Book Review


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*A History of the Ottoman Empire* presents a social history of the Ottoman Empire in the world. It is arranged in chronological order in line with the Islamic calendar. Howard divides the book into seven chapters, which are seven major periods in the history of the Ottoman Empire. These chapters include; The Ottoman Genesis (1300-1397), A Blessed Dynasty (1397-1494), A World View (1494-1591), Ambiguities and Certainties (1591-1688), The Global and the Local (1688-1785), Collaborations and Breakdowns (1785-1882), and Dissolution (1882-1924).

The Ottoman Empire is the child of the leadership of Osman Bey. Osman was a chief of a Turkish tribe that had carved out a territory for itself in the Asia Minor at the end of the Mongol invasions of Asia and the Middle East. Although there are few records that include Osman Bey, the fact of the matter is that the Ottomans accepted the history and story of Osman as the founder of the empire approximately in the year 1299. From this point forward begins the rise of the Ottoman Empire.

In “The Ottoman Genesis, 1300-1397”, Howard describes the social aspect of the rise of the Ottoman Empire. He mentions some of the battles engaged in by the early Ottoman rulers but he does not focus on these, instead he focuses on the outcome and effect each had on the growing empire. In this first chapter, he covers the sultanate of Osman, Orhan, Murad I, and the early years of Bayezid I. One interesting piece of information at the end of this chapter is Howard’s description of the first interfaith dialogue organized by Orhan between himself and Gregory Palamas.

The second chapter, “A Blessed Dynasty, 1397-1494”, covers the reigns of Bayezid I, Mehmed I, Murad II, Mehmed II “The Conqueror,” and the initial time of Bayezid II’s rule during the ninth Islamic century, which corresponds with the period from 1397 to 1494 CE. This chapter covers some of the early social projects that began in the Ottoman Empire including the construction of mosques and medreses and lodging for the merchants. It also discusses vakif or charities, which built and ran the medreses. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Mehmed II’s capture of Constantinople and its subsequent rebuilding and reorganization.

In chapter three, “A World View, 1494-1591”, Howard discusses the Ottoman Empire under the rule of Bayezid II, Selim I, Suleyman I, Selim II, and Murad III in the tenth Islamic Century, which corresponded to the period in the Western calendar as referenced in the chapter title. In this chapter, we see the world events that came to help shape the Ottoman Empire including the rise of European colonization in the
Americas, the threat of the Habsburg Empire as well as the policy of the Ottomans to the different groups in their territories.

The fourth chapter, “Ambiguities and Certainties, 1591-1688”, covers the sultanates of Murad III, Mehmed III, Ahmed I, Mustafa I, Osman II, Murad IV, Ibrahim, and Mehmed IV in the eleventh Islamic century, which had been a time of continuous change and for some dissolution. Still the Ottoman Empire had survived as Howard states, “its boy emperors.” (175).

In the fifth chapter “The Global and The Local, 1688-1785”, Howard analyzes the Ottoman economic policies both at home and abroad in the twelfth Islamic century, during the reigns of Suleyman II, Ahmed II, Mustafa II, Ahmed III, Mahmud I, Osman III, Mustafa III, and Abdulhamid I. Perhaps the most interesting narrative in this period is that the Ottoman Empire turned to having lifetime leases on tax farms, which were tax collection rights granted to the highest bidders in the massive lands of the empire. These fiscal reforms later had a negative effect on the empire, but at that time they brought much needed revenue for the empire. Ottoman commerce prospered as pilgrims went through Ottoman lands for the hajj to Mecca and Medina and other holy lands. This period ends at the end of the Ottoman-Russian War of 1768-1774, which ended with the Ottoman defeat.

The sixth chapter, “Collaborations and Breakdowns, 1785-1882” corresponds to the thirteenth Islamic century and covers the reigns of Selim III, Mustafa IV, Mahmud II, Abdulmecid I, Abdulaziz, Murad V, and Abdulhamid II. The chapter brings us the issues of the Ottoman Empire before its dissolution. It brings to light the fall and disintegration of the Janissary corps and the military reforms in the Ottoman army during the period of Tanzimat or the Tanzimat-i Hayriye, “Blessed Reforms”. These reforms proved costly to the Ottoman treasury and we see the financial fall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of this period.

Howard ends his book with “Dissolution, 1882-1924”, which covers the sultanate of Abdulhamid II, Mehmed V, and Mehmed VI. This chapter covers the political, social, and geographical disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. By the beginning of the 1920s, the sultanate fell and the dynamics of politics changed dramatically. European powers partitioned the Ottoman land among themselves in the stillborn Treaty of Sevres signaling the end of empire.

Overall, the book is well written and surprisingly easy to understand even by those who do not have a depth of knowledge of the Ottoman Empire. It brings a fresh look on the lasting legacy of the empire. The book could serve as a great textbook for professors teaching courses in the social history of the Ottoman Empire.