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Review of Murat Birdal, *The Political Economy of Ottoman Public Debt: Insolvency and European Financial Control in the Late Nineteenth Century*

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and the war veterans that filled their ranks, open roads represented a mythic place that allowed them to drive a modern vehicle par excellence, the truck, and pursue punitive expeditions against the socialists. The blackshirts’ love for roads also went hand in hand with their critique of the bourgeois and negative evaluation of old cities with their tortuous streets and piazzas. As the fascists identified urban life with comfort and cowardice Rome came to epitomize to them the decadence of old Italy. Within this context, the regime’s decision to change the Roman landscape through urban works fitted fascism’s self understanding as a new, forward-looking movement. A modern city needed to emerge from the past, albeit through a return to primordial greatness, that is, the ruins of mythical imperial Rome. New large boulevards where automobiles could zip by at high speed would achieve this goal even if that meant demolishing layers of the city’s history. Indeed, the destruction of nineteenth-century Liberal Rome was the welcome target of the regime’s restructuring. The elimination of such history allowed for a sharper valorization of ancient Rome’s ruins, the part of Italian history that the fascists privileged. Through destruction, fascism reaffirmed its warlike, violence-prone identity first born on the Carso. At the same time, boulevards such as via del Mare and via dell’Impero befitted fascism’s new empire. Roads were monuments to the regime and allowed Italians who travelled them to be aware of Rome’s ruins in ways that exalted action (looking at ruins while on a car ride) rather than contemplation. Through an examination of the master plan for Rome and the competition for the construction of the new Palazzo Littorio, as well as a recounting of Hitler’s 1938 visit to Rome, Baxa also makes the case that the transformation of Rome carried out by the regime’s urban politics showed fascism’s underlying paganism and its inclination towards spectacular politics. Ultimately, roads and ruins were fascism’s testament to its own glory.

The book provides an original exploration of fascism’s cultural landscape against the (physical) background of the war. Although the critical role of the Carso in the fascist imaginary needs to be more grounded, and some of the author’s inferences seem at times far-fetched and would benefit from more evidence, the allusions to the war and the Carsican landscape are thought-provoking and suggest the importance of doing further work in this area. New research could shed more light on the thread linking fascism to the war experience. This said, Baxa offers a unique and stimulating contribution towards reassessing fascism’s origins, both in terms of its actual historical beginnings with the blackshirts and squadrismo, and with regard to its cultural mythical identity built on the foundational experience of the First World War.


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In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire along with Egypt and Iran emerged as debtor states. This was the direct result of the extensive social,
political and economic transformations that were taking place in the region. Extensive reforms under the rubric of defensive modernization aimed at saving these countries from political decline. Economic reforms aimed at preventing the encroachment of European powers within the political economy of these countries. However, drastic changes in the capitalist world economy led to mounting pressure over these economies and transformed them from economically self-sufficient countries to peripheral debtor states. By concentrating on the Ottoman Empire, Murat Birdal’s excellent book on *The Political Economy of Ottoman Public Debt* provides us with a rare glimpse of a debtor state by analysing the major European institution that aimed at securing the payment of the Ottoman debt: the Ottoman Public Debt Administration (OPDA) founded in 1881.

In the past, the literature on the subject has been represented by two diverging views. On the one hand the OPDA was seen as an ‘outpost of the European Imperialism’ (126) and was considered as ‘a severe blow to Turkish pride’ (7). On the other hand scholars viewed the OPDA as a good example of the best features of European financial management that led to the regulation of the Ottoman finances, construction of railways, boosting of the external trade, and as an institution, became a role model for the Republic of Turkey. Despite the fact that Birdal has more inclinations towards the latter, he argues nevertheless that his book ‘emphasizes the dialectics between imperialism and economic modernization’(1). In his analysis of the OPDA’s role in the peripheralization of the Ottoman Empire, Birdal draws on the concepts of core/periphery developed in ‘world system’ theory and combines them with an institutional analysis.

Relying on the annual reports of the OPDA, the Council of Foreign Bondholders (CFB), and the Annual Reports of the Régie Company, Birdal divides his book into six chapters. Birdal discusses the period prior to the formation of the OPDA by concentrating on the Trade Agreement of 1838, which removed all monopolies and restrictions on foreign trade, allowing foreign subjects to export and import all sorts of goods. With the increase of the Ottoman foreign debt coupled with the inability of the Porte to meet its financial commitments, European powers recommended the establishment of an international committee ‘that would supervise the resources of the Empire assigned to debt service’ (53). By the Decree of Muharrem on 20 December 1881, the OPDA was established by the representatives of the major European powers. Under the terms of the decree,

the revenue from the salt and tobacco monopolies, the stamp and spirits taxes, the fish tax, and the silk tithe in certain districts as well as the Bulgaria tribute, the revenue from Eastern Rumelia and the surplus of the Cyprus revenue were irrevocably ceded to the OPDA, until the debt was liquidated. (54)

By doing so the Ottoman Empire ceded more than one-third of state revenues to the OPDA.

Chapter 3 of the book examines the establishment and the functions of the OPDA. Here Birdal argues that a significant portion of the loans in the OPDA
period were allocated to rebuilding the infrastructure of the Empire by concentrating on the railways and hence contributed to the process of integrating the Ottoman provinces into the world economy. Chapter 4 concentrates on the organizational structure of the OPDA and the administration of the five indirect revenues: salt, silk, stamp, spirits and fish (108–24). Chapter 5 for the first time provides an in-depth analysis of the structure, mechanism, and the functioning of the Régie Company which was established in 1883 and held the tobacco monopoly in the Empire for 42 years (132). Birdal’s last chapter is one of the most important of the book. Here, he discusses the role of the OPDA in the transformation of the Ottoman economy and argues that the Turkish Republic ‘inherited most of the institutions created during the OPDA era’ (165).

Overall, Birdal has made an important contribution to the economic history of a debtor state in the Middle East. His book should be read by every student and scholar interested in the political economy of the Ottoman Empire. The book does, however, have some minor shortcomings. First, it would have been much better if Birdal had concentrated in the introduction of his book on the comparative aspects of debtor states in the region. Second, the book does not reflect about public opinion in the Empire or amongst exiles towards the OPDA. Third, Birdal tends to view the peripheralization triggered by the OPDA in positive terms since it ‘brought about not only a weaker state apparatus but also a more efficient one in terms of facilitating the operations of the world economy’ (9). However, he does not discuss the fact that the only beneficiaries of this peripheralization were the non-Muslim elements of the Empire. Finally, it would have been more productive if Birdal had devoted a chapter to the ways in which the early Republican economic institutions benefited from the institutional reforms initiated by the OPDA.


Reviewed by: Valdis O Lumans, University of South Carolina Aiken, USA

The subtitle of *The Death Marches* by Daniel Blatman, *The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide*, introduces the author’s main point. Traditionally viewed by historians as a senseless final atrocity of a Third Reich in its death throes and as the last vindictive act of the Holocaust, for Blatman the so-called ‘Death Marches’ constitute a more complex, broader phenomenon: ‘It was the combination of military, political, economic, and ideological circumstances with local decisions that decided the fate of the prisoners, and not necessarily their national or racial identity’ (417). Essentially their purpose was to salvage all surviving Nazi slave labour, Jews and non-Jews alike. The ‘Marches’ started as a relocation of this labour force from militarily threatened areas to continue German wartime production away from the front, but they rapidly devolved into frantic, decentralized, at times ideologically spurred, spiteful attempts to deny these skeletal shadows of human beings liberation by the Reich’s advancing enemies. Expertly versed in the relevant and most