



Revolution of the Young Turks

Summary :

A presentation of the origins, the making and the activity of the Young Turks' movement in the Ottoman Empire, and a critical evaluation of the relevant bibliography.

Date

1908-1909

Geographical Location

Ottoman Empire

1. Causes of the movement

Sultan Abdülaziz's rule (1861-1876) brought a setback in the [reforms](#) known as **tanzimat**. This instigated the prompt reaction of the Sublime Porte officials and eventually led to the promulgation of the Constitution and the first Ottoman Parliament, in 1877-78. The mastermind of this initiative was the prominent administrator and reformer **vizier** Midhat paşa. A crucial role in the intellectual preparation of these events, however, was played by a group of bureaucrats and journalists, known as Young Ottomans, among whom Namık Kemal was the leading figure. The Young Ottomans introduced new terms in political life and urged a reappraisal of the reforms. They opted for liberal ideas, advocating at the same time the re-appropriation of the Islamic values, which, they argued, would safeguard the sovereignty of the people. Consequently, they criticized the agents of the Tanzimat for introducing reforms, which, in the long run, would undermine both the state and the society. As a result of the movement, Abdülaziz was deposed. However, the new Sultan Murat V, Abdülaziz's first son, a symbol for the liberals, but also a person of precarious mental condition, was soon replaced by his brother Abdülhamid II. The promulgation of the Constitution took place in [Istanbul](#), in the opening session of a peace conference, after one more Balkan War. There the Ottomans were asked to introduce a large reform project for the non-Muslim populations of the Empire. The Constitution, from the Ottoman point of view, made all discussions of reforms redundant, since all subjects were granted equal civic rights.

2. Outbreak of the movement

However, the endeavor failed, and under a state of emergency due to the Russian invasion, the Constitution was suspended and the parliament was finally closed down by the Sultan. The thirty three years of Sultan Abdülhamit's reign which followed marked an ambivalent development of state modernization together with an ongoing suppression of any political opposition. On the other side, new generations, educated in state schools like *Mülkiye* (Civil Servants Academy) and *Harbiye* (Military Academy) were inspired by the liberal and constitutional ideas as well as the patriotism of the Young Ottomans. However, they rejected Islamic religion as a means to modernization. From the 1890s onwards, these young officers and officials, generally known as Young Turks (*Jön Türkler*), in contact with Western ideas and modes of social behavior, could not tolerate what they perceived as the decay of the Empire. Thus, the most radical among them in the army and the administration gradually joined the *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Committee of Union and Progress, CUP). This title had been used already for more than fifteen years by the group of Ottoman dissidents who had found refuge in Paris and had been propagating against the Hamidian regime. The movement in exile was tormented by internal division. On the one hand stood those more radical, led by Ahmed Rıza, a staunch positivist who would not tolerate any foreign intervention in the domestic affairs of the Empire; on the other



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hand stood the supporters of Prince Sabahaddin, himself nephew of the Sultan, who, being more moderate, would welcome such an intervention. The division became apparent already during the discussions in the 1902 conference in Paris.

The movement took a new turn when, in September 1907, the Paris group merged with the *Osmanlı Hürriyet Cemiyeti* (Ottoman Freedom Society) which had been established in Salonica (Thessaloniki) in 1906. This provided the movement with a new impetus within the Empire. In June 1908, the Russian Tsar and the King of Britain met at Reval in the Baltic Sea. Among other issues, they discussed a proposal for the resolution of the 'Macedonian Question', the decades-long conflict among different ethnic groups in the European provinces of the Empire and a threat to Ottoman domination in the region, based on foreign control, which would allow the Sultan only a formal suzerainty. On July 23rd 1908, following these unexpected developments, but also as a result of widespread social unrest, under the leadership of the lower ranking officers Enver bey and Niyazi bey, who henceforth were celebrated as 'heroes for freedom', an uprising was organized in Resna (Rezen) and Manastir (Bitola). Before the threat that the troops would march to Istanbul, Sultan Abdülhamid was forced to re-establish the Constitution of 1876 and proclaim elections that would provide all ethnicities with the right of representation in the new Ottoman Parliament. Furthermore, *müsavat* (in Ottoman Turkish) /*isopoliteia* (in Greek), i.e. equality before the law, was once again officially proclaimed. This was part of a political project aimed at demolishing the old distinctions among the **millet** (ethnoreligious communities) and bringing all Ottoman subjects under a common political umbrella by laying emphasis on Ottoman citizenship whatever their religion or culture. The project was certainly not a novelty. It had been initiated already through the Tanzimat as a policy instigated largely 'from above' and it had then contributed to the emergence of dynamic middle and upper bourgeois groups, mainly - but not exclusively - among the non-Muslim population. However, in terms of political identity, especially after the dissolution of the first Parliament, in 1878, and the establishment of the absolutist Hamidian regime, the Ottomanist project had never been consolidated among the non-Muslims. When this project re-emerged during the Second Constitutional Period, it enjoyed a widespread support among all diverse communities and constituted the platform for a consensus among them, despite the fact that 'Ottomanist' principles as implemented by the CUP leadership were shared only by certain segments among the non-Muslims.

3. Challenge between Young Turks and non-Muslims

The main challenge against the non-Muslim communities was the elimination of their status of autonomy on educational and religious matters that had been institutionalized by the Tanzimat, but pre-existed in various forms well before that. This 'privileges' (*imtiyazlar* in Ottoman Turkish, *προνόμια* in Greek) became the point of contention between the Ottoman government and the Greek-Orthodox communities throughout this period and until the end of the Empire. As a matter of fact, the strife had been already instigated in the 1880s and 1890s with two crises, which had shaken the relations between the [Patriarchate](#) and the Ottoman authorities. A complete rupture was avoided thanks to the decision of the Ottoman government not to insist, but also thanks to the conjuncture of international politics. Thus the Young Turk movement fuelled an already existing conflict. However, the new regime was determined to impose state regulations. This determination emanated both from the radical character of the modernization policies in that era but also from the fact that these regulations had derived from a parliamentary vote, bearing thus the legitimacy they had lacked before.

4. The movement of the Young Turks in recent historiography



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Over the last two decades, the academic debate on the Young Turks and their ideology has been closely related to the debate regarding the emergence of Turkish nationalism. In his pioneering study, Erik Jan Zürcher¹ considers the desire to introduce Western methods and institutions and the need to appease European criticism as the two crucial motives behind the action of the statesmen throughout this period. It is the combination of a superficial understanding of the West and the neglect of traditional values together with the growing authoritarianism which led to the rise of the Young Turk Movement. The importance in this approach lies in the comparison between Young Ottomans and Young Turks which actually had been already introduced by Şerif Mardin.²

The Young Ottomans are supposed to have introduced nationalism and liberalism among the Ottoman Muslims and to have tried to reconcile it with Islam. Thus, one could argue, the ideas supported by the Young Turks, despite all divergences, draw their origins from the First Constitutional Period and its heritage. Moreover, the period of Sultan Abdülhamid could be considered as the continuation of the Tanzimat, due to the Sultan's commitment in modernizing the Empire by bringing improvements in education and communications. It is exactly these advances that made possible the development of a larger opposition movement. Moreover, the suspension of the Constitution had triggered widespread discontent and had alienated the liberal educated individuals who thus appropriated the heritage of the First Constitutional Period.

In terms of their political ideology, Şükrü Hanioglu³ describes the syncretism in the affiliations of the Young Turks, a syncretism which is depicted in their political vocabulary. It is difficult to explain, for instance, how they could combine their adherence to social Darwinism as a guide to understanding social life and Gustave Le Bon's theories on the psychology of the masses with the motto 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. The fact that this slogan had been discarded by the above theories as belonging to a 'pre-scientific' and obsolete past did not prevent the Young Turks from using it. In his view, this slogan was used as a powerful weapon against the Sultan's regime and also in order to win over various Ottoman ethnic groups to the cause of Ottomanism. On the other hand, Prince Sabahaddin's propaganda, the leading figure of the opposition known as the *Entente Liberale*, is said to have been inspired by Edmond Demolins' ideas. The opposition leader aspired to produce a new society through education and therefore he had kept alive the intellectual element of the first period of the CUP. The circle around him focused on 'social progress' which they considered as subjecting to the same laws as 'biological progress'. However, contrary to the Unionists, instead of 'equality', they elaborated on 'inequalities'. The 'decentralization' that the political party founded by Prince Sabahaddin, the *Teşebbüs-ü şahsi ve Adem-i Merkeziyet Cemiyeti* (League of Private Initiative and Decentralization) promoted was a political vulgarization of the theory of Demolins who had elaborated on the positive results of the 'decentralization' in the British Empire. The Unionists were opposing decentralization, since they considered that as it had been appropriated by the non-Turkish elements in a proto-nationalist fashion, this project paved the way to separatism.

Hanioglu also attributes the development of political activism among the Unionists to the recruitment of young officers in great numbers. Since the role of the army in social and political life was a long-standing tradition in the Empire, this transition did not meet many impediments. What is novel, however, is the adaptation of German ideas, most prominently of Colmar von der Goltz, who assigned a special role to the military in society. His work had been used as a handbook for military cadets, who gradually came to see in the dominance of the army the only solution to the Ottoman problems.

According to Hanioglu, the Young Turks were aware of the difficulty of propagating an artificial 'Ottoman nation'



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composed of several ethnic groups. They were aware of the artificiality, therefore they could not employ the notion of an Ottoman 'racial soul' as it had been articulated by Gustave Le Bon or of an Ottoman 'national character', according to Alfred Fouillée's theory. Therefore, the Unionists appropriated only Le Bon's notion of 'crowd psychology', while Prince Sabahaddin used only Fouillée's ideas on psychology and individuality. What is more important, though, is that in his view, since the 'Ottomanism' of the Young Turks was incompatible with scientific theories, it was presented as a mere political ideology with which to address the problems of a multiethnic state. Already, before the outbreak of the Revolution, in the negotiations of the CUP with the non-Turkish groups it had become evident that the latter considered the CUP as representative of the Turks. Even if there were non-Muslim members among the ranks of the CUP, these were considered semi-traitors by their own correligionists.

Thus, the fact that the Young Turks did not derive from all the sections of the Ottoman populations but were instead dominated by young officers whose overwhelming majority was Turkish-Muslim determined the political orientation of the movement. There were no non-Muslim officers and even the Albanians or Arabs who participated in the revolution later on opted for Albanian and Arab independence accordingly. Only ethnic groups that had no claim over specific lands, such as the Circassians, remained loyal. Thus, this Turkish majority saw in the movement not only the means for the defense of the Empire but also for the promotion of Turkish-Muslim nationalist aspirations. In other words, Turkish nationalist ideology was at the core of their political project from the beginning, Hanioglu argues. The reason why they claimed to be working for the preservation of the Ottoman state was the fact that there was no other alternative since this was the only Turkish state in existence. The other option would be - as soon happened - to start abandoning territories which were claimed by the non-Muslim populations living there. Being nationalists, though, the Young Turks opted for the 'maximal' solution. As for their official discourse, they adopted the ideal of the statesmen of the Tanzimat, the concept of *İttihad-ı Anasır* (Union of the elements), while actually aiming at the 'Ottomanization of the minorities'. These ideas were widespread in the Unionist publications of this period, where the term 'Turk' had replaced the term 'Ottoman'. But, similarly to the way the Young Turks abandoned their sociological theories, they also suppressed their Turkish ideology out of 'political opportunism'. Thus, Turkism, like Ottomanism or Pan-Islamism, constituted only a means to the success of their supreme political goal which was the integrity of the Empire. This 'fluid' propaganda of the CUP, it is claimed, accommodating diverse political views, allowed the Unionists to reach an understanding with various non-Muslim groups. The above view, though, does not take into account the capacity of the relevant discourse, even if it was opportunistic in character, to reshape the ideological expectations of its recipients. Moreover, the accusation of ideological inconsistency does not consider the eventuality of diversity and conflict among several views but solely relies on the assumption of a well-organized conspiracy.

Contrary to this view, Zürcher focuses on the central role of religious sentiments among the Muslims. He thus introduces the term 'Muslim nationalism' to describe the rise of patriotic sentiments and the voluntary involvement in warfare, and criticizes the Kemalist ideology precisely for having imposed a pattern of unanimity which eliminated any other version of collective loyalty and for having retrospectively denounced the expression of religious sentiments in politics.⁴

According to Kansu,⁵ who studies both the years before 1908 and the entire constitutional period until 1913, this period 'is a relentless struggle over the political future of Turkey'. Furthermore, Kansu challenges the idea that the 1908 Revolution can be regarded as a 'restoration' of the Constitution of 1876. On the contrary, he argues that the CUP brought about a complete transformation in the political structure and eventually the end of the Ottoman Empire. Relevant is his claim that the events of July 1908 constitute a real revolution and not a simple change of government. In



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other words, the period which followed cannot be conceived as a reform project inspired and applied by bureaucrats 'from above'. In his view, it was the old regime which was dependent upon the bureaucracy-civilian and military- whereas the Revolution aimed at constituting a liberal democratic regime. Moreover, during the Hamidian period, he argues, politics as a public undertaking was restricted in the 'court' and was deprived of any established mechanisms, such as a parliament, which could operate as a medium between this imperial milieu and the population. Therefore, politics were alienated from the public and the agents involved 'were not accountable to the propertied classes.' In other words, he makes it clear that this policy was not only against the public interest in general but against the interests of the bourgeoisie in particular. He thus uses the French model of a 'bourgeois revolution' making a distinction between a pre-modern political structure 'built upon "feudal" or communal ties on the one hand and on the state bureaucracy on the other' and the new era of a 'modern society and its constituent dominant groups organized around distinct class interests, as one would imagine under a liberal democratic environment'. Thus, the distinction between Unionists and Liberals, he claims, does not refer to a usual confrontation between democratic political parties which had appeared through a parliamentary procedure. The *Entente Liberale* was composed of both the remnants of the absolutist regime (disenchanted *pashas*, local notables and officially recognized parties) and the representatives of the various disenchanted Christian communities. Therefore, the opposition to CUP cannot be said to only represent conservative political attitudes. It merely aimed at restoring the old regime. Apparently, Kansu is applying the pattern of 'modernity' versus the 'ancient regime' representing parochialism, opportunism and reaction.

The last decade has witnessed the appearance of a number of works investigating the role of the non-Turkish communities and narrating the events from their point of view as well. Hasan Kayali,⁶ who studied the development of Arab nationalism in this crucial period, has demonstrated the extent to which local notables played a key role in the support of political prospects that might better serve their interests. Janet Klein, on the other hand,⁷ has demonstrated the split among the Kurdish leaders in the Kurdish populated areas in Anatolia who had vested interests in the old regime and those in Istanbul who supported the new regime. What is important in these studies is that loyalties in the pre-revolutionary era, as well as socio-political cleavages in the new era, have been utilized as an analytical tool allowing us to better comprehend the new alliances. In other words, it was not so much ideology as power relations and local social networks that produced new alliances.

On the other hand, it has been argued that non-Muslims as well shared this vision of the reform and survival of the Ottoman Empire despite the strongly Muslim-Turkish character of the movement. Kemal Karpaz⁸ in his seminal article on the Vlach *İttihatçı* Batzaria, among the founding members of the CUP, has pointed to exactly the same considerations and predicaments. Recently, Rober Koptaş,⁹ in his study on the Armenian parliamentary deputy Krikor Zohrab, has argued that despite the fact that Zohrab would fiercely criticize many CUP policies, he whole-heartedly endorsed the need for the regeneration and the integrity of the Ottoman Empire. Benjamin-Trygona Harany, in his study on the Suryani intellectuals and publicists of the period Naum Faik and Aşur Yusuf, has demonstrated the strong impact that the constitutional regime had on that community at least before the collapse of the precarious balance that led to the genocide of 1915. Thus, recently, a historiographical discourse has appeared that focuses on the loyalty of the non-Muslims to the Ottomanist ideal instead of the treacherous character of their revolutionary movements. We know that not only the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (*Dashnaksutiun*) in particular joined forces with the CUP both before and after 1908¹⁰ but also that prominent members of the community beyond the *Dashnaksutiun* endorsed Ottomanism and played a prominent role in everyday politics shortly before their extermination by their erstwhile Turkish comrades.



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In Greek historiography, also, already in the 1980s we come for the first time across publications concerning these events and, broadly speaking, Greek-Turkish relations. In a seminal article, Alexis Alexandris demonstrates the negative effect the involvement of the Greek consular authorities in the preparation for the 1908 elections had on the relationship between the Ottoman Greeks and the CUP. At the same time, he criticizes the arrogant attitude of certain Greek-Orthodox deputies in the Ottoman Parliament. Despite the tension, he points out, in 1912 the CUP wished to negotiate with the political leadership of the Greek-Orthodox, who nevertheless rejected the offer. Even more importantly, Alexandris describes the Unionists as 'politically immature' for wishing to safeguard the cooperation of communities which were until then politically subjected to the Muslim authorities. When, however, they faced massive opposition in the Parliament, especially after 1912, they became all the more authoritarian.¹¹ Thus, for the first time in Greek historiography, the belief in a plan for the annihilation of the non-Muslims is abandoned.

More recently Sia Anagnostopoulou in the context of her study on the Greek-Orthodox populations of Asia Minor has pointed out that the Young Turks, contrary to the first adherents of Turkish nationalism, managed to introduce notions pertinent to a kind of 'political nationalism'. The aim was the homogenization of the Ottoman society based on political, secular principles, and the establishment of a secular state that would rely on this homogenization. However, the only element that allows for the political articulation of Turkish nationalism and the construction and proliferation of a national identity among the Muslims was again 'religion'. Thus, the reintroduction of the distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims in the political discourse of the Young Turks undermines the very same concept of 'equality' whereas the secularization of the organizational structures of the society is being achieved again through 'religion'.

For instance, as far as education is concerned, according to the new legislation, it is not a homogeneous Ottoman education that is introduced. The community schools are preserved, while the state safeguards their financial control and the inspection over their programs and syllabi, thus removing this authority from the hands of the Patriarchate. As a matter of fact, the separate educational system is being preserved, the authority, however, of the Patriarch is removed. In other words, whereas before the education was considered 'Ottoman', whatever its content it might have been, as long as it was subjected to the jurisdiction of the Patriarch, who was acting as the representative of the government, now it would be considered 'Ottoman' only if it was subjected directly to the Ottoman authority. However, as pointed out, in this new era 'the previous "millet right" of education will constitute the legitimization for the claim of the "political" right of a separate education'.¹² Thus, the argument of the government was that if, in this new era, it accepted the 'political right' of the Greek-Orthodox community to have a separate education, a right legitimized by the previous 'millet right', Greek education would be recognized as 'Ottoman' and the whole effort of the state to remove the legitimacy of the 'millet system' would be undermined.

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Glossary :

	grand vizier Highest government official in the Ottoman Empire, second only to the Sultan. Before the 19th century he led the Ottoman army to war, when the Sultan could not go. He had vast administrative, legislative and judiciary responsibilities. During the reforms of the 19th century the office became even more important, as the grand vizier became in fact the head of the Ottoman government, very similar to the prime minister.
	millet The millet system was based on the division of the Ottoman subjects according to religion. The millets were the central communal institutions for the members of the respective ethno-religious groups, in particular for the non-Muslim subjects of the Empire. The millets had its own institutions and functions concerning self-administration, religion, education, justice, and social coherence. Although the division of the subjects according to their religion had always been fundamental in the Empire, the millets in their fully organized form originate in the end of the 18th century. In the 19th century, in particular during the period of the tanzimat reforms, the millets became the main institutions through which the non-Muslim subjects were incorporated in the Ottoman Empire.
	pasha (paşa) A title of high rank in the Ottoman political, administrative and military system, typically granted to governors of provinces and high army officials.
	tanzimat The 19th-century reforms in the Ottoman Empire, which were inaugurated in 1839 with the edict of Hatt-i Şerif and came to an end with the Constitution of 1876. The reforms, which were considered an effort for the modernization and liberalization of the state, concerned every aspect of the political, social and economic life in the Empire. Of particular importance were the ones that equated legally Muslim and non-Muslim subjects.