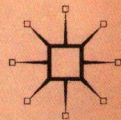


LEARNING TO READ
IN THE LATE
OTTOMAN EMPIRE
AND THE EARLY
TURKISH REPUBLIC
BENJAMIN C. FORTNA



Learning to Read in the Late Ottoman Empire and the Early Turkish Republic

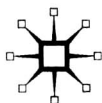
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Learning to Read in the Late Ottoman Empire and the Early Turkish Republic

for Sarah

Preface

This book is the result of a doubtless foolhardy effort to trace the untraceable, namely, what happens when young people learn to read. Like a ship moving through the sea, reading leaves behind little to mark its passing. This lack of evidence is a source of frustration for historians because, as we all know instinctively, reading affects the reader profoundly, even if the impact may not leave any physical trace.

My first book, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire*, attempted to demonstrate some of the ways in which the spread of education both reflected and in turn engendered important changes in late Ottoman society. The focus on institutional public education meant that the book was largely confined to the realm of the state. The book drew largely on governmental archival sources and the writings of individuals closely connected with state-supplied education. It proved difficult, although not impossible, to plumb the ways that education was experienced by its most important constituency, children.

In this book I deliberately set out to try to focus on an important aspect of education that was influenced by the state but hardly dominated by it. Learning to read and reading has, I hope, allowed me to achieve a better balance between state desiderata and individual experience. I have deliberately avoided a dependence on archival material and other state records, trying instead to rely on a variety of sources, chiefly textbooks, magazines and memoirs that inform the practice of reading in the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic. This book necessarily draws on state-based materials for many of the children's texts analyzed here, many of which were written by teachers, pedagogues or bureaucrats and therefore mostly within the state's orbit. But these are, I trust, balanced by recourse to some of the growing literature that was independent of state patronage or direct control. Memoirs proved important to recovering the way all these texts were experienced by young readers.

I wanted also to cross the chronological barrier between empire and republic. To do so I had to go beyond my own training and research comfort zone but I took inspiration from a number of colleagues carrying

out research in the early Republican period. I don't pretend to match their command of the period but I do hope that this modest attempt to move across the divide in order to trace the development of reading will prove helpful to others.

BCF

London, October 2010

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Special thanks go to the members of my own family, including my sons Will, Nick and Benjy for making me proud and keeping me smiling in their own very different ways, and most of all to my wife Sarah, a stellar teacher of reading and prodigious reader. This book is dedicated to her, with love.

Abbreviations

BOA	Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (Prime Minister's Ottoman Archives)
CSSAAME	<i>Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East</i>
IJMES	<i>International Journal of Middle East Studies</i>
REMMM	<i>Revue de mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée</i>
TC	Türkiye Cumhuriyeti (The Republic of Turkey)

Transliteration, Dates and Surnames

Writing about the Ottoman Empire and Turkey presents challenges with respect to a number of markers of historical change, including transliteration, place names, calendar conversion and naming patterns. For the sake of uniformity I have rendered Ottoman Turkish according to the system followed in *Redhouse Yeni Türkçe-İngilizce Sözlük/New Redhouse Turkish-English Dictionary*, 12th edn. (Istanbul, Redhouse Press, 1991). Place names common to Western readers have been given in their usual forms, thus Istanbul (and not İstanbul) and Salonica (not Selânik). I have assumed that publication dates of works that appeared before the Turkish Republic's adoption of the Gregorian calendar in 1926 are in the Rumi (i.e., Ottoman solar calendar) normally used in publishing unless otherwise stipulated. I have referred to author's names as they were published at the time, giving later surnames in brackets. Thus the works of the educationalist Ahmed Cevad [Emre] are alphabetized under Ahmed and not Emre. No system is perfect but I hope to have been consistent with this one.

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1

Introduction: Reading Empire, Reading Republic

In the modern world the importance of reading is everywhere apparent. In today's society we are continually confronted with a swirling array of things demanding to be read. Making sense of them is critical to our engagement with the world and implicitly synonymous with modern existence. The range of texts and images with which we are confronted is prodigious and seemingly ever expanding. In fact, the imperative to read is so great that it is frequently taken for granted or, to use a common English expression, taken "as read."

From our first encounters with picture books and ABCs as small children to the school primers and textbooks that teach us the rudiments of literacy and then serve as the primary tools in our education, we spend more and more time with texts. By the time we are adults the proliferation of texts intensifies. Now we are consuming them on a daily if not hourly basis. It is estimated that the average white-collar adult spends more time reading than anything else except for sleeping.¹ We have become reading animals.

The fare is varied, seemingly changing all the time, reflecting the pulse of technological change and market behavior. In a typical day it is not uncommon for an urbanite to engage in continual reading from morning to night (atypical days present their own types of reading materials: the voting ballot, the roadmap, the hymnal, the playbill and so on). At breakfast there is often a newspaper to be perused or, for those still groggy with sleep, the nutritional information from the cereal box which focuses the only partially comprehending attention. On the way to work, perhaps a newspaper, one's own or that with the more salacious headline over the next fellow's shoulder that proves so difficult to ignore. Others turn to that stalwart of the modern age: the novel, probably a paperback, inexpensive, lightweight and handy.

Still others flip through the pages of a magazine, glossy and alluring. Meanwhile, a range of texts competes for attention: street signs, route information, billboard advertisements. Our own movement makes this assortment of text appear ambient, mobile; some text is actually moving as signs rotate, blink or flash. We can now summon the infinite textual resources of the Internet on a variety of electronic devices and even read electronic "books." Sometimes the commuting reader is interrupted. Is it a mobile phone call? Perhaps it is only a "text" message: more reading matter, but this time sent invisibly, in a sort of high-tech pidgin, and landing in one's hand.

It is now time to work. This usually means more reading, whether of the printed page (letters to sort and decipher, reports to digest, papers to file or grade or write, instructions to absorb or ignore, forms to fill in, surveys to suffer through) or, again, the electronic.² These last can take many of the old textual forms but also throw up a few modern variations (e-mail, web-pages, the circulated joke, the Nigerian get-rich scheme, mortgage offers or worse). Perhaps it is time for a meeting but that does not usually mean text-free conviviality; there are the agenda and minutes to absorb, more reports to wade through, and perhaps a few charts or graphs to attend. On the way home, the process repeats, still plenty of textual opportunities to contemplate. Back home, we might encounter more mail to sift through, a recipe to decode, perhaps someone needs help with their homework. You could check the sports scores in the paper you could not possibly finish earlier in the day, or maybe "catch up" on your e-mail. There are countless web and teletext pages for the desperate. Now it is time to relax, put up your feet and "read a good book." It's a wonder we can keep our eyes open, that we do not drown in this sea of text.

But it was not always this way. For most of recorded time the ability to read (and write) was the preserve of a small elite who controlled access to their knowledge, their texts and their shared language of references and symbols. The lion's share of reading was linked to the perpetuation of statecraft, organized religion and literary traditions. How, when and why reading ceased to be a privileged phenomenon and became instead a popular one is central to the shaping of the modern world, central in fact to what it means to be modern. This link between literacy and modernity operates on a number of levels, that of the individual, paragon of modernity itself, that of groups of individuals who come together for a variety of reasons (religious, social, economic, familial, cultural, political and so on), and that of society at large, of readership in the aggregate.

Texts have become such a basic feature of modern society that it is frequently difficult to imagine contemporary life in the absence of reading and literacy. That the relationship between humans and texts has only recently intensified in the ways that are the subject of this book is easy to forget. It is a useful reminder that the colossus of the modern educational system, upon which so much in today's society depends, was built, over centuries, around the basic tasks of learning to read and reading. British students "read" a particular subject at their universities where the position of Reader is a vestigial reminder of a calmer past more conducive to reading than today's heavily bureaucratic incarnation.

Widespread reading is synonymous with modern society. Economists have adduced a clear link between education and economic advancement.³ Students of the nation have flagged the connection between the emergence of not only common readership, mainly of newspapers, but also of fiction, occasionally serialized in the papers themselves, and the coalescing of nationalisms. For arguably the most influential of these, Benedict Anderson, the emergence of "print capitalism" and the literacy upon which it depended, was the *sine qua non* of national coalescence.⁴ For a modern nation to exist meant having a language and a literature; to deny a nation these attributes was tantamount with denying its very existence.⁵ But the primacy of reading is also clearly a feature of the pre-modern era when, because of its very scarcity, it was valued all the more. Paradoxically, the more widespread literacy has become and the more intense the relationship between readers and texts, the more its power has become taken for granted, and the more its champions need to emphasize its importance. Whatever the case, it is clear that reading bears an iconic quality for the individuation of society in the modern period. Both the widening access to literacy and the increased emphasis on individual as opposed to collective reading has had profound implications in the political, religious, economic and social fields.

Yet for all of its crucial importance, reading is still relatively little studied and even less understood as a culturally and historically conditioned practice. In spite of considerable attention to the mechanics of reading, there remains something surprisingly ineffable, almost mysterious about the process of learning to read and reading. As every parent or teacher knows, there comes a point when a child will simply start to read. He or she has been helped, coached, perhaps even been subjected to phonics methods of various sorts, but in the end there is a liminal leap when, like learning to ride a bicycle, a child becomes a reader and is able to venture forward on his or her own.

The young reader now enters a new territory, a new world. This book is about what young readers experienced when they came into the new country of reading in the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic. It is intended as a modest contribution to a broader literature on reading and learning to read that has focused almost exclusively on the Western experience. This book is about this process of learning to read and childhood reading in a society on the periphery of the West, influenced by it to varying degrees but formed by its own particular historical, cultural and geographical context, namely, that of the late Ottoman Empire and the early Republic of Turkey that partially succeeded it. It is the story of how reading became widespread in a society of unprecedentedly rapid change against the backdrop of warfare, invasion, famine, the dissolution of an old, multi-national empire and the creation of a number of nationally organized states in its wake. It focuses on the relationship between one of these, the Turkish Republic, and the Ottoman Empire in spite of the fact that are not directly comparable by concentrating on reading in the Turkish language. The transition from one to the other offers certain advantages for the history of reading. The normal way of approaching this transition has been to emphasize the break between empire and republic. Yet a remarkable series of continuities – of language, of the attention paid to expanding both education and literacy, of the attempts at social indoctrination and discipline, of many individual lives and careers across the putative border of 1923 – all attest to the fact that in many ways the core of Ottoman literary and cultural life carried on under the republic. Of course, this transition often entailed change, both superficial and profound, and it would be wrong to deny any number of important modifications between imperial and republican culture. For this study, the interplay between the continuities and the changes makes for a particularly rich mix, especially when, as will soon become apparent, the successor state insisted in its early years on painting its predecessor in a largely pejorative light.

In other words, this is a history of the transition from Ottoman Empire to Turkish Republic as seen through the lens of learning to read and reading. This rich but almost completely unexplored angle offers a fresh perspective on the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the most important of its successor states. By looking at the way children's reading was approached, first in the late Ottoman Empire and then in the Turkish Republic, this study offers a new perspective on the fraught historical – and historiographical – relationship between the two eras, focusing on both the continuities and