

# Were the Turks So Terrible: How British Authors Demonized the Ottoman Empire in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Century

Ian Yazbec

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Historian Linda Darling, in her article “Ottoman Politics through British Eyes: Paul Rycaut’s ‘The Present State of the Ottoman Empire,’” remarks “Paul Rycaut’s book ostensibly fits within a tradition of reporting on the Ottoman Empire for defense purposes.”<sup>1</sup> Paul Rycaut and virtually everyone else who reported on the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries displayed a sense of repugnance towards the Islamic Empire’s policies and religious practices. Similar books of the time are concerned with how difficult it would be to defeat the Ottomans. This paper seeks to examine the content of several primary sources from seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century authors dealing with the Empire. Did these authors produce unfavorable reports of the Ottoman Empire’s religious tolerance and civil practices, and why? Were their reports truthful? What could these authors have gained by slandering the Ottoman name? I will compare my primary sources to secondary ones, and determine whether they are accurate. I will also reveal the reasons for my primary sources’ rhetoric, such as the one put forth by Darling. I posit that the Ottoman Empire was much more tolerable and less barbaric than what seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century travelers reported.

The Ottoman Empire extended all the way across Africa, to the Middle East, around to Greece and north into the Balkans.<sup>2</sup> Ottoman cities were considered very cosmopolitan, and Istanbul was called an “urban monster,” with inhabitants numbering about 700,000.<sup>3</sup> In the 1500s, the rising Ottoman Empire was *the* threat to European civilization. The Empire possessed a large and dedicated military. A Venetian diplomat said of the military in 1573, “This most powerful emperor’s forces are of two kinds, those of the sea and those of land, and both are terrifying.”<sup>4</sup> The empire also managed Mediterranean trade, a valuable asset to a world power such as Britain.

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Darling, “Ottoman Politics Through British Eyes: Paul Rycaut’s ‘The Present State of the Ottoman Empire,’” *Journal of World History* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 1994): 74.

<sup>2</sup> Alison Games, *The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion, 1560-1660* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 49.

<sup>3</sup> Games, *The Web of Empire*, 54-55.

<sup>4</sup> Molly Greene, “The Ottoman Experience,” *Daedalus* 134, no. 2 (Spring, 2005): 90.

In 1570, the Pope excommunicated Elizabeth I, thus freeing protestant English merchants from Catholic prohibitions on trading with Muslims.<sup>5</sup> This fact, along with an Ottoman demand for war material to use against Persia, gave way to informal trade agreements.<sup>6</sup> William Harborne, a British diplomat, traveled to the Empire's capital of Istanbul in 1578 to set up a formal trade agreement.<sup>7</sup> In the 1580s permanent trade relations were established between England and the Ottoman Empire. After this agreement, diplomats and merchants began traveling to the Empire and writing about their experiences with more frequency.<sup>8</sup>

In the early-seventeenth century, Britain traded lead and tin to the Ottomans for armaments, and many British trading companies were set up in the Empire.<sup>9</sup> The relative stability and security established as a result of the new trade agreements allowed curious Brits to travel to the Empire. They were now able to peruse the plethora of historically significant sites within the Ottomans' domain.<sup>10</sup> Englishmen could now experience, first hand, the mysterious realities of the Empire. Darling writes that until this relationship was founded, a typical British image of the Empire was "compounded of prejudice against Islam, fear of a powerful empire, lure of Eastern trade, and ignorance of hearsay."<sup>11</sup> I argue this fear manifested itself throughout the Ottoman reign.

Alison Games contends that English travelers were safer in the Ottoman Empire than in other European states. She explains that while the Empire gave Christians fewer privileges than Muslims, they did not go over the top in their policies. In "Historical and Political Observations upon the Present State of Turkey," from 1683, the author explains the first law of Islam is the toleration of other religions.<sup>12</sup> The Muslims of the Ottoman Empire accepted Jesus as a prophet, but did not believe in Christ's passion. Jews were seen as fellow people of the book, and were indeed valuable because of their work ethic and desire to make money.<sup>13</sup> One Spaniard, on the subject of expelling Jews from Spain, said with their exit they "took with them the substance and wealth of these realms, transferring them to our enemies the trade and

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<sup>5</sup> Games, *The Web of Empire*, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Games, *The Web of Empire*, 50.

<sup>7</sup> Games, *The Web of Empire*, 50.

<sup>8</sup> Darling, "Ottoman Politics," 73.

<sup>9</sup> Games, *The Web of Empire*, 50.

<sup>10</sup> Games, *The Web of Empire*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Darling, "Ottoman Politics," 73.

<sup>12</sup> R.D., *Historical and Political Observations upon the Present State of Turkey* (London, 1683), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Mazower, *Salonica: City of Ghosts, 1430-1950* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 47.

commerce of which they are the proprietors not only in Europe, but throughout the world.”<sup>14</sup> Jews and Christians had a lot to offer. They were beneficial to the Empire in terms of their various skills. The Ottoman Empire welcomed persons of different religious affiliation, but did levy some regulations on them, as I will discuss farther on.

Possibly the worst thing that could happen to a Christian or Jew in the Empire was being pressured into converting to Islam.<sup>15</sup> If a conversion took place, their children under fourteen years old had to convert as well. Many Christians converted for the simple fact Christians and Jews were forced to pay an extra tribute to the Empire for not being Muslim.<sup>16</sup> Jews paid the highest *cizye*.<sup>17</sup> One traveler reported in 1656 that the Jews were forced to pay eighty-eight silver coins compared to a Christian’s fifty-six. Furthermore, Jews were charged thirty-eight silver coins to lodge, and Christians thirty.<sup>18</sup>

Mark Mazower’s “Salonica: City of Ghosts” explains that Christians converted to Islam for reasons other than to avoid the *cizye*. Mazower asserts that poor young Christians converted to Islam when they immigrated to the Ottoman city for security, as they were oftentimes without any family. Boys also converted because they had apprenticed to economically powerful Muslims, and girls because they were servants to them.<sup>19</sup> Still, more young Christian boys converted because they were forcibly made janissaries, or soldiers of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>20</sup> All in all, involuntary conversions were rare, especially compared to many European states of the time that were simply killing or expelling those who refused to convert to Christianity.<sup>21</sup> The *cizye* was a major source of income for the Empire, so many Ottoman administrators did not stress conversion.<sup>22</sup> As long as non-Muslims submitted to Ottoman rule and paid the *cizye*, they attained the status of *dhimmi*, or protected people. They were allowed to practice their faith, and the Sultan could not legally persecute them, contrary to the arguments that several of primary sources put forth.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mazower, *Salonica: City of Ghosts*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> R.D., *Historical and Political Observations*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> I.S., *The History of the Turks* (London, 1683), *Early English Books Online*, 391.

<sup>17</sup> Poll tax levied upon non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>18</sup> Games, *The Web of Empire*, 56.

<sup>19</sup> Mazower, *Salonica: City of Ghosts*, 84.

<sup>20</sup> Mazower, *Salonica: City of Ghosts*, 78.

<sup>21</sup> Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire: A Short History* (Princeton: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 2009), 75.

<sup>22</sup> Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire*, 75.

<sup>23</sup> Feroz Ahmad, *Turkey: The Quest for Identity* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 4.

Besides paying the *cizye*, non-Muslims were disadvantaged in a few other areas. For example, they could not testify against Muslims in court.<sup>24</sup> This was a major problem in business matters, but by registering transactions with a local judge, non-Muslims could create an indisputable paper trail.<sup>25</sup> Also, Christians and Jews were not allowed to ride horses or carry weapons, as these were Muslim privileges. Furthermore, non-Muslims were not permitted to build houses higher than their Muslim neighbors, and oftentimes they were forced to sell their houses and move to allow more Muslims to live by places of worship.<sup>26</sup> “A New Account of the Present Condition of the Turkish Affairs,” written ambiguously by a “Person of Quality,” contends that the Alcoran<sup>27</sup> does not keep Christians from using their churches as long as they stand, but if the Church is destroyed it cannot be repaired or rebuilt.<sup>28</sup>

“A Survey of the Turkish Empire,” confirms the dress code: non-Muslims in the Empire were required to wear certain dark colors to denote their religion, while Muslims wore green. In a more serious tone, the author writes that it was a choice between the code and death.<sup>29</sup> He goes on to say that if a Christian struck a Muslim, he was oftentimes put to death. Conversely, the primary source explains that if a Muslim struck a Christian, he was only fined.<sup>30</sup> It seems as if the author had a bone to pick with the Ottomans, because according to Ahmad, the persecution of the *dhimmi* was prohibited.

Christian travelers to the Empire were relatively safe from violence at the hands of Muslims. Relatively, that is not to say they were completely safe. During Muslim festivals, Christians and Jews in the streets could be subject to violence from Turks. Yet, “Surest Way to Destroy the Ottoman Empire” contends that Ottomans were more concerned with killing Persians than Christians: “Their religion obliges them to believe that there is more merit in killing one Persian heretic...than if they flew threescore and ten Christians.”<sup>31</sup> If anything, there was more tension between Jews and Christians. Mazower points to a 1700 court case in which Christians complained to authorities about

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<sup>24</sup> Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire*, 74.

<sup>25</sup> Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire*, 74.

<sup>26</sup> Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> Alcoran or Qu’ran, the holy book of Islam.

<sup>28</sup> *A New Account of the Present Condition of the Turkish Affairs* (London, 1688), *Early English Books Online*, 31.

<sup>29</sup> “A Survey of The Turkish Empire,” *The Critical Review* (January 1799): 9.

<sup>30</sup> “A Survey of The Turkish Empire,” 9.

<sup>31</sup> *The Surest Way to Destroy the Ottoman Empire* (London, 1687), *Early English Books Online*, 11.

their Jewish neighbors throwing garbage into a churchyard and ridiculing them during Christian holidays.<sup>32</sup> Karen Barkey agrees with Mazower in her article “Islam and Toleration,” arguing “fear of losing religious identity and the potential for violence existed between Muslims and non-Muslims, but especially between Christians and Jews.”<sup>33</sup>

“The Surest Way to Destroy the Ottoman Empire” writes about the weak aspects of the Ottoman Military, confirming the hypothesis that most writings about the Empire in the time period were directed at how to defeat the Empire. “A New Account of the Present Condition of the Turkish Affairs” explains Turks had always been aggressive and had ignored treaties. The author laments the Empire consistently astonished enemies with huge armies. “The Ottoman of Lazaro Soranzo” gives insight into Ottoman war qualities as well. The source argues that Ottomans were confident in the size of their armies, so much so that discipline was not stressed.<sup>34</sup> “The Ottoman of Lazaro Soranzo” alludes to the fact that the Turks used Jewish and Christian spies to gain information against their enemies.<sup>35</sup> “Surest Way to Destroy the Ottoman Empire” hypothesizes that the reason the Ottomans were so successful in battle was their belief in predestination and the honor associated with martyrdom. The Ottomans held the belief that if you died in battle, you would immediately ascend into “paradise.” Furthermore, if a Muslim fled in battle, he would lose his honor, and was oftentimes killed by his commanders shamefully.<sup>36</sup> To defeat the Ottomans, the author suggested that an army attack first by sea, band together as Christians, and pray to God for help.<sup>37</sup>

“A New Account of the Present Condition of the Turkish Affairs” gives more insight into Ottoman civil matters. The author wrote: “The people, which is the last of the three orders... of this empire, is tyrannized over by the two others...the military, and that of the law.” The source goes on to claim, “They are almost beggar’d, and employed in the vilest and meanest services; and the tyranny goes so far that the ministry of religion and justice serves for a means to the continual persecutions... against the third.”<sup>38</sup> “I.S.” confirms that the “Grand

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<sup>32</sup> Mazower, *Salonica: City of Ghosts*, 49.

<sup>33</sup> Karen Barkey, “Islam and Toleration: Studying the Ottoman Imperial Model,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 19, no. ½ (December 2005): 15.

<sup>34</sup> Abraham Hartwell, *The Ottoman of Lazaro Soranzo* (London, 1603), *Early English Books Online*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Hartwell, *The Ottoman of Lazaro Soranzo*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> *Surest Way*, 33.

<sup>37</sup> *Surest Way*, 34.

<sup>38</sup> *A New Account*, 14.

Signor's power was so absolute, that his subjects term themselves his slaves." Once again, in my review of secondary sources, I did not come across anything that depicted the Ottomans as being particularly cruel to their subjects.

In keeping with the pattern of demonizing Ottoman rule, "The Ottoman of Lazaro Soranzo" explains "Mahomet is a name dreadful to Christians." He continues, writing the "Emperour" is a fierce and cruel ruler who abhors peace and threatened to kill his own mother.<sup>39</sup> Another source contends Mahomet had once sworn to put all Christians in his empire to death.<sup>40</sup> "The Ottoman of Lazaro Soranzo" also writes that the Ottoman's possessed noisy "warrelike instruments" and a "horrible, barborous shout." The author also vilified the Ottoman administrators for employing dwarves and the mentally handicapped to fight for their own entertainment.<sup>41</sup> This was not the only primary source that criticized the Emperor for strange practices in his court. "I.S.," in "The History of the Turks," explains that the Sultan paid a thousand eunuchs to service his virgins and concubines. The author described the practice as an inhuman barbarity.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, 500 of the most beautiful Christian virgins, taken at eight years old, were constantly kept in the Seraglio.<sup>43</sup> "I.S." also conveys that Ottoman citizens were slaves to the tyrannical government.<sup>44</sup> I did not necessarily come across anything in my secondary sources to debunk the claims of keeping eunuchs, dwarves, or virgins, but following the pattern, I can say they were made to demonize the Ottomans.

A song called the "The Bloody Siege of Vienna" again attempts to display the "barbaric" nature of the Ottomans. The song contains verses that explain how "they sacrificed peasant and peer with fier and sword, they laid all to wast." The song also articulates the Ottoman Empire's military prowess: "Three hundred thousand Turks in rage, who never spared sex or age, in seven hundred leagues they march, til they Vienna did invest." The melody ends with the massacre of the "Terrible Turke," proclaiming the Christian protectors of the city "at every blow cut down a Turk," and killed 70,000 of them.<sup>45</sup> The song was certainly another attempt at slandering the mysterious and threatening Empire.

In conclusion, I claim the primary sources I reviewed were written in order to malign the Ottoman Empire because of the military and

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<sup>39</sup> Hartwell, *The Ottoman of Lazaro Soranzo*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> *A New Account*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Hartwell, *The Ottoman of Lazaro Soranzo*, 39.

<sup>42</sup> I.S., *A History of the Turks*, 382.

<sup>43</sup> I.S., *A History of the Turks*, 382.

<sup>44</sup> I.S., *A History of the Turks*, 384.

<sup>45</sup> *The Bloody Siege of Vienna* (London, 1688), *Early English Books Online*.

religious threat it posed to Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I cannot say they are completely wrong in their attempts, as fear is a powerful emotion. By writing unflattering stories about the Ottomans, the authors hoped to breed hatred, which can enable people to do extraordinary things. They attempted to build revulsion in their readers so that, in case of an attack, a hateful and devoted population could defeat the heretical Muslims. In reality, the Ottomans were more tolerant of differing religions than most nations and were less barbaric than the claims brought against them. Karen Barkey said it best in her article “Islam and Toleration:” “As Ottoman conquerors incorporated vast territories and an extraordinary medley of peoples into the Empire, they — as many other large imperial states did in history — understood and managed difference. Ottomans understood ‘difference’ and accepted it as such, showing no effort to transform ‘difference’ into ‘sameness.’”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Barkey, “Islam and Toleration,” 13-14.