

Childhood in the Late Ottoman Empire and After

The Ottoman Empire and its Heritage

POLITICS, SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

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Edited by

Benjamin C. Fortna



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The Open Access publication of this book was made possible by the generous support of the British Academy.

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ISSN 1380-6076

ISBN 978-90-04-29312-0 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-30580-9 (e-book)

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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Preface: Childhood in the Late Ottoman Empire and After

Benjamin C. Fortna

In recent years the history of childhood has expanded dramatically in scope and sophistication, but its geographical coverage has remained heavily skewed towards the West. This volume breaks new ground by focusing on the ways in which childhood was imagined and experienced on the eastern fringes of Western Europe. The contributions that follow show that in the Balkans, Anatolia and the Arab lands of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the influence of Western ideas about childhood was important but unevenly absorbed, and always mediated through indigenous institutions, individuals, traditions and desires. As the Ottoman Empire gave way to the nationally defined states that supplanted imperial rule, children assumed novel roles and childhood took on new significance and expectations in response to the rapidly changing realities of this turbulent time.

The studies in this volume address childhood in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ottoman and post-Ottoman world. The changing approach to childhood in this period of rapid transformation reflects a confluence of major shifts in societies that were increasingly minded to differentiate it from childhood as it was experienced before the nineteenth century. The Ottoman lands were buffeted by a number of developments both internal and external that fundamentally reshaped certain—but far from all—aspects of society. Far from being protected from these trends, children and, indeed, the very conception of childhood assumed a novel prominence that was increasingly linked to the major questions of the modern period.

In order to appreciate the many changes affecting childhood in the late Ottoman and immediate post-Ottoman eras it is necessary to understand some of the ways in which children and childhood were traditionally experienced and understood before the changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries began to alter the picture so dramatically, a subject which we will address shortly. But it is the changes that have usually attracted the most attention. They have been depicted as the products of a top-down process in which the modernizing state set the tenor for the period, effecting a series of transformations that, taken together, went a long way towards altering society as a whole.

Starting with the crucial decision to reorganize the Empire's military, the late Ottoman state soon found itself engaged in—and assuming responsibility for—areas in which it had traditionally involved itself either minimally or

not at all. The business of creating Western-style standing armies based on drill, uniformity and technical training in turn demanded a cascading series of changes in the way the state operated and engaged with its subjects, now increasingly viewed as proto-citizens with new roles to play as the social contract shifted. The alarmingly expensive requirements of the modernizing military meant first and foremost that the state had to find new sources of revenue, pushing it towards a more intensive relationship with its population. The men and institutions that had so long served as the intermediaries between Istanbul and the provincial population were swept aside. In their place came teams of salaried and uniformed inspectors, tax collectors and governors who filled the rapidly proliferating buildings that most concretely symbolized the central government's newly expanded presence across the Empire's sprawling territories.

The state's new stance swelled the ranks of the bureaucracy. From this point on one of the biggest concerns of the high-ranking bureaucrats was to fill the tens of thousands of government positions that burgeoning process had created. The objective of training capable and loyal officials played a huge role in shaping the creation and articulation of the new state educational system. Traditionally, the Empire had left schooling to the religious establishments, only involving itself in training the relatively small numbers of palace scribes and some military technical vocations. Over the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries this situation changed dramatically. New schools popped up across the Empire as the state attempted to flesh out the ambitious state educational plans envisioned during the period of Tanzimat reforms. From this point on late Ottoman and post-Ottoman childhoods would increasingly be dominated by that quintessentially modernizing, novel institution: the state school. It played a vital role in shaping the discourse of childhood, establishing the terms of the relationship between the government on one side and parents and children on the other, and insinuating itself into a central role in the arbitration of the moral, cultural and social development of the Empire's youth.

Before the arrival of the state school and the rising expectation that children should attend it, formal education had been a minority phenomenon. The majority could generally not afford either to pay for tuition or to sacrifice the labor that sending a child to school entailed. Indeed, before the nineteenth century, the matter of raising and educating children remained far from the attentions of the state.¹ The upbringing of children was largely a private, family

1 Yahya Araz, *16. Yüzyıldan 19. Yüzyıl Başlarına Osmanlı Toplumunda Çocuk Olmak* (Istanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2013), 100.

affair; to the extent that it followed organized precepts, these were inherently religious. Families tended to be very large and the distinction between a defined period of “childhood” and adulthood tended to be blurred. Local traditions and superstitions also played their role in such matters as when would-be parents should try to conceive their children and when they should first encounter education, a time commemorated by the Muslim population by the ‘*amin alay*’ ceremony, a procession held for the child’s first trip to school. This institution, the local, religious school, known as the ‘*mekteb*’, was for centuries the chief locus of learning outside of the home. Often denigrated for its ‘backwardness’ and vilified for the violence that could be meted out by the almighty ‘*hoca*’ who held sway there, these schools were nevertheless sometimes also often remembered fondly after they were largely replaced by the more standardized and secularized state institutions.²

In the pre-modern period most children grew up untouched by the experience of schooling. A certain freedom of the street existed alongside the watchful eyes of the neighbourhood.³ Children learned through playing a number of ‘traditional’ games that absorbed the attentions of children in their free time. But not all children were accustomed to such leisure. Here we come to a major difference between the expectations of the two eras, through work. Child labour was the norm. Because children were not, in the absence of widespread schooling, physically separated from the adult population for long hours, their interactions were naturally far less regimented than would come to be the case in the modern era. As a result, their existence was frequently depicted as relatively carefree, but the lack of regulation and the mixing of generations left them vulnerable to what would today be considered exploitation and even abuse, both economic and sexual.

The changes that would affect children so dramatically were not solely the result of state-led modernization. Important shifts in society were at the heart of the new approach to childhood that would emerge in the modern era. Over the course of the nineteenth century, while important continuities remained,⁴ a raft of changes took hold in Ottoman society. Most visible in the major cities, Istanbul most of all, these shifts nevertheless were not limited only to the capital.

2 On the trope of violence in the old schools, see Benjamin C. Fortna, *Learning to Read in the Late Ottoman Empire and the Early Turkish Republic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

On the often hereditary position of the *hoca* in general, see Araz, 16. *Yüzyıldan*, 118 ff.

3 Bekir Onur, *Türkiye’de Çocukluğun Tarihi: Çocukluğun Sosyo-Kültürel Tarihine Giriş* (Ankara: İmge, 2005), 147.

4 Suraiya Faroqhi, *Subjects of the Sultan: Culture and Daily Life in the Ottoman Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 269–270.

They included an increasingly egalitarian approach to gender relations, the spread of companionate marriage, changes in fertility rates (in part due to later female marriage age), a greater focus on children and increasing prominence of Western manners and dress. These shifts, some highly visible and others more hidden but no less influential, began to make late Ottoman urban family life increasingly distinct from its regional counterparts and closer to European practice.⁵ As a result there were “significant changes in the attitudes of many people in Istanbul towards children from the mid to late nineteenth century, and particularly in the early twentieth century.”⁶ Children were increasingly taken seriously as children, defined as a distinct segment of the population. Society was becoming more child-oriented now with men taking more of an interest in the upbringing of their children,⁷ a trend that began in the late Ottoman period and continued with added vigor in the post-Ottoman nation states. And, as we have seen, the state was also increasingly minded to lavish attention on its youngest subjects, increasingly viewing them as proto-citizens whom it hoped to mold into loyal and productive servants.

As in other parts of the world during this period, children of the region became increasingly visible members of society, recognized and validated both by the state and society at large. Leading the way was the rapidly expanding network of state schools designed to teach them lessons in an array of subjects that were almost universally accepted as necessary for survival in the modern world. At the same time these institutions attempted to go beyond their purely academic tasks and to shape their young charges by inculcating the moral, cultural and social agenda of the state. Meanwhile the private sector increasingly took notice of children as a new category of consumer. Publishers in particular adapted rapidly to the existence of a new market by producing an array of offerings intended for younger readers. Sometimes the messages imparted by such private actors reinforced those of the state but at other times the pull of the market worked at cross-purposes to the state’s agenda. Through the consumption of the new media and its messages and through the effects of globalization, children were increasingly exposed to a wider world than that of previous generations.

The new attention placed on the children of the late Ottoman Empire and its successor states offered them unprecedented opportunities while simultaneously placing new expectations on their slender shoulders. Because these

5 Alan Duben and Cem Behar, *Istanbul Households: Marriage, Family and Fertility, 1880–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 10.

6 *Ibid.*, 226.

7 *Ibid.*, 235.

changes took place during, and constituted an important part of, this period of rapid transformation, the effects on childhood were especially intense. The chapters presented in this volume demonstrate that during this period of transition from the 1880s to the 1930s childhood bore far more than the usual pressure of expectations placed on the young. From the ways in which childhood was reconceived to children's day-to-day experience during periods of occasionally acute national and societal stress, to the various ways in which childhood was subsequently remembered across altered political and cultural boundaries, these studies reflect the particular pressures and concerns of a period in which radical change was becoming almost normalized. The volume is organized around these three main themes: (1) the changing conceptions of what childhood ought to be and how it was experienced, (2) how childhood intersected with changing notions of conflict, gender and the nation, and (3) how childhood was variously remembered in autobiographical works published in later eras. Throughout the volume comparison with Western, regional and other modes of childhood informs the selected case studies, each of which has important implications for the history of the Ottoman Empire, its successor states and the global history of childhood.

One of the most interesting aspects to emerge from this project has been the commonality of experience despite the geographical and cultural differences encompassed between, say, Serbia and Egypt. Given that all of the contributors ostensibly engage with aspects of the same topic, the variety of sources used, the approaches deployed and the arguments produced were remarkable and stimulated considerable interest in pursuing comparative approaches. Particular areas of research convergence included: the changing conceptions of childhood over time, the role of wars or other crises in affecting the lives of children and the complicated but crucial relationship between autobiography and the history of childhood.

The book has its origins in a workshop, sponsored by the British Academy and the British Institute at Ankara, intended to explore the possibilities for the history of childhood in a non-Western context. Of great interest to the presenters was the participation of Laurence Brockliss, a distinguished historian of European childhood. He has kindly written the Introduction that sets the stage for the chapters that follow. His overview of the development of Western ideas of childhood and the field of the history of childhood that has evolved in their wake provides a crucial comparative perspective. As his horizon-tour of a contribution indicates, Western ideas and policies concerning childhood were far from monolithic. Notions of child development, morality, the role of the family, physical punishment and the proper role to be played by the state were disparate, debated and rapidly evolving. The impact that these ideas had as

they were variously adopted and adapted in the Ottoman and the former Ottoman lands is therefore, as these chapters demonstrate, 'partial, fine and complex.' The large degree of commonality between the experience of childhood in the West and the Ottoman and post-Ottoman region suggests that instead of merely looking for the effects of a one-way pattern of borrowing we might more profitably examine the shared dynamics of childhood through a truly comparative approach.

The first section of the book addresses the ways in which conceptions of childhood were changing in response to rapid modernization and increasing state involvement in the lives of its young citizens. Nazan Çiçek addresses the critical connection between the nation's claim to modernity and its conceptualization and treatment of children. Her chapter carries on the conversation opened by Professor Brockliss by placing the early Turkish Republican discourse on childhood in the context of scholarly analysis of the nature and definition of childhood. Because the Turkish experience is in many respects the iconic example of the transition from Ottoman Empire to nation-state, not least in its keenness to disparage the old regime, Çiçek's analysis provides a particularly useful opening for the discussions that follow. Crucial here are the ways in which the Republican elites conceived of childhood and its close relationship with the state. It is interesting to note that even within this relatively narrow ideological band of thought, remarkably varied ideas about what constitutes and informs childhood can be discerned. Also poignant is the tension between romantic ideas of childhood adopted from Western Europe and a much more pragmatic approach that saw children as inherently linked with the future success of the state.

Kathryn Libal's contribution follows nicely by juxtaposing the issue of child poverty with the state's ideological stance against recognizing class distinctions. Populism was, after all, one of the key tenets of the Kemalist 'revolution,' but one that was challenged by evidence of glaring inequality, most poignantly demonstrated by the suffering of children alongside the persistence of elitist notions of class hierarchy and proper comportment. Libal's research shines a revealing light on the often abrupt contrast between the ideal child depicted in the discourse of state ideology and the practical problems facing children in the young Republic; problems such as hunger and poverty, which were particularly acute in the wake of over a decade of warfare and displacement. Her discussion of the emergence of a discourse on children's rights highlights the important but at the time politically sensitive question of the boundary between the state and the non-state. Organizations such as the Child Protection Society and the Turkish Red Crescent Society reveal the alignment but also the tensions that could open up between the state's agenda and competing initiatives,

tensions heightened by the often heavily emotive language and the imagery of suffering children. Interestingly, the extent to which debates about child welfare were shot through with references to analogous problems and solutions in other countries underscores the importance of the comparative approach to this topic, a theme recurring throughout the volume.

Heidi Morrison's chapter provides an excellent example of the usefulness of a regional comparison. Egypt's trajectory from Ottoman province to independence was mediated in important ways by its experience under British rule. This sets it apart from the other regions covered in this book in some respects but also highlights the extent to which both the reality and the discourse of childhood shared crucial features across geographical boundaries and despite distinct differences of historical contingency. Morrison shows that in Egypt as elsewhere the link between childhood and nation has been a central tenet in the modern history of the region. Opening her piece with an indelible childhood memory of political violence, she highlights another crucial theme of this book: namely, the interweaving of individual, communal and national narratives. Morrison demonstrates the ways in which the notion of childhood evolved in Egypt against the backdrop of state-driven modernization, a globalizing economy, Western imperialism and national 'awakening.' As in other countries, the definition and understanding of childhood was wrapped up in notions of progress and independence. As was the case in the Balkans, Anatolia, the other Arab lands and far beyond, education became a vital vehicle for national uplift. But that was not all: education was also freighted with notions of economic and social advancement, with gendered and bodily expectations, and with a conception of morality heavily inflected by Islam. In Egypt as elsewhere in the region institutions such as schools and the literacy upon which they depended were vital to the inculcation of a series of interrelated values and ideals that stood at the heart of an emerging national experience of childhood. As the pace of change increased, Egyptian childhood was, like its counterparts around the region and the world, shaped by attempts to implement a version of morality that showed signs of both universally modern expectations and national particularities.

The second section, devoted to the subject of War, Gender and Nation, focuses on the ways in which periods of crisis intensified and altered the experience of childhood. Elif Akşit's contribution begins the conversation by going back into the late Ottoman period to help us understand the context for the national turn and childhood's place in it. Linking the ways in which girls are portrayed in the new genre of the late Ottoman novel with new ideas of the nation, Akşit distinguishes between fictional works that instrumentalize girls and those that, following the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari, allow them

to 'become women.' By examining the literary approaches to girlhood, she demonstrates the interrelated evolution of the novel, childhood and the nation. Institutions such as the harem, the family and the school form the background to the changing portrayal of female characters in Ottoman Turkish novels. The 'new girl' that emerges was different from the characters of the previous period in that she was a working girl who, like her Western European counterparts, was taking on an unprecedented degree of social visibility. Increasingly to be found in school and in the workplace—both in fiction and in reality—the new girl and new woman were now more fully developed characters. Then making the transition from empire to republic, the fictional girl takes on a new, national guise, albeit one that has deep roots in the Ottoman period, revealing the enduring importance of historical narrative to locating the history of childhood.

Naoum Kaytchev switches the scene to Serbia and Bulgaria, two of the later Balkan states to win independence from the Ottoman Empire, and shifts the subject from females to males. Focusing on the ways in which the newly formed national militaries attempted to indoctrinate the young men they conscripted, his contribution highlights the crucial role that the military played in all of the nation states of this period. In this period of considerable change and national insecurity the militaries received high priority and funding, meaning that their impact on society was especially prominent. The novelty of the mission of forging a national army also meant that its messages were often passionately received. Focusing its efforts on young males of mostly rural origin, the Serbian and Bulgarian military attempted to inculcate a strong sense of fatherland and collective national identity. Emphasis was placed on ethno-national solidarity and the existence of evidence to the contrary was almost completely ignored. 'Othering' the neighbors, including Greece and in particular the Ottomans as the traditional enemy, played a particularly strong role in attempts to foster a cohesive and battle-ready military force. The literature designed for recruits reflects the ebbs and flows in the political situation in the Balkans, with the rivalry in Macedonia never far from the discussion. By the outbreak of the Balkan Wars in 1912, Kaytchev concludes, the two recently formed national militaries had succeeded in fostering a strong sense of patriotism among its recruits, many of whom would lose their lives in the fighting to come.

Nazan Maksudyan's chapter takes us into the period of the First World War, a particularly acute period for the history of childhood. Her contribution examines the practice by which hundreds of Ottoman children, many of them orphans, were sent to Germany to apprentice in a variety of jobs as part of a plan ostensibly drawn up to increase the technical know-how of the Empire. Maksudyan analyses the shortcomings of the project and in particular the gap

between expectations and realities. The ‘triangle of regrets’ that she identifies on the part of the Ottomans, the German hosts and the boys themselves reflects the extraordinary pressures placed on children during the war years. The Ottoman state, despite its rhetoric of raising the technical and commercial level of the Empire, was perhaps more interested in getting rid of ‘excess’ or ‘problematic’ children and the expenses associated with maintaining them in state orphanages. The Germans had expected a chance to spread German language and cultural influence alongside technical skills and to gain a fresh source of labor for their depleted ranks. The boys seem to have had different expectations altogether and were often unpleasantly surprised to find themselves excluded and alienated in their new locales, some of them even turning to crime—the forerunners of some of the less fortunate experiences of the *Gastarbeiter* later in the century. The result was a difficult situation that produced a few successes but mostly left all parties disappointed, a poignant example of the wishful thinking that accompanied adult plans for children, especially apparent during wartime. It also demonstrates the extent to which children’s lives could be dramatically affected by the technological, socio-economic and cultural changes of the period.

Continuing on with the gap between idealism and reality, Benjamin Fortna’s contribution explores the mixed messages with which children were presented from the late Ottoman to the early Turkish Republican period. As public education expanded, a new literature was created for young readers both by the state and the private sector. While there were some important differences between the reading materials that they supplied, both nevertheless shared a clear tendency to present their child audience with very mixed signals. On the one hand children were confronted with images of an idealized, romanticized world that was cut off from the real world. This was a world of fluffy dolls, sweets and games in which the cares of the adult realm were invisible. On the other hand, the exigencies of the period frequently induced educators and authors of children’s works to attempt to inculcate their audience into the realm of first imperial and then national demands. Child readers were frequently told that the success of their country depended on the slender shoulders, particularly in times of acute crisis such as war. The mixed messages that resulted must have been difficult to integrate and reflect the contradictory inclinations and conflicted expectations that adults everywhere place on children, often in spite of their best intentions.

The third section of the book explores the ways in which childhood has been remembered and retold in the post-Ottoman era. Given the remarkable changes in political and cultural terms between the old regime and the new nation states, memory is a crucial factor in contesting the political, social and

cultural fields. Alex Drace-Francis opens the section by giving us two examples of childhood in Romania. As an early defector from Ottoman rule, Romania's history tends to be treated as having little in common with the Ottoman experience. But as Drace-Francis's richly contextualized contribution indicates, the depiction of childhood in Romania shared much with its fellow Ottoman and formerly Ottoman counterparts. By decoding the regimes of space and memory in the memoirs of two rather distinct nineteenth-century Romanians—namely, Ion Ghica and Ion Creangă—Drace-Francis reveals important connections between the local and the national, the individual and the collective and the private and the public. His evocation of childhood experiences, including the crucial transition from family to school life, can be profitably read together with the other evocations of childhood in this volume. But more than just adding another geographical dimension, his contribution suggestively probes what Balzac called 'the history forgotten by historians.' His close reading of the ways in which individual childhood memories are constructed tells us much about the creation of public memory, particularly given the close connection between child and nation in this period.

Returning to the core Ottoman lands, Philipp Wirtz's contribution addresses the complexities inherent in remembering childhood across the political divide of 1923, the year of the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. Focusing on the themes of the family, the physical environment and 'childhood culture,' including the contrast between the new and the old, Wirtz explores how a variety of authors remembered their Ottoman-era childhoods from the vantage point of Republican Turkey. He explains the many ways in which childhood could be remembered differently according to the authors' position *vis-à-vis* the old Empire and the new Republic. Criticism of one or the other periods often suffused the narratives as specific memories were extended to broader political or cultural debates. Depending on whether they deplored the old regime or celebrated its passing, Turkish-language autobiographers frequently used their writings to criticize the disappearance of one set of traditions and the creation of another. The changes—but also the continuities—between the two eras offered considerable scope for the flexibility of human memory, with its capacity for erasure, exaggeration and selective emphasis. Ottoman childhood and the way it was represented in another setting took on distinctly political and cultural overtones.

In the final chapter, Duygu Köksal compares and contrasts the works of two late Ottoman female authors, one a Greek Orthodox Christian and the other a Turkish Muslim. Given that both women wrote in English for foreign audiences, the subject of representation is central to her contribution. The ways the authors represent their child selves, their families and their societies are

mediated through the choice of the language in which they write and the readership they address. Köksal demonstrates that both authors used their writings as a means to challenge the prevailing Orientalist depictions of late Ottoman life. But to do so they had to take extraordinary measures, such as leaving their homeland and adopting a non-native language to communicate with their largely foreign audience; two indications that whatever their intention of subverting the dominant discourse of their day, these women's choices—like the question of childhood in general—were bounded in important respects by the fraught relationship between the West and the Ottoman Empire and its successor states.

In sum, these contributions demonstrate the importance of the Ottoman and former Ottoman lands for an analysis of childhood that is both geographically broader and theoretically deeper than usually understood. By tackling a variety of crucial questions emanating from childhoods imagined, lived and remembered in lands simultaneously affected by and distinct from the West, these chapters have pointed the way forward to a history of childhood that is both integrated with the wider field and also able to make a modest but distinctive contribution to its development.

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