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WHAT WENT WRONG?

FROM BABEL TO DRAGOMANS

INTERPRETING THE MIDDLE EAST



them that they had produced such great sovereigns as Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent and the Caliph Omar, such men of learning as Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ghazali and Zamakhshari; and he saw nothing incongruous in including Arab and Persian Muslims in an appeal to Turkish pride. In his most important historical work, the *Evrak-i Perişhan* (published in 1884), he gives biographies of Sultan Mehmed II, Sultan Selim I, Emir Nevruz Bey, and of Saladin. Most of the other historical works of the period take the Ottoman Empire as the unit of study and seek its origins, not in the history of the ancient Turks, but in that of the Islamic Caliphate.

In this same period, however, we can see the first stages in the development of two new notions: the notion of Turkey, and the notion of Turks. It may seem strange that these two notions should be described as new among the Turks in Turkey, yet so they were in the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. While traces of a Turkish awareness of identity can be found in the early Ottoman period, they were overlaid and effaced by the double weight of the Imperial and religious traditions. In Ottoman writings up to the middle of the 19th century, and in many of them much later, the word "Turkey" is not used. It was a Western term, used by Westerners to describe a country which the Turks themselves usually called "the lands of Islam," "the imperial realm," "the divinely guarded realm," "the Ottoman dominions," and similar expressions—and these were of course understood to include the whole of the Empire and not simply the area inhabited by the Turkish nation, the very existence of which was concealed. The word "Turk" was indeed used, but in much the same way as "fellaḥ" is used in modern Arabic—to denote the ignorant peasant—and its application to the Ottoman gentleman of Istanbul would have been an insult. It is in the course of the 19th century, and under Western influence, that these two ideas appear and make headway: the idea of Turkey as a country inhabited by a certain people and constituting a natural entity, and the idea of the Turks as a nation, distinct from the Ottoman dynasty and Empire.

One of the most important sources of these ideas was the new European science of Turcology. From the 18th century onwards a series of scholars, working from Chinese, Islamic, and later Turkish sources, had studied the history and languages of the eastern and pre-Islamic Turks. From the work of scholars like Joseph de Guignes (1721–1800), Abel-Remusat (1788–1832), Stanislas Julien (1799–1873), Heinrich Julius Klaproth (1783–1835), Edouard Chavannes (1865–1918), Vilhelm Thomsen (1842–1927), Wilhelm Radloff (1837–1918) and others, a new picture emerged of the role of the Turkish peoples in the history of Asia and Europe, and new light was thrown on the hitherto obscure history of the Turks before they entered Islam. This new science was especially cultivated in Hungary, where the belief was held by some authorities in the common origin of the Turks and Magyars.³ National and racial ideas were introduced to the Turks by Hungarian and other European exiles who settled in Turkey after the unsuccessful revolutions of 1848, and were also communicated