From Comparative to Entangled Histories

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Adrian Brisku, *Political Reform in the Ottoman and Russian Empires: A Comparative Approach*. 272 pp. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. ISBN-13 978-1474238564. $114.00.

Will Smiley, *From Slaves to Prisoners of War: The Ottoman Empire, Russia, and International Law*. 304 pp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN-13 978-0198785415. £65.00.

In 2011, this journal published a special issue containing six essays on the "spaces of entanglements" between the Russian and Ottoman empires.[1] In his comments, Andreas Kappeler lamented that this area of research was relatively neglected, owing both to a lack of expertise and the traditional focus on Europeanization in the historiography of both empires.[2] Since then, several books have examined numerous aspects of the long and variegated relationship between these two polities, and the books under review contribute to this growing research trajectory.[3] Indeed, as heirs to a Eurasian tradition, ruled by leaders with great personal authority, and as centers of their respective religions, the Russian and Ottoman empires are rife for comparison. The

[1] "Models on the Margins: Russia and the Ottoman Empire," special issue of *Kritika* 12, 2 (2011).

[2] Andreas Kappeler, "Spaces of Entanglement," *Kritika* 12, 2 (2011): 478–79.

[3] See, e.g., Victor Taki, *Tsar and Sultan: Russian Encounters with the Ottoman Empire* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016); Brian L. Davies, *The Russo-Turkish War, 1768–1774: Catherine II and the Ottoman Empire* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Andrew Robarts, *Migration and Disease in the Black Sea Region: Ottoman-Russian Relations in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); James H. Meyer, *Turks across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856–1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Lucien J. Frary and Mara Kozelsky, eds., *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands: The Eastern Question Reconsidered* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014).

two had a shared history that persisted into the postrevolutionary period for both. Their long history of contact, both adversarial and collaborative, touching on aspects of the political, commercial, strategic, social, legal, and cultural offers fruitful areas of research. This much has been established. Perhaps we might still benefit from a conversation about what kind of methodological approach might best reveal these parallels and address the research questions we want to ask.

Before diving into the texts, I would like to draw the reader's attention to the methodologies of studying the two empires undertaken in the two books under consideration. Comparative history is something many of us who place our historical scholarship in a transnational, regional, or global framework both claim to do and approach with caution. We are cautious, I think, because the social science methodology that underlies comparative historical analysis invites several ahistorical moves. For instance, a traditional interest in explaining phenomena and causes of events forces scholars to turn historical subject matter into artificial units of comparison. Sometimes we even place them along a developmental pathway such as, say, a pathway to an imagined European ideal and compare the historical record against a checklist of attributes we expect to see or develop.[4] Newer perspectives on comparative history argue that it need not be conducted for the sheer purpose of locating the causes of historical phenomena, that identifying similarities between our subjects or elements is enough.[5] Common trends observed among multiple polities would show that a particular trait or occurrence exists beyond a single nation-state.[6] A more nuanced approach, however, has been to turn the main criticisms of comparative method into objects of investigation by looking at the processes or agents that explain why similarities between units of comparison are seldom actually spontaneous or isolated. Entangled history, or *histoire croisée*, aims to overcome the challenges and pitfalls of comparative history.[7] It offers a more flexible approach to examine multiple points of overlap, intersection, and crossover between polities, in relation to each other

[4] The *Kritika* forum about Muscovite despotism is a good illustration of this tendency. See Marshall Poe, "The Truth about Muscovy," and Valerie A. Kivelson, "On Words, Sources, and Historical Method: Which Truth about Muscovy?," in *Kritika* 3, 3 (2002): 473–99.

[5] Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor, "Introduction: Comparative History, Cross-National History, Transnational History-Definitions," in *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective*, ed. Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor (London: Routledge, 2004), xv.

[6] Nancy L. Green, "Forms of Comparison," in *Comparison and History*, 41–56.

[7] Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmerman, "Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity," *History and Theory* 45 (February 2006): 36–37.

rather than to a fixed external model, which is better suited to capturing process and transformation of practices and entities.

Each of the two books under review uses one of these methodological approaches, but the differences between the two are also conceptual. Each text is written to answer a different set of questions and therefore engages with different historiographical traditions in Russian and Ottoman history. Most obviously, this is the question of empire. Both the Ottoman and Russian historiographies have embraced questions regarding the longevity of imperial formations, the structures of authority, and culture of rule for more than 20 years: the imperial turn. In Russian history, questions of empire have largely reoriented the study of imperial Russia away from measured assessments on the extent to which liberalism and constitutional ideas and reforms had taken root in autocratic Russia. These conceptual changes in historiography coincided with other changes and are likely to have been bolstered by them. With greater freedom for foreign researchers to work in Russian archives, fresh topics and approaches to scholarship in post-Soviet Russia and the West, and new historical questions, the studies of Russia's westernization and Europeanizing reforms took a back seat to other, more pressing historical questions.[8] Consequently, over the past 20 years, imperial Russian history has sought to understand the Russian Empire, and its constituent parts, and its methods of rule in a global and comparative framework. In addition to individual studies of imperial rule over disparate parts of the empire, diverse populations, and ranging approaches to its flora and fauna, we have seen numerous theoretical works grappling with the problem of how to understand and characterize the Russian Empire—in fact, in *Ab Imperio*, we have an entire journal devoted to these questions.[9] Perhaps the best testament to this trend are the new sweeping histories of Russia that take the concept of empire as an organizing framework, which feels like a shift from a more traditional narrative framing that focuses on the Russian tsars and development of the Russian state.[10]

[8] Consider the observation made by Alfred Rieber in 2001 that by the turn of the millennium questions of empire had distinguished themselves from other concerns of political history, particularly those of domestic reform ("From Reform to Empire: Russia's 'New' Political History," *Kritika* 2, 2 [2001]: 261–68).

[9] Individual works in this genre would be too cumbersome to list, and from among the theoretical contributions I point to the collected volume from the editors of the journal *Ab Imperio*, which speaks directly to this point (Ilya Gerasimov, Jan Kusber, and Alexander Semyonov, eds., *Empire Speaks Out: Languages of Rationalization and Self-Description in the Russian Empire* [Leiden: Brill, 2009]).

[10] Nancy Shields Kollmann, *The Russian Empire, 1450–1801* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Serhii Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian*

While the Ottoman historical tradition is different, there are obvious parallels in the shift from the study of state formation to methods of empire that ushered in the imperial turn. These newer studies of the Ottoman Empire made a point of stepping away from the decline narrative: that is, both the slow disintegration of the empire tarred with the label of "sick man of Europe" and the eventual transformation of the imperial structure into a nation-state.[11] As an empire, the polity could then be situated and understood in a whole host of trends that constitute numerous approaches to studying global history, including histories of trade and commerce, maritime studies, history of science and technology, as well as legal history and histories of international law (as represented by one of the books under review). With rule across three continents, the Ottoman Empire also fits into numerous regional contexts, including Europe, the Mediterranean world, the Middle East, and Eurasia. At the same time, despite its broad reach and regional diversity, understanding the Ottoman Empire necessarily involves understanding the processes of "Ottomanization," by which provinces and local elites came to be integrated into the high culture of the empire. Even local and regional studies of some corner of the vast polity now grapple with the question of how to uncover and understand these processes, just as national historiographies try to disentangle and complicate them.[12] The point is that for several decades now, scholarship has pivoted from questions of modernization and analysis of reforms to placing some understanding of empire at the center of analysis.[13]

Adrian Brisku's book picks up where an older historiography left off, with an exposition on two sets of political reform projects of the 19th century in the Russian and Ottoman empires, and the underlying question of the evolutionary paths these two polities took to join the "European" 19th century (1–6). Simultaneously comparing the language of reforms and the

Nation from 1470 to the Present (New York: Basic Books, 2017); Valerie A. Kivelson and Ronald Grigor Suny, *Russia's Empires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[11] This is an important theme in Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Donald Quataert, "Ottoman History Writing and Changing Attitudes towards the Notion of 'Decline,'" *History Compass* 1, 1 (2003): 1–9.

[12] For one perspective on the Ottomanization of local elites, see Dina Khoury, "The Ottoman Centre versus Provincial Power-Holders: An Analysis of the Historiography," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, vol. 3, ed. Suraiya N. Faroqhi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 133–56.

[13] On the truly impossible task of capturing the state of Ottoman studies, see Ehud R. Toledano, "A Comment on Virginia H. Aksan's 'What's Up in Ottoman Studies?,'" *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 2, 1 (2015): 215–18. Alan Mikhail and Christine Philliou offer a more elaborate discussion of the shift in the scholarship in "The Ottoman Empire and the Imperial Turn," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, 4 (2012): 721–45.

historiographies of these projects, Brisku argues that Russian and Ottoman westernizing reforms were "an integral part of" the legacy of the "European" 19th century. Not only the reform projects but also their nuances are the subject of comparison, and the similarity of themes across reforms in both polities lie at the forefront of his discussion. Will Smiley's monograph, in contrast, capitalizes on the strengths of an "entangled" approach with its study of international law and legal practices between the Russian and Ottoman empires while showing that the legal questions he raises were at the heart of the empires' self-understanding and self-presentation. These larger conceptual differences no doubt contributed to their chosen methodologies but also to their respective positions on some of the central questions of Eurasian history.

By looking at how select 19th-century reform projects in the Russian and Ottoman empires deployed the language of reform, Adrian Brisku's *Political Reform in the Russian and Ottoman Empires* falls into a strange space between a synthetic history and historical sociology. He sees reformist language as a signal of reformers' desire to introduce the rule of law and economic liberalism and open up the possibility of increased political representations. The book tackles these themes in four chapters, alternating between Russian and Ottoman cases. The book is split into two parts. Part 1 looks at the roles of law and religion in the first half of the 19th century. The first chapter begins with the reform projects of Mikhail Speranskii and turns to Alexander I's Holy Alliance in the second half. The second chapter looks at the role of Mustafa Reshid Pasha and the first of the Tanzimat reforms, focusing on the language of the *Hatt-ı Hümayun*, of the imperial decree signed by the sultan in 1839 that promised fundamental changes to Ottoman administration and equal treatment of all Ottoman subjects. Part 2 examines the idioms of political economy and political representation through the cases of the Great Reforms in Russia and the move toward the constitution of 1876 in the Ottoman Empire. Brisku's focus is, therefore, on reforms that brought the Russian and Ottoman empires closer to supposed European ideals and practices in the "European" 19th century (an assumption rather than conclusion of the book).

To his credit, Brisku's aim—laid out in a lucid introduction that anticipates several of the remarks that follow here—is to destabilize the narrative of a unidirectional transition from autocracy to constitutionalism, economic protectionism to liberalism, lawlessness to rule of law that has saddled much of the scholarship on 19th-century political reforms in both

empires. Unfortunately, the promise of this argument is lost in the chapters themselves, often due to the author's meandering prose. Another problem is that Brisku attempts to carry out his analysis through secondary scholarship, authors whose interpretations of these political projects from each of the empires were written with those very assumptions in mind. Marc Raeff's biography of Mikhail Speranskii, which is a major source for Brisku's understanding of the important 19th-century statesman, was part of Raeff's intellectual project on imperial Russia's liberal tradition—a tradition that has been complicated by the scholarship of Derek Offord, Julia Berest, Susanna Rabow-Edling and many others (few of whom appear in Brisku's bibliography or footnotes).[14] The chapter on the Great Reforms revisits the famous biographies of the "enlightened bureaucrats"—Nikolai Miliutin, Petr Valuev—and meditates on the eventual necessity of top-down reform to make emancipation a reality. While Brisku delves deep into the biographies and writings of his protagonists, their projects seem suspended in an intellectual vacuum of obstinate bureaucracy and external political events. In the two Ottoman chapters, he concludes that both the Tanzimat reforms of the 1840s that limited the sultan's prerogative and made overtures to a more independent bureaucracy that eschewed patrimonialism toward a more rational government (chapter 2) and the political shift leading to the first Ottoman constitution (chapter 4) were largely influenced by external powers, neither of which strays from the prevailing interpretations.

Although the book provides an apt and needed discussion of the parallel experiences of the Russian and Ottoman empires, it misses an opportunity to move beyond the current scholarship. One might have, for instance, looked at one of the thousands of (unpublished) Speranskii documents held in two St. Petersburg collections to gain fresh insight into his reformist rhetoric; or considered the centrality of the Great Reforms in the broader geographical stretch of the Russian Empire; or seen the zemstvos as more than toothless organizations that stood by idly as the tsar resisted constitutional projects. Despite its historical subject, methodologically this is not a history book. Accepting this is the first step to avoiding disappointment with an author who neglected to consult any primary-source materials in his assessment of the language of political reform. To say this is not to fetishize the archive but

[14] Marc Raeff, *Michael Speransky: Statesman of Imperial Russia, 1772–1839* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1957); Julia Berest, *The Emergence of Russian Liberalism: Alexander Kunitsyn in Context, 1783–1840* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Susanna Rabow-Edling, "The Decembrists and the Concept of a Civic Nation," *Nationalities Papers* 35, 2 (2007): 369–91; Rabow-Edling, *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); Derek Offord, *Nineteenth-Century Russia: Opposition to Autocracy* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1999).

to ask how to introduce a shift from the teleological narrative that Brisku accepts as problematic. Perhaps the way forward does not lie in rehashing the same interpretations but in considering new materials or shifting the conversation to new objects of inquiry that may reframe the picture.

With a regional approach to a transnational topic, Will Smiley's *From Slaves to Prisoners of War* examines captivity in wartime in the 18th and 19th centuries in two Eurasian empires. Smiley traces the emergence of prisoner-of-war status in the Eurasian context through a series of Russian-Ottoman conflicts, locating it first within the customary legal framework that emerged between these two powers, which by the middle of the 19th century was concordant with European norms. The book looks at both the legal justifications for captivity as well as the experiences of the captives themselves, tracing how prisoners' treatment and prospects evolved with changes in the international, regional, and domestic contexts. The story is told across ten chapters, each of which explores a different legal question or development and identifies historical pivot points for key developments in the practices of captivity and release. The point of a deep history and close charting of the emergence and evolution of these norms is to show that the Ottoman government came to prohibit the taking of captives and slaves and use the European discourses of humanitarianism not through overt European pressure but through a different course that was underpinned by uniquely Ottoman legal justifications.

A part of modern international laws of war, prisoner-of-war status evolved out of a legal and political tradition that relied on captives to provide manpower to the state (e.g., by rowing galleys) and to serve as domestic slaves. The legal tradition stemmed from the Hanafi school of Islamic jurisprudence (one of four main Sunni schools of law), which held that those inside the territories under Muslim control (*Dar al-Islam*, literally, the abode of Islam) could not be enslaved but those outside, residing in the Abode of War (*Dar al-Harb*)—with permission from the sovereign or in times of war—could. Lucky captives with powerful benefactors were ransomed. But starting in the 1730s, a new customary arrangement, which Smiley terms the "Law of Release," emerged, allowing for the release of (Iranian but also, more significantly, Russian) captives to their states without ransom. The bulk of Smiley's monograph, then, examines the institutional challenges around introducing this practice—challenges that were both abstract and practical: finding the captives, negotiating with slave owners, determining which captives were eligible for release, determining who was covered by treaties and agreements.

This new practice required changes and the expansion of the Ottoman state's capability to deal with the increasing number of captives in the system—an increasingly high cost to the Ottoman state, which in one war spent one-quarter of its budget on feeding its hundreds of prisoners.

The legal and political debates around who was a prisoner of war, how the prisoner was to be treated, and under what conditions the captive ought to be released—the issues at the heart of Smiley's analysis—are more than just an insight into warfare; they offer a look into the way the Russian and Ottoman empires understood their subjects and the categories that made their own and each other's subjects legible to the statesmen tasked with their release. The two empires were not just trying to understand whom to release after each war; they were trying to understand who belonged to each of their bodies politic. For this, various propositions came into play, including religion, language, and subjecthood. Until the second half of the 19th century, the two former traits were stand-ins for formal political affiliation, but eventually Ottoman officials came to directly rely on the category of subjecthood, particularly after the Tanzimat reforms that declared political and legal equality for Ottoman subjects irrespective of religion. Reaffirmation of political identities also came from the captives themselves as they learned that subjecthood was the "key factor in all these legal rules" that governed their release (149). These questions of prisoner status and political belonging are especially interesting as they intersected with minority groups and irregular combatants on the margins of both empires, particularly Georgians and Ottoman Christians. In two chapters Smiley explores how the newly introduced practices affected the marginal groups, considering whether professed political affiliations were enough to extend prisoner-of-war protections to rebelling Greek or Serbian subjects or irregular combatants in the Caucasus.

Smiley's argument is built on a synthesis of Ottoman policy and study of individual cases to understand the way in which policy was administered and applied. Methodologically, he moves away from codified, written law to see how policy and legal opinion were understood and adapted in practice by officials at various institutional levels. Some stories he traces through several international archives, combining perspectives from Russian, Ottoman, and British sources. Individual cases, such as that of Benjamin Tisdale, the British captain of the Russian ship *Maria Magdalena* that was captured by the Ottomans in the first months of the 1787 Russian-Ottoman war with his entire crew, are used to anchor and illustrate abstract principles. This granular level of research allows Smiley to focus on lower-level actors and, at times, the captives themselves, presenting both "vernacular" interpretations of the

law and prisoners' own arguments in favor of release. Hearing fresh voices in a story of legal reforms is a welcome addition to a historiography that often focuses solely on "learned" law and central institutions.

Although generally cautious about claims that came from interested parties—captives, slave owners, government bureaucrats—in his narrative, Smiley does not always treat his other sources, namely diplomatic writings, with the same sense of skepticism. The British observers who reported on Ottoman practices were neither objective nor always faithful in their accounts, possessing a tendency to report rumors as facts. Even their choice of language presented a particular set of biases (e.g., referring to legally sanctioned maritime combatants as corsairs, not privateers, excluded Russia from the norms of the European law of nations), misusages sometimes appropriated by Smiley, who is otherwise so careful with the semantics around wartime captivity.

Given the methodological approach and position in the historiography of these two books, Smiley and Brisku offer different interpretations of central questions in the historiography. One of these points of contrast is the role of Islam, and religion in general, in Ottoman law and policy. Both recognize that at least until the middle of the 19th century, Islamic law, and not the European law of nations, guided Ottoman policy and practice in the sphere of international politics. However, while Brisku presents Ottoman reforms as breaking the harmony between law and politics, suggesting that from the perspectives of traditionalists, the 1839 edict and other reforms undermined a tradition founded on a "sacred code of laws and the regulations that derived from it" (63), Smiley shows that the evolution of Ottoman policy on captivity was based on legal arguments rooted in Islamic law (129, 135, 218)—suggesting that change to rules of captivity, release, and conversion was not necessarily incompatible with religious tradition. In fact, unlike Brisku, who rehearses familiar interpretations regarding external pressure on Ottoman reforms and constitutional project, Smiley does not privilege European law or experience in his interpretation of Ottoman practices. On the contrary, he points to instances where European law was shaped by Ottoman law (at least with respect to captivity and prisoners of war) and argues that changes in Ottoman captivity accompanied changing Ottoman military interests.

Less predictable is their divergence on the locus of change and the relationship between domestic and European politics. One of the points Brisku emphasizes is the porosity of international and domestic issues, suggesting

that the language of reform can be seen in both domestic and international projects (hence a single chapter's discussion of Speranskii's "True Monarchy" and Alexander I's Holy Alliance). However, it is unclear how he actually sees the relationship, because while his reformers all seem to want to improve their empires' administrative practices—"domesticate European civilization" (130)—the empires' leaders are more interested in asserting themselves internationally through foreign treaties and grand projects. For Smiley, the evolution in Ottoman policy was an exercise in sovereignty, in which the Ottoman state tried to articulate who belonged. Rather than crossing legal borders and boundaries, in some ways the Ottoman and Russian empires were attempting to erect and police them. This is not to say, to paraphrase one commentator, that Smiley's entangled approach is merely a repackaged borderlands history.[15] Smiley shows that most prisoners and their fates resided in Constantinople, at the very center of the empire.

To return to the initial point of methodology, these books raise the question of how historians can see and study change: through political agendas of reformist elites or through the application of imperial policies on the ground. Smiley shows us that incremental change to Ottoman practices regarding captives is best studied not through Europeanizing projects in the imperial center but issue by issue, through the actions of imperial intermediaries and in their applications of imperial laws. The point is that change in society is only rarely announced with a sweeping manifesto or law but the most interesting transformations may be hidden across numerous different policies, practices, and only tracked across long horizons. This is the very "evolutionary" approach Brisku wishes to demonstrate, which to him was a compromise between stagnation and radical change, the one that eventually failed and brought about powerful ideologies and revolutions.

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[15] Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, "Entangled Histories: Borderland Historiographies in New Clothes?," *American Historical Review* 112, 3 (2007): 788–89.