

Disliking Others

LOATHING, HOSTILITY,
AND DISTRUST
IN PREMODERN
OTTOMAN LANDS

.....

Ottoman and Turkish Studies

Series Editor

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Edited by

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Introduction

Historians know well that post-nationalist societies are not unique in nurturing dislike—or even hatred—of foreigners and members of marginalized subcultures. The perception of certain groups as outsiders, or as alternative groups within a society, is a salient feature of bygone societies as well. In fact, it would be fair to say that dislike of others has been a persistent condition of society throughout history. This volume explores that theme within the premodern Ottoman context.

Recent historical studies on the Ottoman Empire, as well as a contemporary political rhetoric that glorifies the Ottoman enterprise, have taken for granted that subjects of the Ottoman polity flourished under a so-called *Pax Ottomanica*. This widely—but uncritically—accepted view posits that the economic and social stability of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made the Ottoman lands a relatively safe and secure environment for trade, the flourishing of arts and crafts, peaceful coexistence and settlement, particularly for groups—for example, Jews—for whom the situation in Ottoman lands compared favorably to that in other parts of the world. Whatever the validity of such a supposition, the relative stability of Ottoman lands at that time did not preclude established or even formal antipathies among groups of people within Ottoman society. Some prejudices stretched back to the Middle Ages and earlier; others arose from contemporary social and political tensions. Religious convictions and affiliations were no doubt a factor in the formation of mutual antipathy, but conflicting economic interests played a significant role as well. Thus, historical sources suggest that the social and cultural realities of the premodern Ottoman world were far more complex than is assumed by the proponents of *Pax Ottomanica*—a phenomenon that, plausibly, can be explained and appreciated by historians within its limitations but certainly represents a myth in the way it is understood, especially by

conservative masses, and utilized by populist politicians and neo-Ottomanist demagogues alike.

The critical scholarly evaluation of this myth constituted the principal objective of a symposium at which most of the articles in this volume were first presented. Organized by the editors in October 2015 at the University of Chicago, this symposium aimed to explore two related themes in the context of premodern Ottoman lands: xenophobia (dislike of foreigners) and alterophobia (dislike of “the other,” that is, members of alternative groups within the same society). Defining these terms as “irrational or unreasoned” fear of outsiders and foreigners, scholars have noted the socially and religiously stratified structure of Ottoman society. A systematic analysis of antipathies among communities has not yet been attempted, however. Most studies that investigate controversies stemming from antipathy between groups within the Ottoman context have focused on the nineteenth century, exploring enmities that resulted from varied expressions of nationalism as well as religious identities underscored by nationalistic ideals. These findings, while valuable for the present project, have limited relevance to an effort to understand social antipathies in early modern Ottoman society.

Of course, “dislike” takes a multitude of forms and degrees. Whereas systematic state persecution, forced migration, and violence are located at one end of the spectrum, general contempt or distrust in business dealings can be situated at the other. The editors opted to focus on antipathies among groups of people within Ottoman society. As such, this volume features several essays that contribute to the development of a historical approach to classifying forms of social antipathies and contextualizing them in early modern Ottoman society.

We do not mean to suggest that dislike or distrust was the primary defining characteristic of Ottoman society—or of any past society, for that matter. On the contrary, we are well aware that the cosmopolitanist nature of a multiethnic and multireligious empire allowed for the nonconfrontational coexistence of, and various forms of amicable relationships among, diverse communities. We further emphasize that the Ottoman polity represents a particularly fascinating and fruitful field of historical inquiry because, as an empire, it by necessity allowed not only for the existence of a multitude of officially recognized religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups but also for the coexistence of competing claims held by these subject communities. This volume, therefore, explores forms and expressions

of dislike within the early modern Ottoman context, adding nuance to an otherwise uncritically accepted narrative that presumes the uninterrupted peaceful coexistence of various communities under the aegis of a tolerant imperial polity.

Undoubtedly, an interest in reconstructing such sentiments faces significant difficulties. The authors whose works are presented here were asked to reconstruct, to the extent possible, the mind-set of people living in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Ottoman lands. We hoped to explore patterns in expressions of dislike in literature, historiography, and religious texts, particularly in those texts that one would classify as “ego documents,” such as memoirs or otherwise personalized accounts. By studying a range of historical narratives, the contributors to the volume were able to develop rare insight into the self-described perceptions of individuals. Perceptions are necessarily difficult to delineate and can be open to multiple interpretations. Moreover, delineating negative perceptions can prove particularly difficult, in part because alterophobic sentiments often were not explicitly presented. Rather, one must carefully read between the lines, sweeping through the adjectives used to describe a group of people and comparing them to expressions used to describe various other groups, in order to reconstruct a perception. Utilizing a range of historical narratives yields opportunities to identify people’s perceptions, which can prove exceptionally useful for understanding the intricate workings of past societies. The line of inquiry should not center on perceptions alone; repercussions of antipathy felt between groups compose another important component of analysis. We must be cautious, however, not to conflate feelings of prejudice or dislike with actions, which are likewise not necessarily the result of enduring negative cognition and feelings. Our approach thus considers rhetoric of dislike and actions of hate as two separate analytical categories.

The articles in this volume challenge the received wisdom in the field of Ottoman studies in a variety of ways. Perhaps most importantly, they probe the concept and nature of diversity in premodern Ottoman lands, and focus on a variety of tensions within early modern Ottoman society, by using hitherto unexplored or underutilized historical sources. Some of the essays explore relatively familiar factional divisions; as such, they analyze forms of dislike between groups defined by their denominational belonging or scrutinize expressions of aversion toward traditionally marginalized and alienated groups of people—such as Jews, gypsies, women,

or blacks. Several other contributions focus on forms of antipathy that, one could argue, were peculiar to the Ottoman context. Highlighting the evolution of Ottoman attitudes toward Circassian Mamluks in Egypt and Istanbul, the dislike between freeborn Muslims and converts, and the one-off stereotyping of people from a central Anatolian town, these essays shed light on the nature and character of coexistence between inhabitants of a vast geography. Two articles in the volume contribute to the previously inadequate dialogue between Ottoman studies and the field of southeast European history by highlighting long-standing tensions among Christian communities in the Balkans. Last, but certainly not least, several essays bring forth original arguments based on fiction, poetry, and the rather well-known autobiographical travel account of the celebrated seventeenth-century explorer Evliyā Çelebî.

Collectively, the essays in this volume highlight that the dislike of others is not conditioned solely by religious affiliation. They also remind us that we should be cognizant of the inaccuracy of identifying large groups of people with overarching categories such as *the Muslims*, *the Christians*, *the Jews*, *the Druze*, and the like. In fact, the attribution of group identities or group perceptions to any of these larger communities over time is of limited analytical value—for such attributions are at least partially due to the historian's lack of the sources necessary to accurately reconstruct the intricate inner workings of these communities.

Therefore, we wish to offer the following research questions as a road map for further scrutiny of Ottoman diversities. We developed these questions in the early stages of our project, to envision potential directions for this edited volume and to serve as guidelines for establishing the specificity of various forms of dislike, either to Ottoman society or to the early modern era:

Can prejudices be traced to sacred religious texts, or to traditions emanating from them? What role can be ascribed to religious conviction and affiliation in the creation of cultures of aversion? Did religious traditions influence one another in creating collective antipathies toward third-party groups? What were the similarities and differences among the respective antipathies held by different religious communities? How can one compare and understand the antipathies felt by members of institutionalized religions toward communities, ideas, or the practices of syncretic religious groups, or by the marginal offshoots of a religion? How did political circumstances and effective state propaganda occasion new antipathies?

How did being a member of the majority or a minority group shape an individual's feelings about other communities? How did it effect his or her ability—and willingness—to express dislike in word or deed? How were sentiments of antipathy directed toward specific ethnic groups, regardless of their religious identities? What were Ottoman elites' common perceptions of foreign others, with whom they may have had little or no contact? How did such perceptions trickle down to the common people? How were negative attitudes toward the poor, homeless, and outcasts of society manifested? How did inhabitants of the imperial center of Istanbul, or of other established urban cultural centers, perceive people immigrating to their cities from the provinces? How can one characterize, generalize, or trace the particularities of antipathies based on gender or on sexual orientation within Ottoman society? Were the antipathies of religious or societal groups toward certain others particular to time periods (for example, the aftermath of a rebellion) or to certain geographies (for example, large cities or borderlands)?

Comparative studies to substantiate the forms and causes of dislike across premodern societies of similar configuration will no doubt open new avenues of research and help rescue historians from feelings of singularity. In offering our preliminary findings to the scholarly world via this volume, we hope that the questions above will also guide researchers as they explore and inquire into similar problems in their respective sources.