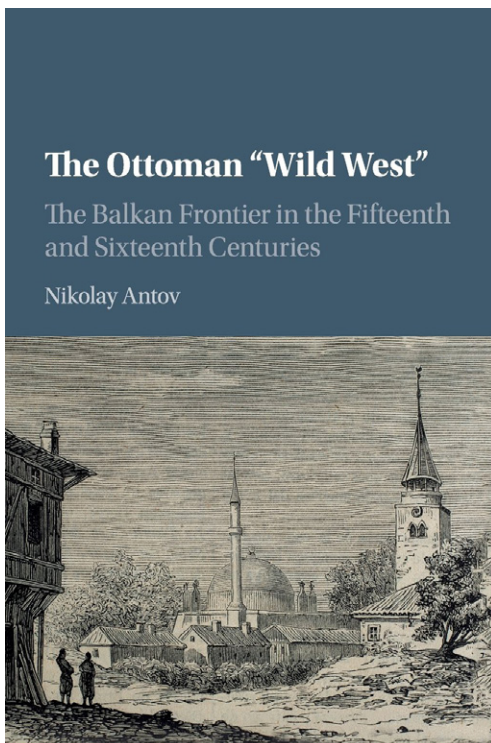


The Ottoman 'Wild West': The Balkan Frontier in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

By Nikolay Antov

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 342 pp., Paper.
£40.05 (Hardback). ISBN: 9781107182639.



Reviewed by Ines Aščerić-Todd
Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Edinburgh

The opinions expressed in this review represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the TRT World Research Centre.



Antov's monograph, by virtue of its attractive title, promises tales of outlaws and gunslingers in the remote Balkan Mountains at the fringe of the Ottoman Empire. However, his work is actually a detailed examination of Ottoman land tax registers (*tapu tahrir defterleri*) with the aim of analysing demographic changes in the Bulgarian provinces of Gerlovo and Deliorman during the 15th and 16th centuries. Through his examination, Antov sheds light on the origins of the Muslim population in Bulgaria, considering the immigration of Turcomans from Anatolia and elsewhere in the Balkans. He also takes into account conversions to Islam from among the indigenous inhabitants of Bulgaria. As such, Antov's book situates itself firmly within the tradition established by early scholars, including Ömer Lütfi Barkan and Nedim Filipović, who were concerned with urban development in the Ottoman Balkans during the formative period of the Ottoman Empire. These scholars focused especially upon colonising dervishes and their role in urban development. 'Antov's work adds to this body of research through close examination of the previously unanalysed regions of Gerlovo and Deliorman. The secondary aim of the study is to examine the local history of this region within the wider context of the 'process of imperial construction' (p. 3), which the Ottoman Empire experienced during this period.

Based on a number of both summary (*icmal*) and detailed (*mufassal*) tax registers from the end of the 15th through the second half of the 16th century, analysis of population changes in the region shows that the development of settlements was largely caused by the migration of nomadic and semi-nomadic Turcomans into the area. This group was followed by a significant influx of colonising dervishes. Both segments of the population were initially granted special tax

privileges, which was in line with similar processes witnessed in other parts of the Ottoman Balkans. Antov further argues that these privileges were gradually limited due to assimilation of these groups into the ordinary *re'aya*. This evidence supports the conclusion that the formation of Muslim communities in Bulgaria was largely due to the migration of Turcoman nomads from Anatolia and other parts of the Balkans. They found the regions of Bulgaria 'ecologically attractive safe-havens', having a long tradition of heterodox-minded Islam. This also explains the distinct cultural and linguistic identity of these communities. Antov also shows that a smaller yet significant number of Bulgarian Muslims owe their origins to the conversion to Islam of the local Bulgarian population. These conversions, however, took place toward the end of, and after, the period under discussion. Somewhat less convincing is Antov's resolve to classify the history of the development of Gerlovo and Deliorman during the 15th and 16th centuries as a case study for the wider historical process of 'empire-building in early modern Eurasia', as propounded by the so-called 'connected histories' theory.

While the core sections of the book largely achieve their purpose, the book as a whole suffers from a lack of cohesion. For a highly specialised academic monograph of this kind, the inclusion of an entire chapter about the history of the Ottoman Empire (Chapter 1) appears unnecessary. This gives the impression of an afterthought, especially as some of the topics included, e.g. the origin and rise of the Safavid dynasty, are not immediately relevant to the discussion throughout the rest of the book. Perhaps the reason behind the insertion of this chapter is the same as the motivation behind the choice of the title, namely, to make the work more attractive and accessible to a wider audience. However, the level of incongruity between Chapter 1, which reads like an introductory textbook, and the focal sections of the work, which consist of

1. Ömer Lütfi Barkan, "İstila devirlerinin kolonizatör Türk dervişleri ve zâviyeleri", *Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda bir iskân ve kolonizasyon metodu olarak vakıflar ve temlikler*, Vakıflar Dergisi II, Ankara, 1942; Nedim Filipović, *Princ Musa i šejh Bedreddin*, Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1971. An example of more recent scholarship in this tradition is Heath Lowry and his *The Shaping of the Ottoman Balkans 1350-1550: the Conquest, Settlement and Infrastructural Development of Northern Greece*, Istanbul: Bahçeşehir University Publications, 2008

specialised analyses of Ottoman sources, indicates that perhaps inclusion of the first chapter should not have been attempted.

Similarly, Chapter 2 is devoted to an historical overview of heterodox dervish orders and movements in Anatolia and the Balkans. Although this section is useful to specialists in the field, the chapter digresses considerably as it examines two hagiographies (*velayetnames*) of 14th and 15th-century Sufis as a means of assessing the role of dervishes in legitimising Ottoman conquests in the Balkans. Another chapter begins with the medieval history of Bulgaria; however, it is only at the end of the chapter (section 3.4) that the work arrives to its main subject, namely Gerlovo and Deliorman, and the population changes that occurred therein.

As a result, some chapters, especially those in the first half, are not well integrated into the book as a whole, and the transitions between them are at times elusive. Similarly, the transitions between smaller sub-sections within the chapters are opaque, and the reader is often surprised by what comes next, especially as these sub-sections do not appear in the table of contents. This problem may arise from the already long and complicated chapter titles, such as that of Chapter 3: 'The North-eastern Balkans from the Late Medieval Period to the Late Fifteenth Century: Pre-Ottoman Turcoman Invasions and Migrations, the Ottoman Conquest, and the "Turbulent" Fifteenth Century. Deliorman and Gerlovo as a "Special Case"'. Despite its length, the title does not provide a full picture of the chapter's contents.

The examination of Ottoman registers and the analysis of the formation, development and/or decline of settlements in Gerlovo and Deliorman provinces display a significant amount of rigour and great attention to detail. However, even in this section the discussion at times diverges from the topic at hand and the initially proposed purpose. Chapter 5 establishes for itself a separate goal of finding a model for development for urban centres in the Balkans and assessing the role of the Ottoman state in dictating the criteria for this development.

The book could have benefited from better editing, and apart from the disconnected chapters and sub-sections, overly long chapter titles, and no mention of the sub-sections in the table of contents, the writing is at times rather dense. It suffers from long, convoluted sentences, and there is a somewhat indiscriminate use of double quotation marks throughout.

The above criticisms notwithstanding, the work provides a useful reference and source of information for scholars of the Ottoman Balkans' religious and social history, particularly for those who focus on its dervish component. Scholars of the Ottoman Sunni/Shia dichotomy and 'confessionalisation' may also find the work valuable.