Midnight at the Pera Palace: The Birth of Modern Istanbul

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A stigma around the ill-defined genre of popular history lingers in the academy. Even as historians are being pushed to pursue public engagement in all its forms, many have maintained their distance, reticent to pursue topics of more general interest, suspicious that their research will be diluted in this unfamiliar practice, and perchance even fearful of rejection from an audience they were never trained to write for and regale. Nonetheless, historians cannot escape the fact that in many countries popular history is undoubtedly becoming more popular, and thus it irks more than before that so many popular histories are considered ‘bad’ histories, indulgent, poorly researched and bereft of historiographical engagement and critical analysis (1); that many histories considered more traditional fit this bill too is beside the point.

Yet although it would seem that popular history has been embraced by a mere fraction of academics – much to its detriment and the academy itself – a growing number of serious scholars have in recent years joined the fray. Professor Charles King of Georgetown is one such scholar, and his contribution bodes well for the genre. Best known for his works on Odessa, the Caucasus and the Black Sea, King strays further afield to Turkey in the book under review here, all the while preserving many stylistic elements and contextual foci from his previous offerings (e.g., the grand scope and flair, the convergence on such themes as nationalism, cosmopolitanism and the city as crossroads, etc.). And despite being a relative outsider to Ottoman and Turkish history, his *Midnight at the Pera Palace: The Birth of Modern Istanbul* is an example of ‘good’ popular history, a high form of the genre produced by a gifted researcher and wordsmith. Ambitious in scope and using a range of Turkish and foreign sources, the book is engaging, entertaining and exudes sincere and infectious affection for its complicated muse: Istanbul, one of the great cities of the world. Istanbul was of course the capital of the Ottoman Empire, a powerhouse of the early modern era whose star collapsed in the years following the First World War. *Midnight* is the story of this imperial city during and after the empire’s fall.

From the death throes of the Ottomans to post-war Allied occupation in 1918 to republican rule in 1923 and up until the end of the Second World War, King delves deep into the life of the city and its variegated, revolving cast of characters. Atatürk, Trotsky, Halide Edip, Hemingway, Nâzim Hikmet, and Goebbels all make cameos. Turks and those who would come to identify as such played a significant part in the city’s social, cultural and physical transformation. But it is the constant arrival, departure and mixing of less

renowned people of different nationalities, races and creeds in the inter-war era that animate this work. Always racked with espionage and intrigue, Istanbul could be at once full of Allied occupiers and 'Turkish nationalists', White Russians and Bolsheviks, Nazis and the stateless Jews and German intellectuals they expelled. For a time, relatively open borders also remade Istanbul into a very different kind of crossroads than it was before and would be again. The city became a place where an African-American White Russian refugee could run a nightclub, where musicians and artists experimented with alien forms, highborn and lowborn migrants flooded Istanbul's secondhand shops with their wares, and foreign baronesses sold their bodies to survive. Now and again, calamity mixed with artistic flair and entrepreneurial zeal to generate hybridity at a frenetic pace (e.g., jazz blended with rebetiko, old and new fashions overlapping, the creation of Turkish tango, etc.). King provides the reader with an image of the city as a pulsating refuge to so many of the world's undesirables. He then shows how much of it fell away.

Istanbul after all could be a cruel host to some. For others, it was but a pit-stop on the way to somewhere conceivably better. Foreigners came and many moved on, leaving elements of their heritage and taking others' traditions with them. But it was the imperial city's longstanding non-Muslim inhabitants, those once Ottoman Christian and Jewish subjects, whose departure cut most deep, producing social and cultural craters at the city's core. Victims of a narrowing Turkish national identity, they left indelible marks on the city before slowly but surely being forced out in large numbers, replaced over time by Muslims from Anatolia and the Balkans whose backstories were often no less heartrending. The book is teeming with their stories and many others.

In reviewing *Midnight*, I found few notable criticisms, but readers should approach the book mindful of certain aspects. For one, those expecting to find a strict history of the Pera Palace (est. 1892) may be a tad disappointed. The grand but troubled hotel at the centre of so much inter-war maneuvering does indeed feature in the book, and its employees and guests provide many entertaining anecdotes, but the Palace's greater purpose is to serve as a compelling stage on which many of the vast changes sweeping the once-imperial seat of power (and occasionally Turkey at large) can be enacted in miniature. This thread runs right to the end with the epilogue of the book even briefly describing the hotel's present-day reinvention under the stewardship of a luxury firm from Dubai, both a jab at the Turkish government's controversial neoliberal attempts at 'urban renewal' that have fostered so much recent resentment and a monument to the past's partial and frequently nostalgized survival in Istanbul despite those and other efforts. Yet King has no compunction about abandoning the hotel for long swathes. Consequently, there are times then we are left hoping he will soon re-enter its baroque interiors for another salacious tale of conspiracy or impropriety, even if, as King shows, the city at large was not lacking in either of those elements.

Second, although chapters tend to alternate between Turkish and foreign sources and subjects, the story can at times lean heavily on foreigners, particularly those Russian and Jewish peoples who are in King's wheelhouse and feature prominently in his other works. Craving more stories of the common *Istanbullu* is perhaps unavoidable here, particularly for historians of Turkey. Yet we must acknowledge that sources revealing the lives of ordinary Turks are in many ways difficult to locate for the period in question, and King does succeed in finding many intriguing characters; for instance, the former imperial eunuchs who established a mutual assistance society so as to acculturate to republican life. Moreover, many of these fascinating subjects are given visual form through the photos of the Turkish photographer Selahattin Giz. An extensive research effort can thus be observed. More importantly, King's selected Turkish and foreign characters bequeath perspectives on early republican Istanbul rarely delineated in so much depth and vigor.

Third, although similarities abound in the rich cornucopias of urban sights, sounds and smells provided as well as in a periodic reliance on foreign traveler accounts, *Midnight* is structurally dissimilar to Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet's *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul* which adopts a somewhat more systematic approach to revealing city life. [\(2\)](#) *Midnight* offers a dazzling panoply of vivid biographical portraits and vignettes of war and inter-war life in the city, but is markedly free-wheeling in its structure. The final chapters, for example, proceed in succession from Trotsky's stint in the Prince's Islands and Soviet espionage to Turkey's first beauty queen to the renovation of the Hagia Sofia to Turkish-Nazi relations and Istanbul's role in the

Jewish refugee crisis of the Second World War. Smooth transitions are then sometimes lacking, and leaps in time and focus should be expected. All this is to say that the book is best read as a series of associated essays, each providing a unique vista from which to understand the city, its population and development. Taken as a whole, *Midnight* still leaves readers with a distinct set of feelings and flavours of the city and its vibrant past, but the expansive scope and occasional discontinuities might at times prove jarring for some.

Finally, glance to the back cover of the book and you will read three pithy and glowing reviews from well-established purveyors of popular history, all lauding King's sumptuous elicitation of Istanbul's colourful past. Yet, peer a little closer and you will see too that they all comment on one significant facet of the work: the nature and consequence of Istanbul's transformation from imperial through to republican times. Joseph Kanon is in some ways the least committal of the three citing simply 'all the chaotic brio and contradictions of a city, and a culture, reinventing itself'. Stephen Kinzer and Simon Winchester's views, on the other hand, are more pronounced, with both reviewers deriving slightly different interpretations of the city's metamorphosis from King's account. While Kinzer chose to read it as 'the story of how Istanbul transformed itself from a refugee-clogged backwater into a vibrant metropolis', Winchester instead centered his comment on 'the slow dimming of Ottoman magnificence' (back cover). Mutually exclusive these visions are not. But they do speak to some of the central tensions in the book; tensions which could elude or confound the reader depending on their knowledge of Turkish historiography. One has to do with Kanon's notion of reinvention, or rather its extent; another with judgments on whether reinvention was a positive or negative phenomenon.

As regards the former, debates on rupture and continuity between Ottoman imperial and Turkish republican epochs have been ongoing for some time, with many historians now often rightly emphasizing the latter in attempts to unravel older, trenchant Kemalist claims of Turkey's emergence as a new and modern republic divorced in every way, shape or form from its supposedly archaic imperial predecessor. For the most part, King positions himself well within this debate. *Midnight* is resolute in showcasing Istanbul's alteration from Ottoman into republican times, but it neither draws so distinct a line between the two eras nor credits all such changes to Kemalist will and ideology. And while there are instances where King could be more critical of the crudeness and finality of the abovementioned Kemalist plotline (3), overall he does well to confront it, pointing out continuities where they exist, and repeatedly showing that 'People always somehow manage to lead messier lives than nationalists would like' (p. 167).

In another respect, his narrative at times appears to come down quite firmly on the side of a rupture, albeit one more gradually induced and less agreeable with the positive assurances of Kemalist historiography. Chronicling the rise of an exclusivist and xenophobic Turkish nationalism, King depicts it grinding away many elements of the multi-ethnic and pluralistic city as well as the former empire it is supposed to represent. This particular iteration of an old chestnut – nationalism undoing cosmopolitanism – is not entirely false but, as King endeavors to demonstrate, nor is it so clean and clear-cut; for while this verdict on Istanbul's transformation is conceivably King's most forceful and pessimistic, it is but one in the book. King is exceptional at imbuing *Midnight* with both the pains *and* pleasures of the past, making the reader feel what was lost and gained as we move forward through different periods in the city's history. It is perhaps due to this purposeful ambivalence that readers might glean, deliberately or not, conflicting judgments on the vices or virtues of the city's many alterations during the republic, encouraged too by their own personal predilections for and against the Ottoman or Kemalist periods. Consequently, even as many will be moved to lament the tragic events which blighted Istanbul and the many peoples who crossed through or settled in it, or grow incensed at imperial life and grandeur succumbing to state neglect or coarse homogenization efforts, others might yet find cause to trumpet Kemalist modernization and Istanbul's transition from 'Byzantine whore' (p. 152) to a more representatively 'Turkish' city. It is unlikely that King had any one such definitive conclusion in mind for the reader when he wrote the book. His epilogue in fact eschews the very notion, urging us to rebuff both the national and elegiac versions of history and adopt something altogether less tidy and straightforward in their place (p. 374–5). Readers are thus asked to chart a route between nostalgia for a lost past and faith in a hopeful modernity.

In sum, *Midnight at the Pera Palace* is an enthralling read. As a popular history, it would most probably be

appreciated in dissimilar ways by different scholarly audiences. For those whose expertise lies outside Turkey, the book can serve as a pleasurable introduction to Istanbul as well as a means of connecting the city to their own research via the multitude of peoples who crossed through it. Scholars of Turkey, on the other hand, may find aspects to contest, but King imparts to them a wonderful array of accounts of the early republican city and more importantly has drawn them together in a captivating albeit loose narrative. *Midnight* then could serve as a teaching resource either for the lively anecdotes it affords instructors, or as an informative and entertaining student text. Finally, King has provided another example of what constitutes 'good' popular history, helping to further destigmatize the genre. Nuanced yet accessible, edifying but enjoyable, *Midnight* is a work academics can feel comfortable recommending to lay readers. The book should be of particular interest to foreign travelers to Istanbul, and could very well be a hit in that country at a time when its citizens are voraciously consuming popular histories of their imperial and national pasts.

Notes

1. What precisely makes a popular history good or bad is of course in many ways subjective, a matter of taste and perception. But for an academic perspective on the matter as well as a plea for academics to try and write 'good' histories for popular audiences, see David Greenberg, 'That Barnes and Noble Dream', *Slate* (17 May 2005) <
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/history_book_blitz/features/2005/that_barnes_noble_dream/a
[2]> [accessed 23 June 2015].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. This is not to say that Fleet and Boyar's monograph is without problems or even a superior work, but it does adopt a rather strict thematic framework and progresses in a more anticipatable fashion. E. Boyar and K. Fleet, *A Social History of Ottoman Istanbul*, (Cambridge, 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For instance, in using the terms 'Kemalists' or 'Turkish nationalists' (p. 91) to describe the armed forces fighting the Allied powers during the War of Independence (1919–23), the book falls somewhat in line with Kemalist historiography. While these terms may have occasionally been used at the time by some actors, they belie the diversity of these armed forces, not simply in their ethnic makeup (Kurds, Circassians, etc.) but also their motivations for resistance and the end-goals they hoped to achieve.[Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11182791/Midnight-at-the-Pera-Palace-The-Birth-of-Modern-Istanbul-by-Charles-King.html> [3]

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/07/books/review/midnight-at-the-pera-palace-by-charles-king.html> [4]

Economist

<http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21616884-hotel-centre-it-all-city-lights> [5]

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