opportunity for harem eunuchs to exercise political power.

Haci Besir Aga was also one of the last eunuchs to hold such political influence and prominence, as evidenced by the fact that they were featured far less often in political chronicles after Haci Besir Aga's time.[118] Not surprisingly, this shift coincides with Ottoman rulers realizing that the country was in dire need of modernization against the ever-rising military and economic threats from the Western world. Harem eunuchs were major stakeholders in the old order, and modernization brought about changes that decapitated the political agency of many old beneficiaries.[119] Going through the entire process of administrative modernization of the Ottoman Empire is not my aim in this chapter. But identifying certain themes of this process that critically affected the position of harem eunuchs and highlighting how these central themes manifested within different chapters of the history of late Ottoman state and society will provide us with a much better understanding of the lives of eunuchs in this time period.

The New Order

Numerous political changes that all fall under the umbrella of modernization had different intended outcomes and were advocated for or against by various groups with conservative or reformist inclinations. By separating and identifying the themes and goals of these changes, we will have a better understanding of different actors and their intentions. A major category was the centralization efforts that sought to concentrate power in the hands of a

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[117] Jane Hathaway, *Beshir Agha: Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Imperial Harem* (Oxford: Oneworld Publ., 2006), 61-63.
[118] Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem,* 221.
[119] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 59-60.

single political entity at the imperial center—contrasted to approaches such as indirect rule through local intermediaries or a constitutional system that limits government authority. For instance, both empowering the sultan as the sole sovereign as in the patrimonial system, as well as the standardization of law to be uniformly enforced throughout the empire by a central civil-bureaucracy,[120] would achieve these outcomes. These two examples also point to a different motif of the modernization process, namely the competition between the palace, headed by the Sultan, and the Sublime Porte, which referred to the grand vizier and the expanding bureaucracy, to wield administrative authority. Another dichotomy was about who would get to occupy positions of power: officials with professional, most often Western, education who had the skills to craft and implement modern policies[121] or individuals who managed to impress and win over the trust of the sovereign who rose up with the "wheel-of-fortune mobility." It is important to state that the latter group was not uneducated. Throughout Ottoman history, the palace had an elite school, but this institution served to inculcate the ruling class culture rather than offer a specialized education.[122] In most cases, eunuchs mostly took a conservative position and pushed against change, as most reforms deprivileged them.[123] Two separate but converging aspects of the reforms, the shift of the power center to the Sublime Porte from the palace and the professionalization of political offices, pushed eunuchs away from political power.

The first sultan to institute reforms in a radical fashion was Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839), who was only able to do so after completely eradicating the Janissaries, who served as the guards of the old order, in 1826,[124] the year which Tezcan marks as the end of the Second Empire.[125]

[120] Şükrü M. Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 109.
[121] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 60.
[122] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 10.
[123] Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem,* 225.
[124] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye*, 68-69.
[125] Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire,* 195.

Mahmud II also founded the Translation Office, which would later become the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This institution set the course for the rise of the scribal class—which was already getting stronger—as a new bureaucratic elite class.[126] Comprising the biggest and most influential portion of the Sublime Porte, this group relayed Western interests to the center of the Empire that demanded reforms as Europe's influence on the empire's administration grew, and, thanks to their interaction with Western ideas and education, also were intrinsically motivated to push for political change, believing it was in the interest of the empire.[127] Mahmud II went on to found other ministries and offices. Of particular concern to us is the Pious Foundations Supervision Bureau, which went on to become a full-fledged ministry during the next sultan's reign. Mahmud II took the authority of oversight over the pious endowment of the two holy cities away from the Chief Black Eunuch and granted it to this office. In the long run, this change was the biggest blow to the power of harem eunuchs, as it eliminated their authoritative position in a large network that extended far beyond the palace.[128] It also serves as a prime example of how bureaucratic structures displaced previous positions of power belonging to the old order.

Mahmud II's ultimate goal in instituting reforms was the empire's centralization, and he would rather concentrate political power in his own palace than the Sublime Porte bureaucracy strengthened by his reforms. Throughout the rest of his reign, he wanted to curb the Sublime Porte's power and ensure that the sultan was the ultimate sovereign. To this end, he repealed the title of grand vizier in 1938. The effort to raise and employ individuals in a bureaucracy with the skills to implement urgently needed reforms, however, had set in motion the machine of civil-

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[126] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 126.
[127] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 137; Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 81-82.
[128] Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem,* 237, 246.

bureaucracy, and it could not be stopped very easily.[129] The grand vizier title was reinstated shortly after Mahmud II's death.[130]

The Tanzimat Era, which lasted from 1839 to 1876, the time interval that corresponded to the rule of Abdülmecid (r. 1839-1861) and Abdülaziz (r. 1861-1876), ushered in a zeitgeist of modernization, Westernization, and radical change. It owes its name to the Tanzimat ("reordering") Edict, also called the Rose Chamber Edict, declared in 1839, which was a manifesto for what was to follow, making promises of rights to life and property as well as uniform laws for taxation and conscription that aimed to treat all citizens equally.[131] The Islahat ("reform") Edict of 1856 reiterated and expanded these promises.[132] Many of the reforms declared were not immediately or fully realized, but the edicts communicated the commitment to modernization efforts.

The form of modernization which Tanzimat officials imagined placed them very much at the front and center. Hanioğlu states that the new civil-bureaucratic elite took "oppressive bureaucracy as their source of inspiration for top-down conservative reform."[133] The dreams of participatory government and constitutionalism that we can imagine reformers supporting, therefore, did not constitute the dominant ideals of the elite at the time. In the absence of strong sultans, the Sublime Porte essentially were able to take over power. The number of people employed in government agencies, as well as the level of their professionalization, grew dramatically over time, and the reformers set up new ministries within and outside of the Sublime Porte.[134] As the scope of bureaucratic authority grew, harem eunuchs were reduced to

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[129] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 140-2.
[130] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 152.
[131] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History,* 72.
[132] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 89.
[133] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History,* 73.
[134] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 151-52, 168-70; Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 94.

politically insignificant actors. One other major change for harem eunuchs was the move from Topkapı Palace to Dolmabahçe Palace during Abdülmecid I's reign, and this would be the main residence of subsequent Ottoman sultans—with the exception of Abdülhamid II, who stayed at Yıldız Palace. Both Dolmabahçe and Yıldız had entirely separate sections as harems, not accessible from the part of the palace where the sultan entertained visitors, and this arrangement cut the eunuchs off from many political operatives, a physical manifestation of the political processes at play within the palace more generally.[135] As we have already seen, it wasn't the case that the old harem was accessible by any measure, but the separation was enforced by personnel as much as by architecture, and the eunuchs could navigate this space across boundaries. The move to the new palaces, in effect, was similar to the administrative reforms of the time in its political outcome for harem eunuchs.

The Tanzimat Era also witnessed the birth of the Young Ottoman movement, which, as we will see, would turn out to have a tremendous impact on Ottoman politics. The movement ultimately dated back to a secret society founded in 1865 but was far from a uniform group. The younger generation of the educated scribal class had a more involved, nuanced, and at times critical understanding of Western ideas and reforms. What early members of the movement wanted from modernization was not direct adoption but a synthesis in which traditional and Islamic values were still respected while modernization was implemented.[136] The common thread that brought them together in opposition was their hostility towards "bureaucratic tyranny." The Young Ottomans were lower-ranking members of the civil-bureaucracy who were witnessing the rule of the country by a group of senior officials much like a sultan would rule his realm without accountability. They pushed for constitutional government in order to limit the

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[135] Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem,* 240.
[136] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 216-17; Hanioğlu, *A Brief History,* 103-4.

power of this select group and introduce participatory elements to the empire's governance.[137]

This was an unintended yet at the same time quintessential outcome of modernization: a class of

dissidents who had the capacity to engage with Western ideas in their own right, participating in

the exchange of these ideas through modern means of communication like the press, and

fervently articulating the "first identifiable political ideology of the modern Middle East."[138]

Abdülhamid's Rule: A Return to Power?

Shortly after his ascension to the Ottoman throne, Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909) put into

effect the *Kanun-i Esasi*, the first Ottoman constitution. Ostensibly a milestone, this was not the

political victory many of the Young Ottomans had hoped: The constitution made "the executive

branch far more powerful than its legislative counterpart" and granted the sultan the right to exile

individuals and disband the parliament. As a matter of fact, when he suspended the parliament in

1878, Abdülhamid was exercising an authority granted to him by the constitution, which he also

suspended.[139] Thus began an authoritarian chapter in Ottoman history. Abdülhamid was the only

one among the last Ottoman sultans to wield significant political power, and the center of power

once again shifted to the royal court under his sovereignty; the Sublime Porte became

subservient.[140] Abdülhamid heavily relied on censorship to silence opposition and have the press

serve his own agenda. Concurrently, he made use of new technologies such as the telegraph and

the railroad to further centralize the state and concentrate power at the imperial center more than

it ever had.[141] On one hand, he managed to create a state that was able to implement policies and

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[137] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 108-9; Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 217; Hanioğlu, *A Brief History,* 103-4.
[138] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 217; Hanioğlu, *A Brief History,* 103.
[139] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 86; Hanioğlu, *A Brief History,* 120.
[140] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History,* 123.
[141] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History,* 126; Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 122-23.

enforce rule over its vast territory, one of the foremost goals of the bureaucratic officials. On the other, he took away from much of the officialdom their privileged and powerful status.

His tight grip over the empire was not without cost, and Abdülhamid grew more paranoid over the period of his rule. He started leaving his hilltop residence of Yıldız Palace ever less often.[142] In this configuration, governing an entire empire from a palace, *Mabeyn*, the palace secretariat which handled communications with the outside world, became the most critical office in the Ottoman Empire. It witnessed tremendous growth in employment and the development of bureaucracy, much like the Sublime Porte of the previous decades.[143] Meanwhile, the sultan's trust—quite the scarce currency when it came to Abdülhamid—became an indispensable prerequisite for entry into high ranks. Abdülhamid valued loyalty above all and greatly rewarded those who deemed loyal to him: "What mattered most was not obedience to the law [as it would have been in the preceding Tanzimat Era] but obedience to a sovereign will superior to the law."[144] In this paranoid and secluded state, Abdülhamid oversaw an extensive spy network to find out about and spoil plots against him. He accumulated a copious number of *jurnals*, intelligence reports provided by his agents.[145]

The picture we have is of a powerful political sovereign with arms and eyes extending far beyond the palace out of which he dared not step. At the same time, he was very careful and particular about who got to be in his proximity. This resembles in some ways the image of the remote Ottoman sovereign, which we saw Peirce describe earlier in this chapter, occupying an exclusive realm, the imperial harem, that embodied sanctity and inaccessibility alike. Thus, intermediaries—those who got to relay messages, advise the sultan, and inform him on matters—

[142] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 229-31.
[143] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 230.
[144] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 229.
[145] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 127; Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 233-4.

became quite powerful again, and "the character of those close to the throne was of critical importance", as some of them ended up shaping the empire.[146] Can we consider this a return to patrimonialism or to Tezcan's Second Empire? This would be too simplistic of an explanation since political institutions of the Ottoman government did not revert back to their premodern form. A much more insightful description is what Findley calls the "servile bureaucracy:"[147] any other institution or actor was subservient to the sultan, but at the same time, the sultan's will had to pass through modern bureaucratic institutions to come into realization beyond the walls of the palace. The cat of modernity was already out of the bag. Abdülhamid's time was not a chapter of regression in the history of Ottoman administrative reform. It was a different way of realizing modern bureaucracy, and the government continued its course of reform after Abdülhamid's rule ended.[148]

Where did this dynamic place harem eunuchs in the political landscape? They still belonged to the ever-shrinking old order of enslaved servants brought up through the palace education system. They did not receive the professional training of the Ottoman officialdom, and they did not occupy offices that belonged to Ottoman civil-bureaucracy. On the other hand, they were spatially very close to the sultan and trusted by him—the sultan would never let somebody he did not trust in his most private chamber. Moreover, they possessed a unique mobility that allowed them to travel between the outside world and private corners of the palace at a time when the sultan was exceptionally immobile. The position of *musahib*, quite a nondescript title designating sultan's eunuch companions, rose in importance due to Abdülhamid's privileging of personal relationships. A hierarchy emerged among *musahibs*, and *baş musahib*, the chief

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[146] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 231.
[147] Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 236.
[148] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History,* 125; Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform,* 240.

companion, became the most powerful harem eunuch.[149] With the demise of the office of Chief

Black Eunuch in the 19th century, the impression is that harem eunuchs gradually faded into

oblivion and did not engage with political processes. This assertion needs to be challenged and

complicated. Harem eunuchs of the late Ottoman Empire did not have the political power of

earlier eunuchs with access to large networks and control over important financial resources, but

they acted as instrumental political operatives due to the particularities of Abdülhamid's reign,

transcending the bounds of apolitical private palace matters.

Nadir Ağa's autobiographical accounts contain illustrative examples of how harem

eunuchs, specifically *musahibs*, came to operate at the intersection of private life and politics.

Nadir Ağa was the third highest-ranking eunuch in Abdülhamid's harem, and he had a very close

relationship with the sultan.[150] One interesting story involved both him and Cevher Ağa,

Abdülhamid's *baş musahib*. Mahmud Pasha, a statesman married to Seniha Sultan, an Ottoman

princess, hoped to receive concessions for the Baghdad railroad. Making his request through

Cevher Ağa as the intermediary, he also passed on a map to further clarify his proposal.

Abdülhamid, believing that Mahmud Pasha would sell the concessions off to the British, was

outraged at the request and destroyed the map.[151] Right away, we can see that the

correspondences Cevher Ağa relayed or the matters he dealt with were not limited to palace

matters but included a broader range of administrative matters. Moving on with the story, as if to

confirm Abdülhamid's suspicions, Mahmud Pasha took his two sons and left for England the

following day. Offended by Abdülhamid's reaction, he left a letter for the sultan as he fled,

declaring he would make his sons, Ottoman royalty, servants to the British Queen. A few months

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[149] Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem,* 237.
[150] Ayşe Osmanoğlu, *Babam Sultan Abdülhamid* (Istanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2021), 93.
[151] Hasan Ferit Ertuğ, "Musahib-i Sani-i Hazret-i Şehr-Yari Nadir Ağa'Nın Hatıratı-II," *Toplumsal Tarih*, February 1998, pp. 6-14, 6.

after this event, the palace received a *jurnal* reporting Mahmud's wife Seniha Sultan was also about to make an escape. Abdülhamid shared this report with Nadir Ağa and sent him off to intercept Seniha Sultan along with an official from the palace secretariat. They managed to find her, and Nadir Ağa proved to be instrumental, as, unlike his partner in this mission, he was a eunuch and could talk to a royal Ottoman woman without causing offense. Seniha Sultan stayed home, and one of her sons came back a few months later.[152]

The political implications of statesmen and royal family members fleeing to another government and perhaps even defecting—though this might reflect an intention to cause worry rather than a serious change of allegiance—was very negative. In fact, Mahmud Pasha's son who stayed in England, Prince Sabahaddin, became a vocal critic of Abdülhamid and one of the leading voices of the Young Turk movement. It is in this light that we can see the efforts to prevent Seniha Sultan's flight as not just a family matter but also a political mission. Precisely in this kind of situation in which the political and private intersect could harem eunuchs be vital actors, as they were both uniquely in the position to communicate with members (specifically women) of the royal family without causing offense and were trusted by Abdülhamid.

Nadir Ağa also tells of one Ahmed Zülküf Pasha, another statesman who married into the Ottoman family, who, according Nadir, had the habit of causing discord. The pasha submitted a *jurnal*, accusing a harem eunuch, who had filed a request to be assigned to a position in a different location, of being an agent of Prince Abdülmecid (who would later become Abdülmecid II, the last Ottoman caliph). This claim was investigated, and the allegation turned out to be false.[153] However, the fact this allegation was taken seriously and investigated goes to show that eunuchs could credibly take part in intra-royal family political intrigue and that they

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[152] Ertuğ, "Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-II," 6.
[153] Ertuğ, "Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-II," 8.

were uniquely capable of it, as they interacted with numerous members of the royal family and traveled between palaces.

On a different occasion, the same Ahmed Zülküf Pasha submitted a *jurnal*, warning Abdülhamid of an assassination plot against him at a public event he was going to attend. To discuss the report, Abdülhamid summoned both Nadir Ağa and Tahsin Pasha, who was the *başkatib*, or chief secretary, of the palace secretariat.[154] The picture we have is very interesting: the sultan, the highest ranking official of the palace bureaucracy, and a harem eunuch trying to figure out how to respond to an alarming intelligence report about an assassination plot. *Musahibs* such as Nadir Ağa regularly provided, forwarded, and sometimes even discussed *jurnals*, taking part in processing how the Sultan perceived the world outside and how he acted in reaction to it. In the case of this intelligence report, Nadir Ağa sensibly questioned its accuracy, and the report ultimately turned out to be inaccurate.[155] It should be noted, however, that assassination attempts against Abdülhamid were a very real threat, with the radical Armenian political organization Dashnaktsitiun having organized one such failed attempt.[156]

Young Turks Rise, Old Eunuchs Fall

While harem eunuchs were enjoying a new era of relevance, with one tyrannical institution (palace) replacing another (Sublime Porte), a new generation of young and educated bureaucrats continued the oppositional movement with legitimate grievances and this time emerged with the name Young Turks. Many members of officialdom grew resentful of Abdülhamid's autocratic system of governance. Constitutionalists were bitter about

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[154] Ertuğ, "Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-II," 9.
[155] Ertuğ, "Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-II," 9.
[156] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 153; Ertuğ, "Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-II," 14.

Abdülhamid's suspension of the constitution. In spite of the tremendous control he exercised over his realm, Abdülhamid had failed to cultivate loyalty in the new generation of educated Ottomans.[157] Against this backdrop, four medical students founded an underground organization in 1889, which would later become the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). The organization expanded within the empire, but it was not long before the sultan's spy network detected it, and some members were prosecuted while ones who were able to flee to European countries.[158] As the opposition abroad continued, starting in the 1900s, the movement organized under the CUP diverged into two main branches. The aforementioned Prince Sabahaddin led a faction that embraced the ideology of liberalism. The other branch, which ultimately kept the name the CUP, had Turkist leanings.[159]

The Turkist CUP gained a large following within the empire, especially in the Balkans and among the military ranks. The Young Turks thus finally had an opportunity to rise to power and began militarily organizing in 1907. Just a year later, the CUP managed to organize "a well planned military insurrection, conceived and executed in Macedonia by a conspiratorial organization whose leadership harbored a quintessentially conservative aim: to seize control of the empire and save it from collapse."[160] The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 marked the start of a new period with the sultan reinstating the constitution, and it significantly altered power relations in the empire.

In the aftermath of the revolution, there were several groups with feelings of discontent or anxiety: Prince Sabahaddin and his liberal faction were angry that the CUP dominated the political arena. Military and bureaucratic officials favored by Abdülhamid now faced the risk of

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[157] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 135.
[158] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 136-7.
[159] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History,* 145-7.
[160] Hanioğlu, *A Brief History,* 147-9.

losing their standing. In addition, some conservatives among the religious order members and the *ulema* were intimidated by the new secularist vision that had come to power. This diverse mosaic of negative sentiments cultivated in a counterrevolution attempt in 1909, but the rebellion quickly took a conservative character.[161] The attempt posed a serious threat in the capital, and it could only be suppressed when military commander Şevket Pasha marched his army to the capital. The CUP held Abdülhamid accountable for the counterrevolution attempt, deposed and sent him to Salonica, and prosecuted many of the rebels. Now the military held sway in politics, and the CUP was free to implement their agenda as long as they did not cross the military.[162] This was a conclusive end not only to Abdülhamid's political prospects but also to the palace's place in Ottoman politics.

Prosecution of the alleged conspirators of the counterrevolution attempt is a contentious topic, as it was and still is difficult to confidently point to a specific group or cause that started the rebellion. However, examining who the CUP prosecuted at the time will also help us have a better idea about the political agency of individuals under Abdülhamid's rule. To accuse someone of organizing a mutiny was also admitting to their political capabilities. Interestingly, both Cevher Ağa and Nadir Ağa were implicated in the CUP's prosecutions, and multiple sources discussed their involvement yet arrived at opposite conclusions. War correspondent Francis McCullagh in his *The Fall of Abd-ul-Hamid* reports the events surrounding the counterrevolution attempt and essentially parrots the CUP's interpretation of the incident. His anti-Hamidian bias is very noticeable, evidenced by the fact that the book is prefaced by none other than Şevket Pasha who crushed the rebellion.[163] McCullagh alleges that, as a part of

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[161] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 149-52.
[162] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 151-4.
[163] Francis McCullagh, *The fall of Abd-ul-Hamid* (London: Methuen, 1910), ix.

Abdülhamid's plan to scrap the constitution and obtain power again, Nadir Ağa bribed the soldiers to encourage the counterrevolution attempt. He goes on further to assert that both Cevher and Nadir were among the founders of the Mohammedan League, a conservative organization that played a major role in the snowballing of the counterrevolution attempt.[164] As evidenced by the accusations, McCullagh and the CUP considered Cevher and Nadir skillful political operatives in Abdülhamid's vicinity who worked to realize his goals. For his alleged crimes, Cevher Ağa was hanged on the Galata bridge.[165] Nadir was detained for 33 days and witnessed numerous people get convicted of taking part in a mutiny and sentenced to capital punishment.[166] However, he managed to save himself from sharing Cevher's fate, as he could provide valuable information about the deposed sultan's belongings and the hidden corners of his mysterious residence of Yıldız Palace.[167] We again witness how eunuchs managed to leverage their unique position of proximity to the sultan.

Many other sources, however, reject Abdülhamid's involvement in the counterrevolution. Zürcher points to Prince Sabahaddin's faction and the religious opposition as the likely starters of the revolt.[168] Abdülhamid's daughter Ayşe Osmanoğlu argues for Cevher Ağa's innocence in her memoir, and offers an alternative explanation for his mistreatment: Cevher Ağa had a personal relationship with Şevket Pasha, and in order to eliminate any evidence of Şevket's connections with the sultan, Cevher "was eliminated along with the *jurnals*."[169] Nadir Ağa hints at a similar dynamic in his memoir. Listing all the times Abdülhamid's *jurnals* were relocated and accidentally damaged in fires, he speculates that some stakeholders of the Young Turk

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[164] McCullagh, *The fall of Abd-ul-Hamid*, 46, 53.
[165] McCullagh, *The fall of Abd-ul-Hamid*, 275.
[166] Münir Süleyman, "Abdülhamid'in En Yakın Adamı Nadir Ağa Eski Efendisi İçin Neler Söylüyor?," *Yedigün*, October 1934, pp. 19-21, 29, https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/22414, 21.
[167] McCullagh, *The fall of Abd-ul-Hamid*, 55.
[168] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 153.
[169] Osmanoğlu, *Babam Sultan Abdülhamid,* 93.

Revolution had connections and provided intelligence to Abdülhamid, and wanted to destroy the evidence.[170] While these interpretations are the opposite of McCullagh's, they allign with him on Cevher's political position. When Abdülhamid ruled the empire through intelligence and intermediaries, his highest-ranking companion, who was a harem eunuch, was much more than an aid on personal matters. He bore witness to the governance of the empire, including its secrets, and he himself took part in it by being an intermediary.

The Young Turks vehemently opposed slavery and especially despised the presence of eunuchs in the Sultan's court. When Mehmed Reşad ascended to the throne after Abdülhamid II, the CUP took away from his *baş musahib* Fahrettin Ağa the prestigious title *devletlü*, which qualified him as a statesman, and prevented Fahrettin Ağa from attending ceremonies when he wore his customary uniform.[171] After a limited revival of power during Abdülhamid II's 33-year-long reign, the political life of eunuchs had ended. The 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century witnessed a grand process of administrative and bureaucratic reform that moved the center of political power away from the Sultan's court and to the hands of a new educated and modern bureaucratic elite.

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[170] Ertuğ, "Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-I," 15.
[171] Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire*, 150.

Chapter 3: The New Nation & The Precarity of Freedom

        The collapse and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent founding of the Republic of Turkey marked a radical change in the lives of Ottoman harem eunuchs. While modernization had been a constant which well preceded the republic—starting in the 19th or even 18th century—and shaped the life story of the eunuchs as shown in previous chapters, the budding Turkish state started an entirely new chapter. With the royal family ousted and the connection to sacred lands lost, harem eunuchs had no place to serve their traditional function. Furthermore, the Ottoman Empire's end meant that sharia law no longer reigned supreme and the institution of slavery officially ended, making eunuchs freemen. The exciting gift of freedom, however, put them in a peculiar position. As full-fledged citizens, they were members of the new Turkish nation, but the nation-state as a social concept was still a project in the making, and where harem eunuchs fit in this project was uncertain. As the pillars of this nation—land, ethnicity, language, etc.—were gradually defined and imposed on the masses, harem eunuchs negotiated and tried to secure a place in modernizing Turkish society, despite the fact that their differences from the majority sometimes meant they did not fit the description of the standard Turkish citizen, as defined by the budding Turkish state. The story of the last generation of Ottoman Harem eunuchs differs starkly from the previous ones. In this chapter, I seek to answer what the transformative modernizing mission to create a secular Turkish nation-state meant for the lives and belonging of (now Turkish, at least by citizenship) eunuchs. To do so, I look at the founding of the modern republic, the defining characteristics of the ideology of Turkish nationalism, racial attitudes against Africans in Turkish society, and the traces of civic and professional lives of the last eunuchs.

Nationalism: Ideas, Underlying Conditions, Politics

      A discussion of nationalism will help us analyze the construction of the Turkish nation and how eunuchs related to this nation. A considerable literature on nationalism has emerged, and numerous different perspectives have been employed to try to explain the emergence and character of nationalism. Discussions of nationalism, naturally, are often concerned with the concept of nation. A nation is the primary social and political unit in the nationalist way of seeing the world. The concept seems self-evident at first but becomes much more nebulous under scrutiny. What elements define a nation and set its boundaries, both in terms of territory and membership? And are nations "natural" or "imagined"?

      In his book *Thought & Change*, Ernest Gellner grapples with the question of nationalism, trying to understand how it has persisted for centuries and the factors that gave rise to it in the first place. He argues that while there are markers of sameness and difference in the population upon which a nation bases itself, there is no inherent nationhood to a specific group of people: "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist — but it does need some pre-existing differentiating marks to work on."[172] Why do nations emerge then?

      Gellner argues one major reason is the disappearance of social niches in industrialized and industrializing lands. In contrast to earlier societies, people in modern societies are organized within structures which one is free to enter or leave, none of which serves to define his/her essence. A shared culture in communication becomes an important aspect of the interaction between these otherwise undifferentiated individuals, and culture serves to provide an identity.[173]

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[172] Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), 168, 150-51.
[173] Gellner, *Thought and Change*, 154-57.

This phenomenon is coupled with the development of mass education. Gellner asserts that only a political entity as big as a nation can implement and maintain a system of mass education. Literacy, acquired through formal schooling, becomes a prerequisite for the modern citizen. This kind of socialization creates a common language: This not only refers to the standard language in strict linguistic terms but also to a cultural language of shared norms and values.[174] Upon this foundation the myth of a nation can stand.

Benedict Anderson also emphasizes the importance of a common language when analyzing nationalism and putting it in a historical context. Anderson defines nation as an "imagined political community": This definition agrees with Gellner on the subjectivity of the concept when it comes to membership. A nation manifests not out of an intrinsic reality but in the minds of the masses who bring it into existence. However, Anderson chooses to focus on the imagination—as opposed to the "fabrication"—required for creating (i.e., collectively imagining) a nation.[175] Furthermore, a "community" implies that the masses imagine a "horizontal" society, which Anderson contrasts with the earlier, hierarchical ways people pictured their societies in which the elite class would stand above and separate from the rest.[176]

When looking at language, Anderson points to print capitalism in Europe as an enabling precursor of nationalism. A dramatic increase in books and other printed material meant that many people were reading the same thing, in the same language. Certain varieties of vernacular languages came to be the standard in print and became prestige languages.[177] Large numbers of people who knew nothing about one another would be talking about the same thing and using the

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[174] Gellner, *Thought and Change*, 159-60.
[175] Benedict R Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016), 6.
[176] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.
[177] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 40-46.

same language, paving the way for large populations to be able to imagine themselves as a connected community. Anderson gives the powerful example of a group of people singing a national anthem: "At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance." Language was an important part of many nationalist movements.[178]

Nation-states differed considerably from the empires that preceded them. As stated above, the ruling class in Ottoman society was separate from the rest of the society, and there was no expectation that rulers would have a shared identity with the masses. Indeed, both Gellner and Anderson mention that many societies had foreign rulers or rulers who did not belong to a single ethnic origin.[179] In nation-states, however, leaders came to share their language and their identity with the masses. Loyalty to the nation had not been a responsibility of which rulers had to be mindful before.[180] At the same time, these states witnessed a great expansion of bureaucracy and public expenditure as well as a growing middle class. Abolition of slavery, mass education, and introduction of suffrage became easily recognizable characteristics of modernity and nation-states. Furthermore, while the earlier imagination of the state depicted a political (usually dynastic) center with power diffusing from it, modern nation-states were defined by territories and borders. This drastic set of cultural and political changes became a framework for the project of modernizing within many societies. As Anderson puts it: "In effect, by the second decade of the nineteenth century, if not earlier, a 'model' of 'the' independent national state was available for pirating."[181] As we will see, the Turkish state also followed such a model very closely.

[178] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 67-68, 145.
[179] Gellner, *Thought and Change*, 152-53; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 20-21.
[180] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 85-86.
[181] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 75-76, 81.

John Breuilly's reading of nationalism is another enlightening perspective. Rather than focusing on the historical or cultural aspects of nationalism that help us dissect it as an idea, he examines nationalism as a form of politics. Treating nationalism as a form of politics enables us to see it as a way to wield and exert state power, specifically in opposition to another political power.[182] Through this political lens, Breuilly is able to categorize different nationalist movements based on two main criteria. The first is the political goal of the nationalist movement, which might be to break away from a state, such as anti-colonial movements, to reform a state in order to align its politics with nationalist principles, as in the case of Japan, or to unify smaller states into a larger nation-state, such as the case of German unification. The second criterion describes the political entity to which nationalist politics mobilize in opposition. This might be a nation-state (e.g., the Basque nationalist opposition to Spain) or a non-nation state (e.g., separatists nationalist movements in the Ottoman Empire). Turkish nationalism, which mounted a challenge against the relatively cosmopolitan dynastic Ottoman regime, is categorized by Breuilly as a (1) reform-oriented nationalist movement, (2) opposed to a non-nation state.[183]

Breuilly briefly examines Turkish nationalism, grouping it together with Japanese and Chinese nationalist politics. The common thread is that all three were reform-oriented and emerged outside Europe and therefore shared similar dynamics. The dynamic under question is that all three countries were subject to European economic and political pressure, and nationalist politics sought to modernize these countries, their institutions, and their populations as a means of fighting the threat of Western domination.[184] Such nationalism is deeply enmeshed with modernization and Westernization. Since the main motivating factor for such nationalisms was

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[182] John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 1, 9.
[183] Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 9.
[184] Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 230.

an external threat, the push for modernization started out with the more modest scope of military reform. But as one reform necessitated another and so on, it became a much larger project and a political force in its own right with nationalist characteristics.[185] In the case of Turkey, considering that modernization efforts of the military in the Ottoman Empire started out as early as the 18th century while Turkish nationalism became the dominant political ideology only after the collapse of the empire in the early 20th century, we can also observe the long timeline of the modernization process and its continuity between the late Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic.

Constructing the State

Before we look at the Turkish state's discursive construction of its complementary nation, we should follow the process of founding the state with which the nation is identified. After a long period of economic and military hardships, the Ottoman Empire effectively collapsed following its defeat in WWI. In the aftermath of the war, European powers occupied many parts of the empire, including majority-ethnic Turk areas. The Ottoman government based in Istanbul signed the *Treaty of Sevres* in 1920 as a peace agreement with the Allied Powers and granted them the authority to maintain spheres of influence over large portions of Anatolia. In Anatolia, largely abandoned by the government, military, religious, and other leaders in local communities established authority, and people formed local militias to defend against foreign occupation. The Ottoman government sent famed military commander Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to Anatolia with the task of bringing these groups under control. Once there, he resigned from his position and joined the movement fighting against occupying powers.[186] Atatürk's arrival in

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[185] Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 230.
[186] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 199-202.

Anatolia in 1919 is considered the start of "the Independence War", the national struggle against the Allied Powers to form an independent Turkish nation, in the Turkish telling of this history.

Once in Anatolia, along with other prominent participants of the resistance movement, Atatürk signed the *National Pact*, a document which pronounced the Turkishness of Anatolia, Istanbul, and its surrounding lands and emphasized their indivisibility. Later, Atatürk arrived in Ankara and founded the Grand National Assembly in 1920, the precursor to the modern Turkish Parliament. This parliament voted on a constitution and exerted its authority over the local resistance formations throughout Anatolia.[187] We can observe the nationalist character of this movement taking shape even before the republic was founded. Territorial claims were made on the basis of nationality, and Ankara, a modest urban center located in central Anatolia that contrasted significantly with imperial and cosmopolitan Istanbul, became the political center of a national struggle that challenged the old regime as well as the Allied Powers. The Grand National Assembly concretely manifested the idea of national sovereignty as an alternative to the rule of a royal family.

The Ankara-based nationalist movement fought against the Allied Powers and competing Armenian and Kurdish claims over the territory. After they successfully crushed a series of rebellions and obtained military victories, the *Treaty of Lausanne* was signed in 1923, which abrogated the earlier *Treaty of Sevres* from 1920.[188] The fact that the Allied Powers negotiated and signed the treaty with the new Turkish government signaled that the nationalist movement had conclusively become the new sovereign of the territory. Now, the military chapter of the nation-building project was to make way for a more political and cultural transformation. This process closely reflects the "idea of the nation as a project, a unity to be fashioned out of the

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[187] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 202-3.
[188] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 203-4.

fight for independence and in the new era of freedom," as Breuilly puts it.[189] While he uses this expression for nationalist independence movements in the colonial world, the nationalist modernization project of Turkey also reflects this sentiment.

The Grand National Assembly enacted a number of sweeping political changes in succession. The Assembly abolished the sultanate in 1922, and Ottoman Sultan Mehmed VI and some other members of the royal family, sensing they were under threat, left the country.[190] The royal family had been the largest employer of eunuchs, so this was also a significant turning point for them. Later, the Assembly founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923. With the sultanate coming to an end and the formal declaration of the republic, the rest of the imperial government in Istanbul (the cabinet as well as the parliament) had practically no authority. The nation had become the sovereign of the country. The third and final significant step was the abolition of the Caliphate and the exile of the royal family in 1924.[191] While Mehmed VI had left the country, Abdülmecid II had been declared the Caliph. Until then, the Ottoman sultan had also held the title of Caliph, and Abdülmecid II was the first Ottoman Caliph who was not a sultan. Zürcher states that Abdülmecid II was the only person who could have counterbalanced the political power Atatürk held in the country and that many people, especially in Istanbul, still felt an affinity to the royal family.[192] This move therefore cemented Atatürk's power and the republic's nationalist-modernist vision. Moreover, abolition of the Caliphate as well as the expulsion of the Ottoman family mark a significant turn from the vision of the Ottoman Empire as a multicultural realm with many groups and the Ottoman Caliph as the leader of a worldwide Muslim community to the Turkish nation as the social unit that constituted an imagined community.

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[189] Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 7.
[190] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 239.
[191] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 204.
[192] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 249.

Zürcher mentions two Indian Muslims sending open letters to the caliph just months prior to the title's abolition, which serves to highlight the international reach of this institution.[193]

Another dimension of the Caliphate's abolition was, of course, the secularization process. Zürcher states that the secularization process, when it came to disempowering old religious centers of power (e.g., the jurist class) and establishing secular institutions, had started a century prior and was finalized in 1928 when Islam ceased being the state religion. However, the modernization process imagined by Atatürk and other reformers entailed going further and eliminating many religious symbols and sometimes even practices from day-to-day life. This wasn't the separation of church and state; the state had significant control over the boundaries of religion as a part of public life.[194] Measures included changing the calendar and work week, banning religious attire in public except for certain professions, and shutting down traditional religious schools to make daily life more secular. Sufi orders were banned in 1925, preventing the formation of alternative networks and hierarchies based on religion.[195] Secularism was a major part of the nationalist modernizing mission, and nationalist leaders sought to replace religion with nation as a marker of identity and belonging.[196]

Some of these changes also highlight the authoritarian nature of the new government. Breuilly describes this kind of "transformation coming through by taking control of the state and then pushing through a national revolution from above" as a tendency among reform-oriented nationalisms.[197] Until after WWII, Turkey had a single-party regime. The politics of the party were also the state ideology. Many symbols of democracy were adopted: the Grand National

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[193] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 249.
[194] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 206-7; Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 276-77.
[195] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 206-7; Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 276-68, 283-84.
[196] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 206; Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 269, 276-78.
[197] Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, 230.

Assembly, as stated before, was a symbol for national sovereignty. Suffrage, one of the hallmarks of the nation-state model, was extended to women as well.[198] However, there is no reason to believe voting mattered much, as the agenda was already set. As Betty Anderson puts it: "The Kemalist project was directed by dictates from the top; citizens were merely implementers."[199] Atatürk eliminated his political opponents such as the Caliph or rivals who also rose within the nationalist independence struggle. He shut down two different attempts at opposition parties.[200] With a very tight grip on power and religion, Atatürk had the authority to shape the nation in the way he desired.

Many of these changes happened in the academic realm. *Darülfünun* was reformed into Istanbul University in 1933—putting a majority of the academics out of their jobs along the way. There was a push to modernize villages around the country by opening schools. The adoption of the Latin alphabet not only signaled the new Western-facing outlook of the nation but was also coupled with mass literacy efforts.[201] All of these changes highlight the pivotal role of education, literacy, and language in the construction of a nation. Circling back to Gellner, this was the process that enabled the masses to share a common language and coalesce around a nation. But most significantly, *the Association for the Study of Turkish History (Türk Tarihi Tetkik Cemiyeti)* and *the Association for the Study of Turkish Language (Türk Dili Tetkik Cemiyeti)* were founded in 1931 and 1932, respectively. These institutions played a vital role in the construction of the Turkish nation on a discursive level.

Constructing the Nation

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[198] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 262-63.
[199] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 211.
[200] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 258-60, 265-66.
[201] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 208-9. Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 286, 279.

After the Armenian Genocide and mass displacement as well as a population exchange between Greece and Turkey, 98% of the Anatolian population were Muslims. The only linguistic communities of significant size were Turkish and Kurdish speakers.[202] At the time of the declaration of the Turkish Republic, the country's population consisted mostly of Turks. But on what was the definition of a 'Turk' based? What were the markers of sameness or difference that helped cut out a subpopulation of people inhabiting the region and describe them as an indivisible political entity—or rather, community? We can start deconstructing Turkish nationalist discourse in the early republic by taking a quick look at the markers of difference in Ottoman society. Baki Tezcan's examination of Early Modern society with respect to identities offers us many useful insights and frameworks. Firstly, Ottoman society was a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-racial, imperial society with many minorities. The situation of these minorities depended significantly on their serving particular niches that were useful to Ottoman society. As long as minority groups managed to serve an economic function or useful social role, their existence was beneficial to the society at large.[203] While Tezcan's article says very little about Black Ottomans, it is easy to imagine harem eunuchs in this framework: they were a clear minority even in Ottoman society which was considerably more diverse than the modern Turkish citizenry, but they fulfilled a very particular role, one for which they were uniquely fit, and that guaranteed them a place in society. In the Turkish Republic, with the Sultanate abolished and the royal family exiled, such a role did not exist, and an important question is how eunuchs tried to compensate for the loss of this social niche.

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[202] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 244.

[203] Baki Tezcan, "Ethnicity, Race, Religion and Social Class: Ottoman Markers of Difference," in *The Ottoman World*, ed. Christine Woodhead (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 159-170, 160.

Another important insight is that the main dividing class in Ottoman society was between the ruling class and the elites on the one side and the rest of the population on the other side. Ottomans were well aware of the existence of different communities: Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Muslims, etc., but as long as they occupied similar functions in society and provided taxes to the central state, their differences did not matter much in the eyes of the ruling class.[204] Muslims were not considered to be closer to the ruling class. As a matter of fact, there were aristocrats of non-Muslim origin, and most of the people who entered the ruling class through upward mobility came from a Christian background due to the *devşirme* system that had recruited non-Muslim children, converted them, and raised them to be slave-soldiers and slave-administrators.[205] Therefore, the most salient dividing line in the society was drawn between the two classes. This is the polar opposite to the nation state which Anderson describes as "horizontal"—the rulers and the subjects are of the same community.

Change came about with the upward mobility of the Muslim community in later centuries. Many more individuals from Muslim backgrounds entered the high-ranks of Ottoman society, and the *devşirme* system waned over time, cutting off that channel of elite membership for non-Muslim Ottomans. As Tezcan puts it, "the common Ottoman Muslim felt that he belonged to a political nation in which class differences were mediated by the collective identity that tied him or her to the ruling class."[206] This is considerably closer to the modern nationalist interpretation, but it would be inaccurate to call this nationalism. There was no sense of a collective and shared interests of the nation that consisted of the ruling class and Muslims. Furthermore, the shared identity was not the secular Turkish identity we observe in Atatürk's

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[204] Tezcan, "Ethnicity, Race, Religion and Social Class", 160-61.
[205] Tezcan, "Ethnicity, Race, Religion and Social Class", 166.
[206] Tezcan, "Ethnicity, Race, Religion and Social Class", 167.

project of nationalist modernization. It was a wider designation that reflected the multiple ethnic communities that practice Islam in the Empire.

Separate ethnic identities further solidified in the 19th century, as European powers started overpowering the Ottoman Empire and had more direct and frequent interactions with the Christian community. Tezcan uses the framework of "convenience" to make sense of this process. Prior to Western economic and military supremacy, it was more convenient for minority groups to identify with the Ottoman Sultan and feel pride in their service to the Sultanate. The multiplicity of identities inherent to any human being allowed this despite the differences in religion or ethnicity. This was not a cynical calculation but a genuine sense of belonging. Later on, for many groups, emphasizing their distinct non-Muslim identities and leveraging these to benefit from the support of outside European powers proved to be more convenient, and these differences became more conspicuous. This development also reinforced Muslims' identification of themselves as a separate group.[207] This framework of convenience will surely be useful for looking at changing identifications in Republican Turkey as well, as there were tremendous changes in political power and identity discourse between the years preceding the republic's founding and WWII.

Given the picture of the late Ottoman Empire with separate Christian groups and Muslims, how did we end up with a nation defined by Turkishness? As discussed previously, education played a crucial role in the construction of the nation. It supplied the masses with a common language and understanding of history—or even of shared origin. It provided the discursive foundation upon which the nation could imagine itself into existence. Through education, a new generation of Turks could be sculpted with secular identities and lifestyles, a

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[207] Tezcan, "Ethnicity, Race, Religion and Social Class", 162-63, 168.

Western outlook, and a modernist affinity for progress—made into citizens. Looking further into

nationalist education in schools and the academic doctrines that informed it will help us point to

specific pre-existing attributes that were emphasized and coalesced into the concept of the

Turkish nation.

E. F. Keyman and Tuba Kancı provide an important perspective on this issue in their

article examining school textbooks and curricula between the 1920s and the 2000s. I will focus

on the portion that precedes WWII. A major theme that emerges from their inquiry is

"ambiguity:" membership to the nation and citizenship was defined with an emphasis on ethnic

or civic elements at different points. In the first decade of the republic, claims of nationhood

were based on territory. The concept of "homeland" was a major theme, and the key to becoming

an exemplary citizen was through serving the homeland—the state which embodied the

nation.[208] The focus on territory makes membership and belonging to the nation easier for many

minority groups, including eunuchs, as it is not based on ethnicity. A clear example of this is the

government granting all inhabitants within the territory of the Republic of Turkey citizenship

regardless of their ethnic and religious identity. This policy did not translate to a complete

enjoyment of citizenship in practice but offered a territorial basis for citizenship that benefitted

ethnic and religious minorities.[209] The connection between territory and nation also hearkens

back to the *National Pact* from the days of the national struggle which argued for the ownership

of territory on the basis of nationality. Only in this case, the logic is reversed, and nationality is

claimed on the basis of territory. This circular logic reveals the lack of an objective and

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[208] E. F. Keyman and Tuba Kancı, "A Tale of Ambiguity: Citizenship, Nationalism and Democracy in Turkey," *Nations and Nationalism* 17, no. 2 (November 2011): pp. 318-36, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2010.00462.x, 322.
[209] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 211.

immutable marker of nationhood and supports Gellner's and Anderson's ideas that nations have to be invented.

As the education system and nationalist discourse defined membership in terms of territory and service to the state that ruled over said territory, the concept of indebtedness emerged as a justification for the love and sense of duty one should feel for his/her homeland. The cause of this debt was the great sacrifices of many martyrs throughout the hard-fought struggle to ensure the nation's independence. As a result, the citizens also needed to work hard to fulfill their duties to the homeland (paying taxes, military service, etc.) and likewise make sacrifices when necessary.[210] Keyman and Kancı argue that this reasoning was an attempt to "define republican morality" in the absence of a religious moral code that governed public life in the new secular state.[211] Once again, people could embrace and practice morality and pay their debt to the homeland irrespective of their religious or ethnic background.

However, in less than a decade, by 1930, ethnic constructions of nationhood—sometimes even ideas and anxieties about racial purity—entered textbooks. One example Keyman and Kancı share is a textbook that interprets the mothers of foreign origin to be a corrupting force in the Ottoman dynastic lineage.[212] We have already seen that royal families across countries very often have more connections between them than to the populations they rule over. We have also seen the Ottoman ruling class was very diverse with regards to ethnic origin for a significant portion of its history. Treating these rather unsurprising historical facts as something unusual occurs precisely in a nationalist context, as the population is perceived to be homogenous, at

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[210] Keyman and Kancı, "A Tale of Ambiguity," 322-23.
[211] Keyman and Kancı, "A Tale of Ambiguity," 323.
[212] Keyman and Kancı, "A Tale of Ambiguity," 323.

least in some key defining aspects, and the rulers over the population are likewise believed to share this identity with the society at large.

A much more overt attempt to define the Turkish nation on ethnic terms was the Turkish History Thesis (*Türk Tarih Tezi*), which was the result of an effort to come up with a "scientifically sound thesis that explained the roots of Turkish history" and became the official state interpretation when it was adopted by the aforementioned Association for the Study of Turkish History.[213] According to this thesis, Turks were an Aryan people who originally inhabited Central Asia. They later migrated to different parts of the world and created many civilizations. According to this interpretation, ancient Anatolian civilizations like the Hittites and Troians as well as ancient Mesopotamian Sumerian were Turks. This rewriting of history enabled the new nation to circumnavigate the Islamic Ottoman heritage while also constructing a shared past that inspired pride.[214] It also made an ethnic and historical ownership claim to Anatolia. The land under the authority of the Republic of Turkey had been a Turkish homeland all along. Most importantly, it asserted that the Turkish nation shared a common ethnic origin.[215] It should be noted that this scientific attempt at a definition also echoes the scientific racist discourse prominent throughout the Western world in the 1920s and 30s. Turkish citizens of African origin clearly fell outside of this definition.

The complementary linguistic theory to the Turkish History Thesis was the Sun Language Theory adopted by the Association for the Study of Turkish Language. This theory, originally put forward by Hermann Kvergic, alleged that all languages had a common origin and that Turkish most closely resembled this language.[216] This theory certainly attributed some

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[213] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 208; Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 282.
[214] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 282-83.
[215] Keyman and Kancı, "A Tale of Ambiguity," 324-25.
[216] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 281.

primacy to the Turkish language. At the same time, the association tried to "purify" the standard language by substituting Arabic and Persian loanwords with words from the vernacular and other Turkic languages. This effort was not entirely successful, but thanks to the Sun Language Theory, the remaining loanwords could be explained away by considering them different variants of Turkish.[217] Language had become another component of national identity with efforts to isolate it from the Islamic heritage and provide a sentiment of pride and exceptionalism through the Sun Language Theory. Betty Anderson frames these academic efforts in history and language which ended up as a significant part of people's education very successfully: "In place of the Ottoman identity that applauded cosmopolitanism and a centuries-long religious tolerance, Kemal substituted a new Turkish identity that harked back to the pre-Ottoman era of Turkic migration and celebrated the distinctiveness of the Turkish language, culture, and history."[218]

There were even attempts to describe the Turkish nation in terms of biological race, as Nazan Maksudyan's analysis of the *Turkish Review of Anthropology* from 1925 to 1939 shows. The *Turkish Review of Anthropology* was not just a simple publication. It was closely involved with groups and offices overseeing the nation-building project. Throughout the time period Maksudyan examined, the Turkish minister of education was mentioned as an honorary president on every issue of the *Review*. The journal and its writers were associated with *Darülfünun*—a premier institution of higher education, and when the institution was reformed and became Istanbul University in 1933, most authors of the *Review* received promotions unlike a significant majority of scholars (157 out of 240) who lost their jobs. Moreover, many among them held

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[217] Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye,* 281-82.
[218] Anderson, *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 206

administrative positions or were involved in politics.[219] Clearly, the *Review* "represented and projected the viewpoint of a section of the Kemalist ruling elite of the time."[220]

The anthropological methodology which the writers of the *Review* employed relied heavily on body and skull measurements. It reflected a general trend in the West that tried to use measurements and numbers to base the concept of race on a positivistic approach and provide a scientific ground for racist ideas.[221] Part of the Turkish scientific elite that published the *Review* embraced this trend and used it to nationalist ends. The authors of the journal argued that there was a Turkish race which was hereditarily distinct from the minority groups in the country. The Turkish race was "pure," meaning it had not mixed with the other groups—Greeks, Armenians, Jews, and the measurements showed, "proved," that Turks constituted a superior race. Clearly, these are not racial categories but historical communities in the region. The authors combined old markers of difference with new methods in a modernist attempt at asserting a strong Turkish identity.[222]

Maksudyan does not mention any articles in the *Review* that talk about Africans. Basing Turkishness on the concept of race excluded Africans on hereditary grounds anyways. However, considering the larger central place of scientific racism in anthropology at the time, there is no possibility that the writers of the *Review* had positive things to say about harem eunuchs or other Turkish citizens of African descent. Şevket Aziz Kansu, one of the anthropologists that wrote for the journal, had conducted "work on the morphology of the skulls of Neo-Caledonians and African Negroes" in France.[223] One article from 1939 talks negatively about dark complexion, as

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[219] Nazan Maksudyan, "The Turkish Review of Anthropology and the Racist Face of Turkish Nationalism," *Cultural Dynamics* 17, no. 3 (2005): pp. 291-322, https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374005061992, 297-99, 316.
[220] Maksudyan, "The Turkish Review of Anthropology," 297-98.
[221] Maksudyan, "The Turkish Review of Anthropology," 295-96.
[222] Maksudyan, "The Turkish Review of Anthropology," 299-303.
[223] Maksudyan, "The Turkish Review of Anthropology," 295.

the study found that dark-skinned individuals in the group of children they inspected for the study were less likely to have the craniometric characteristics associated with the Turkish race.[224] A lighter skin color, then, was a sign of Turkishness, and dark complexion was a sign of inferiority since the Turkish race showed superior morphological characteristics.

The last decades of the Ottoman Empire as well as the early years of the Turkish Republic witnessed a great deal of ethnic conflict, forced migration, and even genocide within the (formerly) Ottoman realm. Furthermore, even though borders of nation-states were drawn in the Balkans and the Middle East, populations were distributed in a much more heterogeneous way. This resulted in a great deal of movement of groups, and the process of granting and revoking citizenship became an important question in Turkey. Not surprisingly, this was also closely related to the question of who was or got to be a Turk. Soner Çağaptay's work examining this issue supports but also complicates our understanding of the Turkish nation so far.

Firstly, Çağaptay discusses how legal citizenship did not translate to equal legal rights for ethnic minorities. In the early years of the republic, ethnic minorities were barred from setting up organizations to represent their groups. In some specific cases, the government did not recognize their diplomas from foreign institutions due to their ethnicity. Meanwhile, ethnic Turks enjoyed unfair advantages like preferential hiring in government employment positions.[225] Such ethnicity-based disparities also existed in the naturalization and denaturalization processes governed by rules passed in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

In 1927, the parliament passed a law to revoke the citizenship of subjects who had been Ottoman citizens but had left the country in the tumultuous years of WWI and the independence

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[224] Maksudyan, "The Turkish Review of Anthropology," 304.
[225] Soner Çağaptay, "Citizenship Policies in Interwar Turkey," *Nations and Nationalism* 9, no. 4 (2003): pp. 601-619, https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8219.00129, 603-4.

struggle in its aftermath and had not yet returned. This law most negatively affected non-Turks, such as Arabs, Jews, and Greeks. It was most detrimental, however, to the Armenian community, as many Armenians had left the country during the time of the Armenian Genocide.[226] This law permanently eliminated their chance to come back. The ethnic conflicts over sovereignty and land ownership throughout the years leading up to the founding of the republic, coupled with this legislation, served to make the new nation-state much more ethnically homogenous. Another law passed the following year gave the government the authority to revoke the citizenship of individuals who had served or become subject to other governments. This vague and very general definition paved the way for the denaturalization of many non-Muslim minorities. Even when Muslims were denaturalized under the same law, they were mostly non-ethnic Turks, such as Kurds and Circassians.[227] Citizenship, as a reflection of membership to the nation, was much more precarious for ethnic minorities.

The opposite process, naturalization of non-citizens, was also deeply entangled with questions of identity and nationality. Interestingly, a considerable number of Jews and sometimes Christians who came mostly from Central Europe and the Balkans were granted citizenship, but as evidenced by their name changes, many of these people converted to Islam. Similarly, a significant number of non-Turk Muslims from these regions also sought and received citizenship in Turkey. This shows that a Muslim identity was an important part of national membership. Indeed, Çağaptay declares, "at least superficially, Islam was a *sine qua non* for Turkish citizenship in the minds of the Kemalists" and describes this phenomenon as "nationality-through-religion."[228]

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[226] Çağaptay, "Citizenship Policies in Interwar Turkey," 605-6.
[227] Çağaptay, "Citizenship Policies in Interwar Turkey," 606-7.
[228] Çağaptay, "Citizenship Policies in Interwar Turkey," 609-14.

On the surface level, this connection between Islam and nationality seems to contradict the staunchly secular character of Turkish nationalism Atatürk and other Turkish leaders envisioned. However, Islam as a basis of national membership is not the same thing as the secularist effort to eliminate religion from public life. Laura Adams's *The Spectacular State*, which examines nation building in Uzbekistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union, offers a point of comparison. Adams finds that, very much like the Turkish Republic, the Uzbek government strives to create a secular and modern national identity. Whenever Islam emerges as a part of this identification, it is there to reinforce and promote Uzbek identity rather than make Uzbek citizens into more devout Muslims.[229] This example shows us that the Turkish case is not an exception and religious identification can matter even in the context of secular nationalism.

Also, Islam is a much more inclusive and porous identity than ethnic Turkishness, and it served as a gateway into assimilating to the majority population. In the case of converts, conversion signified a break from their previous identity and ethnic membership and showed a willingness to assimilate. Tezcan's work informs us that this kind of movement between communal boundaries (but strictly in one direction, non-Muslim to Muslim) had also been possible in the Ottoman times.[230]

This more complex picture of Turkish citizenship also shows the limits of or the exceptions to ethnicism and racism in nationalist discourse. But how could so many different markers of Turkish identity operate concurrently? Maksudyan notices this "heterogenous" aspect of nationalist discourse and attributes it to the "lack of coherence and consistency in early republican nationalist ideology."[231] Keyman and Kancı's emphasis on "ambiguity" when talking

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[229] Laura L. Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 61-62.
[230] Tezcan, "Ethnicity, Race, Religion and Social Class", 164.
[231] Maksudyan, "The Turkish Review of Anthropology," 303.

about nationalist discourse in the education system likewise reflects this heterogeneity. Some parts of Turkish national identity (ethnic, racial) directly excluded harem eunuchs while they could leverage the others (civic, religious, linguistic) to seek membership.

<u>Blackness and Afro-Turks in Turkish Society</u>

It is difficult to discuss understandings of Blackness in Turkey and general attitudes towards Afro-Turks due to the fact that scholarship on these issues is very limited. Toledano's and Erdem's works on the Ottoman slave trade have provided an essential foundation and have increasingly been complemented by newer works. Furthermore, there has been a surge of interest over the history of Afro-Turks both by members of the community and outsiders alike.[232] However, there are still limited resources regarding racial attitudes in the early republican era. Here, I try to get a better impression of these attitudes by looking at education (or lack thereof) on the question, Turkish folklore, and the perspective of popular history.

Esma Durugönül's article asks about the reasons for this invisibility of Afro-Turks. The main culprits she identifies are Turkish historiography and the education system, the early years of which we examined in this chapter. Studies and education in history were and still are primarily concerned with building and imposing a specific image of the nation, which means that certain aspects of history, Turkish citizens of African origin for example, are ignored.[233] Another important point she makes is that Turkish citizens of African origin have been considered Turks due to their Sunni-Muslim identity, so they have not been visibly recorded in historical documents that specify demographics.[234] This paints a rather paradoxical picture in which

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[232] Kayagil, "Vocabularies of (In)Visibilities," 46-47.
[233] Esma Durugönül, "The Invisibility of Turks of African Origin and the Construction of Turkish Cultural Identity," *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 3 (January 2003): pp. 281-294, https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934702238632, 282.
[234] Durugönül, "The Invisibility of Turks of African Origin," 289.

Africans are accepted as a part of the nation without any protests but become invisible and absent from the imagination by this very process. Indeed, as pointed out by Ayşegül Kayagil, Africans appear in numerous popular idioms or rhymes—mostly with the word *Arap* (lit. Arab)— that usually have negative connotations, but their existence within society is not consciously acknowledged by others.[235]

Arap, as evidenced by the older generation of Afro-Turks' tendency to use it to refer to themselves,[236] is the old-fashioned way to refer to a Black person in the Turkish language. It was probably the most common word to denote a Black person in the early republican times. It is peculiar because the word also refers to another group of people, Arabs, of which only a portion is Black. *Arap* might have ended up referring to Black people because Africans arrived in the Ottoman heartland through places largely inhabited by Arabs—Hejaz, Yemen, North Africa. Another explanation might be that Turkish speakers associated Arabness with darkness and came to call Black people *Arap* because of their dark skin. The second explanation seems more likely, as Akpınar argues the term, in the way that Afro-Turks use it, is a category of complexion rather than a category of identity.[237] Both the word *Arap* and the dark skin color had associations of dirtiness, as if the dark skin needed to be cleaned and become light.[238]

Pertev Boratav's article on Black character tropes in Turkish shadow-plays and folk tales offers another regard to Blackness in Turkish society. Folklore gives us a way to understand a shared attitude that is also passed down through history, offering us a better glimpse of the early republican perspective. There are positive depictions of Black characters, mainly "the role of

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[235] Kayagil, "Vocabularies of (In)Visibilities," 56-57.
[236] Akpınar, "Afro-Türkler," 82.
[237] Akpınar, "Afro-Türkler," 83.
[238] Akpınar, "Afro-Türkler," 74-75; Kayagil, "Vocabularies of (In)Visibilities," 56.

Hızır, a saint who does good and helps the distressed,"[239] but most depictions are negative. One motif that emerges is the ugliness of Black characters. Princes test the commitment of their beloveds by presenting themselves as having black skin, and yet in other stories princesses are burdened with marrying a Black (and therefore ugly) man, who turns white in a happy ending.[240] These stories not only depict Africans as ugly and inferior but also consider them less worthy of marriage with other (White) Turks. Another story depicts them as cannibals,[241] evoking savagery.

An article from a popular history magazine by Günver Güneş offers us a snapshot of the African community in Izmir, this time from the late 19th century and early 20th century, as well as a more recent view on the community. Izmir, due to its place in the Mediterranean slave trade and the Ottoman government's decision to house emancipated slaves there, has historically had a significant African community.[242] We learn that Africans lived in Muslim neighborhoods and were mostly concentrated in poorer ones. Even the ones who had better opportunities and served in wealthier households struggled after emancipation.[243]

The article also discusses traditional religious practices and celebrations of the African community. Religious leaders of the communities, *godyas*, who were mostly women, performed religious and communal duties and looked after orphaned children in the community. This is interesting in that it directly parallels Toledano's account of similar community leaders, *kolbaşıs*, in Istanbul, in the earlier part of the 19th century, showing the continuity in the practices of the

[239] Pertev N. Boratav, "The Negro in Turkish Folklore," trans. W. Eberhard, *The Journal of American Folklore* 64, no. 251 (1951): pp. 83-88, https://doi.org/10.2307/536103, 83.
[240] Boratav, "The Negro in Turkish Folklore," 84-85.
[241] Boratav, "The Negro in Turkish Folklore," 85.
[242] Kayagil, "Vocabularies of (In)Visibilities," 52.
[243] Günver Güneş, "İzmir'de Zenciler Ve Zenci Folkloru," *Toplumsal Tarih*, February 1990, pp. 4-10, 5-6.

African community from the Ottoman times into the Republican era.[244] Also mentioned in the article is the Calf Festival (*Dana Bayramı*), an annual religious celebration that involved sacrificing a calf as well as music and events. The celebration reportedly spanned multiple weeks, and the Afro-Turk community believed the sacrifice would bring abundance. One interesting thing about the description of the Calf Festival is that Güneş is adamant in emphasizing its non-Islamic African origin in spite of the fact that the African community was Muslim.[245] Even though there are also religious practices of pre- or extra-Islamic origin embraced by the majority of Turkish population, such as the belief in the Evil Eye, such practices are most often not described in this manner. When a minority group has distinct practices, the reflex is to describe them as different and foreign.

It is important to point out that while Izmir had a considerable African community, eunuchs, most of whom were located in the former imperial capital of Istanbul, spent most of their lives in the Ottoman palace and most likely did not have access to such communities after the demise of the empire.[246] Still, the African community in Izmir and their Calf Festival captured the imagination of the larger population and contributed to the perception of Black Turkish citizens. Calf Festival had disappeared in the middle of the 20th century. Akpınar's ethnographic work shows that the 1925 law which banned Sufi orders also outlawed the celebration of Calf Festival. Much like the religious activities Sufis engaged in, the leaders of the nation-state did not consider this "foreign" celebration to be within the bounds of acceptable

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[244] Güneş, "İzmir'de Zenciler Ve Zenci Folkloru," 6; Toledano, "Shifting Patterns," 904, 907; Akpınar, "Afro-Türkler," 79.
[245] Güneş, "İzmir'de Zenciler Ve Zenci Folkloru," 7-9.
[246] Boratav, "The Negro in Turkish Folklore," 87.

religious practice informed by ideas of secularism, nationalism, and modernism.[247] Calf Festival was revived in the 2000s and is celebrated by the Afro-Turk community today.[248]

<u>Free Lives of Eunuchs</u>

"[F]reedom was another obscurity that he had to handle,"[249] says Özdemir when talking about Nadir Ağa's freedom, and this statement rings true for all harem eunuchs who witnessed the birth of the republic. With slavery officially abolished and the royal family exiled, harem eunuchs had to make a life for themselves. Leaving the palace for good, they were now directly a part of the larger Turkish society. In some respects, they were outsiders: they came from a foreign land, were ethnically and racially different from the Turks, and their life histories were intricately tied to the old Ottoman regime from which the new nation aggressively tried to distance itself. But they also had many commonalities and used their personal agency to craft their belonging to the new nation and the homeland.

A very enlightening piece that highlights these changes is an article from the newspaper *Cumhuriyet* from 1939. The article documents the annual meeting of Eunuchs' Mutual Assistance Society which served to bring together former palace eunuchs and provide aid when needed.[250] This is important evidence of the civic engagement of the eunuchs. In the article, one of the eunuchs declares to the reporter, "we feel great pride in being eternal captives to the heroic Turkish nation that brought us our freedom!"[251] This statement showcases the great ability of the eunuchs to adapt to the changing discourse of the republic. The eunuchs express gratitude to the

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[247] Akpınar, "Afro-Türkler," 80, 83.
[248] Kayagil, "Vocabularies of (In)Visibilities," 55.
[249] Özdemir, "African Slaves," 88.
[250] Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem,* 245.
[251] Salahaddin Güngör, "Eski Haremağalarının Dünkü Yıllık Kongresinde," *Cumhuriyet*, January 9, 1939, p. 7.

modern nation-state that abandoned the practice of slavery, granting them freedom. Yet, the eunuchs are still captives, but this time to the nation, not the royal family! This obviously does not express real captivity. Rather, the object of allegiance and servitude has changed from a royal family to the nation, marking a complete nationalist transition. Eunuchs are indebted to the nation, as it symbolizes the political will that ended the sultanate and founded the republic, ending their literal captivity. Yet, they are also indebted to the nation just like everyone else, as all members of the nation owe their loyalty to it due to the sacrifices of the previous generation. This declaration also showcases the framework of convenience that Tezcan uses. While service to the palace promises material comfort and a social niche, eunuchs pledge their loyalty to the sultanate. When the sultanate no longer exists and the dominant political and social force is nationalist politics, the eunuchs become grateful to the nation. Eunuchs' lives involved abduction into slavery and later total abolition of the single institution for which they had been recruited to work, so a force much more coercive than convenience is at work here, but the underlying mechanism of identity-by-convenience works the same.

Tahsin Nejat Bey emerges as one of the main characters of the article. A former harem eunuch, he is a Turkish Literature teacher at Erenköy Girls High School located on the Asian side of Istanbul. The reporter is enamored by how deeply Tahsin Nejat Bey cares about his students and declares Tahsin Nejat "a dry branch of Africa grafted unto the trunk of Turkey."[252] The first word that sticks out here is "dry." A dry branch does not only refer to Tahsin Nejat Bey's separation from his family and homeland at a very young age. It also euphemistically recalls his castration. Even when a eunuch manages to set an example of an ideal citizen, one in service to the nation, his difference is emphasized.

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[252] Güngör, "Eski Haremağalarının Dünkü Yıllık Kongresinde."

Fig. 2: Former Harem Eunuchs at the annual Eunuchs' Mutual Assistance Society meeting. Sitting at the center are Nadir Ağa to the left and Tahsin Nejat Bey to the right. (Istanbul, Erenköy Kız Lisesi Müzesi, 1939. Courtesy of Sibel Aksoy.)

However, moving along with the metaphor, we see his differences do not hinder his belonging. The metaphor of the grafted tree implies that Tahsin Nejat Bey can join the nation even if he is from somewhere else. Moreover, through grafting, the dry branch once more becomes fruit-bearing. Tahsin Nejat Bey could not have his own children, but he raised numerous girls that would grow up to be modern Turkish citizens. He in many ways exemplifies a success story of integration and national membership. The few pictures from his time at the high school show him surrounded by female students and teachers, as well as a few male faculty—gender segregation at the strict level of the imperial harem probably would not have sat well with the secularist sensibilities of the new national outlook. Still, after his tenure at the

harem, he moved on to another gender-segregated space and found a new niche for himself under the changing conditions of the society. In spite of his differences from the republic's description of who a Turk is, he leveraged his mastery of the language to secure a place for himself and take part in the very institution—education—that implemented the project of the modern nation-state. Tahsin Nejat Bey was a poet and wrote the lyrics to the first school song of Erenköy Girls High School. He took part in the First Turkish Language Convention, where the important decisions were made regarding the Turkish language as one of the defining characteristics of the nation— the Sun Language Theory was adopted two years later at this convention.[253] Tahsin Nejat Bey typifies the agency of the eunuchs who occupied different places and endured many hardships throughout their life. And in the free years of his life, he took part in building the nation of which had become a member.

Fig. 3: Students and Teachers at Erenköy Girls High School. Tahsin Nejat Bey is the first person on the right on the back row. (Istanbul, Erenköy Kız Lisesi Müzesi. Courtesy of Sibel Aksoy)

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[253] Sibel Aksoy, interview by the author, December 11, 2021.

Nadir Ağa also had an exciting life after his time at the palace. Since his personal accounts are incomplete, it is not possible to learn much about his later life from them, but an article from the magazine *Yedigün* from October 1934 penned by Münir Süleyman gives us a small glimpse. We learn that he owned land on the Anatolian side of Istanbul and started farming there. He later ran a general store as well.[254] Apparently both of these entrepreneurial endeavors eventually failed, but they serve to exemplify Nadir Ağa's initiative-taking and personal efforts to find new economic activities after he could no longer practice his original profession.

Another brief look at Nadir Ağa comes from Nazım Hikmet (1902-1963), a prominent Turkish poet, in his book-length epic poem *Human Landscapes from My Country*, which he wrote for the most part in the early 1940s while serving a prison sentence[255]:

> Afternoons like this,
> the Göztepe station is deserted
> except for a black Eunuch of the Harem
>   sitting by himself
>   always on the same bench.
> He's very tall,
> very thin.
> One of the last.
> The oldest.
> Concrete villas.
> The 3:45 train goes screaming past[256]

Özdemir argues that the image of Nadir Ağa sitting by himself near Göztepe Train Station showcases his loneliness and is a testament to the difficulties he faced even under freedom.[257] I disagree with the interpretation of loneliness. The introduction to Nadir Ağa's personal accounts, which describe the process that went into its creation and preparation for publication, reveal a

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[254] Süleyman, "Abdülhamid'in En Yakın Adamı Nadir Ağa Eski Efendisi İçin Neler Söylüyor?," 21.

[255] Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Nâzım Hikmet: The Life and Times of Turkey's World Poet* (New York, NY: Persea Books, 2013), 131.

[256] Hikmet Nâzım, *Human Landscapes from My Country: An Epic Novel in Verse*, trans. Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk Blasing (New York, NY: Persea Books, 2009), 17.

[257] Özdemir, "African Slaves," 87.

network of relations with him at the center: Abdülhak, a professor who purchases Nadir Ağa's house, requests that his experiences are recorded. Fehmi, head of the local board, writes down the accounts as Nadir Ağa dictates. Hasan Ferit, who spent his childhood in the same house with Nadir Ağa, prepares the document for print.[258] It seems that Nadir Ağa had enough people who sincerely cared about him.

Similar to the web of people who personally know Nadir Ağa, Hikmet's epic poem places him squarely in connection to others. As the name suggests, Hikmet's work features numerous people from different walks of life, collected together in one book. The poem's translator Mutlu Konuk Blasing describes the work as a "social panorama," as "the individual portraits were intended both to stand as isolate units and to work as parts of a whole, as separate 'lines' of a 'poem.'"[259] Hikmet's collapsing of people across time and space into a "contemporaneous community" encapsulated in a literary work strongly resembles the conceptual process of nationalist imagination.[260] From this standpoint, Nadir Ağa is part of a mosaic of people that come together to constitute Hikmet's country—Turkey—and its nation.

It should be noted that Nazım Hikmet's perspective does not represent the standard nationalist perspective of his time. He was a staunch communist who spent more than a decade of his life in prison, and, after his release, the rest of it in exile. His imprisonment took place in 1938 under the rule of the single-party regime outlined in this chapter, highlighting the irreconcilability of his political views with the state ideology. Yet his views on his homeland and its people reflect an affinity shared by the masses much more than a radical ideology. In addition to personalities like Nadir Ağa, *Human Landscapes from My Country* depicts scenes from "the

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[258] Ertuğ, "Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-I," 15.
[259] Blasing, *Nâzım Hikmet*, 131-32.
[260] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 26, 145.

Independence War," showcasing people's bravery and sacrifices in a patriotic tone and taking part in the nation's act of imagining itself into existence. He even makes use of Atatürk's accounts.[261] Moreover, the central concept of landscape in his epic poem, which places "his characters in the social and natural landscapes they both shape and are shaped by," establishes a deep relationship between the people and their land similar to the understanding of the national ownership of land. However, the translation "landscape" does not do the original Turkish word justice. The Turkish word *manzara* comes from the Arabic root *n-ẓ-r,* which means to look or consider, and *manzara* in Turkish has a strong visual connotation, describing a landscape to be looked at. Hikmet not only brings together this catalog of people through his writing but also pictures them, putting the image back in "imagined community."

The final stage of the lives of the last harem eunuchs resembled neither their childhood back in their original home nor their tenure in the Ottoman palace. They were free again, but freedom meant they were in charge of their own life, and the new nation-state caused a lot of precarity in the lives of the eunuchs. A nationalist struggle led by Atatürk successfully had warded off European powers and secured a homeland for Turks. In this homeland, the modernization process that had started during the Ottoman Empire continued in full force, and the objectives of reform, secularization, and nation-building became inseparable. The removal of the old system and the founding of new institutions carried the aim of inculcating a new national consciousness, but this required articulating what the Turkish nation was. In spite of the top-down process, there was not a consistent basis of Turkishness, and different identities (racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and civic) all played a part. Harem eunuchs certainly did not cleanly

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[261] Blasing, *Nâzım Hikmet*, 133-34.

fit the description of a typical Turkish person, and the society they inhabited held mostly negative views on Blackness. Nevertheless, they leveraged convenient and useful aspects of their identity to assert their membership and forge a belonging with the imagined community. Looking at Tahsin Nejat Bey and Nadir Ağa's lives after the palace, we see two powerful examples of integration and perseverance.

Conclusion

Fig. 4: Nadir Ağa's headstone at İçerenköy Cemetery, January 2022 (Photograph by the author)

Fig. 5: Nadir Ağa's grave at İçerenköy Cemetery, January 2022 (Photograph by the author)

As my research progressed, the characters I explored—Nadir Ağa, Tahsin Nejat Bey—stopped solely being part of some past that took shape only in my imagination. They were people physically embedded in the former imperial capital of Istanbul, in which I lived. Nadir Ağa's neighborhood Göztepe and Erenköy where Tahsin Nejat Bey worked are both places very close to my home on Istanbul's Anatolian side. Each time the train I was riding on passed through Göztepe Station, it was the specter of Nadir Ağa, sitting on the same bench, watching me instead of me going through the images, writings, and the impressions he left behind. Living very close to them, I wanted to get a hold of the material traces of their lives. Nadir Ağa's house seems to have fallen into disrepair and been demolished, and I could not locate Tahsin Nejat Bey's house.

But thanks to an inquisitive Twitter user, I found out that Nadir Ağa lay at İçerenköy Cemetery, only 30 minutes away from my house by foot. I went to pay him a visit.

Nadir Ağa's grave is one of the very few material things that he left behind. İçerenköy Cemetery is on the Anatolian side of Istanbul sandwiched between a public hospital, a busy main road, and a conglomeration of apartment housing and offices, in very typical Istanbul fashion. His grave differs significantly from the graves of the countless previous generations of eunuchs. It is not located in the vicinity of a sultan's palace or the mosque and tomb of the veneered companion of the Prophet Ayyub al-Ansari, as was typical of many harem eunuchs. Nor is it located in Cairo or Madina, as he did not leave Istanbul after his tenure at the sultan's harem.[262] His grave resembles the graves of civilians surrounding him much more than it resembles the graves of previous eunuchs.

Looking closer at Nadir Ağa's gravestone, we come across more visual markers of the modern time in which he lived. The text engraved on the gravestone is in the Latin script, which replaced the Arabic script that had been used for centuries to write Turkish. The only exception is the Arabic inscription *Hüve'l Baki* ("He is the Eternal One"), which hints at the Islamic Ottoman heritage while also appearing in many modern Turkish tombstones.[263] He has a surname—a privilege only enjoyed by eunuchs who lived through the year 1934 when the Surname Law was instituted. This surname he shares with his wife Kevser, who lies alongside him. While his date of birth is a mystery, his date of death is clearly marked as November 14, 1957. He must have been at least 75 years old when he passed away. The only thing that gives away a clue of Nadir Ağa's identity as a eunuch is the presentation of him by the gravestone as

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[262] Hathaway, *Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Harem*, 264-273.
[263] Edhem Eldem, *Death in Istanbul: Death and Its Rituals in Ottoman Islamic Culture* (Istanbul: Ottoman bank archives and research centre, 2005), 234.

"one of the *musahibs* of Sultan Abdülhamid II." While a single word—*musahib*—might give away a lot of details to those who are knowledgeable about the history of the Ottoman harem, the word has no associations of harem or castration to the average Turkish speaker. In its location, construction, and presentation, the grave of Nadir Ağa resembles the grave of a regular Turkish citizen. It does not do justice to his exceptional and tremendously interesting life, but it situates him squarely within Turkish society. In his eternal resting place, he is finally one among many.

In this thesis, I have presented the important changes in the lives of Ottoman harem eunuchs that came about along with the reforms aimed at modernizing the empire. Throughout the course of the empire, eunuchs existed as servants to their royal masters, guardians who stood between different spaces of varying exclusivity, and important mediators with close proximity to the sultan. As the late modern period radically transformed and ultimately repealed these deep-rooted relationships, harem eunuchs found themselves in the middle of a new nation that defined (and in doing so constructed) itself in new terms. In this new age of freedom, they worked to establish lives for themselves by constructing new relationships with the surrounding world and embedded themselves in the emerging nation. Throughout this process, they were active agents rather than mere witnesses of history.

I have engaged with and sought to contribute to different branches of scholarship in Ottoman/Turkish history. I have built on the rich and interesting scholarship of Ottoman harem eunuchs by studying a previously underemphasized time period and offered perspectives on how to characterize it. With its focus on a later time period, my thesis also relied heavily on the scholarship on Ottoman modernization and tried to enrich it by offering a eunuch perspective on modernity through the eyes of eunuchs. Finally, I hope to have added to the small but proud field

of Afro-Turk studies by describing harem eunuchs as a part of this community, unified by their common experience of slavery and racial difference to the majority-White Turkish Republic.

This work also made use of an interesting array of primary sources. Principal among them were Nadir Ağa's accounts of his life, as well as both Nadir and Tahsin Nejat's life stories, told by them and reported by journalists. These invaluable sources helped us get a glimpse of how eunuchs felt about their experiences, others around them, and their connection to their surroundings. Their perspective served to complement the top-down perspective which other sources reproduce all too often. I supplemented these with other newspaper and magazine articles, which helped me to understand how their contemporaries regarded eunuchs. These historical perspectives, rich secondary literature, and critically useful primary sources helped me paint a picture of belonging, remembering eunuchs and embracing them once more as a part of modern Turkish society.

Further Research

This academic work, in spite of its rather limited focus, is not comprehensive. I chose specific aspects of modernization based on the availability of primary sources, scope of secondary scholarship, and the chronological structure of the thesis. However, there could have easily been another chapter which focused entirely on sex and gender. Castration was the single most distinguishing characteristic of eunuch-slaves, and castration was practiced precisely because of the unique condition it produced with regards to sex and gender. What was the understanding of gender in Ottoman society, and how were eunuchs perceived in terms of gender? Were they men, possibly women, or neither? How did changing cultural and scientific perceptions in Ottoman society, largely adopted from the West, affect attitudes about eunuchs?

How did the concepts like masculinity or the family relate to the construction of a Turkish national identity, and were these obstacles to the national membership of eunuchs? Junne mentions several medical works on eunuchs from the time period, which could be used to answer some of the questions I have posed.

I mention the professions and economic activities of some of the eunuchs, but future research could compare the wealth of harem eunuchs in the later Ottoman to earlier periods in order to derive inferences about eunuch power and influence. It is possible to ask more about the financial situation of later eunuchs, especially in the Turkish Republic, where there was not a specific profession cut out for them. Records like land registries can be used to provide new evidence on the economic situation of later eunuchs. Did they own land or houses? Did they live in poorer or better-off neighborhoods? We have a good idea about Nadir Ağa when it comes to these questions, but learning about other harem eunuchs would complete the picture.

In addition, as the field of Afro-Turkish studies develops and new theoretical frameworks emerge from it, the sources and topics I have used should be revisited. There is still much more to uncover about Afro-Turkish history and more to say about Blackness in Turkish society. What are the particularities of the Afro-Turk experience, and how were these reflected in the lives of harem eunuchs? Were there any connections, sense of common history or solidarity, or collaborative civic engagement between harem eunuchs and other Afro-Turks? How did scientistic perspectives on race that emerged during the modern period influence perceptions of harem eunuchs or even materially affect their lives? These questions wait to be answered.

Ottoman harem eunuchs in the late Ottoman Empire and early Turkish Republic provide a fresh perspective on the eunuch condition and highlight several facets of the incredibly

complex phenomenon of modernity that necessitated its study. In every life stage of this generation of eunuchs—abduction into slavery, palace service, leaving the harem and starting a free life—we were able to see the transformative effects of modernization efforts in the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. These changes made obsolete the previous sets of relationships that had defined eunuchs for centuries, but eunuchs sought new relations in place of the old and crafted a new belonging.

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