

# INTRODUCTION

## THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN THE AGE OF REVOLUTIONS

The Empire is menaced with total dissolution; the finances are exhausted; and a rebel already threatens to place a stranger on the throne.<sup>1</sup>

From the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century there were approximately 19 uprisings in Istanbul, six of which ended with the sultan being deposed.<sup>2</sup> In the first half of the seventeenth century, rebellious incidents occurred at short intervals (see [Table I.1](#)), and three times the reigning sultan lost his throne. The eighteenth century began with an uprising (1703), which also brought about a change in the throne, but in general the sultans of this period seemed better able to weather the rebellious storms; out of seven uprisings in this century, only the uprisings of 1703 and 1730 deposed the ruler. After 67 years of relative stability, the nineteenth century dawned with three serious waves of unrest (1807, 1808 and 1826), with two claiming the throne. The abolition of the janissary army in 1826 put an end to this long tradition of armed dissent in the Ottoman metropole.

All of the aforementioned rebellions are typical early modern Ottoman uprisings, in the sense that they were Istanbul-based, palace-centred<sup>3</sup> and marked by the dominance of the traditional military corps (janissaries, armourers, artillerymen and cavalrymen) among the rebels. Early modern Ottoman revolts were spontaneous, parochial and unfolded in a rather standard pattern.<sup>4</sup> They often involved open attacks on those in authority,

**Table 1.1** Uprisings in Istanbul (seventeenth to mid-nineteenth century)  
(\* = sultan deposed)

17th c.	1622*	1623	1629	1632	1648*	1651	1655	1656	1687*
18th c.	1703*	1717	1718	1719	1730*	1731	1740		
19th c.	1807*	1808	1826						

who were perceived as culpable for some public wrong, and took place at specific sites of administrative power. By contrast, modern social protest generally avoids direct attacks on the state and instead employs the tactics of group-level persuasion, such as public meetings, barricades, strikes, electoral rallies or boycotts, while the sites of mass demonstrations are generally chosen for their national and symbolic characteristics.<sup>5</sup> In the early modern period, however, convincing decision makers through brutal force was the most effective strategy. Since the sultan had the immediate authority to rectify grievances and eliminate those responsible, rebellious incidents took place in the capital, centred on Topkapı Palace, the administrative centre of the Ottoman Empire. Although civilians (artisans, religious groups and ordinary urbanites) were active in some of these uprisings, it was the military groups who were the overwhelming majority, whether as core revolutionary cadres or ordinary participants. The military had the necessary organizational and institutional resources, as well as the high levels of social solidarity and prestige, to execute rebellions and facilitate wider public participation in them. The military's discipline and codes of behaviour became emblematic of Ottoman uprisings, and gradually became recognized in Ottoman society as setting the pattern rebellions would take. Similar repertoires of contention developed across the world in this period, although inflected by enduring traditions of collective action, which differed according to time and locale.<sup>6</sup>

The May 1807 uprising, the topic of this book, was the last of the typical Ottoman uprisings in which the rebellious forces were victorious against the decision makers.<sup>7</sup> The story is simple, short and dramatic. It starts on 25 May 1807, with rebellious stirrings among the auxiliary troops (*yamaks*) stationed at the Bosphorus fortresses, and ends on 29 May – just four days later – with a change in the throne. The immediate triggering cause was rumours that the sultan intended to impose the *Nizam-ı Cedid* (the New Order) army uniforms upon the

*yamaks*. Following the murder of a commander at the fortresses, the rebellion rapidly grew in size as other military groups, as well as civilians, joined, and the crowd marched from the Bosphorus into the city. As the crisis escalated, the sultan quickly acceded to the rebels' demands, declaring the abolition of his new model army and allowing the rebels to kill eleven statesmen. Unsatisfied with these concessions, the rebels demanded that Sultan Selim III's cousin, Mustafa (IV) (r. 1807–8), replace him upon the throne.

Within a few days, leading ministers had been annihilated, Selim III dethroned and Mustafa IV crowned. These events were followed by over a year of chaos during which the rebels blocked the establishment of effective and stable government in the capital. Succession problems, intra-elite rivalry, political purges and executions further paralyzed the Porte, which was already at war with Russia. Selim lived in confinement while Mustafa IV reigned over an empire wrecked by turmoil and unrest. Eventually, Alemdar Mustafa Pasha (d. 1808), an *ayan* of Ruşuk, marched on the capital to free Selim from the royal cage and re-install him on the throne. Before he could secure the palace, however, Selim was killed by confidants of Mustafa IV; consequently, Mahmud II (r. 1808–39) was enthroned while Mustafa IV replaced the deceased Selim in confinement.

The May 1807 rebellion thus prepared the ground for the rise of an *ayan*, Alemdar Mustafa Pasha the grand vizierate, to the highest position. On his own initiative, he prepared the 1808 *Sened-i İttifak* (Deed of Alliance), a document that put the Ottoman dynasty at the mercy of regional magnates. This fundamental restructuring of power relations within the empire is perhaps the most significant consequence of the May 1807 rebellion, although it is also important for having prepared the way for the eventual dissolution of the janissary corps by Mahmud II in 1826. The rebellion of May 1807 and the subsequent excesses of the rebels and janissaries were used as a pretext by Mahmud II for the dissolution of the janissary troops. In short, the traditional military corps, and particularly the janissaries, won a tactical victory in 1807, but were ultimately defeated in 1826.

The importance of the May uprising does not end there: this uprising is unique in Ottoman history for having occurred during the reign of a reforming sultan. Selim III's *Nizam-ı Cedid* reforms, implemented from 1792 onwards, were designed principally to reinvigorate the Ottoman

military, establishing a new corps on a model inspired by the West, and a new treasury to finance it (the *İrad-ı Cedid*, New Fund). Since the 1807 uprising terminated the project of reform, it is perhaps understandable that the historiography of May 1807 has concentrated on the reactionary aspects of the uprising – to the exclusion of other social and political significance that this important upheaval might possess. Drawing on the accounts in the contemporary narratives, late Ottoman and early Republican historians have tried to fit the rebellion into the broader context of reactions to the modernization/Westernization process which culminated in Mustafa Kemal's declaration of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

The New Order programme occupies a pivotal space within the framework of this established historiographical discourse, and it has been adopted as the dominant historical frame through which to understand the Selimian era. This approach offers scholars a simple ready-made package with which to describe the events; however, it is unable to transmit to the reader the complexity of the events that took place and the patterns of causation which underpinned them. This complexity cannot comfortably be contained within a simple dyadic model of modernization versus reaction; or so this book shall argue. The dominant historiographic approach is especially problematic since we do not yet possess a well-established factographic or chronological account of the May uprising, let alone a satisfactory comparative analysis of rebellions in Ottoman history. In the absence of any systematic study of Ottoman uprisings, historians have exhibited a tendency to provide explanations by enumerating the peculiarities of specific incidents and then cherry-picking features thought to be in common with the rest.<sup>8</sup> Students of the Ottoman uprisings thus lack reliable analytic tools to make sense of their geographical and historical distribution and this, unfortunately, blocks progress on global and domestic comparisons of revolutionary traditions. With this wider project in mind, this study takes particular care to begin by establishing a basic chronology of the May uprising and, on this basis, seek clues to understand the rebellious routines and rhetoric which typified Ottoman uprisings.

The contention of this book is that, rather than being driven by simple class struggle, factional strife, the fractious nature of the traditional military classes or atavistic anti-modernization tendencies, the May uprising of 1807 was a popular–military uprising engendered by the socio-economic and political problems of the late eighteenth

and early nineteenth centuries. It properly forms a part of the late eighteenth-century crisis, and its roots have much in common with other parts of the world; indeed, the Ottoman Empire's wider problems stemmed from the global economic, environmental and political crises of the period, which were experienced in related ways in many regions. Climatic shocks and natural disasters during the late eighteenth century led to bad harvests, malnutrition and epidemics in many areas, causing decreases in populations and concomitant social unrest, and threatening the political and financial bases of established regimes worldwide. Moreover, the generalized upheaval led to a crisis of legitimacy for rulers in many regions, provoked by their apparent inability to secure the essentials of life for their increasingly restive populations. This dynamic is clearly evident in the Ottoman uprisings of the early nineteenth century.

The same period also corresponds to the Age of Revolutions (1760–1840), a worldwide series of revolutions and upheavals, including the devastating French revolutionary wars. Although in this period the revolutionary ideas of Western Europe had only limited currency in the Ottoman Empire, the aggressive expansionist policy of Napoleonic France did involve the region directly, and the Ottomans thus engaged with France more through war and diplomacy than via the sphere of ideology. Like Spain and Portugal, the Porte became the focus of contestation among the Western powers; unable to disentangle itself from this dynamic, it was forced to adapt,<sup>9</sup> which furthered the processes of decentralization, raised the salience of “the Eastern Question”, and provoked the rise of nationalist movements in the Empire. This, then, was the fertile soil on which the seeds of the 1807 uprising were sown.

Although not on the verge of total dissolution, as claimed by Olivier Guillaume-Antoine, the Ottoman Empire certainly knew hard times in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This was a period of fiscal crisis, economic recession, political decentralization and social discontent, as well as mounting international tension and warfare. Frequent uprisings in the Balkans, Anatolia and the Arabian provinces destabilized the empire both politically and economically. Rebellions occurred in Cairo, Istanbul, Damascus, Macedonia, western Bulgaria and northern Greece, and between the years 1787 and 1793 there were riots in Anatolia (Kastamonu, Diyarbakır, Maraş, Adana, Ayntab, Aleppo), the Balkans (Macedonia) and the Arabian provinces (Damascus and

Cairo). The same period saw widespread banditry in Rumelia (perpetrated chiefly by “the Mountaineers”), the revolts of semi-independent local magnates (*ayans*), initial outbursts of separationist nationalistic movements (the Serbian uprising in 1804), and millennial and puritanical religious and other political movements (notably Wahhabism). Moreover, the aggressive expansionist policies of the Great Powers directly impinged on the imperial domains, as manifested by the French occupation of Egypt (1789), the British Naval Expedition (1807), and frequent wars and shifting alliances between the Great Powers, all with an eye to drawing advantage from the Ottoman Empire’s difficulties. These events brought about a period of diplomatic gamesmanship and intense warfare, which in turn triggered further instability and fiscal crisis.

Selim III’s military-oriented and piecemeal reforms were indeed intended as responses to the complicated problems of this period. The disruption brought about by the late eighteenth-century crisis, the Ottoman Empire’s fiscal problems and internal disorder, and the challenges of international conflicts triggered largely by the Napoleonic Wars, all necessitated the development of a reform policy designed to strengthen the Empire. Selim III’s intent was to establish a Western-style military system, increase state intervention and so boost revenue, and implement a programme of re-centralization. Yet, these reforms aggravated the problems from which the Empire was already suffering – the rising social tensions, deepening inequality and heightening competition over scarce resources, all characteristic of the “disintegrative period” (discussed below). Similar to the eighteenth-century French efforts to finance its costly and unsuccessful wars, which resulted in “risky, but incoherent, programmes of reform, which gradually undermined the basis of the monarchy itself”,<sup>10</sup> the reforming policy of the Porte changed the redistributive policies of the centre, creating losers and winners.

In short, it was the crisis of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which prepared the ground for the May uprising. This does not mean that the modernization paradigm has no relevance for the study of the early nineteenth century; nevertheless, the study of the uprisings in general, and the May 1807 uprising in particular, requires closer contextualization and a more sophisticated understanding of eighteenth-century realities. While Selim III was promulgating the

New Order, the Empire had barely recovered from the global crisis of the seventeenth century, and another powerful wave of complex problems was gathering force. Jack Goldstone has combined studies on a number of different dynamics in order to model the multi-layered structures of causation at work behind the state breakdowns of the seventeenth century. According to him, since agricultural output had particular limits in the pre-industrial world, ecological crises and rapid population growth in a given polity put pressure on agricultural productivity and this, in turn, had an impact on the economy and state finances, while at the same time destabilizing social and political structures. Economically, disequilibrium in population and productivity causes price inflation, a fall in real wages and exacerbates rural poverty. The effects are observed in increased poverty, urban migration, a rapid rise in social mobility and intra-elite competition for scarce resources, as well as increased social disorder in the cities and countryside. States try to increase taxation to feed the expanded bureaucracy and army, but face resistance from different segments of society. The budget deficit persists, and in most cases leads to state bankruptcy, loss of military control and the breakdown of central authority.<sup>11</sup> Developing Goldstone's thesis, Peter Turchin and Sergey A. Nefedov have proposed a model of longer-term demographic, social and political oscillations, which they refer to as "secular cycles".<sup>12</sup> The key to these changes is the "alternating increase and decline phases, each roughly a century long."<sup>13</sup> While Goldstone restricted himself to examining the seventeenth-century global crisis, Turchin and Nefedov developed a synthetic model, combining several interlinked variables, which could be applied to any period in the pre-industrial world. They label their two kinds of periods "integrative" and "disintegrative".<sup>14</sup> The former is generally a more conducive phase for polities, being characterized by centralizing tendencies, unified elites, territorial expansion and population increase. The integrative phase is further divided into stable *expansion*, and a period of stagnation and high inflation known as *stagflation*, followed by general *crisis*. The disintegrative phase is marked by decentralizing tendencies, intra-elite strife, internal instability and external weakness, decreases in population and civil war.<sup>15</sup>

Although Turchin and Nefedov frame their theories for the European experience, they emphasize that their cyclical theory is intended to be applicable to agrarian societies in general. Hülya Canbakal, an

Ottomanist, was the first to place a local disturbance in an Ottoman town, Ayıntab, within the context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century crisis by combining the models of Goldstone, and Turchin and Nefedov. Though focusing on the struggles of two status groups (the janissary–*sadat* conflict) in the second half of the eighteenth century, she builds her theory on the fact that, like Russia, China or France of the same period, the Ottoman Empire was suffering serious fiscal and economic problems, as well as having to deal with heightened political activism, all of which were rooted in the global climatic crisis and revolutionary unrest. The burden of the fiscal crisis and inflation was not shared equally across society, and inequality also increased, leading to fierce socio-political competition over scarce resources and heightened faction formation.<sup>16</sup>

The years 1770–1820 correspond to the disintegrative phase in the Ottoman Empire. As in much of the world, a period of economic expansion had faltered by the mid-eighteenth century and a serious economic recession began in the 1760s. This was followed by rapid depopulation, migration, inflation and social unrest across the imperial domains, while the Porte suffered a loss of revenue and was forced to reconcile itself with decentralization. The reforming policies implemented, especially by Selim III and his ministers, allowed the rise of a new state-aligned elite, mostly at the expense of the existing military and provincial elites. This new elite formed the most powerful faction in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, creating a bureaucratic quasi-oligarchy that bred nepotism. The rise of this bureaucratic elite, which began to exert control over scarce resources of wealth, power and prestige, increased competition among the elites closest to the throne – and in this regard the so-called anti-reformist group associated with the May uprising can perhaps best be described as the “faction of outs”, since it comprised a group of Ottoman statesmen who had become more or less excluded from power and decision making. Factional and personal rivalry amongst the Selimian elite further paralyzed central politics, and Istanbul became ripe for an uprising. On a local level, mass migration to big cities, and especially to the capital, disturbed the already fragile provisioning policies of the Porte, increasing popular discontent and causing riots. Growing social and economic inequalities were marked by an increase in the number of claimants of *askeri* status for tax exemption. The late eighteenth and



early nineteenth century was thus a period of increased economic inequality, social unrest and political activism.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam complains that the concerns of people and religious movements during periods of crisis tend to be neglected in favour of impersonal political, economic and social data. Such periods do indeed give rise to millennial or religious movements advocating the re-ordering of the world via a “renovator”.<sup>17</sup> Apart from the expansion of puritanical Wahhabism, the Selimian era is also characterized by the rise in importance of the *Naqsbbandî–Mujaddidî* religious order, founded in the sixteenth century by Sirhindî, titled *Mujaddid* (the renewer). Born out of the crisis of the previous centuries, the late eighteenth-century crisis fueled the spread of this order and it now found a large number of advocates/disciples among the Ottoman dignitaries. The disciples of this order advocated reform of the empire for the survival of the Islamic *umma* in the face of internal and external threats. In addition to contributing to the eighteenth-century Islamic enlightenment, this religious order also supported the reforming policies of the Porte.<sup>18</sup> Within this context, Selim III was also considered to be a *mujaddid*, a renewer of his age and empire – and the term New Order may indeed suggest a “re-ordering” of the Ottoman domains, rather than a completely new order as the term is commonly taken to imply.

Rebellions or revolutions are direct manifestations of a social psychology, which is not always easy to explain or define. What is striking about the period preceding an uprising is a kind of revolutionary mood or “proto-rebelliousness”, without which the eruption of dissent would be difficult, no matter how serious the grievances. The 1800s were indeed marked by a revolutionary mood. A deep sense of betrayal, factionalism and social defeatism, and a level of conspiracy thinking that verged on neurosis were prevalent across the different strata of society. This malaise was not unfounded: resentment over the inability of the Porte to cope with the frequent foreign incursions had already aggravated popular anxieties; it also struck at Selim III’s imperial legitimacy and alienated the masses from his ministers. The sense of proto-rebelliousness eventually combined with the political activism of the traditional military corps (janissaries, armourers, and artillerymen), and the May uprising materialized.

### Sources

The May 1807 rebellion occupied a central position in contemporary Ottoman writings and later historiography, and its perceived connection to the New Order still intrigues historians today. In contemporary records, two different discourses have crystallized concerning the upheaval. The first can best be described as imperial and dynastic, advocating the policies of the Porte and taking a stance close to the factions loyal to Selim III. The alternative views are more difficult to categorize. Although they are not anti-dynastic, they do not represent imperial historiography in the sense that they are fiercely opposed to the ruling elite and generally critical of the reform policies. The first discourse, sharpened and reformulated, is what emerged victorious in the later historiography, and it subsequently became the received view in Republican historiography.<sup>19</sup> The most widely held theory of nineteenth-century history is that it essentially turned around efforts at modernization/Westernization, and Republican historiography has embellished this picture by viewing the Selimian elite as a vanguard of twentieth-century Turkish modernization. Seen against this sweeping historical background, the Selimian elite appear as patriotic heroes, and those opposed as representative of all things reactionary. In fact, far less is certain than this historiography suggests.

Attempts to explain the causes and consequences of the uprising produced a large number of works already during the early nineteenth century: a considerable number of monographs are available, as well as local and foreign reports, and chronicles which devote pages to it. Thirteen monographs were produced, two of which were compiled by foreign observers.<sup>20</sup> In addition to these, the chronicles by Ahmed Asım,<sup>21</sup> Şanîzâde Mehmed Ataullah Efendi,<sup>22</sup> and Câbî Ömer Efendi,<sup>23</sup> as well as a *Ruznâme* (*Daily Routines of the Sultans*),<sup>24</sup> devote a considerable number of pages to the rebellion. The number of non-elite sources regarding the uprising are, however, very limited, comprising little more than a few janissary ballads and a memoir-like account attributed to a certain Aşık Razi.<sup>25</sup> Unlike the above-mentioned elite sources, these do not attempt to convey factual information; yet, they do allow us to hear fragments of the voices of the rebels and the common people themselves.

It is not always easy to categorize the authors of contemporary narratives in terms of their viewpoints. Contrary to later Ottoman and

Republican historians, few of them attempt to set out a well-formulated discourse about the rebellion. The main problem in this regard stems from the fact that we have only limited information about the identities of these historians and chroniclers, and are thus rarely in a good position to understand the motives that lie behind their comments on a given issue. It is extremely difficult to discern the nuances of their views on the rebellion from the scattered clues in their texts; it is therefore better to differentiate between them according to the simple criterion of whether or not they approve of the uprising – this yields three groups of attitudes: those who condemn, those who apologize, and those who remain ambiguous about the revolt. Kuşmânî's works (especially his *Fezleke*),<sup>26</sup> Mustafa Necib Efendi's *History*,<sup>27</sup> the second author of *Neticetü'l-Vekayi*,<sup>28</sup> the *Ruznâme* of Selim III<sup>29</sup> and Georg Oğulkyan's *Ruznâme*<sup>30</sup> fall into the category of those who condemn. We should also include in this list the accounts of two foreign observers, Juchereau de Saint-Denys and Ottokar M. von Schlechta-Wssehrd.

It is easier to associate those about whom we have at least some information with a faction or clique or at least explain why they clung to a certain view. This is the case with Mustafa Necib Efendi, then a minor bureaucrat, who felt himself closer to the bureaucratic cadres of the Selimian era and displayed great respect for the ruling elite.<sup>31</sup> Necib Efendi never accuses or blames the Selimian elite in any respect, and denies any kind of corruption on their part: according to him they were not motivated by self-interest; to the contrary, they strove hard for the well-being of the empire. It seems that he composed his booklet expressly to explain that the rebellion was not the fault of the ruling elite, and that the uprising had other causes – which means that he was aware of the accusations directed towards them. Mustafa Necib Efendi seems to have had special connections with Ibrahim Nesim Efendi (d. 1807), one of the most influential figures of the Selimian era, and always refers to him with great respect. The position of Dihkanîzâde Ubeydullah Kuşmânî is similar to that of Mustafa Necib Efendi: he was an ardent supporter of the Selimian reforms and a great admirer of the sultan and his statesmen. Little is known about Kuşmânî's life. His real name was Said Refet<sup>32</sup> and he describes himself as a wandering dervish travelling to various places for religious concerns; it is known that he was affiliated with the Behçetiye branch of the *Naqşbandî-Mujaddidî* religious order.<sup>33</sup> He was encouraged to write his treatise by Kadı

Abdurrahman Pasha, the famous commander of the New Order army, and he dedicated the work to Selim III. In fact, he had intended to present his treatise to the sultan, but the uprising deprived him of the opportunity.<sup>34</sup> This, therefore, is a self-appointed observer's account of the reforms, defending them by using the same arguments as the imperial centre.<sup>35</sup>

Among those who approve of the uprising are Lokmacı Matruş Ebubekir Efendi (the first author of *Fezleke*), the authors of two anonymous short chronicles,<sup>36</sup> Kethüda Said Efendi's *History*<sup>37</sup> and the *History* of Tüfengçibaşı Arif Efendi.<sup>38</sup> Though it is not always easy to determine which faction they are associated with, it is clear that most of the historians in this group favour any kind of reaction to the Selimian rule and applaud the May uprising for ending his era. Information on Lokmacı Matruş Ebubekir Efendi, the first author of the *Fezleke*, is again limited. Actually, the *Fezleke* is composed of two different texts authored by two individuals, namely Ebubekir Efendi and Ubeydulah Kuşmânî, in the same volume. All we know about them is that Ebubekir Efendi was an intellectual of the period who was able to enter the circles of the Selimian elite, but became closer to the factions that came to power following the accession of Mustafa IV. Previously, he had entertained closer connections with the ruling elite and apparently enjoyed their patronage and took part in their meetings; however, some time before the uprising, for an unknown reason, he fell into disgrace and lost his position to Shaik Selami Efendi, a Naqshbandi *shaik*.<sup>39</sup> Evidently, he was greatly disappointed, which may have led him to become an enemy not only of Selami Efendi, but also of the Selimian elite. Apparently an opportunist, he swung his support behind the opponents of Selimian rule, both for the sake of his own self-aggrandizement and also to take revenge for his exclusion. Ebubekir Efendi was in the city during the outbreak of the rebellion, and he seems to have been at the Meat Square when the murders of the statesmen took place; he describes the brutal scenes in contented tones. Would Ebubekir Efendi have rejoiced in the murders of the ruling elite if he had not lost his privileged position in that very elite to his rival Shaik Selami Efendi?

Kethüda Said Efendi is another contemporary historian who adopts an apologetic tone regarding the uprising. As a steward (*kapı kethüda*) to Veliefendizâde Mehmed Emin Efendi (d. 1805), a former *kadıasker* and a supporter of Selimian policies, one would expect him to reproduce the

imperial historiography. On the contrary, however, he praises the uprising and defines the rebels as “angels” sent by God to correct the religion. We do not have sufficient information about his life to allow us to decipher his unexpected position, yet two important clues might explain this oddity. Following the death of her husband, the wife of the deceased Veliefendizâde married Mehmed Said Halet Efendi (d. 1822), who was closer to Mustafa (IV).<sup>40</sup> Kethüda Said was still serving as the steward of the same family at the time of the rebellion, so he might also have given his support based on family affiliations. More importantly, however, Veliefendizâde was in possession of a considerable number of janissary payroll tickets, as were most of his servants.<sup>41</sup> This may have given Kethüda Said a strong incentive to sympathize with the rebels. There are also those sources that fall into neither of the above categories, and it is interesting to note that the account of the official historian Asım is one of them. The same is also true for Câbî Ömer Efendi, while *Yayla İmamı Risalesi* can also be added to the list.

Contemporary authors clearly take the New Order to have been the cause of the uprising. Most agree that the attempt to change the uniforms of the *yamaks* was the trigger, although a few disregard this claim as gossip (Mustafa Necib from the first, and Lokmacı Matruş Ebubekir from the second group of historians). The reforms themselves are widely criticized by those authors who adopt apologetic or ambivalent tones regarding the uprising. Only once does the author of *Yayla İmamı Risalesi* aver that the reforms counted as *bid'at* (innovation seen as reprehensible in religious law). The anonymous writer of the abridged chronicle of the May uprising, on the other hand, considers the reforms to have been a well-intentioned attempt to defeat the Empire's enemies, yet still holds that they were a violation of the spirit of Islam and is happy that they failed, something which he attributes to divine intervention.<sup>42</sup>

Overall, mutual recrimination and a strong polarization of views is characteristic of the early nineteenth-century sources which address the uprising.<sup>43</sup> Mirroring the deep factionalization observable among the higher echelons of society, the authors of the Selimian era accuse each other of corruption, abuse and betraying the interests of the state and religion (*din ü devlet*) for their own benefit. Such discourse is clearly designed to demonize the other side: to represent themselves as good subjects and cast their opponents as self-seeking conspirators and

traitors.<sup>44</sup> Historians closer to the Selimian policies attack the janissaries and single out certain “corrupt” dignitaries, such as *shaikh al-Islam* Ataullah Efendi and *kaimmakam* (deputy to the grand vizier) Musa Pasha, for blame. They lay emphasis on the benefits of the reforms and name officials who they say conspired against the interests of the centre. On the other hand, for Asım, Lokmacı Ebubekir Efendi, the author of *Yayla İmamı Risalesi* and for an anonymous author, it is the ruling elite of the Selimian era who became the main target of criticism. These accounts concentrate on the oppression of the “corrupt” ruling elite and its repercussions, and tend to praise the rebels who were instrumental in annihilating this group. It appears to be not the New Order but rather the elite, who promulgated the reforms, coming in for attack.

All contemporary accounts place strong emphasis on conspiracy; that is to say, they interpolate causality into history via the designs of certain perfidious individuals, an approach which is inherited by later historians.<sup>45</sup> This leaves a rather strange impression that, in the absence of the conspiracies attributed to whichever group or individual they single out for criticism, the uprising would not have broken out – or, that if it had happened anyway, it would have been easily suppressed and certainly would never have led to the deaths of the dignitaries and the deposition of Selim III. This conspiracy mode of thinking and explanation was apparently not unique to the Ottoman authors; similar discourses are evident in European historiography from around the same period. Imputations of conspiracy may indeed have seemed like a plausible explanation at a time when the speed of change of political conjunctures outstripped contemporaries’ capacity to make sense of them.<sup>46</sup> Finally, the conspiracy-based explanatory model reflected the authors’ suspicions about the “public’s inability to discern what is true or false”, an expression widely used in contemporary narratives, meaning that the authors considered the public open to manipulation by rival groups.<sup>47</sup> Reflection on conspiracy theories is important for understanding the psychology of the contemporary observers, and also for deciphering the dynamics of discontent and division in a society, especially the factor of resentment.<sup>48</sup> The sources, which refer to plots and conspiracies, provide clues to the concerns of the opposing parties, a point that is directly related to factionalism and power groups, and to which we return in [Chapter Five](#).

## Review of Chapters

The book has six chapters, organized thematically. **Chapter One** narrates the chronology and factography of the May uprising, and also provides a comparative analysis of the flow of events in Ottoman uprisings in general. Like most rebellions throughout history and across the world, Ottoman rebellions can be seen as an “extended form of negotiation” in which both the Porte and the rebels engaged in tense dialogue. Accordingly, the May uprising will be studied as a continuous exchange between the two sides, marked by several stages of negotiation and bargaining. In order to draw out comparisons with examples from other parts of the world, it is important to sketch the basic patterns of the Ottoman rebellious tradition. This is also the intent of this chapter.

The next three chapters attempt to describe the domestic and international context in which the uprising broke out. At the very basic level, these chapters study the distal causes of the uprising. **Chapter Two** is an effort to locate the 1807 uprising within the context of the late eighteenth-century crisis. The issue of possible connections between modernization and the uprising is the topic of Chapter Three, in which the reactions to the Selimian reforms are studied. A survey of the period and the reactions to the New Order reveals that it was not solely the reactions to the so-called modernization process which led to social unrest and instability, but rather intra-elite competition, rivalry over scarce resources, challenges to the decentralized power structures and challenges to vested interests. Chapters Two and Three make special effort to evaluate these issues from the perspective of potential rebels, rather than imposing our own assumptions about Westernization or modernization.

The mainstream historiography of the uprising usually dwells on the internal context, and is marginally concerned with understanding the international arena as it stood before and after the events of May 1807. Foreign relations are rarely mentioned and, when they are, it is mostly in order to furnish background information on how the Ottoman army had degenerated since the beginning of the eighteenth century. In **Chapter Four**, therefore, we focus on the international context not solely for the sake of background information, but in order to illustrate the role of foreign affairs at the heart of the internal politics of the Porte. The purpose is twofold: first, to show that the reforms were abused by the

foreign powers active in the domestic arena; and second, to show that the involvement of the Great Powers in the politics of the Porte stoked resentment in society against a government seen as unable to hold its own vis-à-vis international competition. The feelings of insecurity and betrayal which were thereby engendered were crucial for the 1807 outburst. Finally, the chapter also tries to determine whether any foreign power did indeed have a role to play in the outbreak of the rebellion.

In [Chapter Five](#), we examine the elite rivalry and elite power structures in the capital, again focusing on the possible connections to the uprising. The two initial sections are devoted to the identity, views and networks of each group, with the purpose of describing them through close reference to archival sources and other contemporary materials, rather than simply labeling them based on historiographic prejudice. It will also be argued that attitudes to the Selimian reforms were not the only denominator in the division between groups, but that this also turned on factional strife, patron–client ties, attitudes to foreign policies, personal relationships and religious affiliations – all of which will illuminate the complexity of political structures during the Selimian era.

[Chapter Six](#) is devoted to an analysis of the rebels in the May uprising, in terms of their identity, motives and the ways in which they sought to legitimize their rebellious actions. As in most Ottoman uprisings, the rebels in this case were drawn mainly from military groups: the rebellion was instigated by the auxiliaries in the Bosphorus forts, but these were rapidly joined by other military groups (janissaries, artillerymen, armourers) as well as some urbanites. Establishing the identity of the sub-groups among the rebels and drawing comparisons with other Ottoman examples will help us place the May uprising within the wider context of Ottoman uprisings. The abolition of the New Order and the elimination of the ruling cadres do not fully explain the rebels' actions, for they continued to prosecute their rebellion even after these goals had been achieved. The causes which lay behind the deposition of Selim III are, thus, studied from within the theoretical framework of the “right to rebel” in the Ottoman context, supported by empirical data, in order to investigate the crisis of legitimacy which struck the Porte in the Selimian era.