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# Prologue

“EITHER I TAKE THIS CITY, or the city will take me, dead or alive,” announced the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II to the Byzantine emperor Constantine XI before the final assault of Constantinople (modern Istanbul). On 29 May 1453, the capital of the thousand-year-old Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire fell to Mehmed, who is remembered as Fatih or the Conqueror. Three generations later, on 29 August 1526, at the battle of Mohács in southwestern Hungary, Mehmed’s great-grandson, Süleyman I, annihilated the army of the Kingdom of Hungary, which had halted Ottoman advance in Europe for more than 150 years. Three years later, in 1529, Süleyman stood at the gate of Vienna. The siege failed, but the Ottomans would rule over central Hungary for 150 years from Buda (modern Budapest), just 250 kilometers (150 miles) from Vienna.

Since Voltaire and Edward Gibbon, many historians considered the Byzantine Empire’s fall to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 as a watershed in European and world history that signaled the beginning of the modern era. Some saw the ensuing exodus of Greek scholars to Italy and the Ottomans’ control of the trade routes between Asia and Europe as stimuli for the European Renaissance and geographical explorations. While the extent to which the Ottomans influenced the European Renaissance and the geographical explorations remains disputed, the conquest’s effects on European geopolitics are clear and manifest. Possession of Constantinople enabled the Ottomans to cement their rule in southeastern Europe, Asia Minor, the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea littoral and build the most potent contiguous empire since ancient Rome.

The consequences of the battle of Mohács were equally profound. After the death of the young King Louis II of Hungary in the battle, Archduke Ferdinand of Habsburg acquired the long-coveted thrones of Hungary and Bohemia. Together with Austria, the two kingdoms became part of the Habsburg dynasty's Danubian monarchy in central Europe. With the Holy Crown of St. Stephen of Hungary, the Habsburgs inherited from the medieval Kingdom of Hungary the burden of defending Christian Europe against the Muslim Ottomans. Hungary became the principal continental battleground between the Ottomans and the Habsburgs. The other frontier was the Mediterranean, where the Ottomans fought Ferdinand's brother, Charles of Spain, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. This was a dramatic turn of events, as Charles's grandparents—Isabella the Catholic, queen of Castile, and Ferdinand the Catholic, king of Aragon—had conquered the last Muslim state of the Iberian peninsula, the Kingdom of Granada, completing the Reconquista by 1492. *The Last Muslim Conquest* narrates the emergence of the Ottoman Empire and the epic rivalry between the Muslim Ottomans and the Catholic Habsburgs.

The Ottoman Turks emerged in the late thirteenth century in northwestern Asia Minor, which the Turks, Persians, and Arabs called Rum (Rome), the land of the Eastern Roman Empire. Named after its eponymous founder, Osman I (d. 1324), the small Ottoman principality was but one among the many chiefdoms that the Turkic and Muslim semi-nomads of Central Asian origin established in Asia Minor. The Ottoman polity was ruled throughout its existence by the House of Osman, the descendants of Osman. While Europeans saw them as a Turkish empire, the followers of Osman called themselves *Osmanlı* in Turkish—which in English came to be rendered as Ottoman. The Ottomans called their polity the Realms of the House of Osman (*memalik-i Osmaniye*), emphasizing the importance of the dynasty of Osman (*âl-i Osman*). Likewise, Ottoman chroniclers titled their histories “Annals of the House of Osman” (*Tevarih-i Âl-i Osman*), whereas compilations of laws enacted in the name of the ruler were titled the “Laws/Law Code of the House of Osman” (*Kavanin/Kanunname-i Âl-i Osman*). The dynastic empire that Osman's successors built was multiethnic and multiconfessional. It

was the longest-lived such empire of its kind in Eurasia, which collapsed during World War I, along with its longtime rivals, the similarly multi-ethnic empires of the Houses of the Habsburgs and Romanovs, the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires, respectively.

The Ottoman dynasty and the ruling elite remained distinctly Muslim. However, for centuries the rulers married across ethnic lines, and the ruling elite and bureaucracy incorporated recent converts to Islam both at the center of power and in the provinces. The empire's subjects spoke dozens of languages. They worshiped according to the teachings of Sunni and Shiite Islam, various Christian churches, and Judaism, to name but the most important religious communities. To rule over such a diverse population required flexibility, negotiation, and adaptability to local customs in governance. As this book demonstrates, Ottoman strategies of conquest and incorporation went beyond sheer military might, which has often been singled out in the general literature when explaining the "rise" of the Ottomans. Eclectic pragmatism that incorporated Turco-Mongolian, Byzantine-Slav, Persian, and Arab traditions and institutions of governance characterized Ottoman rule from the time of their earliest conquests in the fourteenth century. Strategic adaptability and negotiation remained the hallmark of Ottoman governance throughout the period covered in this book.

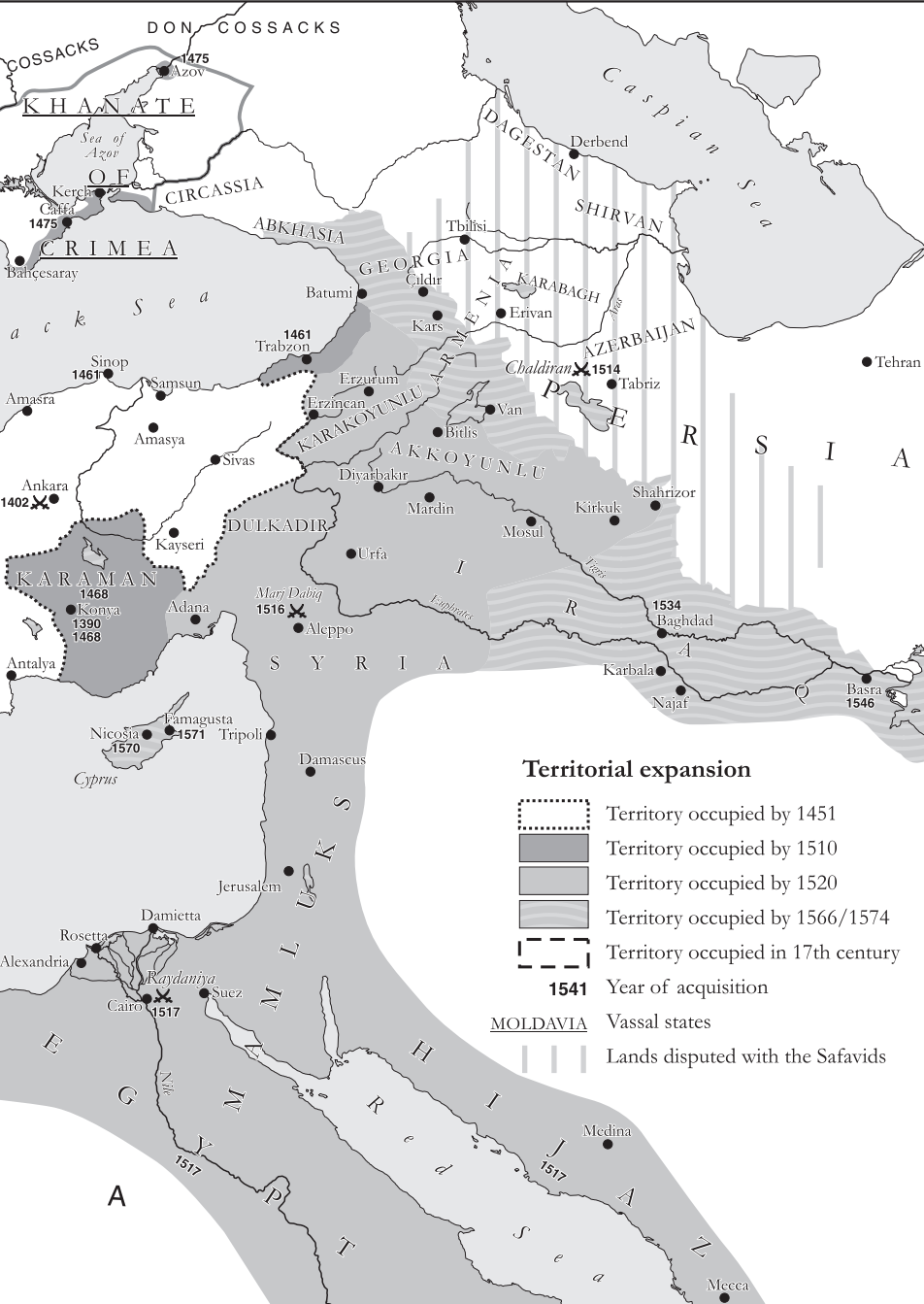
After the conquest of Constantinople, Mehmed II subdued the Turco-Muslim emirates in Asia Minor and the Christian Slavic states of Bulgaria, Serbia, and Bosnia. Mehmed's successors extended Ottoman rule to Hungary in the north and to Yemen in the south, to Algeria in the west and to Iraq in the east. In its heyday in the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was among the militarily most formidable and bureaucratically best-administered empires that impacted the lives of millions across three continents. The Ottomans were a crucial player in European power politics too. They were a constant military threat to their Venetian, Hungarian, Polish-Lithuanian, Spanish, and Austrian Habsburg neighbors, besieging, albeit unsuccessfully, the latter's capital city Vienna twice, in 1529 and 1683.

At the end of the seventeenth century, an international coalition of the papacy, the Habsburg monarchy, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth,





The growth of the Ottoman Empire (Drawn by Béla Nagy.)



Venice, and Muscovy conquered most of the Ottoman domains north of the Danube River. In the eighteenth century, the Ottomans' military might continued to decline vis-à-vis the Habsburg monarchy and Romanov Russia. The fate of the Ottoman Empire—its possible partition by the European “Great Powers” or among the emerging nation-states—became one of the crucial issues in European politics, known in its day as the “Eastern Question.” Yet, the Ottomans continued to rule over much of the Balkan Peninsula and the Middle East until 1878 and World War I, respectively. It is a formidable accomplishment, even considering that Ottoman control over provinces far from the capital was often nominal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

*The Last Muslim Conquest* contributes to four overarching histories. First, chapters in part 1, “Emergence,” examine how the small principality of Osman had, by the early sixteenth century, evolved into the most powerful empire in the region by conquering and incorporating the neighboring polities. These chapters illustrate how the Ottoman conquest shaped European history, especially that of southeastern and central Europe, the main theaters of Ottoman expansion. Second, chapters in part 2, “Clash of Empires,” examine the entanglement of Ottoman and European politics in the context of Ottoman-Habsburg competition, one of the defining imperial rivalries of the age. These chapters demonstrate the impact of this rivalry on both European and Ottoman policy-making and diplomacy. Third, chapters in part 3, “Sinews of Empire,” examine the shifting military and soft power of the Ottomans and their regional rivals. Finally, two chapters in part 4, “Frontiers and Wars of Exhaustion,” and segments of other chapters examine the history of the empire's Danubian frontier provinces. It was here that the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg monarchy deployed their military might, resulting in the heaviest concentration of forts and garrison soldiers on both sides of the Muslim-Christian divide. This contested borderland is examined from several angles, including Habsburg and Ottoman military commitments, administrative strategies, and the use of diplomacy and intelligence gathering.

When I first envisioned this project some ten years ago, chapters in part 1 were meant to be a much shorter introduction to a book whose

primary focus was to be on Ottoman and Habsburg power and their contested borderlands. However, I soon realized that to understand how the Ottoman-Habsburg imperial rivalry unfolded, one should first examine how the Ottoman conquest in southeastern and central Europe shaped the Ottoman Empire and affected the emergence of the Habsburgs' Danubian monarchy. My goal was to explore the Ottoman conquest as an integral part of European history by putting the respective source material and specialized historiographies into dialogue. These chapters serve as a synthetic narrative of the emergence of the Ottoman Empire in its European context.

In our global twenty-first century, we often emphasize multiculturalism, varied ethnic and religious contexts, cultural exchange, and connected histories. Such an approach is a welcome corrective to earlier studies that privileged religious antagonisms. Yet, the emergence of the Ottomans shows the continued significance of religion. Although the Ottomans emerged in a multireligious milieu, Islam and holy war—termed *ghaza* by the Ottomans—played a useful role in rallying support for the Ottoman enterprise. *Ghaza* became an increasingly important part of Ottoman loyalty creation and dynastic legitimation. This was especially true from the mid-fourteenth century onward when the Ottomans fought against Bulgarians, Serbs, Hungarians, and Crusaders from central and western Europe. The use of religion for legitimation was not unique to the Ottomans. The Ottomans' Muslim neighbors also employed similar strategies of religious legitimation. Examples include the Sunni Akkoyunlu Turkmen Confederation of Uzun Hasan, the Mamluks of Syria and Egypt, the Shaybanid Uzbeks of Central Asia, and the Shiite Safavids of Persia. However, since the Ottomans fought against their Christian neighbors in Europe for centuries, they could claim to be the true *ghazis*, fighters in the way of God (*mujahid*), and defenders of Islam.

Along with the ideology of holy war, historical contingency and accidents, and longer-term Ottoman strategies of conquest and incorporation (dynastic marriages, forced resettlement, and the co-optation of the defeated elites into the Ottoman military and bureaucracy) were significant factors that contributed to the emergence of the House of

Osman. Of the historical contingencies, I use the Byzantine civil wars in the middle of the fourteenth century to illustrate how the policies of Emperors Andronikos III and John VI Kantakouzenos of soliciting military help from the neighboring Turkish emirs of Saruhan, Aydin, and Ottoman created opportunities for the latter to extend their influence into Byzantine domains. The alliance between Kantakouzenos and Orhan, the son of Osman and the second Ottoman ruler—who married Kantakouzenos’s daughter, Theodora—is especially illuminating. It demonstrates that the Ottomans (unlike their Turkish neighbors, who were contented with war spoils) used these temporary alliances to occupy strategic sites and gain territory. These alliances created a pattern. The Ottomans later masterfully exploited the civil wars of their neighbors, as the conquests of Serbia and the Morea (the Peloponnese) demonstrate.

Despite temporary alliances with their Muslim and Turkish neighbors, the Byzantine emperors were busy organizing crusades against the Ottomans and routinely exploited domestic disturbances and civil wars in the Ottoman domains. They sought military help from the papacy and the Catholic monarchs of Europe. Their clergy and political elite were willing to accept the union of the Orthodox and Latin churches in return for Western military aid against the “Turks,” presented in Byzantine chronicles as the “natural enemies” of Byzantium and Christendom. As the Ottomans reached the borders of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, Hungarian monarchs styled themselves as “Champion of Christ” (*athleta Christi*)—such as King Louis I of Hungary and Poland, the first king who had to deal with Ottoman incursions into his domains. His successors assumed the titles of “shield and rampart” (*scutum atque murus*) of Christendom. Sigismund of Luxemburg led the Crusade of Nikopol in 1396 and established the first effective defense system against the Ottomans along Hungary’s southern Danubian borders (as discussed in chapters 1 and 2). Threatened by Ottoman conquests, statesmen and intellectuals in Hungary, Croatia, and Poland formulated their self-image as “bulwark of Christendom” (*antemurale, propugnaculum Christianitatis*) against the new religious “other,” the “infidel Turk” (*infideles turcos*). The images of self and the Turkish other

were then disseminated through political propaganda, influencing thinking about Turks and Muslims to this day.

The details in the book may try the patience of the reader. But the details are necessary if one wants to go beyond superficial generalizations. Detailed narratives give agency to lesser-known actors. Traditional histories of the Ottoman Empire—following Ottoman court chroniclers—have privileged the rulers of the dynasty as the most important actors in the Ottoman story. The first ten sultans undoubtedly brought stability and shaped Ottoman policy in the long term: six sultans ruled for between twenty-five and thirty-seven years, and Süleyman ruled for forty-six years. However, other actors played important roles too. Marcher lords and their raiders, viziers, advisers, provincial governors, soldiers, surveyors of revenues, tax collectors, interpreters, and spies shaped Ottoman policies, as did their counterparts in the Byzantine Empire, and the polities in southeastern and central Europe.

I discuss selected Ottoman sieges and battles to demonstrate how the Ottomans overcame their rivals by using military might and diplomatic skills. Historians, with the benefit of hindsight, habitually single out battles and sieges that they deem decisive in shaping history. Few battles in the early modern era shaped geopolitics so profoundly as did the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople (1453) and the Ottoman battlefield victories at Chaldiran (1514), Marj Dabiq (1516), Raydaniyya (1517), and Mohács (1526). The conquest of Constantinople marked the end of the Byzantine Empire. It reconfigured the power balance in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea littoral. It also empowered Sultan Mehmed II to transform the nascent Ottoman frontier polity into a more centralized patrimonial empire. The battle of Chaldiran secured Ottoman rule over most of eastern and southeastern Asia Minor and Azerbaijan, the traditional base of Turkmen confederations and the homeland of pro-Safavid Qizilbash tribes who had long challenged Sunni Ottoman rule. Chaldiran also pushed the Safavid state, originally a Turkmen confederation, to assume a more pronounced Persian and Shiite character and to position itself as the main counterweight to its two Sunni Muslim neighbors: the Ottomans to the west and the Timurids (Mughals) of India to the east. During two centuries of

Ottoman-Safavid rivalry, Shiism solidified in Persia and the adjacent territories in Iraq, as did the split between Sunni and Shiite Islam (with consequences to this day). Marj Dabiq and Raydaniyya marked the end of the Mamluk sultanate, which had ruled Greater Syria and Egypt for more than 250 years between 1250 and 1517. These victories heralded the introduction of Ottoman rule in the Arab heartlands of Islam, with significant consequences for the development of both the region and the Ottoman Empire. The conquest of Egypt also acquainted the Ottomans with the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. It offered the Ottoman padi-shah an opportunity to dislodge the Portuguese from the Indian Ocean and control the spice trade, a chance that the Sublime Porte, as the Ottoman government was known in Europe, missed. However, the Porte achieved its more limited goals. It secured the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina and restored the spice trade routes in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. Some Ottoman governors in Egypt and naval commanders in Suez may have entertained a more ambitious strategy. Nonetheless, Ottoman policy in the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean remained limited in scope and objectives owing to Ottoman strategic priorities that focused on the Mediterranean and central Europe and the modest size and restricted radius of action of the Ottoman oar-powered galley fleets.

Ottoman conquests energized the papacy and the European monarchs to devise new crusading plans to halt further Ottoman advances in the Mediterranean and central Europe. Yet, the Habsburg-Valois rivalry, which unfolded after the election of Charles of Spain as Holy Roman emperor in 1519, and the religious division in Christendom (following Martin Luther's movement) divided Europe and diverted attention from the "Turkish menace." As examined in chapters 5 and 6, European political and religious discord coincided with the shift in Ottoman strategy under Süleyman. After his father's decade-long war against the Safavids and Mamluks, Süleyman targeted central and Mediterranean Europe. The ensuing Ottoman-Habsburg rivalry and wars profoundly influenced the fates of both the Ottoman Empire and Habsburg central Europe.

The focus on imperial rivalry and wars underlines the important role that war played in shaping Ottoman history, Ottoman-European rela-

tions, and the evolution of governmental, military, and financial institutions in the Ottoman Empire and in the countries neighboring the Ottoman domains—issues discussed in part 3, “Sinews of Empire.” Wars influenced domestic policies too, as they forced the competing imperial governments in Constantinople and Vienna to negotiate with their respective elites. The interdependence of Ottoman and Habsburg imperial governments and their elites shaped imperial policies, military capabilities, and strategies not only vis-à-vis their imperial opponents but also concerning domestic opposition.

Recent trends in the scholarly literature privilege European-Ottoman encounters, alliances, and cultural exchange.<sup>1</sup> While these works are useful, as they balance the one-sided “clash of civilizations” approach, one should be careful not to overstate their importance. The fact that European contemporaries felt the need to justify their alliances with the “infidel Turk” suggests that alliances across the Muslim-Christian religious-cultural divide were considered the exception instead of the norm. When King Francis I of France, King John Szapolyai of Hungary, and the Protestant princes of central Europe sought Ottoman help, their propagandists were keen to convince their Christian brethren that they did this in desperation, and only because the Habsburgs attacked them. Their opponents, on the other hand, assailed them as heretics. Ottoman jurists, for their part, argued that peace with the infidel would be temporary, and only if it benefited the Muslims.

By all accounts, the Ottoman leadership was practical. Chapters 10 and 11 (“Lawfare and Diplomacy” and “Embassies, Dragomans, and Intelligence”) illustrate how the Ottomans manipulated truces and commercial treaties with selected European monarchs to their advantage, making lawfare and intelligence gathering an integral part of Ottoman grand strategy. Unlike the more centralized Venetian and Habsburg secret services, Ottoman intelligence gathering remained ad hoc and personal. Rivalries and factionalism among the various power groups in Constantinople and the provinces had a negative effect on Ottoman efforts to seek information. As a consequence, the Ottoman intelligence-gathering function was less efficient than that of the Venetians and Habsburgs and failed to translate the gathered information into systematized knowledge about the Porte’s



European rivals. Lack of such knowledge about their enemies weakened the Ottomans' soft power at a time when their military might was also waning.

In the sixteenth century, the Ottomans were feared and admired by Europeans from Niccolò Machiavelli to the Russian soldier and social critic Ivan Peresvetov. Having served as a professional soldier in Poland-Lithuania, Hungary, and Moldavia, Peresvetov knew the Ottomans and regarded Sultan Mehmed II's just governance and orderly army as models to be emulated by his ruler, Ivan IV (r. 1547–84) “the Terrible” of Muscovy. Venetian diplomats regarded the Ottoman sultans as “the most powerful” monarchs. The Flemish Ogier Ghiselin Busbecq, Habsburg ambassador sent to the Ottoman court in the mid-sixteenth century, noted the Ottomans' military superiority over the Habsburgs. Yet, at the beginning of the Long Ottoman-Habsburg War of 1593–1606, fought in Hungary, the Hungarians and Habsburgs realized that the once formidable Ottoman Empire no longer constituted a deadly threat to them. Writing in 1596, Hasan Kafi, an eyewitness Ottoman jurist from Bosnia, noted the Habsburg troops' superiority over the Ottoman cavalry. Four generations later, Ibrahim Müteferrika—a Hungarian convert to Islam and the founder of the Arabic-letter printing press in Constantinople—considered the military reforms of Peter the Great (r. 1682/96–1725) of Russia as an example worthy of imitation in his advice literature, written in 1732 for Sultan Mahmud I. Ottoman military setbacks and the contrasting views of Peresvetov and Busbecq, on the one hand, and Hasan Kafi and Ibrahim Müteferrika, on the other, reflected significant shifts in Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian military fortunes.

Contemporaneous Ottoman thinkers and later historians found the causes of Ottoman military defeats in the corruption of the institutions of the idealized “old order” (*nizam-i kadim*). The paradigm of “Ottoman decline” was created. It has been echoed by the Ottomans' European contemporaries and in the works of historians. The latter blamed “Islamic conservatism” and “military despotism” for the Ottomans' decline. Some scholarship has questioned the traditional “rise–golden age–decline” periodization of Ottoman history. This scholarship disproved almost all the major arguments of the traditional decline schools,

demonstrated the resurgence of the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century, and declared the decline paradigm a myth.<sup>2</sup> However, none of these studies was able to satisfactorily explain the eclipse of Ottoman military capabilities by the Ottomans' two major regional rivals, Habsburg Austria and Romanov Russia.

Comparing and contrasting military developments in the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg monarchy, and Muscovy/Russia helps us better understand the divergent paths that the Ottomans, Habsburgs, and Romanovs took, and thus the nature of their respective empires. *The Last Muslim Conquest* uses new evidence from the Ottoman archives to examine Ottoman military capabilities vis-à-vis their immediate rivals, demonstrating that such an approach yields a more realistic assessment of Ottoman strengths and weaknesses and the shifting military balance. The book also shows the long-unappreciated role that the Ottomans played in catalyzing military transformations, and related fiscal and institutional developments, across a vast terrain from Habsburg central Europe to Safavid Persia and beyond.

While the empire experienced significant military and socioeconomic transformations from the late sixteenth century onward, these did not constitute such a break with the past as to mark the beginning of a "second Ottoman Empire," as one study argued.<sup>3</sup> After all, the empire remained an ancien régime. While recruitment strategies, resource management, taxation, and central and provincial administration had all been adjusted to meet new challenges, these changes did not trigger a radical overhaul of the Ottoman Empire and its military, finances, and administration. The legal system established in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries remained in use until the nineteenth-century legal reforms. The same can be said of the frameworks within which the empire's peoples lived and interacted with one another and with representatives of the government. Although new geopolitical realities at the end of the seventeenth century forced the Ottomans to accept international principles of respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of foreign states, Ottoman diplomacy, too, followed traditional patterns. It was not until the late eighteenth century that the overhaul of the Ottoman ancien régime started in earnest during Selim III's reign, labeled "new

order.” It continued with the *Tanzimat* reforms (1839–76), resulting in the emergence of a “second” Ottoman Empire, which increasingly looked and acted like the other nineteenth-century European empires. This is not to say that the empire of Mehmed IV (r. 1648–87) was the same as that of Mehmed II, the Conqueror of Constantinople. To the contrary, I have attempted throughout the book to demonstrate how successive generations of the Ottoman elite tried to adjust their policies and institutions to new challenges, both domestic and external, and how these adjustments affected the relations of the Porte with its European neighbors from the fifteenth through the early eighteenth centuries.

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