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The constitutional revolution of 1908 and its aftermath in Trabzon
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INTRODUCTION

The events discussed in this study took place in Trabzon, a major port city in the northeast of Turkey. While there is a lack of definite information about who originally founded the city or when, evidence suggests that in the middle of the 8th century BC, a Milesian colony was established there, and the first known document to mention the city was the *Anabasis*, which dates from around 400 BC.¹ As a port city, Trabzon was the site of numerous political struggles in antiquity and was under the dominion of the Persians, Alexander the Great, the Kingdom of Pontus and the Roman Empire. After the Roman Empire split, the city fell under Byzantine rule. When Alexios Komnenos fled the infamous sack of Istanbul in the year 1204, he made Trabzon the center of the Empire of Trebizond.² In the wake of the Ottoman conquest of Trabzon by Sultan Mehmed, the Conqueror in 1461, the city quickly became a major Islamic center. Sultan Selim I served as governor there for twenty-four years before becoming sultan and Sultan Suleiman, the Magnificent was born in the city.³

In the years of the Ottoman Empire, Trabzon was a key point on the trade route that extended between Europe and the Persian territories to the east.⁴ As a result, Trabzon, which served as the seaport for cities such as Erzurum, Gümüşhane, Bayburt, Van, Muş and Ağrı, became even more important as a trade route thanks to technological developments in seafaring and flourished in the process. Non-Muslim traders in Trabzon grew wealthy through trade with points in Europe, as did Muslim merchants, who started to play a more active role in the city's political, economic and cultural life.⁵ During the course of Ottoman modernization which was hastened by the Edict of Gülhane, Trabzon was an important indicator of the changes that were happening around the

1 Heath Lowry - Feridun Emecen, "Trabzon", *DİA*, Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, 2012, vol. 41, p. 296.

2 Ibid, pp. 296-297.

3 Ibid, p. 297.

4 A. Üner Turgay, "Trabzon", *Doğu Akdeniz'de Liman Kentleri 1800-1914*, (eds. Çaylar Keyder, Y. Eyüp Özveren, Donald Quataert), İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1994, p. 45.

5 Kudret Emiroğlu, "Vilayet Salnamelerine Göre Trabzon'da Bürokrasi ve Eşraf", *Kebikeç*, No: 14, 2002, p. 163.

empire,⁶ and at the turn of the twentieth century, Trabzon was still a major center in the region thanks to its social dynamism.

A Brief Historical Overview

On the morning of the 24th of July in 1908, the governor of Trabzon received an official telegram from the capital Istanbul, and like the governors of the other provinces around the empire, he was in for a shock, as were the residents of the capital who happened to pick up a newspaper and read the brief official announcement that had been published on the first page. The announcement, which marked the end of an era, stated that Sultan Abdülhamid II had reinstated the constitution and that work would soon get underway to reopen parliament. It was revolutionary because with that change, Sultan Abdülhamid's nearly thirty years of autocratic rule had come to an end and elected representatives would now be involved in running the country along with the sultan. The Second Constitutional Period had now officially begun.

Before delving into an examination of the events that set into motion dramatic transformations in that era, it would be useful to overview what a well-known Turkish historian referred to as "the longest century in the history of the Empire."⁷ The Ottoman Empire had made efforts at modernization and Westernization throughout the nineteenth century as a way of trying to cope with the political, economic and social developments in Europe brought on by the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution.

The attempts at modernization and Westernization launched by Sultan Selim III, most of which concerned the empire's military forces, were driven further by his successor Sultan Mahmud II, who didn't hesitate to force state bureaucrats and society to adapt to new changes. Through his reforms, Sultan Mahmud II was determined to not only restructure the military but also the state itself. In order to succeed in his efforts, he had to take important steps in two regards. The first of those was a radical revamping of the economy, as he needed funding, and the second was education, as that was seen as being crucial in making sure that the reforms held.⁸

When Abdülmecid I succeeded Sultan Mahmud II as sultan in 1839, he pushed his father's multifaceted reforms even further, and under his rule, crucial

6 For further information see: Hamdi Özdiş, "Taşrada İktidar Mücadelesi: II. Abdülhamid Döneminde Trabzon Vilayeti'nde Eşraf, Siyaset ve Devlet (1876-1909)", [PhD Dissertation, Ankara: Hacettepe University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of History], 2008.

7 İlber Ortaylı, *İmparatorluğun En Uzun Yüzyılı*, İstanbul: Alkım Yayınları, 2005.

8 Erik Jan Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye'nin Tarihi*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 29th Edition, 2014, pp. 67-75.

steps forward were made, particularly in terms of developing a constitution and social rights. The Tanzimat reforms, which were instituted in 1839 with the implementation of the Edict of Gülhane, represented a major transformation as regards new rights, social life and the functioning of the state.

The Tanzimat reforms, which introduced the ideas of constitutionalism into Ottoman governance for the first time, launched a process that bolstered the efforts at modernization that would impact the empire throughout the nineteenth century. For that reason, it came to be known as the Tanzimat Era. In those years, major reforms were introduced which had an impact on the military, the central bureaucracy, governance of the provinces, taxation, education and communication. In addition, the era was marked by judicial reforms and a focus on developing a system of consultation within the administration.⁹

The Crimean War, which lasted from 1853 to 1856 and resulted in the defeat of the Russians by the Ottomans with help from the French and the British, was crucial as well. Following the war, the Congress of Paris was held, upon which the Reform Edict was enacted by the Ottoman state. The edict was critical in that it granted new rights to religious minorities living in the empire and marked a major step forward in that regard.¹⁰ While these developments were occurring, however, the empire was also being rocked by problems, both domestically and abroad. When Sultan Abdulmecid was succeeded by Abdülaziz in 1861, an autocratic system of rule persisted despite the protests of state elites and intellectuals who had been swayed by the tenets of constitutionalism.

The ongoing power struggle between the sultan and bureaucratic elites and intellectuals came to a halt in 1876 in a palace coup which resulted in the deposition of Sultan Abdülaziz. As a result of the coup, which had been masterminded by Midhat Pasha and Hüseyin Avni Pasha, Murat V was reinstated as sultan. However, after ruling for just ninety-two days, it was decided that he was unfit to rule for psychological reasons and he too was deposed. A deal was struck with Prince Abdülhamid about instituting a constitutional form of rule, and he took to the throne as Sultan Abdülhamid II.

In Turkey today, the era of Sultan Abdülhamid II's rule is one of most contentious times of Ottoman history. When he ascended to the throne on the 31st of August in 1876, his first order of business was to enact a constitution. After completion of elections which were held between December of 1876 and January of 1877, the Ottoman parliament officially took office on the 19th of March in the same year, but it was short-lived. During the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, the Ottomans suffered a crushing defeat which resulted in

9 Ibid, p. 92.

10 Ibid, pp. 87-89.

the Russian army marching towards the gates of Istanbul, and on the 14th of February in 1878, Sultan Abdülhamid II dissolved parliament for an indefinite period of time.¹¹

Thus began a roughly thirty-year period of autocratic rule under Sultan Abdülhamid II, which the opposition referred to as an “era of tyranny.” As he tried to manage the country single-handedly through the creation of a strong centrist platform, he nonetheless perpetuated the reforms that had been gradually introduced starting in the early nineteenth century. In that way, the Tanzimat reforms proceeded apace under his rule but only in certain regards,¹² as political rights and freedoms were eroded; Sultan Abdülhamid II went to great lengths to suppress and quash any and all opposition to his personal rule.

Despite his efforts, however, all around the country various illegal organizations emerged that were opposed to the existing system. First was the Society of Ottoman Union (*İttihad-ı Osmani*), which was founded by military medical students in Istanbul in 1889. Soon after, however, the group’s activities came to light and some were arrested while others fled the country. Under the leadership of Ahmet Rıza Bey, the opposition in Paris expressed their opposition to the rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II through various newspapers and journals, particularly the newspaper *Meşveret*. Others got organized in cities like Geneva and Cairo, where they also used the press to voice their opposition. Mizancı Murat Bey fled to Europe only to be followed by Prince Sebahattin Bey, and their participation in the opposition created tensions about who would be its leader. After a while, Mizancı Murat struck a deal with Sultan Abdülhamid II and returned to Istanbul, and when Prince Sebahattin had a falling out with his followers at a congress held in 1902, Ahmet Rıza Bey took over as the leader of the main opposition.¹³

A new organization, the Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) was created by this main opposition movement. While it also used the press to express its members’ dissatisfaction with the personal ruling regime of Sultan Abdülhamid II, it was not very effective. However, a development in 1907 breathed new life into the movement. In 1906, some civil bureaucrats in Thessaloniki and soldiers from the 3rd Army who were disgruntled with the Ottoman leadership rallied together and formed the Ottoman Freedom

11 Ibid, pp. 121-122.

12 Ibid, p. 122.

13 For further information, see: Zürcher, *ibid.*; M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Young Turks in Opposition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; Ahmet Bedevi Kuran, *İnkılap Tarihimiz ve Jön Türkler*, İstanbul, 1945; Şerif Mardin, *Jön Türklerin Siyasi Fikirleri 1095-1908*, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1997; Tarık Zafer Tunaya, *Türkiyede Siyasal Gelişmeler 1876-1938*, İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2001.

Association (*Osmanlı Hürriyet Cemiyeti*), which then contacted the opposition in Paris to propose that the two groups unite their forces. As the result of secret meetings held between members of the organizations, it was ultimately decided that they would establish a new organization, the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress (*Osmanlı İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*), which was founded in October of 1907. Under the banner of the slogan “unity of the people” (*İttihad-ı Anasır*), they sought to get the constitution reinstated and reestablish parliament. In a short period of time, they easily managed to pull numerous others into their ranks, especially soldiers from the 3rd Army in Macedonia and civil bureaucrats.¹⁴

Because of the mounting economic and social problems that the Ottoman Empire was facing, it was becoming easier to find supporters for the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress, particularly from the educated segments of society, and developments abroad were fueling support as well. When British King Edward VII and the Russian Tsar Nicholas II held a summit at Reval, the stage was set for action to be taken, as the decisions that were made at the meeting directly threatened the geographical and political integrity of the Ottoman Empire. A revolt, which began when certain officers loyal to the Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress headed to the mountains with their troops, proved to be too difficult to put down, so Sultan Abdülhamid II opted to agree to reinstate the constitution in full and reestablish the parliament. On the 24th of July in 1908, the official announcement went out saying the constitution would be reinstated and parliament would reconvene.¹⁵

Although the movement initially tried but failed to dethrone Sultan Abdülhamid II, the launch of the Second Constitutional Period on the 24th of July in 1908 marked one of the most important shifts in Ottoman history, as political, economic, cultural and social changes began occurring with unprecedented rapidity.

The Aims and Subject of the Study

This study aims to examine the political, economic, cultural and social events that occurred in Trabzon, an important provincial city that had a uniquely multicultural population consisting of Turks, Greeks, Armenians and a smaller number of Iranians. The timeframe of the study is the first six years (1908-1914) of the Second Constitutional Period, a time when changes and transformations

14 For further information, see: Zürcher, *ibid.*; M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks 1902-1908*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; Feroz Ahmad, *İttihat ve Terakki 1908-1914*, Istanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 2004.

15 Zürcher, *ibid.*, pp. 141-142.

were occurring at an unprecedented rate in Ottoman lands. This study takes as its subject the developments that occurred in Trabzon, which at the time was the provincial center of an area that includes the present-day provinces of Samsun, Ordu, Giresun, Trabzon, Rize, Artvin, Gümüşhane and Bayburt.

Within the scope of this study, a wide range of issues are discussed in light of the changes that were occurring under the leadership of the Committee of Union and Progress, including the activities of the Unionists, the relationship between the center and the periphery, how local nobles perceived the Committee of Union and Progress and its politics as well as vice versa, and the extent to which the Committee's political, cultural, economic and social policies had an impact on local life. In short, the main aim of this study is to bring to light the political, economic, cultural and social changes and transformations that occurred in Trabzon under the Committee's leadership between 1908 and 1914.

Sources and Methods

In order to achieve the primary goal of this study, I carried out a detailed examination of the available sources. First, I thoroughly examined the sources at the Ottoman archives and scanned all of those that pertained to the period 1908-1914 and Trabzon, whereupon I obtained printouts of those related to Trabzon and the Committee. After sorting the printed documents, I wrote transliterations of the texts. As a result of this process, I was able to examine the period and Trabzon through the perspective of the documents I had obtained. At this point, it should be noted that many of the documents I used were from the *Dahiliye Nezareti* section of the Ottoman Archive, followed by the *Maarif Nezareti*, *İradeler* and *Yıldız* sections. It is extremely unfortunate that the archives of the Committee of Union and Progress and the Committee's Trabzon branch no longer exist, as that marks a great loss for studies of Turkish history and the history of Trabzon. Nonetheless, I tried to make up for the absence of that material with the existing primary sources.

In the second stage of my research, I felt that it was necessary to obtain sources that offered a different perspective so that I could examine the information obtained from the Ottoman archival documents in a comparative manner. To that end, I sought out the reports of foreign consulates that existed in Trabzon at the period of time under study. After a long and laborious process, I was able to obtain the reports of the British Consulate, which are sorted by subject, and incorporate the information obtained therein into my study. A search on the Internet revealed that the relevant reports of the American Consulate are located at archives in Washington, DC. However, because I could not obtain the funding needed to go there, I was unable to obtain those reports. Because of a

language barrier, I was also unable to peruse the reports of the German, French, Austria-Hungarian, Russian and Greek consulates. However, the reports of the British Consulate contained a wealth of information, so I was able to carry out a comparison of their accounts with those offered in the Ottoman documents. Previous studies about Trabzon had not included the British sources, so that aspect of this study is particularly useful for enriching our understanding of the history of the city.

After completing my archival research, I identified newspapers and magazines from the period that were published in Trabzon. Once I had figured out which libraries and museums in Turkey had those in their collections, I determined which issues they had. My research indicated that the newspapers *Trabzon'da Meşveret*, *Feyz*, *Tarık* and *Haber Anası* could be found in the collections of various libraries and museums, as well as the magazines *Envâr-ı Vicdan* and *Kehkeşan*, so I then ascertained which copies were available for perusal and created an index for each of them. Working from that index, I examined the issues, identifying which articles pertained to my subject, and created transliterations. These periodicals were extremely useful for this study because they revealed the spirit of the era in light of the daily developments that were occurring. One of the sources that constituted the backbone of this study was the newspaper *Trabzon'da Meşveret*, which was the mouthpiece of the Committee of Union and Progress in Trabzon, and hence is an invaluable source for historical research on the Second Constitutional Period for the area. Thanks to the information I was able to glean from these periodicals, I obtained a clearer picture of Trabzon for the years 1908-1914 in terms of local developments, conflicts between the opposition and members of the Committee, and the economic, social and cultural life in the city. Another point that makes this study original is the fact that I examined all of the existing copies of these periodicals, particularly *Trabzon'da Meşveret*.

Once I had completed my primary source research, I turned to secondary sources, and I found that there is an abundance of books, articles, theses and dissertations that have been written about Trabzon, although few of them deal with the Second Constitutional Period. However, those that do focus on the period are quite weak in terms of references to the primary sources mentioned above. All the same, it would be useful to point out that the works of Şakir Şevket, Mahmut Goloğlu, Kudret Emiroğlu and Melek Öksüz do turn to primary sources in their studies on the period in question for Trabzon. While Şakir Şevket's *Trabzon Tarihi*, which has been referred to as the first urban study for the Ottoman era, and Mahmut Goloğlu's *Trabzon Tarihi: Fetihden Kurtuluşu Kadar* do include references to primary source materials, they fall short in terms of academic sources considering the time period in which they were written.

However, Kudret Emiroğlu's articles and his work on *Trabzon Salnameleri*, and Melek Öksüz's fine studies on the era are deserving of commendation. The majority of the few other studies on the period tend to mirror one another in the sense that they repeat the same formulas, including both correct and incorrect points, and hence are not very pioneering. This study, on the other hand, fills a major void in the field by taking up a comparative approach of varying perspectives on the political, economic, cultural and social life in Trabzon for the years 1908-1914 and employing a wide array of primary sources based on local and foreign archival material and periodicals that were locally published.

Work Plan

This study consists of an introduction, four main chapters with subsections, and a conclusion. The first main chapter deals with political life in Trabzon for the years 1908-1914. After providing a historical overview of the political situation in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it discusses the developments that took place in Trabzon before and after the 24th of July in 1908, when the Second Constitutional Era began. The chapter then goes on to provide a discussion on perceptions of constitutionalism in Trabzon, the impact of the opening of the first parliament on the city, and reactions to the Press Law. After that, it offers a look at how the 31st of March Incident, which was a major turning point in Ottoman history, reverberated in the city. In addition, it discusses Committee members and the opposition, the elections that took place, and the visit of ex-Minister of Finance Cavit Bey to Trabzon. The chapter then goes on to explain in detail the effects of the Italo-Turkish War and the Balkan Wars on public opinion and how the local populace reacted to them. Other matters that come up in the chapter are the celebrations of the anniversary of the proclamation of the constitution, the governors of the era, and the consulates that existed in the city.

The second chapter, which takes up economic life in Trabzon for the years 1908-1914, starts with a general historical overview of the Ottoman economy. After discussing the economy in Trabzon before the proclamation of the constitution, it examines issues such as the railway and port projects, customs, agriculture and private enterprise. The chapter then goes on to deal with a variety of issues concerning trade in the city and offers a detailed look at how the boycotts of products from Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Greece impacted economic life in the city during the time period in question.

The third chapter deals with education and cultural life in Trabzon for the years 1908-1914. After taking up the matter of developments in the field of education before and after the proclamation of the constitution, the chapter

discusses the minority and foreign schools that existed in the city. The section concerning cultural life deals with the press and publications, as well as theater and the cinemas of Trabzon.

The fourth chapter concerns social and daily life in Trabzon. It discusses in detail the associations and clubs that existed in the city, the aid campaigns that were carried out, the health problems that arose, and natural disasters, as well as the foreigners and members of minority groups who lived in the city.

In summary, this study examines the local impacts of the policies of the Committee in the Second Constitutional Era, which played a major role in shaping developments of the time. By focusing on what was happening in Trabzon during the years 1908-1914, it sheds light on a period of time in Trabzon's history about which heretofore little was known.

