2 · Between Tradition and Innovation: Sultan Selim III and the 'New Order', 1789–1807

In all the fields touched upon in the first chapter (territory, population, ideology, administration, economics and international relations) the period between the outbreak of the French Revolution and the close of the 1830s witnessed a quickening of the pace of change, most aspects of which in one way or another had to do with the changing relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Europe.

The first ruler to preside over these changes was Sultan Selim III, who acceded to the throne in 1789. Even before his accession, he had displayed interest in the world outside the palace and in Europe. It is known that, as a prince, he had corresponded with Louis XVI of France, his 'role model', and he had gathered around him a circle of friends and servants who shared his interest in things European. When he acceded to the throne, he appointed many of them to places of influence. During the first three years of his reign, Selim had to concentrate on the conduct of the war against Russia. In 1792, with the Ottoman military situation hopeless, Russia and the Ottoman Empire accepted British and Prussian mediation, which led to the Peace of Jassy, basically a confirmation of the Peace of Küçük Kaynarca (1774), with some additional territorial gains for Russia on the Black Sea shores.

Almost immediately after the conclusion of peace, the sultan launched the programme of reforms, which was officially called the *Nizam-i Cedid* (New Order). This programme aimed to increase the strength of the central state organization, against both external enemies (mainly Russia, which after two disastrous wars had emerged as the greatest threat to Ottoman power) and internal ones (the semi-independent *ayan*). These were problems that had plagued Selim's eighteenth-century predecessors and his attempts to solve them were essentially traditional: he attempted to strengthen the state apparatus (notably the armed forces and tax collection) by combating abuse and corruption and re-establishing the traditional system, and thus the *adalet*

(justice). All groups and individuals were again forced within their *hudud* in an effort to show that the government was upholding the Islamic order. Selim's decrees enforcing traditional clothing and building restrictions, particularly on the non-Muslim *reaya*, clearly illustrate this side of his policies.

What makes Selim interesting as a transitional figure between the traditional attempts at reform since the time of the Köprülü *vezir*s, who had restored central authority in the mid-seventeenth century, on the one hand, and the nineteenth century *Tanzimat* (reforms), on the other, is the extent to which he was prepared to accept European practices (and European advisers) to achieve his goals and the way in which his reign opened up channels of communication between Europe and the Ottoman ruling elite.

The reforms of the 'Nizam-i Cedid'

The military programme started out with attempts to make the existing corps, the janissaries, the *Sipahi* feudal cavalry and the specialized units, for example gunners and wagoneers, more efficient. The programme separated the strictly military from the administrative functions of the officer corps to try to eliminate opportunities for corruption and reduced the ranks through the elimination of those people who held pay tickets (*esame*) but did not actually serve with the army, while enforcing stricter discipline and guaranteeing regular payment for the remainder. It soon turned out that obstruction from within the system rendered this type of reorganization almost totally ineffective. The sultan and his men then decided on a more radical solution: to create a new army outside the existing structure. The work on this new army began in 1794 and by the end of Selim's reign in 1807 it was close to 30,000 men strong and, according to contemporary observers, relatively well equipped and trained. The navy, too, was reorganized.

Of course, this programme demanded both a new system of training and education and a great deal of money. To meet the former need, the sultan tried to attract foreign officers as advisers and instructors. Most of them were French and they were recruited through the French government, interestingly both that of the *ancien régime* and those of the republic and the Napoleonic empire. A modern medical service and school were established, while the existing naval engineering school was modernized and an equivalent for the army established in 1795. When it came to financing the reforms, Selim III's government was ineffective. It did not try to create a regular budget in which income and expenditure could be balanced instead of the chaotic 'first come first served' financial regime, and its feeble attempts to reform the highly inefficient traditional

system of taxation, or even to enforce the existing system, failed. The government employed traditional means to increase its revenue: confiscation and debasing the coinage, thus damaging the public's trust in the mint and in the long run only increasing the problems. Selim's attempts to increase the efficiency of the central scribal (administrative) institution consisted of efforts to reduce the chronic overstaffing of the offices (itself a source of corruption) and in 1797 to concentrate the work relating to important affairs of state in an 'office of important affairs' (*Mühimme Odası*), partly as an attempt to introduce a minimum of confidentiality. Overstaffing, favouritism and corruption, however, proved impossible to quash without regular payment of salaries and clear regulations defining positions and tasks; although the nineteenth-century reforms brought the latter into force, the Ottoman Empire continued to suffer from these problems almost until the end.

New channels of communication

More important, perhaps, than Selim's actual measures, were the increased opportunities he created for the flow of Western ideas into the Ottoman Empire. The European, mainly French, instructors attached to the different army corps that Selim had founded or reformed produced one channel of communication. Their students learnt French and eagerly started to discuss all kinds of new-fangled ideas with their foreign teachers. Besides, these foreigners were allowed much more freedom in Ottoman society than had been the case with their predecessors of the generation before them. They socialized regularly, not only with leading members of the local Christian communities, but also with members of the Ottoman ruling class.[1] The new Ottoman embassies in Europe provided a second major channel of communication. Sporadic Ottoman missions had been sent for specific purposes to European capitals earlier in the eighteenth century, but diplomatic business in the main was still conducted through Greek interpreters in Istanbul, as it had been in the heyday of the empire. Now Selim for the first time established permanent Ottoman embassies in London (1793), Vienna (1794), Berlin (1795) and Paris (1796). Many of the later reformers of the empire had their first experience of Europe while serving as secretaries at these Ottoman missions. The first ambassadors were by all accounts less than effective. After all, they brought no experience to their jobs and had to learn the European game of diplomacy from scratch. But however clumsy these first modern Ottoman diplomats may have been as Ottoman ambassadors to Europe, they and their successors a generation later most certainly were effective as ambassadors of European life in Ottoman society.

The fall of Sultan Selim III

Selim's policies had made him many enemies. He had alienated the military establishment by his efforts to create a new army and the majority of the *ulema* disliked the French influence at court and among the younger members of the elite. The sultan was also unpopular among the populace at large, which had not benefited from his attempts at reform but had been made to bear the burden of paying for the new army and navy through new taxes on, among other things, coffee and tobacco. In the provinces, the reign of Selim, despite his efforts to strengthen central authority, in fact saw an increase in the power and autonomy of the great *ayan* (notables). This was because the sultan not only depended on them for tax revenue and for provisioning the capital, but also because the notables provided the army with most of its troops in the Napoleonic wars. Even the original *Nizam-i Cedid* army was built up with contingents sent by a number of notables. The notables' attitude towards the sultan and his policies was ambivalent. On the one hand, they supported his attempts to weaken the position of the *ulema* and the janissaries, who were their main rivals for power in the provincial centres; on the other, they certainly did not want more effective control from central government. This showed in 1805, when the sultan issued an order for a new *Nizam-i Cedid* corps to be established in Edirne. When the troops arrived in Edirne in 1806, the notables from the European provinces threatened to march on the capital unless they were withdrawn. The sultan had to give in, so strengthening the notables' position even further.

It is doubtful whether any sultan like Selim, with his limited understanding of the European models he wanted to emulate, with insufficient funds and faced with the vested interests of powerful traditional institutions, could have achieved radical reforms. It is probably also true, however, that Selim lacked the necessary ruthlessness and cunning for the task. When in May 1807 the auxiliary contingents of the janis-sary garrison of Istanbul rioted (an uprising in all probability engineered by conservative court circles) and demanded the abolition of the *Nizam-i Cedid* corps and the sacking of important reformists, the sultan gave in without trying to use his new troops. He did not succeed in saving his position, however. He was deposed the same day, on the basis of a *fetva* (religious opinion) pronounced by the highest religious dignitary, the *Şeyhülislam*, which stated that his reforms were incompatible with religious law.

International relations: French Revolution and Napoleonic wars

Apart from internal opposition, the sultan was certainly hampered in his efforts at reform by the fact that his reign coincided with the inter-

national upheaval caused by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars.

The cornerstone of Ottoman foreign policy for over two centuries had been the empire's friendly relationship with France, the House of Habsburg's archenemy. As mentioned before, Selim himself had been in touch with the French king, but the relationship with France continued after the French Revolution and even after the execution of King Louis XVI – in fact until Napoleon Bonaparte suddenly landed in Egypt in 1798. Napoleon's expedition has been the subject of an extensive literature. It was a result both of the colonial and commercial rivalry between France and England, which was still being fought out in India, and of the realization in Paris that the available means did not allow a direct attack on England itself. Napoleon himself may well have entertained romantic dreams of conquering the Middle East as a new Alexander the Great, but French policy aims were more limited: indirectly to weaken the British position in the East by turning Egypt into a French base. The French invasion shocked the Ottoman government into concluding an alliance with Britain and with its old enemy Russia, but this expedient lasted only as long as the emergency itself. The Peace of Amiens in 1802 saw a restoration of the old warm relationship between France and the Porte. The refusal of the Ottomans, under Austrian pressure, to recognize Napoleon's coronation as emperor led to a breaking-off of diplomatic relations in 1805, but within a year the Ottoman Empire was allied to France once more and in a state of war with both Britain and Russia, a situation that led to a new Russian invasion. Napoleon's sudden reversal of policy during his negotiations with the tsar in Tilsit in 1807 left the Ottomans to face their enemies alone.

The ideological influence of the French Revolution

Although it is indisputable that the international complications of the French Revolution and its aftermath affected the Ottoman Empire a great deal, the extent of the revolution's ideological influence on Ottoman society is less clear.

The French Revolution had certainly not inspired Sultan Selim III when he launched the *Nizam-i Cedid*, even though the term itself may have been derived from the French.[2] He had admired the absolute monarchy of Louis XVI, whom the revolutionaries were to guillotine, and French military and administrative skills. It was the traditional Ottoman army's dismal performance in the Russian war that decided Selim in favour of military reform. The impact of the revolution and the ideas of the revolution in Ottoman Muslim ruling elite circles seem to have been limited. There is no evidence that the secular character of the

revolutionary ideology made its ideas easier for a Muslim public to swallow than might have been the case with religiously tainted ideas. Ottoman observers who commented on the anti-religious character of the revolution without exception denounced it.[3] The French occupation of Egypt, too, though shocking as an attack on a Muslim heartland, created an awareness of French military strength, not of French philosophy. The exposure of members of the Ottoman ruling class to European ideas, caused by the opportunities of actually mingling with foreigners that Selim's regime allowed, certainly had an effect, notably in the tendency of the younger bureaucrats to look for rationally motivated solutions instead of traditional ones, and hence to new legislation. Especially those young Ottomans who served at the embassies in Europe were deeply impressed by the effectiveness of the bureaucracies they encountered there. Where Ottoman dignitaries had to sustain their way of life by supplementing their salaries (which were often months if not years in arrears) with an extra income consisting of 'appointment gifts', fees and fines, and had to ensure that they were reappointed each year, the servants of European states were already developing into the true bureaucrats they would become in the nineteenth century: salaried officials, secure in their jobs and with their tasks and prospects clearly defined by regulations. More abstract ideas like liberalism, constitutionalism and patriotism did not affect members of the Ottoman elite until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Where the ideas of the French Revolution had a marked effect was among the literate members of the Christian communities of the empire. The first to be influenced were the Greeks, thanks to their commercial connections with all the major European ports, and the Serbians, who were in constant touch with central Europe through their exports to Austria. Of the three catchwords of the French Revolution, 'liberty, equality, fraternity', it was 'liberty' that caught on among these communities; but to them liberty meant not the guarantee of civic rights but national independence. Nationalism was introduced into the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the revolutionary wars, but the nationalism of the Ottoman Christian communities was of a central European rather than a West European type. In search of a nation on which to build their states, the Balkan intellectuals constructed romantic visions of their historical past, defining Ottoman rule as an 'occupation' in the process.[4] The year 1808 saw the beginning of a Serbian insurrection, which at first was no more than a protest against the abuses of the local Muslim landowners and the janissaries, but which developed into a movement for autonomy and later independence. It was no coincidence that the movement's first leader was a rich pig exporter called Kara George. The birth of Greek

nationalism can be traced to the founding by Greek merchants in Odessa in 1814 of the *Philiki Hetairia*, a secret society aiming for the reconstruction of the Byzantine Empire. During the nineteenth century the growth of nationalism, first in the Balkans and later also in the Asiatic provinces, was to prove the most important factor in the destruction of the Ottoman state.

Economic change

Economically, the main development of the revolutionary years in the Levant was the strengthening of the position of the Greek traders and shippers. The revolutionary and Napoleonic wars had seriously damaged the position of the French merchant navy in the eastern Mediterranean and its leading position in long-distance sea trade was taken over by the Greeks, whose business had already been booming in the late 1700s. At the same time, the British blockade of Napoleonic Europe and the counter blockade known as the 'continental system', introduced by the French, increased the importance of the Ottoman Empire for trade in and out of central Europe.[5] Selim III had actively tried to improve conditions for Ottoman merchants in their competition with the Europeans by establishing consulates in the major Mediterranean trading centres and by giving Muslim traders berats that would enable them to compete with the Europeans on equal terms. These initiatives were realized under his successor, but they failed to undermine European dominance in international trade.

Alemdar Mustafa Pasha: the provincial notables in power

After he was deposed, Sultan Selim III was kept prisoner in the palace. The coalition of conservative *ulema* and janissary officers that had staged the coup of 1807 brought to the throne his cousin, Mustafa IV. Their motivation having been a negative one (common loathing of Selim's policies), they failed to develop a coherent policy, however, and meanwhile a number of leading survivors of the toppled regime took refuge with one of the leading *ayan*, *Alemdar* Mustafa Pasha in Rusçuk. Mustafa Pasha, like many of the leading *ayan*, had had ambivalent relations with the deposed sultan, supporting him against the janissaries and the *ulema* but sabotaging his attempts to extend central control to the provinces. But he had drawn close to the sultan when in 1806 the Russian advance threatened his area of control on the Danube. His headquarters became the centre of opposition to the conservative coalition in power in Istanbul and a little over a year later, in July 1808, he marched on the capital, intending to restore Sultan Selim III to the throne. His captors assassinated Selim before he could be freed, but within a week *Alemdar*

Mustafa Pasha's troops were in complete control. They deposed Mustafa IV and raised to the throne Selim's other cousin, Mahmut II, a known partisan of the *Nizam-i Cedid.*

So, ironically, the reign of the first sultan who tried to re-establish central control in the empire ended with the provincial notables (the *ayan*) in power in the capital. *Alemdar* Mustafa Pasha's period in power lasted for barely four months but what he tried to accomplish in that time is interesting. Apart from trying to terrorize his opponents, the stagers of the 1807 coup, into submission, he tried to revive the reforms of Sultan Selim and even to reconstitute the *Nizam-i Cedid* under a traditional name, that of *Segban*s (Keepers of the Royal Hounds – later incorporated into the janissary corps as a division of 34 companies). Contingents sent to the capital by loyal notables formed the nucleus of this corps. Furthermore, he took the remarkable initiative of inviting all the major *ayan* of the empire to Istanbul, to take part in a conference, attended also by the highest dignitaries of the central government, on the problems of the empire.

Most of the leading Anatolian notables did come, but a number of the standard-bearer's Balkan rivals and Mehmet Ali Pasha of Egypt (of whom more anon) excused themselves, while Ali Pasha of Yanina, the most powerful notable in the western Balkans, sent only a representative. Those who attended the conference discussed a programme submitted by Mustafa Pasha and agreed on a 'document of agreement' (*sened-i ittifak*), signed in October 1808. In the document both the sultan and the notables promised to rule justly. Taxes would be justly imposed by the government and justly collected by the notables. The notables promised to support reforms and the creation of a new army. They declared their loyalty to the sultan and his government and promised to defend him against any rebellion. They also promised to respect each other's territory and autonomy. A remarkable document, the *sened-i ittifak*, has sometimes been presented as an Ottoman Magna Carta, or a first attempt at constitutionalism. The former is more accurate because the document is really a pact between the ruler and his barons, not a codification of the rights of citizens. As such, it constitutes the high-water mark of the influence of the *ayan* in the empire, who were here recognized officially as partners in government. The document, possibly for this very reason, was never personally signed by the sultan, but he gave permission to put the imperial monogram (*tuğra*) at its head.[6]

One month after its signature by the notables, the janissaries in the capital revolted once more over rumours that Mustafa Pasha intended to disband them. The pasha, who had had to send his best troops to Rusçuk to defend it against his rivals in Bulgaria and had no reliable support left

in Istanbul, had to take refuge in a powder magazine. When the janissaries entered, he blew himself up. The janissaries, in coalition with the guilds and the *ulema* were once more masters of the capital. The sultan, however, reacted swiftly: he had Mustafa IV, his only remaining male relative, strangled and ordered the *Segban*s to the palace. A stalemate ensued, which was eventually solved by compromise, the sultan remaining on the throne but having to dissolve the *Segban* corps.