

Benjamin C. Fortna,

Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire,

New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, 280 p., ISBN 0-19-924840-0.

Fortna- a historian of the Modern Middle East with research focuses on the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic- begins his work with showing the importance of education in the modern world. However, its role is only comprehended to certain degree and little consideration is given to the educational concepts. Fortna explains his main purpose of writing this book as analyzing the general acceptances of education and its relationship with modernity. The effort of Fortna in writing this work expresses his aim throughout the book with the emphasis on the explanation of Ottoman education reflecting the imperatives and the reason behind the changes of educational policy according to some trends. Fortna points out these trends such as the greediness of the foreign powers, the offensiveness of their missionaries, and the restlessness of neighbors and minority groups alike. The book explicates the conjunction of the educational issues of the late Ottoman Empire and the modern world. The author also aims to provide apprehending the integration of modernity and tradition evidently. There is an attempt to make evident the Ottoman agency by an apprehensive cooperation with the education. The role of education has been questioned as being a powerful commodity enabling the transformation of a society for good or bad with the impact of the officials' minds. The book is composed of six chapters in addition to the list of illustrations, table, map, a bibliography, and an index that is why the study could be described as reader friendly.

The first chapter "Education and Agency" provides a historiographical perspective about the late Ottoman education. Fortna begins and emphasizes the role of Islam during the process of educational alteration and states the importance of it as "By turning a blind eye to the continuities in the relationship between Islam and modern learning, histories of the region have perpetuated the belief that the two are mutually exclusive." (p. 1). It might be deduced from here inevitably that the thought Islam and modern learning are also mutually inclusive is not included.

The author mentions the unavoidable necessity and acceptance of the term "reform" to afford to point out the explanations of inconsistency of common historical bases. These bases include the competitive spirit of the late Ottoman

educational policy, the combative counterpunching in the educational attempt, Western influence, and Eastern passivity. Fortna also highlights one of the reflections of an approach to education with the tendency to think of students as cohort but not as individuals. Therefore, it is probable to feel the deterministic atmosphere in education and as the author implies the tendency of calling this approach as mechanical engineering (p. 6). In this chapter one of the major issues that the author suggests to the reader is that upon thinking of the historical role assigned to the state education, it is a necessity to broaden the point of view with an extensive range of circumstances. The reader needs to be cognizant of both the political legitimacy of the government, a yearning for new modes of living, political thought, socio-economic options, and the anti-regime tendencies of student behavior. In this chapter Fortna also associates the Ottomans' perception of the Western influence as a sea change but he calls attention to his preference for adaptation instead of adoption. The latter one is recognized as being the prevailing view and the previous one is concentrated on as it allows to see the diverse perspectives according to the author. As Fortna explains the reason to base his study on a comparative framework to go beyond the East-West dynamic and points out one of the benefits of this approach as seeing the simultaneity of the educational experience across unexpectedly wide swaths of geography (p. 12). There are both some similarities in the approaches of governments such as Russia, Japan, Ottoman, France, Germany, Iran, China, Egypt to create a national system and differences due to the exclusive need of societies. The common major issue mentioned frequently in the work is the importance and critical role of education to comprehend a society's historical self-conception. The author looks at the Ottoman society through the view of educational change and explains the reason from three perspectives; this change allows the view of controversy between religious and secular claims, the other point is the notion of cultural dualism with the impact of French education in the Ottoman Empire, and the last one is the predominantly positivist reading of historical changes. The author misses to specify the certain points due to overgeneralization in this part.

In Chapter 2 "Hope against Fear" Fortna explains the historiographical perspective about the Ottoman Empire in more detail. The title of this part is depended on the attempt of both the Ottoman Empire and its counterparts in the nineteenth century and their being under the impact of hope and fear with their policies. Fortna, in the aim of comparative framework as mentioned earlier, starts this chapter with resembling the schools in being in the battles between different

sets of adversaries in different countries such as church and state in France; traditionalist and progressives in the United States; aristocrats and levelers in Tsarist Russia; classicists and modernizers in Wilhelmine Germany; and nativists and Westernizers in Meiji Japan (p. 44). It might be comprehended that these adversaries in these countries and the Ottoman Empire motivate the restoring the educational process, policies and its effect on the social change. The author underlines the state involvement especially in Russia and the Ottoman Empire to create, not refine, a national educational system in the nineteenth century. However, in the other countries the main aim is the social effect of expanding education. As the author stresses there is a tendency at the crux of educational change to produce loyal students to the state and it is particularly highlighted the prohibition of children from enrolling the foreign schools. It is remarkable that the author explains the memories with the citations from various researchers and makes the issues perceptibly. For instance, Fortna cites from Strohmeier and explains one of the thinkers' approaches in those years. With the effect of prohibiting the children from entering foreign schools, an important reformist Egyptian thinker Muhammed 'Abduh had urged Istanbul to find a higher school in Beirut to counter the effects of Christian education (p. 52). It is striking and obvious that there is hesitation in foreign missionary activities according to the governor's perception. Fortna emphasizes the role of education as being not an abstract or a static issue but rather an enormous impact on the society and its vital importance to the empire's future once again.

The role of neighboring is another important sublime issue mentioned in this study. One of the risks by neighboring is the independence from Istanbul, the other one is the issue of educational competition, ethnic or confessional groups and there are some regional events which effect the state such as the rivalry between Shiite and Sunni in the provinces of Ottoman Iraq. The excess of independence of neighbors in the affairs is one of the reasons of internal threatening. Therefore, the title of the second chapter is more understandable for the fear of hesitation in enabling the unity. In this chapter the author engages the reader's attention to the reports written by some experts from diverse provinces such as Süleyman Paşa from Iraq, Ahmet Şâkir Paşa from Anatolia, Mehmet Ferid from Konya, and Zühdü Paşa from Salonika. Except for Western Europe, neighboring states there is also indigenous minorities such as the Greeks and Armenians in the state being the source of educational rivalry as Fortna mentions in this chapter. Fortna also shares the views of the officials from the capital "Istanbul" towards the end of this

chapter. The officials gather information about the educational issues and regulate the educational policy. The author explains these regulations under three items; the first one is the government' tracking the developments of the foreign schools, the second one is the state's desire to control the missionary activities and the last one is the government's measures against the foreign schools being explained in detail in the third chapter. Fortna concludes this part with resembling the late Ottoman educational system as the double-edged sword (p. 86) for being both a panacea and the danger related to the very beginning of the chapter about the gap between hope and fear.

Chapter 3 "Fighting Back" deals with the state's reaction against the challenge represented by its various educational competitors. The author describes the development of school system as a weapon used by the state and he exemplifies the practices such as closing foreign schools, hiring traveling ulama to inveigh against the dangers of missionary schooling and to combat the ill effects of indigenous or foreign propaganda, deploying a growing number of inspectors to monitor the competition. (pp. 89, 95). These words refer to the crucial role of education maintaining a balance with the demands of the present in a society and in the world. The educational changes are germane to the need of the era. Kenan adds a critical point about these changes: "It is obvious that educational methods and the curriculum should change in tandem with the internal and external socio-political cultural climate in both in Turkey and outside world. When it does not, the education system, whether it is supported by the State, will inevitably lose its relevance and eventually perish. Even if the educational model is working perfectly and sustainable in every sense of the word, it will also naturally invite dynamic changes in content and methods from time to time."¹

The history of the Galatasaray lcyée (the Mekteb-i Sultani) as the Imperial School is explained under a special subheading as being the model for idadî (preparatory) school and the key to Ottoman educational change. The idadîs have a crucial role in the educational policy of the Hamidian period as Fortna points out. The place of the idadîs is also a focus point in this chapter as Abdülhamid II's regime heir to a long period (from 1876 to 1909) pays special attention to the preparatory level. As in the previous chapter, the author repeats the description battle for the hearts and minds (p. 89) via education as a response form the state.

1 Seyfi Kenan, "Confronting and integrating modernity: Religious education and curriculum reforms in Turkey", *Muslim Education in the 21st Century: Asian perspectives*, eds. Sa'eda Buang and Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 162-179, here p. 175.

Thus, the author makes the readers think again about the secret and the role of education in a society. Fortna points out two kinds of inspections applied by the state; one of them is towards the state's own schools and the other is over against the schools run by the foreigners and other non-Muslim systems. As in the previous chapter the recommendations for the sake of the state such as from Süleyman Paşa and Münif Paşa being the educational minister are again taken into consideration for the development of the Ottoman state school system. Two developments; the founding of the *lyée* of Galatasaray and the promulgation of the Educational Regulation of 1869, for the existence of the *idadî* schools are emphasized in this chapter in detail. As for the founding of the *lyée* of Galatasaray, Fortna mentions his purpose in this part as not to repeat the historical background but to point out important aspects such as being a combination of Franco-Ottoman adoption, Sultan Abdülaziz's visit to Paris, the choice of language as the language of instruction, important figures as the director of the institution, the courses, increasing the role of Islam principles, overhauling the curriculum to comprehend the early history of the Mekteb-i Sultanî. The other development "the Educational Regulation (*Maarif Nizamnamesi*) of 1869" is explained as a master plan implemented to a great degree for the reign of Abdülhamid II. The regulation covering what the state did is explained in a variety of detail within the four subtitles: The Gap, Funding, Reorganization and Numbers. One of the major issues that the author stresses the emphasis upon displaying the achievements arranged by the Hamidian bureaucracy not only for internal attempts but also being more public. The Ottoman yearbooks (*Devlet Salnamesi*), the provincial yearbooks (*Vilayet Salnamesi*) and the Ministry of Education's yearbooks (*Salname-i Nezaret-i Maarif-i Umumiye*) are mentioned as the official demonstrations of the progress. Fortna also points out an interesting and remarkable approach by Abdülhamid II who prepares the photographic gifts for abroad to display the achievements. In conclusion, the author details the state's educational message in this chapter.

In Chapter 4 "Buildings and Discipline" the main points Fortna focused on are the discussion of school life, the role of architecture of the school buildings related to government structures not the maktab of madrasa of classic Islam and its reasons, and common tendency to behave towards the role of schools. This chapter covers the Western presence and influence on the buildings and daily life at schools.

The author provides illustrations of the façades of the schools' building, his comments about the structure of the buildings and the role of ulama as the

instructors. Reflection of the sources through these illustrations from Istanbul University Rare Book Library enable the reader to revive.

The author highlights the radical change in the schools via removing from the traditional values and describes the late Ottoman state schools as “new, secular, European” (p. 134). At the very beginning Fortna mentions his tendency towards grounding his study in a comparative framework, it might be also noticed in this chapter. He makes the differences among the *idadi* schools of various cities such as Gelibolu, Erzurum, Trabzon, Ankara, Aleppo, Edirne, Jerusalem as for what they reveal. For instance, Fortna makes an argument over the school standing alone on the edge of town in Trabzon, Ankara, and Aleppo seem to herald a fresh start for the empire’s future and on the other hand the ones in Edirne and Jerusalem suggest a much closer alignment with the Ottoman and Islamic past (pp. 135-136). The reason behind what they reflect is explained with location; the latter one is in the center of the cities close to Selimiye mosque in Edirne and the other one is not far from the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

As the Islamic values have a great impact on the courses, Fortna also points out the role of ulama being hired to teach Islamic subjects by citing two figures such as Mahmud Efendi from Diyarbakir and member of the ulama from Mamuretülaziz. Another point the book provides is the detachment from the religion could be noticed from the architecture of school including the buildings, windows, entrances, staircase, and cornices. Fortna also emphasizes the calligraphic phrases, monograms, crescent on the walls of the schools. As the exterior factors, one of the crucial parts in the schools is the interior environment of them. Fortna gives valuable examples about that the daily routines including some Western reflections under the title of Living and Learning.

In this chapter it is remarkable and thought-provoking that the author summarizes his reading about late Ottoman schools in a sentence the less bounded approach needs a broader airing (p. 150). It might be concluded that there is a necessity to have a closer interest in our works via understanding and benefitting productive approaches from this inference. The subject of discipline is the last subtitle of this chapter and Fortna considers the centralized system of the state critically. He highlights the policy by listing and giving examples about some strict schedules in the schooling process including the attempts to control student life and activity.

Chapter 5 contains the role of maps in expanding the Ottoman state educational system. It is noticed that this material is a part of the battle for the hearts and minds of the young generation. The state's attempt is to protect its policy from the harmful influences of foreign resources with the usage of European cartographic application as noticed in the previous chapters is converted into creating the state's school maps to enable patriotic relationship. Fortna begins this part with a wartime map to describe an outdoor map created by the Ministry of Education to get attention of the public of Istanbul. He focuses on the changed paradigm for the usage of cartographic production during the Hamidian state. It is noticeable that the vital aim is again to create the imperial loyalty as the author explains throughout the book. Fortna also points out that the risks that came with using a new pedagogical device that was as powerful as it was unproven (p. 166).

The author highlights the usage of the science of cartography for military, nautical, administrative, public works, and architectural purposes earlier. However, he mentions the usage of maps for pedagogical aims was during the late Ottoman period. He also reflects from his reading that the Hamidian school system started to attach importance to the geography class. Following these changes, Fortna mentions the curriculum reform during the Hamidian educational policy but there are some factors including secular approach in its agenda and Fortna explains them from four perspectives: the loss of Ottoman territory, the increasing stridency of nationalist or proto-nationalist activity, missionary and millet educational offerings, the preponderance of missionary and millet schools (pp. 175-176). Some educational policies under the impact of religious might also be observed in the previous reign. For instance, in the planning of central education during the reign of Sultan Abdülmecid, the issue of religious is a major factor as İhsanoglu mentions: "These two principles [*ulûm* and *fünun*] would determine the conceptual framework of the first central Ottoman educational policy and the integrative approach that constituted the paradigm of Ottoman modernization. The new Ottoman citizens educated in line with this approach would first acquire a religious culture as well as a sufficient command of the modern sciences to enable them to constitute the new Ottoman society."²

The usage of maps in the classrooms is supported with the autobiography of Şevket Süreyya Aydemir in this chapter. As Fortna cites, Aydemir makes a

2 Ekmeleddin İhsanoglu, *The House of Sciences: The First Modern University in the Muslim World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 10.

comparison between the past and the present imperial border with the description of the map of the Ottoman Empire. It might be noticed that the sense of loyalty is awakened by the exposure to the pedagogical approach with maps as the state attempts. Fortna also focuses on the encouragement of the maps for the students to feel their deepest relationship with the capital city and their belonging to the center. He summarizes his comment as the following in a broader context the use of school maps must also have encouraged young Ottoman subjects to think of the empire of which they were subject- and to which the state was attempting to cement their political loyalty- in the context of the other countries of the globe (p. 198). Fortna's study and emphasis on the maps contributes to the reader's attention to the role and meaning of the maps and how they need to be received.

The last chapter examines "Morality" and its prominent role in the Ottoman educational effort externally and internally. He mentions the state's purpose to sustain the discipline to control the students' behavior and its vital emphasis on the importance to the empire's future. Focusing on the moral pedagogy and practices helps the readers re-examine the secret power of education for a society. One of the reasons of the emphasis on public morality is explained as being at risk of thought, practice, and even dress from the arrival of harmful ideas and fashions from the West by the author. As the starting point, Fortna goes into the meaning of moral. He shares his consideration about the philological and contextual evidence of the term. He investigates the Ottoman Turkish term "ahlâk", the English word "character" and "moral" philologically. The other point that the author stresses is the modification of the curriculum on an empire-wide scale by the Hamidian government. For instance, one of the changes in the curriculum is the meticulous choice of the individual who will carry out the courses. The influence of the reports might be understood in this part again and their impact on the decisions. From one of the anecdotes that the author shares, Zühtü Paşa, the ministry of education, points out the advantages of courses such as religious principles, history, and English in missionary schools and then inspires the system. The role of the texts during the education is another major issue so there is a dedication with considerable attention to the commissioning, controlling, inspection, and occasionally the banning of a variety of texts that appeared in the late Ottoman Empire as Fortna mentions (p. 220). Fortna points out the role of moral report card is also highly crucial as it affects student's standing and the authorities' decision. In general, the final chapters include a major transformation adapted by the Hamidian agenda. In this chapter the author highlights the press such as The

Ladies' Own Gazette for women during the Hamidian Period by intense political oppression. However, the education of girls could be mentioned within a separate subtitle in this book. As Aydınlık and Kenan points out "The graduates of the first teacher training college for women, as well as the home-schooled daughters of some leading intellectuals of the period, also started contributing to these magazines."³ Somel supports with his research "In the last period of the Ottoman Empire, a serious breakthrough in the education of girls was made during the reign of Abdülhamid II."⁴ Therefore, the reader might question the background of the schools for the girls.

Fortna has approached the educational mission of the Hamidian state from various and integrative point of views with a detailed scholarly analysis. Throughout the book, it is noteworthy that there is no strict line between the definitions of religion and secularism, however, it is perceived that the demand of the period effects the paradigms.

İletişim, one of Turkey's leading publishers, enables the readers also with the translation of Benjamin C. Fortna's study into Turkish in 2005 with the title *Mekteb-i Hümayûn: Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Son Döneminde İslâm, Devlet ve Eğitim* by the translation of Pelin Sıral. Successfully translated book is a valuable contribution to understanding the last years of the empire and its educational legacy. However, it could be pointed out that the translated work misses the analytical index, although it was available in the original. This study is highly recommended for those interested in schooling in the late Ottoman Empire and the history of the modern Middle East. As Professor Benjamin C. Fortna hopes at the beginning of the book, in my opinion the readers will find the approaches complementary with its clarity to understand the nature and spirit of the era and with its contribution to the field.

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3 Badegül Eren Aydınlık and Seyfi Kenan, "Between men, time and the state: education of girls during the Late Ottoman Empire (1859–1908)," *Paedagogica Historica*, (2019), pp. 1–19.

4 Selçuk Akşin Somel, "Osmanlı Modernleşme Döneminde Kız Eğitimi," *Kebikeç*, 10 (2000), pp. 223–238.