

A Reformist Philosophy of History: The Case of Ahmed Vâsîf Efendi

*Ethan Menchinger**

Islahatçı bir Tarih Felsefesi: Ahmed Vâsîf Efendi Örneği

Öz ■ Bu makalede, vakanüvis ve devlet adamı Ahmed Vâsîf Efendi'nin (ö. 1806) 18. yüzyılın sonlarında Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda tanık olduğu değişime dair bazı eserlerinde ileri sürdüğü görüşleri, yazarın tarih anlayışı ve felsefi fikirleri ışığında incelenmektedir. Vâsîf'in argümanlarının gayet akli ve de basit kadercilikten uzak olmasının yanında, imparatorluğun bu fırtınalı döneminde ortaya çıkan tarihî ve ahlaki meselelere de matuf olduğu ileri sürülmektedir. Ahmed Vâsîf Efendi salt Osmanlı'nın askerî başarısızlıklarını ve ıslahat ihtiyacını ön plana çıkarmamış, aynı zamanda yaşadığı evreni, vak'alar arasındaki nedenselliği ve tarihsel değişimi, yine kendisinin geliştirdiği kuramlarla geniş bir çerçevede açıklamaya çalışmıştır. Aynı zamanda bir saray görevlisi olan Ahmed Vâsîf Efendi, kendi hamisi olan sultanların ve Osmanlı devlet adamlarının söz konusu dönemde oluşan şartları nasıl algıladıklarına dair bize önemli bilgiler vermektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Islahat, III. Selim, Vakanüvisler, Tarih Yazıcılığı, Tarih Felsefesi

Historians rightly see the late 18th century Ottoman Empire as a sort of crucible for reform, when sultans Mustafa III (1757-1774), Abdülhamid I (1774-1789), and Selim III (1789-1807) began the first fitful attempts at European-

* University of Michigan, USA.

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style administrative and military modernization. These efforts are well-attested in scholarship. Yet much less understood is the intellectual climate which surrounded this activity, an outpouring of energies in response to the shock of defeat and imperial collapse. Little research to date has viewed the period from an intellectual angle, to say nothing of how Ottomans specifically understood and rationalized their empire's reverses.¹

This article explores how one Ottoman – the bureaucrat and court historian Ahmed b. Ebülbekâ Hasan al-Harbûtî, called Vâsîf Efendi – grappled with these issues. The last quarter of the 18th century was especially traumatic for the empire, and the political life of the period suggests that elites underwent a deep moral and intellectual crisis.² Military collapse, eroding power, bankruptcy, and the rise of hostile powers like Russia seemed to undermine any pretense of “Ottoman exceptionalism,” the widespread belief that the empire was, somehow, divinely favored,³ while at the same time they demanded cogent answers: *Why did this happen? How could this happen? What must be done?*

Vâsîf's is a complex, cerebral response. The empire's unsettled state posed moral and historical problems that figure at the very heart of his writings. It is no surprise, then, that in his work, and particularly his chronicle and historical essays,

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- 1 Intellectual history remains one of the biggest lacunae in the study of the 18th century. See Jane Hathaway, “Rewriting Eighteenth Century Ottoman History,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 19 (2004): 29-53. Some outstanding exceptions include Virginia H. Aksan, *An Ottoman Statesman in War and Peace: Ahmed Resmi Efendi, 1700-1783* (Leiden, 1995); Kemal Beydilli, “Küçük Kaynarca'dan Tanzimat'a İslahat Düşünceleri,” *İlmi Araştırmalar Dergisi* 8 (1999): 25-64; Kahraman Şakul, “Nizâm-ı Cedîd Düşüncesinde Batılılaşma ve İslami Modernleşme,” *İlmi Araştırmalar Dergisi* 19 (2005): 117-150; Fatih Yeşil, *Aydınlanma Çağında bir Osmanlı Kâtibi: Ebubekir Râtib Efendi (1750-1799)* (İstanbul, 2010); and Aysel Yıldız's compendious “Vaka-yı Selimiyye or the Selimiyye Incident: A Study of the May 1807 Rebellion.” (Ph.D. dissertation, Sabancı Üniversitesi, 2008).
 - 2 For the idea of a moral crisis in the 18th century Ottoman Empire, Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, (Montreal, 1964), 26-30; George W. Gawrych, “Şeyh Galib and Selim III: Mevlevism and the Nizam-ı Cedid,” *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 4 (1987): 93-96.
 - 3 Gottfried Hagen defines “Ottoman exceptionalism” as the belief that history culminates in the Ottoman dynasty, which is divinely supported, combines absolute justice and zeal in jihad, and will endure until the end of time, “Afterword” in Robert Dankoff, *An Ottoman Mentality: The World of Evliya Çelebi* (Leiden, 2004), 233-241. See also Gottfried Hagen and Ethan L. Menchinger, “Ottoman Historical Thought,” in *A Companion to Global Historical Thought*, ed. Presanjit Duara et al. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 92-106.

Vâsîf not only made Ottoman defeat and reform his key concern but outlined a more general framework for understanding the universe, causation, and historical change – one might say, in a word, a philosophy of history. And Vâsîf was by no means alone. As a member of the court, he reflects a milieu increasingly concerned with political reform, agency, and moral responsibility. In this regard, his perspective is unique only in its degree of detail.

Ahmed Vâsîf and his Corpus

Before examining Ahmed Vâsîf's philosophy of history, it will be useful to say a word about his life and work.⁴ Born in Baghdad in the 1730s, Vâsîf entered state service around the year 1768 and began a career of no small distinction. In the nearly forty years between 1768 and 1806, the year of his death, he undertook a number of diplomatic initiatives. Chancery posts aside, Vâsîf negotiated truces in both the 1768-1774 and 1787-1792 Russian-Ottoman wars, helped to re-open the imperial printing press, and served as ambassador to Spain in 1787-1788 and court historian (*vekâyinüvis*) for four terms under Abdülhamid I and Selim III. He was well-traveled and highly-placed; his duties, moreover, brought him into contact with a surprising number of Enlightenment-era personalities: Russian generals Piotr Rumiantsev and Nikolai Repnin, Carlos III of Spain, the English littérateur William Beckford, the Spanish admiral Don Federico Gravina, and Catherine the Great.

As an intellectual Vâsîf was meanwhile one of the most formidable Ottomans of the 18th century. His corpus includes a divan of poetry, an embassy report (*sefâretnâme*), and short works of belles-lettres, geography, and printing in addition to a history covering the entire second half of the 18th century (roughly,

4 Printed sources on Vâsîf include Ahmed Âsım, *Âsım Târîhi* (İstanbul, 1870), 1: 255-259; İsmail Paşa al-Bağdâdî, *Hedîyyetü'l-Ârifîn: Esmâ'ül-Müellifîn ve Âsâr'ül-Musannifîn* (İstanbul, 1951-55) 1: 183; M. Nuri Çınarcı, "Şeyhülislâm Ârif Hikmet Bey'in Tezkiretüş-Şu'ârâsı ve Transkripsiyonlu Metni," (master's thesis, Gaziantep Üniversitesi, 2007), 108; Süleymân Fâik, *Sefinetü'r-Rüesa* (İstanbul, 1852), 146-149; Davûd Fâtın, *Tezkere-i Hâtîmetü'l-Eş'âr* (İstanbul, 1854), 431-433; Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, *Geschichte der osmanischen Dichtkunst* (Pest, 1837), 3: 552-554; *İslâm Ansiklopedisi (İA)* (İstanbul, 1940-1987), s.v. "Vâsîf"; Cemâleddin Karslızâde, *Osmanlı Tarih ve Müverrihleri: Âyine-i Zürefâ*, haz. Mehmet Arslan (İstanbul, n.d.), 64-66; Mehmed Nâil Tuman, *Tuhfe-i Nâilî: Divân Şâirlerinin Muhtasar Biyografileri* (İstanbul, 2001), 2: 1139; Ahmed Vâsîf, *Mehâsinü'l-Âsâr ve Hakâikü'l-Abbâr*, haz. Mücteba İlgürel (İstanbul, 1978), xix-xlvi; Otocar von Schlechta-Wssehrd, "Die osmanischen Geschichtsschreiber der neueren Zeit," *Denkschriften der phil. hist. Klasse der Kaiserl. Ak. der Wissenschaften* 8 (1856): 5-9. A careful survey of the author's own work, however, reveals much fuller biographical data.

1753-1805).⁵ Vâsîf, or so it would appear, also authored the pro-reform tract *Koca Sekbanbaşı Risâlesi* and the so-called “Maçın Mahzarı,” which the Ottoman army sent to Selim III from the warfront in 1791 expressing their refusal to fight.⁶ By all lights he was willful, opinionated, and highly involved in the political and intellectual controversies of his day.

Vâsîf’s most important work, however, is his court chronicle *Mehâsinü’l-Âsâr ve Hakâikü’l-Abbâr* (*The Charms and Truths of Relics and Annals*). Perhaps the most extensive Ottoman histories of the 18th century belong to the office of the court historian, or *vekâyinüvis*. The *vekâyinüvis* recorded the dynasty’s contemporary history as a salaried official, often while serving simultaneously in other posts, and submitted his work to the sultan in regular installments. During the 18th century over thirteen men served as court historian. Their efforts, like Vâsîf’s, number thousands of folios and remain mostly unpublished.⁷

Current literature on Ottoman *vekâyinüvises* leaves many stones unturned. Why, to what purpose, and with what degree of autonomy these men composed history is largely taken for granted. Bekir Kütükoğlu, for example, assumes court historians had essentially the same aim as the modern historian: to present the past for its own sake in all factual detail.⁸ The view that *vekâyinüvises* somehow

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- 5 These works survive in numerous manuscripts and often author or presentation copies. No comprehensive bibliography exists. The best available, though outdated, is in *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), xlviii-l.
- 6 The identity of “Koca Sekbanbaşı” seems finally to have been resolved in favor of Vâsîf. See Beydilli, “Sekbanbaşı Risalesi’nin Müellifi Hakkında,” *Türk Kültürü İncelemeleri Dergisi* 12 (2005): 221-224. Cf. Ali Birinci, “Koca Sekbanbaşı Risalesinin Müellifi Tokatlı Mustafa Aga (1131-1239),” in *Prof. Dr. İsmail Aka Armağanı* (İzmir, 1999), 105-120; Beydilli, “Eureka, Eureka veya Errare Humanum Est,” *İlmi Araştırmalar* 9 (2000): 45-66; Hakan Erdem, “The Wise Old Man, Propagandist and Ideologist: Koca Sekbanbaşı on the Janissaries, 1807,” in *Individual and Ideologies and Society: Tracing the Mosaic of Mediterranean History* (Finland, 2001), 154-177.
- 7 Bekir Kütükoğlu’s long article remains the most useful survey, “Vekayinüvis,” in *Vekayinüvis Makaleler* (İstanbul, 1994), 103-138. Lewis V. Thomas gives the best account of an individual chronicler in *A Study of Naima* (New York, 1972). For the 19th century see Christoph Neumann’s *Araç Tarih, Amaç Tanzimat: Tarih-i Cevdet’in Siyasi Anlamı*, trans. Meltem Arun (İstanbul, 1999).
- 8 Kütükoğlu, “Vekayinüvis.” His words on Vâsîf’s method are most revealing, idem, “Müverrih Vâsîf’in Kaynaklarından Hâkim Tarihi,” in *Vekayinüvis Makaleler*, 139-194; idem, *Çeşmizâde Tarihi* (İstanbul, 1959), vii-xxiv. See furthermore Filiz Çalışkan, “Vâsîf’in Kaynaklarından Enverî Tarihi,” in *Prof. Dr. Bekir Kütükoğlu’na Armağan* (İstanbul, 1991), 143-163.

represented the past in a neutral, Rankean light, “as it actually happened,” is also found in studies by Rhoads Murphey, Baki Tezcan, and others.⁹ With few exceptions do scholars evaluate these histories as the self-contained products of individuals operating within distinct intellectual milieux. To Vâsîf, for instance, history was inherently didactic, useful for its political and moral examples.¹⁰ He was by no means neutral but actively interpreted history. What is more, unlike earlier court historians Vâsîf, commissioned by Sultan Selim III, edited and rewrote the work of at least seven predecessors. He was, quite literally, rewriting the history of his empire. Seen in this way, his corpus expresses a set of values and concerns, a way of viewing the world, likely shared by his patron the sultan and a powerful part of Ottoman society.

It is noteworthy in this respect, finally, that Vâsîf consistently aligned himself with reformist circles. In his early career, he cultivated Grand Vezir Muhsinzâde Mehmed Paşa and a group that included *reisülküttâb* Abdürrezzâk Bâhir Efendi and Ahmed Resmî Efendi. This trend continued in the 1780s, when he received posts and patronage from Grand Vezir Halil Hamid Paşa. Under Selim III, meanwhile, Vâsîf moved in decidedly *Nizâm-ı Cedîd* circles. With growing prestige, culminating in his selection as *reisülküttâb* in 1805, he fraternized with Selimian reformers like Tatarcık Abdullah Molla, *sırkâtibi* Ahmed Fâiz Efendi, and Mahmûd Râif Efendi.¹¹ These connections should not be gainsaid in Vâsîf’s writings. His views at least partly express those of his milieu, which was sympathetic to political reform.

What follows traces Vâsîf’s understanding of the empire, reform, and the mechanisms of history – that is, his philosophy of history. It moves chronologically through four illustrative works. Beginning with Vâsîf’s earliest words on the subject, an essay (*risâle*) submitted to Abdülhamid I in 1784, it proceeds through

9 Tezcan, for example, argues that court chronicles were seen as “neutral bearers of historical reality,” “The Politics of Early Modern Ottoman Historiography,” in *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire* (Cambridge, 2007), 167-198. Murphey says court historians gave “minutely-detailed, factually accurate description; in other words to portray the world *wie es eigentlich gewesen*,” “Ottoman Historical Writing in the Seventeenth-Century: A Survey of the General Development of the Genre after the Reign of Sultan Ahmed I (1603-1617),” *Archivum Ottomanicum* 13 (1993-1994): 282. For dissenting views, Ethan L. Menchinger, “‘Gems for Royal Profit’: Prefaces and the Practice of Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Court History,” *History Studies* 2:2 (2010): 127-151; Hagen and Menchinger, “Ottoman Historical Thought.”

10 For example, *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 3; *Mehâsin*, İstanbul Arkeoloji Müzesi Kütüphanesi (İAM), nr. 355, 3a-3b.

11 See again *Mehâsin* (İlgürel).

his 1789-1794 chronicle, a 1798 piece on the French invasion of Egypt, and ends with sections of his chronicle written around 1802.

The 1784 Risâle

Some of Vâsîf's earliest words on reform, causation, and historical change are found in a short essay (*risâle*) he wrote at the behest of Abdülhamid I and inserted in a chronicle entry for 1784.¹² The timing was no coincidence. For some ten years the Ottoman court had been mired in indecision and bickering, loath to accept the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca and in particular the loss of the Crimean peninsula. The task of reform fell eventually to Vâsîf's patron Grand Vezir Halil Hamid Paşa (1782-1785), whose efforts elicited the historian's hope and lavish praise.¹³

That year, Vâsîf tells us, the Duke of Montmorency-Luxembourg¹⁴ sent the sultan a letter by leave of the French king. Within the Duke suggested that Ottoman territorial losses were due to inadequate training and that their forces were ill-prepared in military science. He hence proposed a mission to instruct the Ottoman army in fortification, mortars, and cannonry.¹⁵ Abdülhamid was inclined to accept the French offer and gave a guarded assent. However, he asked his court historian Vâsîf to first prepare a tract on the soldiers used by Christian kings and related topics.¹⁶

The 1784 essay stridently rejects French offices. The armies of Christian and Muslim kings, Vâsîf says, are inherently different. While European rulers use orphans as soldiers or conscript peasants, employing them under duress, Ottoman levies are virtuous, devoted to their leaders, and cannot be compelled. Their

12 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 149-152; İAM nr. 355, 129a-132b. Cevdet adds a condensed version to his history, *Târih-i Cevdet* (İstanbul, 1891/1892), 3: 85-88. Şerif Mardin also discusses the essay in "The Mind of the Turkish Reformer, 1700-1900," in *Arab Socialism* (Salt Lake City, 1969), 24-48.

13 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 5-9; İAM nr. 355, 5a-8b. Vâsîf goes so far as to call the Grand Vezir the "sâhib-i mia," or the one whom "the Lord God sends to this community at the beginning of every 100 years...who restores its religion." On Halil Hamid Paşa see *Sefînet*, 118-120; *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DİA)* (İstanbul, 1997), s.v. "Halil Hamid Paşa"; and İ. H. Uzunçarşılı, "Sadrazam Halil Hamid Paşa," *Türkiyat Mecmuası* 5 (1935): 213-267.

14 Probably Anne Charles Sigismond de Montmorency-Luxembourg (d. 1803), a French commander and the Duke of Piney-Luxembourg.

15 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 149; İAM nr. 355, 129a-129b.

16 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 150; İAM nr. 355, 130a.

unity and commitment to holy war guarantee victory, even if, from time to time, the infidel prevails; nor does Vâsîf think such men will ever stoop to learn enemy arts.¹⁷

Vâsîf thus begins from the vantage point of Ottoman exceptionalism, a belief he shared with many, if not all, of his peers.¹⁸ But affairs raised a disturbing question: if the Ottomans were favored by God, if they were guaranteed victory, why did they now fare so poorly in war? Vâsîf presents this dilemma first and foremost as a divine trial. “If things have now altered so that our soldiers are denied victory,” he says, “and if the enemy sometimes prevails by land and sea, this is an effect of their faculty of *istidrâc*, produced by satanic efforts.”¹⁹ To Vâsîf *istidrâc* – a theological concept whereby God gives unbelievers success, making them prideful, in order to lure them to damnation and test believers’ fidelity – has led to recent Ottoman defeats. However, he assures us that *istidrâc* is rare and cannot last long.²⁰ The enemy’s arms and organization are no different than in the past and in the end the Ottomans shall continue to prevail. This fine point is tied to God’s will.²¹

By invoking God’s will, the 1784 essay raises problems of historical causation and agency that were at the forefront of 18th century intellectual debate. While many Ottomans held that mankind had free will of a sort in moral, civil, and political life, and indeed that to deny its existence was sinful,²² there are strong

17 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 150-151; İAM nr. 355, 130a-131a.

18 See for example his words on the merits of the Ottoman dynasty, *Mehâsin* (İstanbul, 1804), I: 4-10.

19 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 151; İAM nr. 355, 131a. All source translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

20 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 151; İAM nr. 355, 131a. “İstidrâcın hükmü ise kalîl ve her zamân emeli câri olmak müstehil...” The 19th century scholar Abdülhakîm b. Mustafa Arvâsî gives this definition of *istidrâc*: “Fâsıkların (günahkârların), bilinmeyen bazı şeyleri haber vermeleri, âdet üstü hârikulâde hâdiseler göstermeleridir. Allahü teâlâ, her şeyi bir sebep altında yaratmaktadır. Allahü teâlâ, sevdiği insanlara, iyilik ve ikrâm olmak için ve azılı düşmanlarını aldatmak için, bunlara âdetini bozarak sebepsiz şeyler yaratıyor. Bunlar kâfirlerden, fâsıklardan, günâhî çok olanlardan zuhûr ederse, istidrâc denir ki, derece derece kıymetini indirmek demektir.” Quoted in *Evlîyalar Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul, 1992-1993), I: 21. Cf. Şemseddin Sâmî, *Kâmûs-ı Türki* (İstanbul, 1899/1900), 98. Ibn al-‘Arabî also discusses this “divine guile” in some detail in *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, summarized by William Chittick in *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabî’s Metaphysical Imagination* (Albany, NY, 1989), 267-269.

21 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 151; İAM nr. 355, 131a.

22 Ottoman theologians argued as much in contemporary tracts. Şamil Öçal, “Osmanlı Kelamcıları Eşarî miydi? Muhammad Akkirmânî’nin İnsan Hürreti Anlayışı,” *Dinî*

indications of a sentiment – how widespread is not known – of fatalism, or at least of resigned despair, at even the very highest levels. Mouradgea D’Ohsson, for example, a contemporary, states that a notion of total predestination held increasing sway over much of the population and that complaints against inertia were seen as gross impieties. Whether this attitude was genuine or, as was not uncommon, a cynical way to shirk responsibility is beside the point.²³ Interestingly, and perhaps indicative of a general loss of nerve, others maintain that some Ottomans privately owned a sort of deism or atheism and denied God any active role in earthly affairs.²⁴

This question of agency took on added immediacy in the late 18th century Ottoman Empire. In particular, it became closely tied to political reform and man’s control over the outcome of matters like warfare. Vâsif’s rejection of the French offer leads him to speak openly on this subject, in a passage that merits quotation:

Indeed do victory and defeat depend on the will of God. As for Christian nations, their beliefs dispute this. Hence they say, following a group of philosophers, that the circumstances of war are among particular events [*umûr-ı cüziyye*] and that God – Heaven forbid! – has no effect on particular events. They not only ridiculously contend that whichever side can muster superior means [*esbâb*] of warfare will prevail, but they produce proofs weaker than a spider’s web, crediting victory to the perfection of means [*esbâb*] and necessities and heedless of the sacred import of “Not the least atom is hidden from Him” and “There is no aid but from God the Almighty.”²⁵

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- Araştırmalar* 5 (1999): 225-254; Arif Yıldırım, “Karlı Davud (Davud-i Karsî) Efendi’nin İrade-i Cüz’iyye Anlayışı,” *A. Ü. Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi* 15 (2000): 189-199. See also Mouradgea D’Ohsson, *Tableau général de l’empire othoman* (Paris, 1788-1824), 1: 166-168; Mardin, “Mind of the Turkish Reformer,” 29-30.
- 23 D’Ohsson, 1: 166-177. For a cynical use of “fatality,” see *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 167-171. Here Halil Hamid rebukes statesmen who criticize decisions in private but refuse to give their opinion in council, saying only “It is the will of God” or “It is the requirement of the turning celestial spheres.”
- 24 Elias Habesci, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (London, 1784), 135-137; Lady Mary Wortley-Montagu, *The Turkish Embassy Letters* (London, 2006), 62, 110-111; and Sir James Porter, *Observations on the Religion, Law, Government, and Manners of the Turks* (Dublin 1768), 31-32. Some of these are quoted by Berkes, 28-29.
- 25 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 151; İAM nr. 355, 131a-131b. Quotations are from the Quran, 34:3 and 3:126, 8:10 respectively. Mardin too quotes this passage, “Mind of the Turkish Reformer,” 28.

Vâsîf, to refute this view, then cites past campaigns in which Ottoman troops won in spite of ill-preparedness and disorder. With such counter-examples, “how,” he asks, “can anyone impute victory to refinement of the means of war [*tekâmîl-i esbâb-ı ceng*] and defeat to inadequate arms?”²⁶

This passage requires some explanation, for it partakes in a long-standing philosophical and theological discourse. “Particular events (*umûr-ı cüzîyye*)” and their counter-part “universal events (*umûr-ı külliyye*)” are key terms in the Ottoman causal lexicon on relations between the earthly and divine. Both are traceable to earlier Islamic scholars and were current in some schools of theology along with the concept of “particular will (*irâde-i cüzîyye*).” Particular will, sometimes translated less strictly as “free will,” denotes human will as the end product and reflection of the divine will (*irâde-i külliyye*). “Particular events,” then, are worldly events that admit human agency, while “universal events” encompass larger historical processes linked to divine pre-ordination.²⁷

Ottoman intellectuals were quite familiar with this discourse. In the 17th century work *Tuhfetü'l-Kibâr*, for example, the polymath Kâtib Çelebi explains at some length how worldly causation operates.²⁸ God, to begin, is the Almighty and Primary Cause (*müsebbibü'l-esbâb*) who decrees all things in His earthly dominion. However, God also created the world as a world of causes (*âlem-i esbâb*) so that each event is revealed by way of a cause.²⁹ He furthermore, through benevolence, endowed humans with particular will (*ihtiyâr-ı cüzî*) and made a custom (*âdet*) of creating as an outcome thereof. Kâtib Çelebi consequently argues that it is man’s duty to exert free will through these “secondary causes (*esbâb*).” While humans are not, strictly speaking, the cause of events, they are empowered and enjoined by God to take initiative.³⁰

26 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 151; İAM nr. 355, 131b. Vâsîf cites the Eğri campaign of 1596 and the battle of Hisarcık.

27 Mardin, “Mind of the Turkish Reformer,” 28-29. Also Philipp Bruckmayr, “The Particular Will (*al-irâdat al-juz’iyya*): Excavations Regarding a Latecomer in Kalâm Terminology on Human Agency and its Position in Naqshbandi Discourse,” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 13 (2011).

28 Kâtib Çelebi, *Tuhfetü'l-Kibâr fî Esfârî'l-Bihâr* (İstanbul, 1911), 163-164. Discussed by Gottfried Hagen in “Osman II and the Cultural History of Ottoman Historiography,” *H-Net Reviews* (2006), 6.

29 A more accurate translation of *müsebbibü'l-esbâb* is “the one who makes the causes function as causes.” Frank Griffel, *al-Ghazali’s Philosophical Theology* (Oxford 2009), 221. Ottoman authors often refer to *âlem-i esbâb*, though more often than not the idea is assumed.

30 *Tuhfetü'l-Kibâr*, 163-164. For a detailed discussion of this understanding of causality, based in Islamic atomism, I refer the reader to my doctoral dissertation.

In this reading the 1784 *risâle* sketches, if vaguely, a stance that might be called “activist.” At no time does Vâsif deny that humans have particular will or that warfare is a “particular event.” His mere use of the phrase suggests otherwise. What he instead rejects is the idea that God has no part in such outcomes – that victory rests only on human initiative through causes, an impious notion to say the least.³¹ That Vâsif connects this idea to a group of “Christian philosophers,” moreover, suggests he is to some degree aware of intellectual trends in Europe. His words are a recognition and firm rejection of Enlightenment-era materialism, and maybe of any home-grown materialist tendencies.³²

Neither does Vâsif question the utility of initiative. This becomes clearer when he turns to his patron Halil Hamid Paşa’s reform efforts. “Ultimately,” Vâsif writes, “there is still reason to struggle for the causes/means [*esbâb*] at the heart of our discussion; and these, praise to God, are now being readied and gradually brought to completion.”³³ In his conclusion, Vâsif extols Halil Hamid and his circle for their cooperation and reform initiatives. The French offer was not to be trusted and is in any case unnecessary. For should the Grand Vezir and his colleagues continue, by God’s grace, to attend to state affairs, “the means/causes will undoubtedly come to full fruition.”³⁴

At least one scholar, Şerif Mardin, characterizes Vâsif’s 1784 *risâle* as a “fatalist,” arch-conservative position.³⁵ On the contrary, in the larger debate of the time it is neither fatalist nor conservative but toes a fastidious line between the poles of fatality and a godless materialism, a stance usually seen as “orthodox” in Sunni Islam. Vâsif considers military defeat a divine trial, or *istidrâc*. At the same time, however, he advises action and his understanding of causation affirms that

31 The term “activist” is Mardin’s. According to Ulrich Rudolph, absolute human free will was seen as a form of unbelief in that it ascribes divine attributes (creative power) to mankind, while fatalists commit unbelief by anthropomorphizing God, associating Him with human wickedness, *Al-Mâturîdî und die sunnitische Theologie in Samarkand* (Leiden, 1997), 336-339. Both sides, moreover, commit infidelity by harboring a defective hope in God. See D’Ohsson, I: 329.

32 On materialism, Louis Dupre, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven, 2004), 18-44.

33 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 151; İAM nr. 355, 131b-132a.

34 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 151-152; İAM nr. 355, 132a-132b. Vâsif accuses the French of having base motives, such as designs on the island of Crete where they proposed to offer training.

35 Mardin, “Mind of the Turkish Reformer,” 28-30, 32; idem, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (Syracuse, 2000), 172-173. Cf. Berkes, 66.

humans have a role to play, albeit a limited one. Vâsîf sees the world as a world of causes. He hence ties the military success of the empire to moral considerations but allows room for reform and activism. These same ideas, moreover, played a large and growing role in Vâsîf's historical philosophy in ensuing years.

The 1787-1792 War: the Morality of Victory and Defeat

The second text under examination dates to the Russian-Ottoman-Austrian War of 1787-1792, which raised anew the spectre of Ottoman defeat and collapse. Sparked by Grand Vezir Koca Yusuf Paşa (1786-1789, 1791-1792), who forced an ill-advised declaration of war against Russia on 14 August 1787, the conflict pressed the Ottomans into a campaign along the Danube against Russia and their ally Austria. Vâsîf himself served at the front from 1791 to 1792, witnessing the signal Ottoman rout at Maçın, which effectively ended the war, and negotiating a truce with General Nikolai Repnin in August of 1791. He later reflected on these events, when bid by Sultan Selim III in 1793 to produce a history of the war from the work of two earlier chroniclers, Sadullah Enverî and Mehmed Edîb.³⁶ Most notably, the historian used this occasion to explain the failure of the empire's arms, elaborating on agency and the causes of victory and defeat.

Vâsîf's most explicit words on this subject come in his account of the Ottoman defeat at Foksani. In July of 1789, Koca Yusuf's successor Hasan Paşa (1789-1790) stationed the bulk of his forces at Foksani in Moldavia to prevent a joint Russian and Austrian assault on Bucharest. By means of a forced march, however, the Russians under General Suvorov arrived earlier than expected. The Ottoman force was taken completely by surprise and disintegrated when the Russians and Austrians attacked together on 30 July.³⁷

Contrasting the Ottoman and enemy armies, Vâsîf argues that a disobedient mass of soldiers who disregard secondary causes (*esbâb-ı zâhire*) cannot match the obedient, disciplined, new-style soldier fielded by Russia and Austria; indeed it is outwardly difficult, if not impossible, to defeat an enemy without equal or perhaps superior organization. The pressing concern, then, lies in "secondary causes," which, he says, "encompass warfare and the arts of combat [*kanûn-u muhârebe*

36 Vâsîf was sent to the army to serve, among other things, as court historian. This appointment's date is uncertain but seems to have taken place in April of 1791. Vâsîf was certainly at the front by June of that year. Kütükoğlu, "Vekayinüvis," 118-119. Also *Mehâsin*, İstanbul Üniversitesi (İÜ) nr. 5978, 81a, 87b-89a; *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), xxix; and related documents, Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri (BOA) Hatt-ı Hümayûn nrs. 10467, 11579, 57475.

37 Stanford Shaw, *Between Old and New: the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim III* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), 36; İÜ nr. 5978, 25a-26a.

ve *fünûn-u müzârebe*] – in other words, the new [military] organization which is part of the mathematical sciences [*fünûn-u riyâziye*].”³⁸ Vâsîf then presses the argument at length, stating:

According to the philosophers, everything is contingent; what is contingent admits influence; and what admits influence cannot be without cause. The Sunnis say that although everything issues un-contingent from God and man’s deeds have absolutely no effect nor influence on causes or ability to influence the course of events, it is God’s custom to create everything as an outcome of secondary causes [*âdetüllah bunun üzere cârîdir ki her şeyi esbâb-ı zâhire ‘akabinde halk idê*]. Therefore, it is ever incumbent on all sects that when they must undertake a matter they should secure the secondary causes forthwith and complete necessities pertaining to the circumstance, then await God’s victory and seek the fruits which derive from the sense of “Hobble your camel and trust in God.”³⁹

Vâsîf therefore links acting through secondary causes to both obedience to God and success in battle.

A similar grasp of causality can be found elsewhere in Vâsîf’s day in the work of scholars and statesmen. Indeed, this was a matter of heated debate. While theologians like Mehmed Akkirmanî (d. 1760) and Karlı Davud (d. 1755) argued that human agency was both real and obligatory,⁴⁰ would-be reformers called especially for warfare based on worldly causes. For example, İbrahim Müteferrika (d. 1745) acknowledged that victory and defeat depend on God’s will but that “God has consigned the outward realization of every matter to initiative through causes. Man must operate thus.” The victorious army is hence pious and just as

38 İÜ nr. 5978, 26a-26b. Vâsîf’s association of mathematics and warfare here and elsewhere seems to corroborate Adnan-Adivar’s claim that modern mathematics entered the Ottoman Empire “through the military channel.” See Berkes, 49.

39 İÜ nr. 5978, 26b-27a. The proverb is from a hadith, G.W.F. Freytag, *Arabum proverbia, vocabilibus instruxit, latine vertit, commentario illustravit et sumtibus suis editit* (Bonn, 1838-43), 2: 112.

40 Such men argued, according to D’Ohsson, that “dans toutes les circonstances de la vie et dans toutes les entreprises publiques ou particulières, on doit d’abord implorer les lumières célestes, par l’intercession du Prophète et de tous les saints du Musulmanisme; ensuite réfléchir, délibérer, consulter ses propres lumières, en usant de tous les secours que peuvent suggérer la prudence, l’expérience et la raison. Ce n’est qu’après avoir employé ces moyens, que l’on peut attribuer aux décrets éternels les événements humains, auxquels on doit alors se soumettre avec une résignation absolue.” I: 168.

well as well-trained, well-led, disciplined, and informed of tactics and weaponry.⁴¹ The 1768-1774 war, provoked and prolonged by men who argued precisely the opposite – that God grants victory on religious zeal alone – intensified this debate and produced a spate of treatises in the 1770s and 1780s. Among them, Ahmed Resmî's (d. 1783) trenchant *Hulâsatü'l-İtibâr* (*A Summary of Admonitions*) rejected the war and its authors' insouciance, and exposed the empire's decrepit military system. Resmî agreed that Russian power was divine punishment (*istidrâc*) for Ottoman moral failings, but called for reform and a pacific foreign policy.⁴² Even Canikli Ali Paşa's (d. 1785) conservative *Tedâbîrül-Gazavât* (*The Expedients of War*) admitted, if in a vague way, that divine preordination and worldly causes work in tandem, and that the Ottomans must attend to strategy if they are to reverse their fortunes.⁴³ Ottoman reformers seem to have internalized this discourse by the reign of Selim III. While Vâsif derided Canikli Ali's essay as outmoded, he found no fault in its notions of causality. The art, rather, was in arguing for reform without veering into outright materialism.⁴⁴

41 İbrahim Müteferrika, *İbrahim Müteferrika ve Usulül-Hikem ve Nizâmi'l-Ümem*, (Ankara, 1995), esp. 148. "It is secret wisdom that victory, success, and triumph over the enemy depend always and utterly on the Lord God's infinite aid to believers; that rule rests on His exalted will; and that victory and defeat lie within His preordination. However, God has consigned the outward realization of every matter to initiative through causes. Man must operate thus." See also Gottfried Hagen, "Legitimacy and World Order," in *Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power* (Leiden, 2005), 74.

42 Resmî particularly attacks his peers' bellicosity and implicit faith in the "zeal of Islam." For example, *A Summary of Admonitions: a Chronicle of the 1768-1774 Russian-Ottoman War*, trans. Ethan L. Menchinger (Istanbul, 2011), 33-34, 36-37, 57, 65-68, 76, 80, 82. Berkes, following Resmî, blames the war on "conservatives" who hoped to show that pious zeal was enough to bring victory, 55-59. For a discussion of this work and others after the 1768-1774 war, see Virginia Aksan, "Ottoman Political Writing, 1768-1808," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25 (1993): 53-69.

43 Yücel Özkaya, "Canikli Ali Paşa'nın Risalesi 'Tedâbîrül-Gazavât,'" *Ankara Üniversitesi Dil-Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Araştırmaları Dergisi* 7/13-14 (1969): 136-137, 144-145, 167. For example: "Gerçi takdîr-i ilahî böyle imiş lâkin tedbîrde 'azîm hatâ itdiler."

44 *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 278; İAM nr. 355, 214a. Şakul argues that by Selim's time reform had become the only legitimate discourse. Debate therefore centered around the nature of the reforms themselves. Ömer Fâik Efendi, for example, urged a balance of "moral" and "material reforms (*tedbîrât-ı ma'nevîyye / tedbîrât-ı sûriyye*)," but evidently withheld his tract from fear, 129, 145-148; also Beydilli, "Islahat Düşünceleri," 37-42. For examples of such causal language in imperial decrees see, for instance, BOA Hatt-ı Hümayûn nrs. 9284, 56252.

What, then, did “secondary causes” mean to Ahmed Vâsîf? The historian gives us some indication when he clarifies the link between these causes and victory and defeat. Victory over the enemy, he says, occurs through sound judgment and good strategy, together with great effort and preparation, solicitude for proper order, and fortitude on campaign and in bearing hardships. After all this comes whole-hearted trust in God’s aid.⁴⁵ Vâsîf rejects the idea that bravery and zeal suffice for victory. Rather, a successful army must assign each matter to experts and have men of strategy, effort, and vision as leaders “to illumine the darkness of affairs with the light of the proper path of reason, to stand against enemy arms, and to adapt his forces according to the rules of war when is proper.” Defeat, on the other hand, is essentially a moral failure. Sin incurs God’s wrath, says Vâsîf. A sinner betrays the faith and the traitor is fearful by nature, hence Ottoman armies fare poorly because, as sinners, they lack strength of heart. Secondary causes, then, include here military preparations, strategy, and also the active removal of vice through measures like shuttering taverns.⁴⁶

In his 1789-1794 chronicle Vâsîf is clear that although God ordains everything and is the only true agent in a theological sense, man must still live as though his actions are his own, as God has commanded.⁴⁷ This stance resembles those taken by İbrahim Müteferrika and Ahmed Resmî, with whom Vâsîf was familiar and whose work he had thoroughly digested.⁴⁸ However, Vâsîf is more explicit than either in outlining a sort of calculus for war, a morality of victory and defeat. In this calculus human initiative is seen as a moral duty and weighed along with piety, zeal, and other factors. To Vâsîf “observing Islamic practice and perfecting causes” will result in victory; impiety and sin, defeat.⁴⁹

45 İÜ nr. 5978, 27b-29b. Cf. Müteferrika, who lists attention to holy law and justice, awareness of tactics and weaponry, discipline, good intelligence, trust in God, and the Prophet’s intercession, 170-172.

46 İÜ nr. 5978, 33a, 83a.

47 This recalls the axiom attributed to Muslim ibn Yasar (d. 718 or 720): “Act therefore like someone who knows that only his own acts can still save him; and trust in God like someone who knows that only that will strike him which was meant for him.” Eric L. Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: the Dispute over Ghazâlî’s “Best of All Possible Worlds”* (Princeton, NJ, 1984), 71.

48 Vâsîf knew Resmî personally and used his *Hulâsat* as a source. *A Summary of Admonitions*, 24-29. Vâsîf’s intellectual debt to Müteferrika meanwhile began in printing, but he seems at least to have read *Usulü’l-Hikem* and reproduced some of its material. Cf. the similarities between the tale of the “Frankish king” in *Usulü’l-Hikem*, 177-178 and *Mehâsin* (1804), 2: 187.

49 İÜ nr. 5978, 33a.

The 1798 Tesliyetnâme

The next representative text dates four years later to the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt. According to Yüksel Çelik, the French landing at Alexandria on 1 July 1798 took Selim III and his ministers unawares. The sultan was greatly affected and dismissed Grand Vezir İzzet Mehmed Paşa and *şeyhülislâm* Dürrîzâde Arif Efendi, sending them into exile.⁵⁰ The other ministers feared Selim's volatile moods. In an attempt to calm him, they summoned Ahmed Vâsîf to the Porte and asked him to compose a tract that would sooth and admonish the sultan. Vâsîf hastily put together a few folios of material to submit.⁵¹ The result was an essay in the literary genre of *tesliyetnâme*, or letter of consolation. Yet Vâsîf's 1798 *Tesliyetnâme* is also a historical essay, as he uses fourteen historical examples in an attempt to draw parallels to the French invasion and demonstrate to the sultan that their disturbance is temporary. The work, then, presents the invasion as a historical problem, lending more insight into the author's view of causation, historical change, and the universe at large.⁵²

Vâsîf begins by claiming that the invasion, while serious, is no cause for despair. The French have taken Alexandria but are in an untenable, doomed position. They betrayed in the empire a friendly and generous power and have become haughty in their faculty of *istidrâc*; their pride is extreme and scripture confirms they will soon suffer God's wrath.⁵³ The *Tesliyetnâme*, then, invokes in the idea of *istidrâc* the same divine providence as the 1784 essay. As further consolation, however, Vâsîf reassures the sultan that such mishaps occur because the universe is naturally variable. "This world," he declares, "is the world of generation and corruption (*'âlem-i kevn ü fesâd*)."

50 Yüksel Çelik, "Siyaset-Nasihât Literatürümüzde Nadir bir Tür: Mısır'ın İşgali Üzerine III. Selim'e Sunulan Tesliyet-Nâme," *Türk Kültürü İncelemeler Dergisi* 22 (2010): 88-95.

51 Çelik, "Tesliyet-Nâme," 94. See also *Târih-i Cevdet*, 7: 7. This story is related in Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi, Serez nr. 1890, a copy commissioned by one of Vâsîf's sons, probably Vâsîfzâde Abdullah Lebîb Efendi, 1b-2a. In the presentation manuscript, Vâsîf writes in a marginal note that he tried to submit the work to the Porte but was thwarted by administrative turn-over. The work went unread and he resubmitted it, hoping it might preface another, separate work on the Egypt campaign, 117; Topkapı Sarayı Hazine (TOP) nr. 1625, 1a. The latter appears to be the unfinished *Mehâsin*, İÜ nr. 6012.

52 Çelik, who published the text, analyzes it as a literary piece with little "real" historical value, "Tesliyet-Nâme," 96-99.

53 "Tesliyet-Nâme," 118; TOP Hazine nr. 1625, 1a-1b.

Its edict is changeable, ephemeral, and always prone in base bodies to give rise to sundry accidents. It defies the natural course of the world for nations' circumstances to remain in a single disposition [*nüsûk-ı vâhid üzere ber-karâr bulmak*] or for states' affairs to be free of accidents affecting the realm [*umûr-ı düvel 'avarızât-ı mülkiyyeden vâreste olmak*]. And though the various aspects inscribed by God in the cosmos at times take loathsome form, holy scripture demonstrates that they lead to great good and benefit.⁵⁴

Historical examples then follow to demonstrate Vâsîf's thesis: that calamities have occurred "from the beginning of the world and Sublime State till our own day" but lead, ultimately, to the good.⁵⁵

The *Tesliyetnâme's* historical examples number fourteen and are taken from Ayyubid, Mamluk, European, and Ottoman history. Generally these examples show the hand of providence or a fortuitous Muslim victory. During the Fifth Crusade, for example, crusaders landed in Egypt and took Alexandria and Damietta. They then marched on Mansure. In the course of the siege, however, the Nile flooded and cut off the crusaders' path of retreat. Desperate, they were forced to negotiate with the Ayyubids and relinquish Damietta in exchange for safe conduct.⁵⁶ In another example, the Andalusian emir Ebü'l-Velîd İsmail met a huge Christian army outside of Grenada with only 5,000 men and slaughtered over 50,000.⁵⁷ Vâsîf even adds an anecdote of his own. During the 1768-1774 campaign, the Russians besieged Silistre with 70,000 soldiers, routing two Ottoman commanders in turn. Silistre was hopelessly surrounded. Yet, at the time of the final assault 6,000 Ottomans made a sally, "like a speck of white on a black cow," and with God's aid crushed the Russians and broke the siege. Vâsîf himself passed through Silistre after the battle as a courier. He claims the defeat was such that cannons and munitions lay scattered everywhere, abandoned, and that the road was nearly impassable from heaped Russian corpses.⁵⁸

Vâsîf's examples on one hand show that all rulers in all ages are subject to flux. "Were I to detail these affairs, the quarrels between states, and the property thereby wasted," he insists, "they would form a weighty, instructive tome. Sovereignty

54 "Tesliyet-Nâme," 118-119; TOP Hazine nr. 1625, 1b.

55 "Tesliyet-Nâme," 119; TOP Hazine nr. 1625, 2a.

56 "Tesliyet-Nâme," 119; TOP Hazine nr. 1625, 2a-2b.

57 "Tesliyet-Nâme," 121; TOP Hazine nr. 1625, 4a.

58 "Tesliyet-Nâme," 121-122; TOP Hazine nr. 1625, 4a-4b. Vâsîf says elsewhere that he was there to announce the accession of Abdülhamid I. *Mehâsin*, TOP nr. 1406, 22a-23a.

and dominion are never without cares nor rulers without enemies.”⁵⁹ On the other hand, though, these self-same events confirm God’s solicitude for believers. According to the *Tesliyetnâme*, God will support the Ottoman Empire until Judgment Day and despite reverses, as history and scripture attest. Vâsîf therefore encourages Selim III to bestir himself against the French. The remedy, he says, “is to immediately put trust and forgiveness with God and, asking aid from the Prophet, to purify intent, strive with all effort, and spend might and main to perfect secondary causes [*esbâb-ı zâhire*] before any time is lost.”⁶⁰ Vâsîf then suggests a number of reforms should the sultan succeed in regaining Egypt, including dividing Egypt into three provinces, transferring Mamluk posts to loyal men for three-year terms, and stationing a flotilla at Alexandria.⁶¹

The *Tesliyetnâme* responds to many of the same problems as the 1784 *risâle* and 1789-1794 chronicle. Perhaps most pressing to Vâsîf and his peers was to reconcile Ottoman exceptionalism with the reality of defeat, which he does here, most outstandingly, by theodicy. As earlier, Vâsîf interprets defeat as a trial by God. However, at the same time he adds that accidents are universal. The world is one of constant change, of atomistic “generation and corruption” through which God realizes His perfect cosmic plan and where apparent evils are in fact good.⁶² These two premises are not openly integrated but do not contradict each other. Vâsîf’s argument, furthermore, rationalizes French power while still upholding the semblance of exceptionalism. His parallels suggest that the Ottomans, and believers more generally, experience peaks and valleys, times of good fortune and ill, but that history and their role within it progresses onward to God’s ordained end. Everything changes, as it were, while nothing really changes at all. The French invasion is no different.

In terms of causality, Vâsîf must also, again, address man’s power to affect outcomes. His universe is one in which change is a fixed principle and through which God, the Primary Cause, reveals His will. Humans are powerless in this universe’s larger revolutions. Victory follows defeat by God’s grace, as Vâsîf illustrates, and believers to an extent must simply remain faithful and trusting. Yüksel

59 “Tesliyet-Nâme,” 121; TOP Hazine nr. 1625, 3b.

60 “Tesliyet-Nâme,” 122-123; TOP Hazine nr. 1625, 4b-5a.

61 “Tesliyet-Nâme,” 123; TOP Hazine nr. 1625, 5a-5b.

62 Ormsby calls this explanation of suffering “apparent evil, real good.” This type of theodicy holds that divine wisdom is hidden within suffering. Evils are really disguised goods, and all evil contains some hidden benefit such that the good would come to naught were the evil removed. The reverse can also be true, with apparent blessings working evil, 255-257. Also Griffel, 225-231.

Çelik deems this view “irrational” and “fatalistic,” but such is not the case.⁶³ To Ottoman intellectuals the link between worldly and divine causation was complex but reasoned. Humans could not compass larger historical processes or “universal events,” as said above. But they could exert will in “particular events” by taking initiative and preparing secondary causes that God, if He desired, would realize. This is why Vâsif ends the *Tesliyetnâme* with a plea for action. An absolute fatalist would neither urge the sultan to “perfect secondary causes before any time is lost” nor suggest reforms. Since God allows humans to act, at least in limited cases, Vâsif again holds that initiative through secondary causes complements faith and trust in God as a solution.

Vâsif’s 1798 *Tesliyetnâme* is by no means “fatalistic.” Like his earlier writing it enjoins moral considerations alongside action and is, in fact, sympathetic to reform. It depicts a universe where men are partly bound to flux and destiny, partly able to foresee and condition outcomes. This is a universe of “generation and corruption” as well as one of “causes.”

Later Chronicles

Ahmed Vâsif expanded and applied these ideas on a larger scale in his later chronicles. Under Selim III, Vâsif rewrote earlier court histories like those of Sadullah Enverî, Mehmed Edîb Efendi, and Halil Nûri Bey. These works covered Selim’s reign from 1789 onward.⁶⁴ But during his last term as court historian the sultan gave a further commission: to edit and rewrite a twenty-three year period of history back to the 1750s, including the work of Hâkim Mehmed Efendi and Enverî’s account of the 1768-1774 war and Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca. Vâsif completed this work around 1802 and it was subsequently printed.⁶⁵ It is the latter, the war chronicle, that is of interest here.

63 See “Tesliyet-Nâme,” III for a clear example. Here Çelik ascribes Vâsif’s “fatalism” to “a submissive understanding that takes refuge not in analysis but in categorical perceptions of religion and the world...”

64 Kütükoğlu, “Vekayinüvis,” 118-122; *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), xxxix-xliv.

65 *Mehâsin* (1804), 2: 3-4, 315. Vâsif calls himself the “former chancellor” (*tevkî’î*) in the first volume but had regained the post by the second. *Mehâsin* (1804), 1: 3, 2: 3-4. He therefore finished the first volume between his dismissal and re-appointment as *tevkî’î* (18 February 1801 – 7 February 1802), the second volume during his second appointment (8 February 1802 – 29 January 1803). The work was printed in November/December of 1804. Also on these appointments, İÜ nr. 5979, 271a; İÜ nr. 6013, 49b-50a, 110b-111a, 171b; BOA Bâb-ı Asâfi Rûûs Kalemi Defterleri nr. 1628, 37; BOA Hatt-ı Hümâyûn nr. 15168.

Vâsîf's chronicle of the 1768-1774 war shows clearly his active interpretation and belief in edifying history. Here, as elsewhere, he not only reckons history's practical uses but adds analysis and morals to the text, usually as addenda or asides.⁶⁶ Vâsîf also disparages Enverî's method and insists his version is superior because it makes use of moral and practical philosophy, understands "the cosmic revolutions that are tenets of historical science," and seeks to profit the state. In this way, he claims, it will better instruct statesmen.⁶⁷

But there is more. In the 1768-1774 chronicle, Vâsîf reiterates his views on the universe, change, and causation. The history covers a dire military defeat that was still fresh in Ottoman minds and which raised the problems of the 1784 *risâle*, the 1789-1794 chronicle, and 1798 *Tesliyetnâme* on a mass scale. Vâsîf applies his philosophy to the work as an interpretive framework and is thereby able to broach issues like agency, morality, historical change, and reconciling defeat with exceptionalism.

To begin, the chronicle preface places the 1768-1774 Russian-Ottoman war directly within a framework of the "universal" and the "particular." Vâsîf writes:

Because the universe is formed of constituent elements, and because it is changeable, the periodic appearance of misfortune on the face of the earth – now peace and harmony, now misery and war – is, according to men of great acuity, a precept of philosophy. The occurrence of these two opposing states, moreover, depends on certain causes that by the will of God and hidden verdict of fortune cause quarrel between peoples. Such it is that if one cares to scrutinize the universal and particular events that have occurred in the world from the creation of man till this age, all of them will be founded upon a cause. All things issue from God, who doeth what He will. But if man's deeds have, in fact, absolutely no effect on causes nor ability to influence the course of events, then it is clear the Lord God (His Majesty be exalted) has a divine custom of creating something as the outcome of secondary causes [...*bir şeyi esbâb-ı zâhiresi 'akabinde halk itmek 'âdet-i ilâhîyesi olduğu muhtâc-ı beyân olmayub*]. Indeed, this approximates what the philosophers say: everything is contingent; what is contingent admits influence; and what admits influence cannot be without cause.⁶⁸

The war, the preface continues, began because Russia's reform efforts had made them powerful. They grew bold through *istidrâc* and asserted themselves abroad,

66 *Mehâsin* (1804), 1: 2-3. A wider discussion on the value of history can be found in his first chronicle, *Mehâsin* (İlgürel), 1-4; İAM nr. 355, 2a-4a.

67 *Mehâsin* (1804), 2: 3-4, 314-315.

68 *Ibid*, 2: 4. Vâsîf follows Kâtib Çelebi nearly verbatim.

even in neighboring Poland, while the Ottomans thought to make territorial gains, “commenced a serious matter of unknown outcome,” and declared war.⁶⁹ Vâsif lastly promises to retail the armies’ movements and “whenever...through poor command, lack of provisions, or disloyalty among the troops, occasions arose which had consequences for the campaign.”⁷⁰

The preface places human agency at the very heart of the chronicle. Vâsif again evokes a universe of “generation and corruption” and “causes” wherein God alone is responsible for events leading to the war, His causes inscrutable, determined, and necessary. However, the historian leaves room for action alongside God’s will, with the caveat, as in his earlier work, that secondary causes are meaningful. The Ottomans could not prevent Russia’s rise through *istidrâc*, for instance, which led to the conflict. But Ottoman statesmen were perhaps too rash and misjudged the situation. War was avoidable. Vâsif, moreover, indicates he will narrate so as to highlight secondary causes – movements, mistakes, and critical junctures all caused by decision-making – and to show how actions like poor strategy and preparation (“particular events”) contributed to a larger outcome: a disastrous Ottoman defeat (a “universal event”). Vâsif, then, raises agency as a basic problem through which the campaign can be understood; his preface offers readers a legend to interpret the history as a whole.

An example will illustrate how Vâsif draws these connections – the Ottoman defeat at Falça in 1770. During that year’s campaign season a large Ottoman army under Abaza Mehmed Paşa and Abdi Paşa joined a Tatar force north of the Danube at the ford of Falça. Vâsif, himself an eyewitness, was serving in the entourage of Abaza Mehmed.⁷¹ After skirmishes with the main Russian force under Field Marshal Rumiantsev, the Grand Vezir, south of the Danube at the imperial camp, sent reinforcements with Janissary Ağa Kapıkıran Mehmed Paşa. The Russians moved before Kapıkıran could arrive. The night of July 18, they caught the sentries asleep and attacked at dawn, causing the Ottomans to beat a hasty retreat and abandon their camp and ordnance.⁷²

The chronicle’s account of this event stresses agency. Vâsif notes that some blamed the rout on the soldiers’ negligence and some on the commanders, but calls the latter claim baseless. God, he argues, enjoins believers to jihad and other

69 Ibid, 2: 4-5.

70 Ibid, 2: 6.

71 *Mehâsin* (1804), 2: 84-85. See also *A Summary of Admonitions*, 52-53 for English translation and 106-107 for Ottoman text; Aksan, *An Ottoman Statesman*, 148-151.

72 *Mehâsin* (1804), 2: 85-88; *A Summary of Admonitions*, 53-54/107-108.

religious duties. The Russian victory was divine punishment because the soldiers had abused Ottoman subjects during the campaign, disobeyed orders, and behaved immorally. And as exegetes know, the inner truth of the matter (*emrin hakikati*) is that scripture reveals what sort of behavior brings victory.⁷³ To further defend his commanders, Vâsif then turns from “inner truths” to “externals” connected with secondary causes:

On the other hand, men who observe outward appearances [*erbâb-ı zevâhir*] claim that the Russian soldiers were trained in the newly developed principles of war and combat; that they were obedient to their officers; that they were assiduously drilled in all the means of artillery, prevented from luxury, and kept from rest; that there was no place in their ranks for the untrained and, in most situations, victory will go to the trained, hardened soldier over the untrained, soft, disorderly soldier.⁷⁴

In this respect, he believes one cannot fault Abdi Paşa and the others, especially as the Tatars fled the field and induced panic.

Vâsif’s analysis of Falça balances concrete action and morality, the earthly and the divine, in what is, once more, a calculus of victory and defeat. “External” factors like order, provisioning, obedience, and up-to-date strategy are juxtaposed with “internal” moral factors. Neither is preferred over the other. Yet Vâsif’s preface suggests divine and human agency are closely entwined and do not merely co-exist.⁷⁵ As Kâtib Çelebi writes in *Tuhfetü’l-Kibâr*, God determines outcomes but it remains for man to obey and discharge his duties, both in living morally and exerting particular will; “inner” and “outer” causes are thus complementary.⁷⁶ The soldiers at Falça forsook their duty, especially waging war, and failed to behave obediently. However, Vâsif’s contrast of the two forces indicts the Ottomans’ preparation, training, and seriousness, all secondary causes which ought to have been prepared beforehand. Here as elsewhere, his remedy lies in a combination of moral renewal and activism. The lesson of the passage, furthermore, is not simply historical. Its reformist implications would have been clear to readers in 1802.

Ahmed Vâsif also applies his philosophical framework to war and peace. For Ottomans the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, which ended the war, was a

73 *Mehâsin* (1804), 2: 88. Aksan notes his analysis in *An Ottoman Statesman*, 151.

74 *Mehâsin* (1804), 2: 88.

75 See Hagen, “Osman II,” 6, where he is critical of Gabriel Piterberg’s statement that divine and earthly causes “simply coexist” and are unproblematical. Cf. Gabriel Piterberg, *An Ottoman Tragedy: History and Historiography at Play* (Berkeley, 2003), 89.

76 *Tuhfetü’l-Kibâr*, 163-164.

humiliating blow.⁷⁷ One of chronicle's chief aims is to explain why this treaty was necessary and perhaps how it could have been avoided. Vâsîf's own position is clear. He believed that internal bickering and failure to agree to initial settlements led, ultimately, to the more onerous terms of Kaynarca.

As in all things, war and peace to Vâsîf result on a universal scale from change and instability. This is why the 1768-1774 campaign inclined toward peace:

The Lord God, who doeth what He will, settled this world of generation and corruption with mankind, and since human nature consists of contrary elements, enmity and opposition being natural to this creature, the wars that occasionally occur between states can be considered a precept of philosophy. The universe, however, is not fixed in a single disposition [*nesak-ı vâhid üzere ber-karâr olmayub*]. However long warfare lasts, the ephemeral conditions of the universe demonstrate that accidents – here peace and repose, there war and suffering – will befall peoples settled on the face of the earth. The will of God inevitably deigned that the quarrel between the Sublime State and the Russians give way to peace; and there being now truce and now negotiation, the foundations for a reconciliation of both parties began to be laid.⁷⁸

On a lesser scale, nevertheless, humans have influence over war and peace. For example, after the Battle of Kartal in 1770 Marshal Rumiantsev wrote Grand Vezir İvazpaşazâde Halil Paşa to propose peace negotiations. The Grand Vezir deferred to Istanbul, where the sultan's circle dismissed the overtures.⁷⁹ Vâsîf laments this failure by saying that the outcome of war is uncertain. Since ancient times men, and especially Europeans, have therefore made it a habit to be peaceable in wartime, warlike in peacetime, and to secure victory whenever possible. Hence the Ottomans refused peace for nothing but more lost blood and treasure.⁸⁰

War and peace too are therefore fitted on a framework of flux and causality. Vâsîf allows that God ordains the larger patterns of amity and enmity so that, for instance, an enemy might grow menacing or docile. Yet he also stresses that Ottoman decision-making forestalled peace and did the realm great harm. He repeatedly states that reluctance to make peace led to death, destruction, and in

77 On Kaynarca see *DİA*, s.v. “Küçük Kaynarca Antlaşması”; Osman Köse, *1774 Küçük Kaynarca Antlaşması*, Ankara, 2006, esp. 107-232.

78 *Mehâsin* (1804), 2: 196-197.

79 *Mehâsin* (1804), 2: III-III. For more on these peace overtures, *A Summary of Admonitions*, 56-57/III-III; Aksan, *An Ottoman Statesman*, 153-154; Köse, 52-57.

80 *Mehâsin* (1804), 2: III.

the end the bitterer terms of Kaynarca.⁸¹ These are pointed words if one considers contemporary attitudes. While most statesmen desired peace, he says, the court refused to act. Sultan Mustafa III, despairing, expressed his lack of faith in peacemaking with the words, “There shall be no peace in our time,” which others like Yenişehirli Osman Efendi, who subverted the first round of negotiations in 1772, used to insist that war and peace were predestined. What was the use in trying? Even Grand Vezir Muhsinzâde Mehmed Paşa, Vâsîf’s patron, refused from fear to assent to peace and thus, the historian says, showed grave moral weakness.⁸² If the “true” cause of peace’s failure was God’s will and *istidrâc*, then, Vâsîf still includes war and peace as secondary causes over which humans can and should exercise control.⁸³ In this vision God, in essence, sets the basic conditions while man is left the choice – a moral one – to act or not.

In sum, Vâsîf’s chronicle of the 1768-1774 war sets out what might be called a “reformist” philosophy. The work’s main problem is agency and, in applying this question to Ottoman history, it stresses the ability of men to exert their will. To act, moreover, is not an idle decision. It is a moral one. Finally, the chronicle labors like Vâsîf’s other work under an even bigger problem: how can defeat be reconciled with Ottoman exceptionalism? The answer to this question is that the entire work forms a sort of theodicy. As in his other writing, the chronicle depicts a universe in constant change but one bound ultimately to God’s immutable will. In this universe, Vâsîf hopefully asserts, trust, piety, and abiding by the morality of victory and defeat will deliver the empire and community of believers now and till the end of time.

Final Observations

Vâsîf Efendi’s philosophy of history – his understanding of the universe, causation, and historical change – is too complex to be fully detailed in this article. His life and career during a tumultuous period of Ottoman history was simply too long, his output too large, and the above discussion omits much of his court chronicle. However, a few points merit final emphasis.

81 Ibid, 2: 115, 203-204, 225-226, 244-246, 305-306.

82 *Mehâsin* (1804), 2: 247, 280-281; Cf. Osman Efendi’s words on peacemaking in Muharrem Saffet Çalışkan, “(Vekâyi’nüvis) Enverî Sadullah Efendi ve Tarihi’nin I. Cildi’nin metin ve tahlili (1182-1188 1768-1774),” (Ph.D. dissertation, Marmara Üniversitesi, 2000), 347-348.

83 *Mehâsin* (1804), 2: 245-247. In this passage Vâsîf sets human and divine causes side by side.

Firstly, Vâsîf presents a coherent and rationalized view of the universe. He tackles contemporary moral and intellectual problems, those raised in late 18th century Ottoman society, and attempts to reason through and understand them. Causality, human agency, and reconciling defeat with Ottoman exceptionalism were not academic diversions; these were among the most urgent questions of the day. Vâsîf's work thus addresses immediate concerns and sheds light on the learned milieu in which he lived, wrote, and worked.

Secondly, Vâsîf's philosophy is activist. It refutes a "fatalism" that would rely on God's will alone or deny humans the ability to influence outcomes. While Vâsîf recognizes God as the ultimate Primary Cause, he holds that initiative is not only desirable but itself a moral obligation, enjoined by God alongside other divine commands. This position creates a powerful intellectual justification for reform. It is hardly a coincidence that Vâsîf's work buttresses the type of efforts undertaken by reformers and especially his patrons Halil Hamid Paşa and Selim III.

Thirdly, Vâsîf's ideas are not overly novel but draw on much older lines of reasoning. They stem from native currents of thought going back to at least Kâtib Çelebi and derived from even earlier thinkers. Scholarship, however, has yet to come to terms with this intellectual heritage. Exactly how such thought was nurtured, developed, and adapted remains, as so much in Ottoman cultural and intellectual history, unknown.

Fourthly and finally, Ahmed Vâsîf lends insight into Ottoman court historiography. Namely, his work belies much that scholars have claimed about *vekây-inüvises*. His history and essays are not neutral, factual repositories but openly didactic, highly interpretive, and seek to impart readers with lessons and a certain worldview. Vâsîf makes no pretenses to neutrality or to record things "as they happened." To him, as to others, history's purpose was to instruct and limn the moral contour of events. But by no means does this fact make his history mere "political propaganda." To read it as such over-simplifies complex intellectual discourses as well as a historiographical tradition in which moral and political concerns were convergent, if not inseparable. "Universal," "particular," and related terms (*esbâb*, *istidrâc*) can therefore help us grasp Vâsîf's political orientations but also, more importantly, how he and his peers in the late 18th century interpreted the immense changes around them.

A Reformist Philosophy of History: The Case of Ahmed Vâsif Efendi

Abstract ■ This article examines the historical and philosophical outlook of the chronicler and statesman Ahmed Vâsif Efendi (d. 1806) on the changes of his own time, the late 18th century, through a study of some of his written work. I argue that Vâsif's views are complex, reasoned, and address moral and historical problems raised by the empire's unsettled state; the historian not only made Ottoman military collapse and reform his key concerns but outlined a more general framework for understanding the universe, causation, and historical change. As a court official, meanwhile, Vâsif sheds light on how his patrons – sultans and statesmen both – came to digest their new circumstances.

Keywords: Reform, Selim III, Court Historians, Historiography, Philosophy of History

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