An Honorable Break from Besa: Reorientating Violence in the Late Ottoman Mediterranean

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Summary

In this presentation of ongoing research into the shifting fortunes of Ottoman western Balkan regions (represented here in their main towns) at the end of imperial rule, I will argue the evidence of certain internal dynamics compel us to reconsider what are the animating forces at work during a period of state reorientation. Using the cases of the Ottoman western Balkans as extensions of broader regional interactions between (not so neatly distinctive) state and subject actors, it becomes clear that the origins of certain kinds of social upheaval are linked to local socio-economic forces directly affiliated with administrative reforms adopted to harness local practices of conflict resolution. As argued throughout, these local forces engaging with presumably distinct state actions only later translate into new conditions that often manifested in terms of indigenous principles. The manner in which the eventual shifts in how state authorities try to co-opt these local practices are manifested, prove violent. Such violence invariably appears

in the documents. Where this paper seeks to go, however, is to highlight how the violence alone cannot serve as our focus to better understand how change is brought to the region.

Evidence of violent exchange may require a careful reinterpretation of what this violence actually reflects at several layers of social organization and institutional interaction. In the end, violent moments that appeared to mark the collapse of Ottoman rule in the western Balkans, often seen in regional historiographies as an ascendency of local practices, need deeper inspection. While local practices based on Albanian "honor codes" or BESA may have played a role, I wish to suggest an indirect one in order to correct an indigenous sourced essentialism. As such, this paper looks into tensions around the regulation of honor codes in Albanian territories through discourses of the native, as much as the manifestation of a product of policy or indigenous agency, the final product being violence. This complication of the interaction is one means I am continuously seeking to develop in order to suggest our greater sensitivity for intersections of tension may be but extensions of intricate domestic disputes that are themselves marked by gradations of *possible* violence. In the end, I hope this paper will initiate a new approach to monitoring social dynamics in Ottoman Balkan settings while discussing otherwise neglected cases of indigenous sources of systemic change that is obscured in the literature by the violence of the First World War.

Introduction: The Problems of Telling a Violent Story

Underlying any study of those violent confrontations that account for fundamental changes in how societies function, must be a quest to identify causes and effects. Predictably, this has led to contradictory, if not ultimately confusing, narratives with as much left out of the story as imposed by the story-teller. What these contradictory, if not incoherent stories ultimately imply

is that any attempt to study the animating factors leading to, and resulting from, violence in any specific theatre will suffer from a fundamental flaw: any composite narrative misrepresents the reality of disparate and geographically dispersed events that contribute to very different processes taking place at the same time (and even place).

The following invariably also suffers from this methodological weakness in that it too mobilizes a narrow selection of events/nonevents (at the expense of including others) in order to reinterpret the so-called origins and enduring legacies of violence in still understudied western Balkan areas during the late 1880s to 1913 period. Among the underlying impediments to analyzing the disparate events identified as contributing to, for instance, the Balkan Wars' long-term consequences rests, in part, on a narrow focus on specific administrative zones—the mountainous borderlands of Kosova, Işkodra, Serbia, and Montenegro known here as the Malësi—and their inhabitants, without fully engaging seemingly peripheral events beyond these locales. However, as we learn from looking at events in such settings more closely, the long assumed role of 'tribal' violence within the Ottoman Balkans proved that have important, often forgotten, implications.[1]

In many ways, the literature is trapped by the formal categories used to understand events prior to World War I, a lexicon largely drawn from post-WWI narrative strategies that privileges the undifferentiated "nation-state" and its essentialist "ethno-national" character over the many different possible socio-political, economic, and inter-cultural orientations still at play in each

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[1] "Imperial" interests in Africa translated in the Balkans with respect to Italy's delicate balancing of its immediate strategic interests and long-term concerns with expanding Greek, Serbian/Russian, and Austro-Hungarian influence in the region. Such issues are highlighted in Isa Blumi, *Reinstating the Ottomans: Alternative Balkan Modernities, 1800-1912* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 151-173.

"country."[2] In the period, local and regional politics of the western Balkans were messy, with competing factions operating under very different conditions. These factions, often changing in composition over even very short periods of time, catered to very different constituencies, be they in Austrian-administered Bosnia and Sancak, rural Macedonia, or the various coastal trading towns of the Adriatic and its hinterland. This study adds to these complications by considering some of the conflicting agendas among those fluid clusters of actors straddling the political and commercial frontiers of the western Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire that always threatened (but not necessarily resulted in) violence. It will be the intersections of multiple interests that will prove especially useful to reconsidering an implicit violence (as opposed to actual violence) always promising to threaten the already fragile imperial experience. As discussed below, it is the ever-present *possibility* of violence that shapes how government officials, individuals and their communities in the Malësi adapt to contingencies for which they themselves ultimately are responsible. Just how such officials and objects of official reports cater to largely reductive and misrepresentative tropes of the mountainous regions of the Balkans therefore is part of a dynamic that shapes policies around as much the concern about the possibility of violence as actual violence itself, a concern that may have dominated the modern state's rise in the twentieth century.

As highlighted elsewhere, due to the way physical, organized, and specifically directed violence transformed the texture of life in the Balkans immediately during and after the Balkan Wars, individuals and the communities they make often invested in new forms of association that conflicted directly with evolving state-building projects as appeared in modified form after the

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[2] A good example of this are those books seeking to streamline an account for the origins and consequences of the Balkans Wars, see Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars, 1912-1914: Prelude to the First World War* (London: Routledge, 2000). For a useful challenge to the scholarship on these events see M Hakan Yavuz and Isa Blumi (eds.), *War & Nationalism: The Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and Socio-Political Implications* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013).

war in the heartland of Ottoman Empire. In case of the western Balkans, the very process of

occupying Ottoman lands after victory in 1912, often by regimes composed of political and

commercial elite with strong residual associations with the Ottoman state, suggests an intimacy

between "enemies" that is neglected in the scholarship.[3] There are, in other words, considerations

at play that cannot rely on the clichés that leave an ethno-national imprint on the way we write

about violence in the Ottoman urban peripheries. There was certainly some kind of bureaucratic

'understanding' of what were the essential forces at work in these dangerously volatile regions,

but just who was promoting these themes in the larger cultural context may provoke new

suspicions about just what is at work in the Balkans.

The Ottoman-Albanian Effendiyya Agent of State

There is an interesting tension in the way men linked to the generation of native-born

state reformers orientated themselves toward the Balkan region. Because of the disproportionate

number of natives of the region making up this cadre of Young Ottomans, many faced the

awkward task of claiming authority on the basis of their direct association to a society that the

larger group of reformers believed was in desperate need of state rule. Undoubtedly, these "self-

hating" Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Vlachs would prove to be the most virulent

advocates for the kind of "harsh love" long associated with a particularistic European

colonialism.

As suggested throughout, one cannot help but read a quasi "colonialist" attitude in the

correspondences of native-born bureaucrats discussing the affairs of their tumultuous homelands

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[3] I just completed a book that explores how such processes play out in a number of regions of the former Ottoman Empire, Isa Blumi, *Ottoman Refugees, 1878-1939: Migration in a Post-Imperial World* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming, August 2013).

in the western Balkans. In almost absolute ubiquity, when analyzing the conditions in the western Balkans, these native-born reformers put emphasis on the special role that the state in changing the region. The most crucial task of this empowered state in their reports and publications was to integrate the region into a larger world that these local members of the Young Ottomans saw (or imagined) was emerging. Revealingly, these policy agendas were regularly iterated in almost racist tones, where "reform" in the provinces entailed "civilizing" local populations (Makdisi 2002). While such attitudes have been already observed in the Ottoman story (Deringil 1997; Reinkowski 2005), it is actually the "native-son" who used the racist colonial epistemology to justify "governing" his homeland as a hostile land in need of "civilizing" violence. In other words, native-born members of the Ottoman state apparatus were the greatest apologists for Ottoman bureaucratic expansionism in the western Balkans during the nineteenth century.

Localizing Reform

The problem with studying Ottoman reform is that there is always the danger of thinking of the *effendiyya* "class" as a monolith. To the contrary, there were internal divisions, factions, and ultimately rivalries that reflected the initial geographic, social class, and "ethnic" diversity of this bureaucracy. This impacted how reforms were actually implemented. There is evidence, for instance, that the reforms were not applied uniformly in the Balkans. Often the more lucrative projects and its big budgets went to home districts while the more authoritarian measures were dedicated to underrepresented areas deemed 'savage' or 'backward' in the documents. In this respect, these reports promoting either neglect (what is the point of throwing money down the drain) or heavy investment (these subjects need greater state presence), reflect a local flavor that is sometimes lost to historians.

In crucial ways, native-born bureaucrats often hailing from southern Albanian regions known as *Toskëri*, administered each region, in each distinct instant, with different variations of reforms. This suggests a manner of applying state power that was always mitigated by a combination of local conditions and personal connections to the communities slotted for reform. There was, in other words, a local and personal context to the way "modern reform" and its violence (or potential) was implemented as well as experienced.

While conflicts of interest may translate into a positive flow of government funds and jobs for many in the western Balkans, it could mean an imbalanced, unjustified use of negative government power for others. This incongruence is possible to identify, however, only if we disaggregate the bureaucracy, breaking apart the generic into more detailed units of observation. This requires distinguishing the native-born from the nonnative as well as going a step further and understanding that being from one village, *kabile,* or *fis* (Albanian for clan) and not the one from which a reformer came probably determined the quality of "reform" in one area or another.

To the many natives of the western Balkans who formed a large part of this bureaucratic class, the larger spirit of reform meant harnessing their localism to a larger state apparatus. With this considerable potential for power, they then often projected back to the region their personal and collective prejudices, which translated into exploitative, arrogant, and even violently hostile policies toward select groups. For many Young Ottomans of southern Albanian origin (Tosks), therefore, the opportunity to "reform" parts of the western Balkans meant "naming" and characterizing the "nature" of these regions as well as devising schemes to implement "development" or "expansion" that again would mirror the patronizing, often racist discourses associated with western European colonialism of the same period.

Importantly, these criteria of prejudice were never fixed, and they were constantly changed as the world transformed around them. Individuals and groups alike constantly translated the meaning and value of these systems of differentiation—linking one's association to regional affiliations Geg/Tosk, Bektashi/Catholic—to perceptions of power that, over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, changed in often dramatic ways. For those self-identifying "modern" men, wearing "modern" clothes, for instance—long, "Western"-style coats, and fez caps, the quintessential marker of an Ottoman gentleman—may have reflected a larger *attitude* toward the very objects of this *effendiyya* class' reforms, namely, the traditional, "uncivilized" locals (read: *Gegë/Malësorë*) who still resisted "reforms," "union," and "progress." The task now is to begin understanding these relations at their most subtle levels to retell western Balkan histories vis-à-vis the overhanging presence of violence (or the possibility of violence).

By integrating the work of historians of the empire who consider state power as a reflection of elite pathologies struggling to deal with "subaltern agency," we find that the Ottoman Balkans and, indeed, the societies that by the mid-nineteenth century were evolving beyond the direct influence of Ottoman state reforms also seem to change in incongruent ways. In response, the erudite masters of the modern world adopted increasingly idiosyncratic ways to objectify the poor—"savage" mountain "tribesmen," pirates, or religious fanatics—to address anxieties about their inability to control events on the ground. One method may have been the frequently modified narrative of mass politics, including "populism" and ultimately nationalism, beginning to emerge in media. The other was the violent underbelly of the persistent state of being 'uncivilized.'

Studying what are ultimately exchanges rather than clashes reveals how Ottoman intellectuals and the western Balkan "masses" were equally complicit in a process that

transformed the imperial project. In many ways, their attempts to assert distinctive associations in the terminology of *millet* and the disaggregation of those within each assumed 'national' group gained importance in the late nineteenth century as many members of the Ottoman Balkan elite articulated frustrations with the lack of social mobility and perhaps the feeling of being trapped on the periphery of a more cosmopolitan and dynamic Ottoman society. It is at this time when various "identity" claims got reflected both in categories of state and local practice and as a category of analysis. As a category of practice, it was used increasingly (but not always!) by actors in everyday settings to make sense of themselves and their activities and, thus, communicate their specific interests to others through relative violence. Often, the identity claims used were framed in geographic terms with immediate assumed social proclivities towards violence induced by powerful 'honor codes' long associated with 'tribal' peoples throughout the region. So at one point, a set of local interests could be presented in the form of the immediate community—Hoti, Gruda, Kelmendi, and Kastrati—larger confederations of communities—*Malësorë, Gegë, Bijelopavlić*—or finally entire regions—Montenegro/*Karadağ*, Kosova, Macedonia, Albania/*Arnavutluk*.

It is this last spatial configuration that is especially interesting; the evocation of what were geographic abstractions to identify a larger *possible* constituency, for instance, "Prizren," "Drenica," "Montenegro," or "*Arnavutluk*," was increasingly used to persuade some locals to understand themselves momentarily in one productive way and not another. The fact that such efforts were at the same time informed by concerns with lingering, parallel loyalties, shaped by notions of BESA in the areas under study created a conflicted interface between would-be nationalists, Ottoman loyalist instilling Ottoman nationalism, and 'locals.'

The peoples known as *Malësorë, Gegë, Bijelopavlić* were all to be directly associated with a particularly popular cultural explanation for the occasional violence in their home regions. Being synonymous with violence required, however, further nuance that especially catered to the Albanian bureaucratic elites' claims to having a particularly unique set of skills to 'understand' these agents of potential violence. As such, a growing field among the reformist classes was to promote the ethnography of highlander 'honor codes' in Albanian known as Besa, to both suggest a primordial set of practices that, with proper oversight, could be harnessed, as well as suggest an explanation for why violence in strategically sensitive areas like these borderlands needed the direct attention of well-placed Tosk Albanians.

What is crucial to draw from exploring this interesting side effect of Young Ottoman policies is that these were all contingent and short-lived. The reification of different identity associations proved to be a social process, not just an intellectual practice. Analyzing this kind of politics leads us to an accounting of processes and mechanisms through which what has been called the "political fiction" of the nation becomes but one of many possibilities available to the many competing stakeholders in the western Balkans. As I constantly wish to iterate in my larger body of work that we must be careful not to assume that these periodic claims to broader associations mean what most post-Ottoman historians claim them to mean. These suddenly "modern" expressions of long-used strategies of engagement by locals vis-à-vis the larger world betray the underlying tensions of the empire often forgotten in the literature on Balkan nationalism.

Drawing on recent studies of late Ottoman literature and social commentary, in particular, helps to highlight how Ottoman intellectuals did not interpret events as manifestations of European, and thus foreign, cultural hegemony. From Ali Cevad, Lütfiye Hanım, and Ahmed

Vefik to Ahmed Cevdet, Ottoman observers believed that local factors, along with outside

machinations, accounted for the temporary, parochial, and isolated events in the Balkans covered

in this book (Boyar 2007: 42–71). More importantly, these witnesses were particularly certain

that the animating factors behind the occasional outbreak of violence were not linked to what we

today call nationalism, but a primitivism that needed modernist intervention.

Crucially, the contingent actions of locals actually frustrated the ambitions of outside

states as much as the Ottomans themselves to more clearly unify these communities. This proves

crucial when considering the impact that contingencies had on how prominent Ottoman Balkan

natives responded to the forces pushing and pulling the empire during the course of the middle

years of the nineteenth century.

The demonstrably ideological constructions of the "people" did not take place in a social,

cultural, or political vacuum. The targets of what became nationalist romanticism actually

determined the extent to which important early "nationalists" could recreate their idealistic vision

of the nation while also remaining committed to their Ottoman universe. We see this with the

examples of the creative work of Sami Frashëri/Ṣamseddin Sami (henceforth Sami).

Men such as the Frashëri brothers formed a cohort that, even when faced with challenges

to the empire, for the most part did not take the separatist route. Writing poems and plays, these

men would serve as the foundation of the next phase of adaptation starting from 1875, when the

world in which they emerged again threatened to crumble, as covered in detail in the next

chapter. That being said, they did not constitute a monolith easily enframed in post-Ottoman

categories like "Albanian." They operated within a set of fluid social roles and thus had often

contradictory expectations. The divergent careers of many can be appreciated, therefore, only by

considering their individual ambitions, the impact reform efforts of the Ottoman state had on

their particular set of networks, and the growing presence of outside powers whose money and promises of new kinds of opportunities successfully disrupted temporary alliances.

In this period, Ottoman state agencies presumed considerable power over the same "uncivilized" locals. At times, the overwhelming shift in strategies seemed to follow a clear trajectory toward monopoly of coercive power in the hands of the state. Local despots linked to various ministries and parliamentarian bodies alike entertained absolutist ambitions as outsiders invested resources into a new vehicle—the state—to maximize the capacity of private capital to extract surplus from the world. Scholars in the twentieth century often unquestionably treat these confrontations in the Ottoman Balkans as representations of an indigenous effort of separation on the basis of a language, religion, sect, or historically fixed geographic terms. This is especially clear in regard to the misrepresentation of the drive to create a single mega province such as Syria in the Middle East, Tuna (Danube), Prizren, and then *Arnavutluk* (Albania) by key members of the Young Ottoman generation. What is conveniently forgotten is the context in which reformers such as Pomok Midhat Pasha initiated the last phase of reforms that created these mega provinces.

Some of the schemes that Midhat Pasha developed were the insertion of direct power via a newly reformed police force, the expansion of infrastructure, and schooling in the Niš *sancak* he governed. These policies coincided with the larger civilization-building project found throughout Europe at the time and mirrored the sentiments already discussed above among other native Balkan members of the Ottoman government. In other words, Midhat Pasha and the elite he represented began to convince historically independent communities to see their immediate interests as extending beyond the confines of their traditional areas.

The 1850s in autonomous Ottoman principalities such as Serbia and Montenegro witnessed a number of important measures implemented in the attempt to consolidate power around landed elites, a set of power shifts that translated into new forms of identity politics paralleling those in the rest of Europe. In rapid succession, the Ottoman state responded to some Slav leaders' increasing overtures to Russia by investing considerable resources into securing, for instance, the area around Shkodër, the commercial hub of the region bordering Montenegro. Of the government agents charged with securing the area, the first, Ömar Lüfti, proved controversial (and counterproductive) because, between the years 1851 and 1853, he initiated the first attempt at directly taxing local communities (Reinkowski 2003: 249).

As a result of the predictably violent resistance to these taxes, a new generation of state officials elected to adopt a different set of reforms that spent less time focusing on taxing local landowners and more on simply co-opting them to serve the government in some capacity. Under a new governor, Mustafa Pasha, for instance, the Ottoman state invited prominent locals to join a committee that brought all communities of the *Malësi* together.[4] Community leaders in the immediate area around the city of Shkodër who joined this committee, called the Committee of the Shkodër Mountains (CSHM), were given formal titles and salaries and were charged with the responsibility of ensuring stability and the smooth administration of areas previously only nominally under state control. Such overtures initiated a process of regional integration that would open the door for greater direct state rule in these previously isolated regions. They were also forged on the assumption certain hierarchies existed and entire regions could be best

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[4] BBA, Irade Dahiliye 23192, Message to newly appointed administrator of Shkodër, Mustafa Pasha, dated 1856, p. 1.

administered by co-opting members at the top of these pyramids forged by honor (or Besa) pledges.

Within five years, another set of attempts to integrate the larger region, this time initiated by the famous *Tanzimat* reformer Ahmet Cevdet, would take place in Shkodër (Cevdet 1986: 2: 190). The Young Ottomans, in other words, were institutionally formalizing a communal identity of *Malësorë*.

Importantly, while their agenda may have been to consolidate the authority of the Ottoman state, the principal agents of this policy at the local level—Hasan Tahsini (first director of Istanbul University, known in Albanian literature as Hoxha Tahsini), the Frashëri brothers, Zef Jubani, and Pashko Vasa[5]—were not immune to the regionalism that the reforms had sought to erase. For one, considerable tension existed between these activists of reform and the constituents they hoped to co-opt. This tension distorted an otherwise straightforward example of state centralization that confounds the simplistic nationalist paradigms in vogue today.

Reforming Home for the Empire

Since Tosk officials played a central role in the application, if not the outright design, of these policies in the western Balkans, the Porte adopted different strategies for Tosk and Geg territories. As already suggested, *Toskë* based in Istanbul and embedded in the reformist regime had few to no links in Kosova and Işkodra while maintaining strong personal connections with their home regions further south. As a result, Tosk Ottoman reformers were selective when evoking the expansion of direct state control of the western Balkans. One of the ways this was manifested was the attitude of Tosk elite toward the mountainous regions in *Malësi*, which they

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[5] Also known as Wassa Effendi and/or Vaso Pasha in the documentation.

believed constituted the biggest threat to Ottoman development. The projects adopted by the future luminaries of Ottoman-Tosk culture were thus underpinned by a clear sense of frustration over the lack of "order" in the mountainous regions. Among other things, these reformers felt that unless these autonomous mountainous regions were formally incorporated into the larger Ottoman society, it would be through these areas that Russia or Austria-Hungary would be able to penetrate the empire. Events further to the north in Bosnia during the 1860s and 1870s proved these fears to be justified. The idea then was to promote an aggressive campaign of civilization building at the expense of local autonomy, and often at the end of a gun.[6]

Already in 1857, reformers were attempting to expand on earlier efforts to assert state influence in the *Malësi* by working with the local Catholic clergy, who were asked to address the so-called blood feuds problem, a debilitating series of vendettas that had kept highland communities in a state of perpetual warfare. In lieu of using force, new strategies to bring the region some stability included the strengthening of a religious presence (by building more churches and mosques) and a greater investment in direct government involvement in the area by building police stations, courthouses, and schools. As revealed in the fine work of Hasan Kaleshi (1964), Ottoman reformers started to address these issues by slowly establishing judicial uniformity and normalizing the daily interactions between state officials and the local population. In particular, reformers hoped that the investment in government structures could solidify the authority of Ottoman judges, who, with the coaxing of clergy, would begin to replace a violent social domain largely inaccessible to the state. In essence, the goal of these early

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[6] Military expeditions were often a product of such strategies, leaving stubbornly autonomous Malësi constantly facing state violence advocated by southern Tosk officials. For details of one such campaign that originated in Dibër in the height of the winter, see HHStA, PA, XXXVIII, 201, Wassitch to Andrassy, dated Scutari, December 23, 1873.

reforms was to replace the local leaders who had been the major arbiters in peoples' lives with streamlined state surrogates who would always assist Istanbul while helping unify a society traditionally fragmented by blood feuds (Kaleshi 1964: 110).

At times such efforts would require the old strategy of simply co-opting rivals by appointing them as the chief of a newly created police station or the headmaster of a new school. The subtleties of modern state-building, however, did not allow for this age-old policy of buying loyalty and pitting rivals against each other to be the sole substitute for direct rule. New methods initiated during the *Tanzimat* took a cultural track as much as an institutional one. In the context of instituting greater direct Ottoman administration of the highland regions, an often public animosity toward the "tribal habits" practiced in "savage mountain districts" increasingly made its way into the documents and early newspapers (Deringil 2003: 322). The strong community identifiers along *fis* or "tribal" lines in the highlands clearly juxtaposed loyalty to family and community with good citizenship, as demanded by the Tosk officials linked to the Ottoman state (Reinkowski 2005: 189–194, 264–278). The assumed inaccessibility of such communities required direct state intervention that combined bureaucratic measures and cultural chauvinism.

In the end, the rise of tropes about backward tribal culture represents a crucial shift in the Ottoman rule of the western Balkans. For many Ottoman officials from Tosk regions, the *Malësor* savage was as much a tool of state expansion as the institutions that were meant to civilize these people.[7] Such thinking has parallels in other modern societies of course and scholars theorize such relations in the literature. Much like the Ottomans, other empires faced

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[7] Even well into the Abdülhamid period, authorities debated the best approach to changing the region. In one report, demands were made for additional judges and police officers and for schools to be set up in *Malësi* as the region suffered from many of the same ills mentioned by the reforms in the 1860s. BBA, YA.RES, 71/35, No. 339, Yildiz Sarayi to Meclis-i Vükela, dated 5 Safer 1312 (August 9, 1894).

similar administrative problems as they absorbed large tracts of the Americas, most of Africa, and southern Asia (Guha 1994; Mallon 1994).

Remarkably, the stated animus toward the *Malësorë* and their "uncivilized" nature did not arise from the Tosk Ottoman elite alone. By the time the *Tanzimat* reformers were making their move into the region, native sons were also vocal critics of *Malësorë* resistance. The few agents of state expansion who actually came from the regions targeted for reform were prepared to accommodate not only the growing state presence in their homeland but also its use of some of the more pernicious cultural tools of the modern state: the politics of civilization. For example, both Zef Jubani and Pashko Vasa, influential *Gegë* with long track records of service to the Ottoman state, shared with their Tosk allies a certain intellectual distance from the people living in the north, particularly the rugged mountains. In particular, Shkodër-native Zef Jubani decried the failure of the *Tanzimat* reforms to reach the *Malësorë*. He not only blamed bureaucratic incompetence for this but also offered a cultural explanation for the ultimate failure of reforms to reach the region. Jubani saw the continued lack of government presence in these areas as the result of the resistance by the "uncivilized" *Malësorë* to progress by way of intractable 'honor' codes.

As I discussed earlier, this strategy, at least in the western Balkans, originated when a number of Ottoman reformers, including many *Toskë* and several *Gegë*, wanted to smooth over the communal signifiers of difference—religious or "tribal" —increasingly stimulated by outside patronage. To accomplish this, reformers until the 1860s advocated a realignment of the institutions governing the provinces in the hope that they would help create, through educational and economic development schemes, new criteria of association advocated by the work of Sami Frashëri.

Sami: The Patriarch of Tosk Cultural and Regional Elitism

From his earliest writings in the 1870s until his death in 1904, Sami probably represents the single most important Ottoman intellectual of the Hamidian period.[8] Contrary to the way he is portrayed today, a close look at his work leaves the impression that he wavered throughout his adult life with conflicted loyalties. Both Turkish and Albanian historians have made persuasive arguments linking his work to larger exclusivist narratives; their strategies have focused mainly on either ignoring the consequences of studying Sami's entire body of work outside its Ottoman context or, at best, vetting his writings that contravene their particular frame of analysis as mere intellectual anomalies (Bilmez 2003).

It would be a mistake, however, to see Sami Frashëri's "contradictory" loyalties as in any way strange in light of what happened throughout the western Balkans during this period. Seeing oneself as sharing a regional heritage with a larger Ottoman identity was not necessarily a contradiction in the late Ottoman period.[9] Instead, Sami's vast body of work on the Ottoman language and the composition of his invaluable encyclopedias all speak of a man firmly embedded in an intellectual current connecting him to like-minded Ottomans and the larger world (Dağlıoğlu 1934). As a result, his purported links with the parochialisms of Albanian

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[8] Revealingly, Turkish nationalists today spend considerable time making the claim that Sami's loyalties lay with a modern Turkish identity, framed in Ottoman terms, in direct contrast to claims that Sami was unequivocally an Albanian nationalist (Bilmez 2003). I argue that Sami was a loyal Ottoman subject who not only advocated the development of regional vernaculars such as *Toskërisht* but also emphasized the need for Ottoman to be the language of an empire that was the cultural melting pot of the eastern Mediterranean and Central Asian world (Kaleshi 1970).

[9] In letters written in *Toskërisht* to activists in Italy and elsewhere, Sami notes a tension between what some beyond the Ottoman Empire hoped was the beginning of a drive for political separation and a still strong sense of affiliation among prominent Ottoman-*Arnavu/Shqiptar,* figures such as Sami. See AQSH, F.51.D.4.f.1–3, Sami Frashëri to Jeronim de Rada, dated Istanbul, February 20, 1881.

nationalism is more a reflection of post-Ottoman cultural politics than a meaningful observation of the context within which he and his political allies were operating at the time.

This brings us back to the disciplinary role of reformers in the Balkans. Sami's early writings all point to an attempt to strengthen the Ottoman Empire by lecturing and, if possible, shaming *Gegë* and especially *Malësorë* for the manner in which they engaged with the world around them. Sami's first serious work, the play discussed below, and his many articles published in Istanbul newspapers all focused on a social engineering theme that reflected the general spirit of his generation: reforming the cultural peripheries of Ottoman society. Moreover, much like the reformers based in the Balkans, the idea of a single regional province (be it *Arnavutluk* or *Prizren*) became central in his mind to protecting what remained of the empire's Balkan territories and preserving its Islamic heritage.[10]

As already noted, the issue of civilization proved central to realizing these reforms, and it would be the task of educated, "civilized" men such as Sami and his brothers to edify the backward regions of the Ottoman Empire on this point. In one of the most celebrated works attributed to Sami he actually discusses at length the differences between *Gegë* and *Toskë* in terms of the savagery that paradoxically helped to preserve archaic forms of authentic Geg culture while the *Toskë* were changed by western civilization. Admittedly, his informative ethnographic studies also emphasized these regional differences.[11] According to Sami, the

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[10] Sami was unambiguous in identifying Albanians (*Arnavutlar*) of all faiths, as well as Muslim Slavs, as integral parts of the great Islamic nation and as members of the Ottoman state. This is an emphasis on social cohesion in the larger empire on Islamic terms that are rarely pointed out today (Frashëri 1988: 1: 21).

[11] Sami Frashëri was a careful scholar and his meticulously written encyclopedia provides insight into a world he had no problem segregating into regions—*Gegalık* and *Toskalık*—and even more narrowly

principal distinction between people alongside their geographic distance was their level of education. Couched in terms of being civilized and uncivilized, Sami clearly delineated the role that subjects of the Ottoman state would play in the reform efforts that energized his generation. Often one finds in his work direct reference to the intellectual and cultural gap that existed between "tribal" highlanders and his own educated cohort. In this context, Sami used the trope of the quintessential "warrior race" and their cultural tools, revolving around the "*besa*" (or oath sworn "in blood," with which much of the Ottoman public was familiar), to discuss the state's role in shaping Balkan life.[12] In this regard, some of Sami's work introduces a counterintuitive dynamic in which he hoped that *Malësorë* and highland peoples throughout the Balkans would feel obligated to join in the effort of strengthening and unifying the empire's vulnerable northern frontier.

As already noted, the issue of civilization proved central to realizing these reforms, and it would be the task of educated, "civilized" men such as Sami and his brothers to edify the backward regions of the Ottoman Empire on this point. In one of the most celebrated works attributed to Sami he actually discusses at length the differences between *Gegë* and *Toskë* in terms of the savagery that paradoxically helped to preserve archaic forms of authentic Geg

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into villages that he and his fellow Ottoman subjects felt had shaped their own personal hybrid identity. Sami, for one, asserts that his hometown was a bastion of civilization set in a larger Balkan/Albanian context of ignorance. See his entry for his hometown, Fraşer (Sami 1996b: 5: 3353).

[12] The working trope infused much of the popular literature—and resulting 'scholarship'—in the Habsburg Empire, a crucial player in shaping inter-communal relations for the years leading to World War I. The Ottoman state learned of stories in Vienna newspapers about the particularities of Albanian honor codes, a that they were a source of disloyalty to the Sultan, a wedge many in Vienna's power circles hoped to exploit. BBA BEO 340/25431, report from Ministry of War, dated 1 B 1311.

culture while the *Toskë* were changed by western civilization. Admittedly, his informative

ethnographic studies also emphasized these regional differences.[13] According to Sami, the

principal distinction between people alongside their geographic distance was their level of

education. Couched in terms of being civilized and uncivilized, Sami clearly delineated the role

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dynamic in which he hoped that *Malësorë* and highland peoples throughout the Balkans would

feel obligated to join in the effort of strengthening and unifying the empire's vulnerable northern

frontier.

 First released in 1874, Frashëri's play *Besa Yahud Ahde Vefa* (*Besa or Testimony of*

Loyalty) represents quite vividly this underlying tension in Ottoman elite circles.[14] Particularly

among the *Toskë* who made up a significant proportion of the empire's educated elite, the

uncultured, brutal, and fearsome highlander was a problem. Sami's play reveals this sentiment

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[13] Sami Frashëri was a careful scholar and his meticulously written encyclopedia provides insight into a world he had no problem segregating into regions—*Gegalık* and *Toskalık*—and even more narrowly into villages that he and his fellow Ottoman subjects felt had shaped their own personal hybrid identity. Sami, for one, asserts that his hometown was a bastion of civilization set in a larger Balkan/Albanian context of ignorance. See his entry for his hometown, Fraşer (Sami 1996b: 5: 3353).

[14] The play was translated and printed in Sofia by activist A. Ypi Kolonja in 1901: Frashëri, Sami Bey. *Besa, Drame me ghashte pamje, prej Sami Bej Frashërit, Shqiperuar nga Turqishtja prej Ab. A. Ypi Kolonja* (Sofia: Mbrothesia,1901).

inasmuch as it tries to lay down for his audience a stark contrast between the habits and customs of uneducated mountain peasants and people who were cultured, urbane, and part of a structured hierarchy. His characters spell out the dividing line separating civilization from barbarity and imperial demise from the promise of the empire. The tragic lesson of his story is the danger of deviating from a clearly laid out *Tanzimat* plan that suppresses the application of personal and communal law to ensure the exclusive arbitrator role of the state.[15]

For Sami Frashëri and his fellow intellectuals based in Istanbul, the practices of blood honor and strong "clan loyalties" were particularly detrimental to the efforts of the Ottoman state to bring reform to the key frontier districts.[16] This is evident in Sami's play as he blurs the lines normally separating the hero from the villain. One of his main characters, the southern-born Tepeleni Demir Bey (by designation, a gentleman and officer of the state), is used to issue a warning to the audience. One of his own officers, who himself is from a respected city family, threatens the natural hierarchy in the Ottoman society by lusting after a beautiful village girl who is already engaged. Demir Bey warns the audience that the educated, urban, and noble families charged with administering the wild lands should refrain from interfering with the domestic affairs of the "tribal" characters found in the mountains. In other words, one needs to stick to one's social and political circles when it comes to issues of family and romance. As the audience

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[15] There are a number of reasons why scholars have misinterpreted the play as representing a glorification of highland values. That being said, reading it in the most literal sense (and after all, it was meant to be performed on stage) suggests that this tragedy was meant to convey a clear-cut message very much in line with the Ottoman reform movement's goals. See Gawrych (2006: 15–18) for an example of how the play has been misread as an anachronistic nationalist plea to Albanians.

[16] Some noted the state attempts to reduce the number of vendettas between communities in and around Prizren, Prishtina, and Peja (Ipek), a direct consequence of local struggles for power (Durham 1909: 112; Roux 1992: 244).

is forewarned, tragedy befalls the region when an impetuous junior ignores Demir Bey's pleas to not mix with the highlanders and pursues the innocent local beauty, whose own loyalties and love (both pure and idealized) rest with a man of her community. In the end, it is clear to the audience that trouble comes to those who disrupt a pattern of socialization that, while perhaps archaic, still needs to be respected (Sami 1875: 89–100).

Juxtaposed with this message of class boundaries (nicely captured in figure 2.1) is the confrontation between power and injustice that makes Sami's play a helpful tool for studying the entire period. The *Tanzimat* was not meant to bring state power to bear on the wild people of the mountains as much as justice, order, and the straightforward application of the law throughout the empire. While the violence of local justice clearly denotes the necessity for universal legal codes administered by the Ottoman state, it is not just the backward customary law that needs regulation. Demir Bey, the appointed official and powerful landlord of the region, is also culpable in Sami's play. He oversteps his authority when he tries to compel a father to surrender his beautiful daughter to the governor's infatuated officer. While Demir Bey is wise enough to advise his officer not to pursue a shepherd's daughter, he still makes the fatal mistake of acting unjustly toward the father when his officer's impetuous behavior leads the locals to challenge the hierarchy of power. While they should not interact with locals, the moment the latter resist the wishes of the elite, all codes of behavior must take a back seat.

Interestingly, Sami uses the illiterate, simple but proud shepherd to alert the audience to the fact that after the *Tanzimat* reforms there can be no more arbitrary use of power (Sami 1875: 102–105). This is the second side of Frashëri's story: the *Tanzimat* is the mechanism that preserves order, and while respect is due to the class of powerful men, they cannot abuse it by

simply imposing demands, especially unreasonable ones such as handing over an engaged daughter to a smitten officer. The consequences for the empire are dire.

Through the mechanism of a stereotypical representation of the form of agreement in highlander societies predicated on honor—the *besa*—Frashëri offers in his play a social formula for integrating *Malësi*, *Gegëni,* and southern highland communities into the Ottoman fold. No longer shall true subjects be loyal to backward ideals and customary laws. Rather, through their "ancient" honor-bound system, they shall declare an oath/*besa* to the empire as a mechanism that will free them from their self-destructive behavior, while also promising them just treatment by enlightened and restrained governors. United under the guidance of the Ottoman state, these simple people could serve a vital role in preserving the homeland (*vatan*): in this context, a vital part of the Ottoman Empire (Ahmed Cevdet 1986: I(V), 185).

The rise of the autocratic Hamidian regime and consolidation of the palace's authority at the expense of a generation of liberal state reformists led to 40 years of give and take in the halls of power and provincial governance. As argued elsewhere, in response to the 1877–1878 fiasco, members of the Midhat Pasha generation did not give up, but actively continued to lobby the Porte and then secretly created underground movements to advocate the reinstatement of a policy that reconstituted the western Balkans into a single administrative area dominated by a *Tosk Arnavut* ruling class.[17]

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[17] In response to the Russian military victories and recognizing that there would be serious territorial consequences, a number of organizations were formed in the later months of 1877 to lobby European powers for the return of the status quo (i.e., no territorial rewards to the Russian state). One of these organizations was the Central Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Albanian People, founded by Istanbul-based regional intellectuals in December 1877 in Istanbul. Contrary to what most scholars read into the committee, it seems clear that its initial purpose was to protect Ottoman interests

The apparent ascendancy of Pan-Slavism in the Balkans as a result of Russia's military victory rendered obsolete early attempts to secure loosely defined constituencies by way of reordering provinces to fit within one administration. The strategy of creating the mega province of *Arnavutluk,* in particular, would ultimately be sacrificed as a new political order in Istanbul followed the palace coup of 1876 and the rise of the new sultan. This new state of reactionaries responded to the nearly total military defeat that was instigated by divisive forces of communalism originating outside the empire—Pan-Slavism and the Megali Idea—with a new strategy for social organization. Abdülhamid's regime would not equivocate and constantly experimented with tactics to disrupt the ability of groups to consolidate influence over vulnerable populations, a strategy *Tanzimat* reformers had once believed would help Istanbul rule the empire more efficiently. What happened in 1877–1878 thus exposes a significant strategic divide within loyal but competing segments of Ottoman society. For those reformers from an earlier generation, still convinced of their vision of a loyal, militarily secure Ottoman Empire based on formally consolidated *millets*, they would have to struggle in opposition while a new generation of impassioned conservatives reacted to local contingencies in a new way. This tension over how to best react to the dramatic shift in fortunes as a result of the 1877–1878 war was the crucial sociopolitical force at work for the last 40 years of Ottoman history (Karpat 2001).

The Legacy of "Soft" Violence

I have long argued that various manifestations of local agency—trade, politics, social, and cultural exchange—destabilizes the modern border-as-extension-of-state model of observing

by soliciting the European public (such organizations would send open letters to newspapers), claiming that they were part of national communities operating independently from the Ottoman state (Gawrych 2006: 43–45; Skendi 1967: 35–36).

events. In place of the assumed geographic order the 1878 diplomatically drawn boundaries offered the region, peoples living within these reconstituted "borderlands" experienced the parallel trajectories of the still unharnessed modern world. In this regard, beyond laying out a detailed study of the new frontier administrations the new states of Montenegro and Serbia had to impose on their frontiers, I introduce cases of local mobilization that ultimately challenged these new borderland regimes and the sense of possibility for various political entrepreneurs directly affected by the Balkan Wars. In these cases, it will be the contradictory demands of governance in reaction to local contingency, often introduced by investment schemes, that opens up avenues of action for a number of indigenous actors and hence permit our rereading of the region's history at large, both prior to, and after, the Balkan Wars themselves.

That ascendant locals like Esad Pasha Toptani emerged in this period with considerable power only partially tells the story, however. Their activism did force ascendant regional state administrations to adapt to conditions they created on the ground, but as a result of a *combination* of factors, these adjustments created even more channels of engagement for locals. The consequences were a growing list of potential constituents, clients, and rivals to these ascendant locals and all the competing states created by the Treaty of Berlin in 1878—an Austro-Hungarian regime in Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Sancak, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania and an expended Greece.[18]

Reconsidering the complex interplay of pre-WWI state-building measures as reflective of local dynamics inducing, and reacting to multiple external interventions, thus offers us an opportunity to explore the complexity of the modern world through largely ignored indigenous channels that are informed by the very Ottoman context in which they emerge. In a word, we are

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[18] See Peter Sluglett and Hakan Yavuz (eds.) *War and Diplomacy: The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 and the Treaty of Berlin* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011).

not simply dealing with nation-states and national heroes defined by boundaries. The transformations that contributed to the foundations of war in the Western Balkan towns remained a local experience that was then translated in other forms once filtered through the emerging state bureaucracies of the era.

What such a series of events suggest is that a local proved key to the initial process of accessing local natural resources.[19] These developments could only happen with the collaboration of local leaders like Prenk bib Doda, who, thanks to the lobbying of Ottoman officials by the Austro-Hungarian diplomats in Vienna and Istanbul, was soon after freed from his exile.[20] Interestingly, by the very fact Prenk bid Doda claimed authority (and thus owner of these resources) the diplomacy that set him free put the burden of enforcement on the Catholic leader. This was crucial as locals, many deciding that Prenk bib Doda no longer represented their interests, resisted. The once primordial BESA that supposedly tied an exiled "leader" to his people had broken, leading to any number of subsequent political reorderings of life in the larger Shkodër area. These changes were shaped on an alliance between commercial interests, the Ottoman state and rivals to Prenk bib Doda who were expected, and eagerly enforced, violent authority over the assumed subjects of once powerful 'tribal' leaders who needed to be exiled. Such reorientation ultimately compelled key factions to reach beyond "traditional" spheres of

[19] By 1910, Bid Doda Pasha was on a "first-name" basis with Italian foreign ministry officials and a collection of his letters discussing his haggling between Italian and Austrian companies suggests he was clearly in control of his region's resources, ASMAE Ambass 220, no. 4848, Bid Doda Pasha to Llima, 3 November 1910.

[20] Suggestively, Prenk bib Doda Pasha's career as both a local power holder and a future partner in the timber industry starts even earlier. Evidence found in reports coming out of Lebanon in the 1870s suggest the Austrian representatives, along with the Ministry of Mines and Forests, and prominent local Arab leaders linked to the Malhame family, were actively promoting Prenk Bib Doda for a possible appointment as the top administrator for Mount Lebanon. BBA YA.RES 20/19, dated Vienna, 16 C 1300 [24 April 1883]. Prenk Bid Doda would soon be the centre of much debate over his role as appointed Mutassarif of Lebanon to replace the deceased Vasa Paşa [Pashko Vasa], another Mirdita Catholic who set off the successful reforms of the province.

association, including forming alliances with once rival/expansionist land owning families like the Toptanis. The long-term consequences of such an orientation of Shkodër political life will be discussed in later work; for now, the key point is these tropes worked and did not work according to any number of factors that take us beyond seeking the documented interactions between assumed local patriarchs and their state intermediaries.

As I suggest in my forthcoming book, the crucial link to begin to undermine the methodological shortcomings of past focus on such documented hierarchies is the aforementioned refugee populations that reoriented themselves, in large part, to serve as key extensions of various rival centers of power that undermined already constantly changing political alliances. Of those who opposed the expansion of predatory capitalism at the expense of their constituencies wealth (and culture); refugees from the former Nis province and Herzegovina provided ample manpower to *threaten* violence. Similarly, Malësorë villagers were often mobilized to descend into town during market day, in full warrior attitude, to help express discomfort and frustration with certain decisions made by authorities and their erstwhile commercial partners. Indeed, these displays of formidable potential violence, coupled by the appearance of outspoken local-born priests, often impressed outsiders to believe, with the benefit of hindsight, that these could be the foundations of Albanian nationalist uprisings that destabilized the last of the Ottoman Balkans in 1910, and has since been glorified in Albanian nationalist historiography.

In this manner, revisiting the violent events in the region at the turn of the century contributes to the paradigm shift sought here. The cause for which well-armed mixed *çeta* groups fought the state and each other, which have long been mistakenly attributed to "ancient" ethnic and/or sectarian hatreds or a natural predilection to violence among backward Balkan peoples,

can be more fruitfully explained by seeing events as a struggle to secure a safe home for family and fellow-community members. The events taking place in the late Ottoman Balkans were actually part of a productive exchange, no matter how contrived the nationalist tropes by a self-appointed intellectual vanguard rhetorically co-opting historical events in places like the larger Işkodra province may be. In fact, when the two contradictory states of social, economic, and political existence met (when, for example, Serbian state agents paid "Christian" peasants to fire guns at their Muslim neighbours) a sort of productive "friction" took place that ultimately constituted the historical force studied here. A more complicated analysis of what were the possible alternative agendas at play among some of the top personalities retroactively associated with nationalism in the Western Balkans, in our case for the moment, Albanians like Esad Pasha Toptani, may help make the larger subversion of dominant paradigms in the historiography easier to accept. This in part will be part of the larger project.

Conclusion

There are, beyond the concerns with neighboring states' primordial/ideological interests in these regions, socio-economic explanations to consider. Moreover, these socio-economic rationales stem from an intimacy of direct, often collaborative exchange between constituencies that only in the war, proved categorically antagonistic. For example, the appropriation of wealth by the victors, especially the property of many natives of the region, deserves our attention. Considering there are linking commercial interests involved in how property was taken from the previous inhabitants of western Balkan towns like Shkodër (and its suburbs) may help provide depth to the manner in which administrations, forced to deal with the *threat* of violence, approached *potential* instability in different ways. These evolving strategies of coercion and/or collaboration

mobilized by officials who were often intimate with the constituencies they were expected to govern—as rivals or as partners—promises a complex set of layers to study late Ottoman/early post-Ottoman societies. Part of the task in respect to this seminar is avoiding the presumption that violence in such settings is inevitable on account of primordial codes of behavior. This skepticism extends to questioning how the threat of violence as a form of Ottoman discourse was only ever addressed when geo-strategic conditions in the larger Balkans changed.

Taking this interpretive range into consideration, this study identifies different kinds of short and long-term social and political consequences of urban violence, as a conceptual possibility as much as an experience. In the first part of this intervention, I wish to highlight how ambiguous and inarticulate forces afflicting the larger empire since the Berlin Congress of 1878 misleadingly suggest important causal factors to the collapse of internal relations crucial to maintaining regional stability. Contrary to common belief, however, much of the problems associated with the increasing manifested violence in the region actually stem from the idiosyncratic applications of "reforms" (and how historians have chosen to read them later) that seemingly undermined the capacity of various state administrations to manage their regional affairs effectively. These "reforms" correspond with a crucial outburst of what I call elsewhere "ethnic entrepreneurialism" that animates much of the Ottoman Balkans after 1878 in the form of the "nationalist revolt" retrospectively imposed by the scholarship.[21] The problem is these forms so communicable to a 20th century audience cannot so easily be assumed to mirror what are essentially post-Ottoman social and political orientations that still require a World War to take place. In other words, the implicit threat of violently disrupting social order in Ottoman (and nominally independent post-Ottoman states like Serbia, Greece and Montenegro) by way of

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[21] Isa Blumi, *Foundations of Modernity: Human Agency and the Imperial State* (London: Routledge, 2012), 94-116.

mobilization along "ethnic" lines proved only valuable in certain contexts; other forms of threats of violence (with actual displays of violence recorded at times) also animated daily politics in the Ottoman Balkans.

One possible approach to untangling the web of assumptions linking the prevailing stereotypes about how Balkan societies (at least in designated zones of backwardness) with violence (or its potential) is to invest in studying the role natives of these societies objectified and perhaps exploited the stereotypes for their own careers. As needed intermediaries, the likes of Albanian-origin bureaucrats seem to have developed a particularly important reputation for 'understanding' their objectified Albanian cousins. Placed in the context of lingering concerns in Istanbul about the very capacities of the reforming/transforming state to sustain direct rule in regions long assumed too primitive to fully embrace modernity on its own terms, regions like the Malësi and its inhabitants long became the object of wild stories about the equivalent of the 'wild west.' Crucially, I suggest many of the late Ottoman perpetrators of this menace to Ottoman reforms were themselves self-identified Albanians, whose insights into these societies, would necessarily give their own authority greater weight, a kind of authenticity claim to local knowledge which could have been used to mobilize networks for greater causes. Considering the characters involved in exploiting the tropes of Albanian highland violence, largely linked to primordial honor codes long associated with "BESA" (a term that eventually made it into the nomenclature of Ottoman and post-Ottoman state bureaucracies).[22]

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[22] Indeed, family feuds based on older conflicts back in the Balkans continued to plague refugee communities in Anatolia as they were forced to resettled after the collapse of the empire's Balkan provinces in 1912-1913. Blumi forthcoming.