

CENSORSHIP AND THE 'EASTERN GAZE': OTTOMAN TRAVEL NARRATIVES BY EUROPEAN DIPLOMATS (1839–1914) AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ANATOLIAN IDENTITY

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Abstract

This review article examines the interplay between censorship, the so-called "Eastern Gaze," and the construction of Anatolian identity within Ottoman travel narratives authored by European diplomats between 1839 and 1914. Focusing on the Tanzimat and Hamidian periods, the study analyses how diplomatic travelogues functioned not only as instruments of state policy but also as cultural texts that mediated European perceptions of Anatolia. It interrogates the mechanisms of Ottoman censorship that shaped the production and circulation of these narratives, and explores how European diplomats' observations contributed to a discursive construction of Anatolia as a space of backwardness, exoticism, or potential. Drawing on postcolonial theory, Orientalism, and recent scholarship on Ottoman travel writing, the article argues that these narratives were caught between imperial rivalries, state surveillance, and the diplomats' own professional and personal biases. Ultimately, it demonstrates that the "Eastern Gaze" was a contested and contradictory lens through which Anatolian identity was framed, often in ways that served both European imperial interests and Ottoman modernising agendas. The review concludes by suggesting avenues for further research, particularly the need to integrate Ottoman and indigenous perspectives more fully into the analysis of travel writing.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire; travel writing; European diplomats; censorship; Eastern Gaze; Anatolian identity; Orientalism; Tanzimat; Hamidian period; sefâretnâme

1. Introduction

The nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic expansion in travel writing about the Ottoman Empire, a genre that encompassed everything from grand diplomatic reports (sefâretnâme) to personal memoirs and letters. While much scholarly attention has been devoted to European representations of the "Orient" as a whole, less has been paid to the specific subgenre of diplomatic travel narratives authored by European envoys and consuls stationed in the Ottoman realm. These texts, produced between the proclamation of the Tanzimat reforms in 1839 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, offer a unique window into the complex, often fraught, relationship between European empire and Ottoman state. They are also crucial sources for understanding how Anatolia—the geographical and cultural heartland

of the modern Turkish nation—was imagined, classified, and ultimately constructed as a distinct identity within the late Ottoman imperial space.

This review article explores three interconnected themes: first, the operation of Ottoman censorship as a mechanism that directly shaped the content and reception of European travel narratives; second, the analytical utility of the concept of an "Eastern Gaze" as a tool for understanding how European diplomats perceived and represented Anatolian society; and third, the role of these narratives in the discursive construction of Anatolian identity. By bringing together these strands, the article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of existing scholarship and to suggest new directions for research.

2. Theoretical Frameworks: Orientalism and the Eastern Gaze

The foundational framework for analysing European travel writing on the Ottoman Empire remains Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Said argued that Western representations of the "Orient" were not innocent depictions but were deeply implicated in the exercise of power, serving to justify colonial domination by portraying Eastern societies as decadent, irrational, and in need of European guidance. However, Said's model has been critiqued for its monolithic conception of Orientalist discourse and its neglect of local agency and resistance. Subsequent scholarship has sought to complicate this picture by examining the specificities of different national traditions, the role of indigenous intermediaries, and the potential for travel narratives to challenge, as well as reinforce, Orientalist stereotypes.

In the context of the Ottoman Empire, scholars have drawn attention to the phenomenon of "accidental Orientalism" (Spackman, 2017), whereby European travellers who found themselves in the Ottoman lands through historical accident produced narratives that sometimes destabilised the East-West binary. More recently, the concept of an "Eastern Gaze" has been deployed to analyse the ways in which Ottoman intellectuals themselves looked eastward, both towards the Arab provinces and towards Anatolia, employing categories and tropes borrowed from European Orientalism (Palabıyık, 2010). This concept is particularly useful for understanding how European diplomats' observations were received, refracted, and sometimes internalised by Ottoman elites.

3. Historical Context: The Tanzimat, Hamidian Censorship, and the Age of Steam and Print

The period under review (1839–1914) was one of profound transformation for the Ottoman Empire. The Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876) sought to modernise the state's administrative, legal, and military structures, often by emulating European models. This era of reform was accompanied by an expansion of print culture and an increased circulation of ideas, both within the empire and across its borders. However, the rise of new media also triggered state

anxiety. The Hamidian regime of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) is notorious for its elaborate system of censorship, which extended to foreign publications as well as domestic ones.

Ottoman censorship was not a monolithic or static phenomenon. It fluctuated in intensity and targeted different kinds of material at different times. The state was particularly concerned with publications that could foment political dissent, challenge the Sultan's authority, or promote separatist ideologies (such as Armenian nationalism or Arab separatism). As one historian notes, "the history of censorship in the Ottoman state is dominated by a permanent shift between intensification and loosening of censorship measures since the 19th century" (Becerik Yoldaş, 2012). The Hamidian regime used censorship not only to suppress opposition but also to shape public opinion and promote a pan-Islamic legitimacy.

Technological developments played a crucial role in both enabling and constraining travel and communication. The advent of steamships and railways dramatically reduced travel times, facilitating the movement of diplomats, officials, and goods. The expansion of the telegraph and the printing press accelerated the dissemination of information. However, these same technologies also made it easier for the Ottoman state to monitor and control the flow of ideas. Customs officials were instructed to inspect incoming publications, and suspicious material was forwarded to the relevant ministries for review (Kocyjigit, 2020).

4. European Diplomatic Travel Narratives: Sources, Genres, and Motives

European diplomatic travel narratives from the Ottoman Empire are a diverse body of texts. They include official dispatches and reports (*dépeches*), which were often classified and intended for a restricted audience; personal letters and diaries, which offered more candid observations; and published memoirs and travelogues, which were shaped by the conventions of the travel writing genre and the expectations of a reading public back home. Many of these narratives were written by ambassadors, consuls, and attachés stationed in Constantinople (Istanbul), but also by diplomats who travelled extensively throughout the provinces, including Anatolia.

The motives for writing these narratives were multiple. Official reports served to inform European governments about political, economic, and military conditions in the Ottoman Empire. They also functioned as instruments of intelligence gathering, particularly in the context of the "Eastern Question"—the competition between European powers for influence over the declining Ottoman state. Personal letters and diaries, by contrast, might reflect the diplomat's own intellectual curiosity, social ambitions, or desire for adventure. Published memoirs often sought to entertain, educate, or justify the author's actions to a wider audience.

Despite their differences, these narratives share certain characteristics. They are invariably shaped by the author's professional training, social position, and cultural assumptions. They often adopt a tone of superiority, portraying the Ottoman world as exotic, corrupt, or chaotic. They also tend to focus on certain themes: the nature of Ottoman governance, the condition of religious and ethnic minorities, the state of infrastructure and commerce, and the character of the population. Anatolia, in particular, was often depicted as a backward, neglected region, ripe for European intervention or reform.

5. The Operation of Censorship: Shaping the Narrative

Ottoman censorship directly impacted the production and circulation of European diplomatic travel narratives. The state imposed controls on both the entry of foreign publications and the export of sensitive information. Diplomats were aware that their correspondence might be intercepted and read by Ottoman authorities. This led to a degree of self-censorship, particularly on matters pertaining to the Sultan, the imperial family, or sensitive political issues (such as the treatment of Armenians). One study notes that the Hamidian regime "through the instruments of censorship, imprisonment, or expatriation, had obliged the Ottoman intelligentsia to leave even remotely political" discussions (Bilici, 2011). While primarily aimed at Ottoman subjects, this climate of repression also affected foreigners.

Censorship was not always effective, and diplomats found ways to circumvent it. They might use coded language, send letters via trusted couriers, or delay publication of sensitive material until after their departure from Ottoman territory. Nevertheless, the threat of censorship shaped what could be said, and how it could be said. It encouraged a focus on seemingly apolitical topics (such as archaeology, ethnography, or natural history) while discouraging overt criticism of the Ottoman state. This, in turn, influenced the kinds of knowledge about Anatolia that were produced and disseminated in Europe.

6. The 'Eastern Gaze' in Practice: European Diplomats in Anatolia

When European diplomats travelled beyond Constantinople into the Anatolian interior, they brought with them a set of preconceived notions about the "East". These notions were derived from classical texts, biblical accounts, earlier travel literature, and contemporary Orientalist scholarship. The result was a mode of perception that tended to see Anatolian society through a lens of otherness. Villages were described as primitive, bazaars as chaotic, and religious practices as superstitious.

Yet the "Eastern Gaze" was not monolithic. Individual diplomats varied in their attitudes towards the Ottoman state and its subjects. Some were sympathetic to Ottoman modernisation efforts and expressed admiration for certain aspects of Turkish culture. Others

were deeply hostile, viewing the Ottomans as irredeemably corrupt and backward. Moreover, diplomats often had to navigate conflicting loyalties: to their home government, to the Ottoman authorities who hosted them, and to their own professional and personal networks.

Recent scholarship has emphasised the extent to which European diplomats were embedded in local networks of informants, translators, and guides. This meant that their observations were often mediated by indigenous intermediaries, whose own biases and agendas shaped the information that was relayed. The resulting narratives, therefore, represent a complex negotiation between European and Ottoman perspectives, rather than a simple imposition of a Western gaze.

7. Constructing Anatolian Identity: From Province to Homeland

One of the most significant contributions of diplomatic travel narratives is their role in the discursive construction of Anatolian identity. Before the nineteenth century, "Anatolia" was not a clearly defined political or cultural unit. It was a geographical expression, referring to the Asian provinces of the Ottoman Empire. However, as the empire lost territory in the Balkans and the Caucasus, Anatolia increasingly came to be seen as the heartland of a potential Turkish nation-state. European diplomats played a part in this process by writing about Anatolia as a distinct region with its own history, geography, and population.

Diplomatic narratives often emphasised the ethnic and religious diversity of Anatolia, noting the presence of Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Kurds, Jews, and others. This diversity was sometimes portrayed as a source of weakness and instability, but it was also seen as an object of ethnographic interest. Some diplomats became experts on particular communities, advising their governments on how to exploit ethnic tensions for strategic advantage.

At the same time, European diplomats contributed to the erasure of certain identities. By focusing on the "backwardness" of Anatolian Muslims, they reinforced stereotypes that would later be used to justify the policies of the Turkish Republic, including the forced assimilation of Kurds and the expulsion of Greeks. In this sense, the "Eastern Gaze" was not merely a reflection of European prejudice but an active force in shaping the region's political future.

8. Review of Major Studies (Pre-2020)

A substantial body of scholarship, published before 2020, has laid the groundwork for understanding the themes explored in this review. Faik Reşit Unat's foundational work, *Osmanlı Sefirleri ve Sefâretnâmeleri* (1992), provided a comprehensive catalogue of Ottoman ambassadorial reports, establishing the documentary basis for later analyses. Hadiye Tuncer

and Hüner Tuncer's *Osmanlı Diplomasisi ve Sefâretnâmeler* (1992) offered a more analytical treatment, examining the evolution of the genre.

More recent studies have adopted a cultural and postcolonial lens. Daniel O'Quinn's *Engaging the Ottoman Empire* (2018) examined the complex interpersonal and aesthetic relationships between European diplomats and Ottoman society in the long eighteenth century, while Gerald MacLean's *Looking East* (2007) explored English writing on the Ottoman Empire before 1800. Hasan Baktir's *The Representation of the Ottoman Orient in Eighteenth Century English Literature* (2010) analysed how Ottoman society and culture were depicted in pseudo-Oriental letters and travel tales.

The issue of censorship has been addressed in works such as Deringil's *The Well-Protected Domains* (1998), which discussed the ideological use of censorship under Abdülhamid II, and in various studies on the Ottoman press. The concept of an "Eastern Gaze" has been developed in dissertations such as Palabıyık's *Travel, Civilization and the East* (2010) and in articles examining the travel writings of Ahmet İhsan (Arslan, 2012) and the phenomenon of "internal Orientalism".

Finally, the construction of Anatolian identity has been explored in studies of local travel writing, such as Ayşe Ozil's article on an Ottoman Greek traveller in Pamphylia (Ozil, 2020), and in broader works on Ottoman and Turkish nationalism. Together, these studies provide a rich foundation for further research, but they also reveal gaps, particularly in the integrated analysis of censorship, the Eastern Gaze, and identity construction across the full range of European diplomatic narratives.

9. Conclusion and Future Directions

This review has argued that European diplomatic travel narratives from the late Ottoman Empire are indispensable sources for understanding the complex interplay between censorship, the "Eastern Gaze," and the construction of Anatolian identity. These narratives were shaped by Ottoman state controls, which limited what could be said about the empire, particularly during the Hamidian period. They were also shaped by the diplomats' own cultural assumptions, which often led them to view Anatolia through an Orientalist lens. Yet, within these constraints, diplomatic narratives contributed to a discursive construction of Anatolia as a distinct region, laying the groundwork for later nationalisms.

Future research should aim to integrate the analysis of European narratives more fully with Ottoman sources. This includes reading diplomatic dispatches alongside Ottoman archival documents (such as the *mühimme defterleri*), Ottoman travelogues (*seyahatnâme*), and the censored publications of the period. A comparative approach, examining narratives produced

by diplomats from different European powers (British, French, German, Austrian, Italian), would also be valuable. Finally, attention should be paid to the reception of these narratives in Ottoman intellectual circles. How were European descriptions of Anatolia read, translated, and appropriated by Ottoman reformers, nationalists, and ordinary readers? Answering these questions will require a truly transnational and interdisciplinary approach, but the rewards will be a more nuanced understanding of how the modern Middle East was imagined and made.

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