



**Workshop 03**

***Ottoman Legacies in the Contemporary Mediterranean: the Middle East and the Balkans Compared***

**directed by**

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***Workshop abstract***

The Balkans and the Middle East share a common history spanning over four hundred years that are characterized by Ottoman control and influence. The importance of the Ottoman legacy for the shaping the contemporary Balkans is evident. The various Ottoman features of the contemporary Balkans can be traced in different cultural spheres: from languages to local cuisines; from contesting historical memories to architecture and social and administrative structures. However, it is clear that the most important reflections of Ottoman domination in the area is the development of Islam and its various local features and the place given to the Ottomans in the collective memories of the Balkans peoples. As for the Middle East, although the presence of Islam predated the arrival of the Ottomans, the long period of Ottoman rule in the area shaped some of the major political, institutional, legal and religious features that formed the Modern Middle East. Compared to the Balkans, the memory of the Ottomans as shaped by Middle East societies is clearly less shrouded with negative connotations. However, the Ottomans' memory was subject to different interpretations and perceptions.

The workshop seeks to gather experts of different approaches: social and cultural historians, anthropologists, philologists, specialists of literary, religion, art and architecture studies. Our main

interest will be to explore the various modes according to which Ottoman rule is remembered, used and debated in the Contemporary Balkans and in the Middle East.

### *Workshop description*

The Balkans and the Middle East share a common history spanning over four hundred years that are characterized by Ottoman control and influence. The importance of the Ottoman legacy for the shaping the contemporary Balkans is evident; Maria Todorova claims that "it seems that the conclusion that the Balkans are the Ottoman legacy is not an overstatement"<sup>1</sup>. The various Ottoman features of the contemporary Balkans can be traced in different cultural spheres: from languages to local cuisines; from contesting historical memories to architecture and social and administrative structures. However, it is clear that the most important reflections of Ottoman domination in the area is the development of Islam and its various local features and the place given to the Ottomans in the collective memories of the Balkans peoples. As for the Middle East, although the presence of Islam predated the arrival of the Ottomans, the long period of Ottoman rule in the area shaped some of the major political, institutional, legal and religious features that formed the Modern Middle East. Compared to the Balkans, the memory of the Ottomans as shaped by Middle East societies is clearly less shrouded with negative connotations. However, the Ottomans' memory was subject to different interpretations and perceptions.

While the last two decades witnessed the appearance of numerous studies exploring the various cultural, religious and political aspects of the Ottoman heritage in each one of these two areas, there is still a dearth of comparative studies that deal with the common features of the Ottoman legacies, while, in tandem, highlight the unique cultural aspects. Probably because of the different languages needed to study the two areas and because of the prevalence of the nation state as the main research frame, the study of the Balkans and the Middle East developed separately with only few attempts to examine the two regions in a comparative attitude.<sup>2</sup> The proposed joint workshop aims to fill this gap by comparing the various aspects of Ottoman heritage in the Middle East and the Balkans and investigating their relevance to contemporary Muslim and non-Muslim societies living in these former areas of the Ottoman state.

The workshop seeks to gather experts of different approaches: social and cultural historians, anthropologists, philologists, specialists of literary, religion, art and architecture studies. Our main interest will be to explore the various modes according to which Ottoman rule is remembered, used and debated in the Contemporary Balkans and in the Middle East. The imagined past of Ottoman rule

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York and Oxford, 1997), 12.

<sup>2</sup> See, as one major example L.C. Brown (ed.), *Imperial Legacy: the Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East* (New York, 1996).

plays an important role in the shaping of contemporary collective memories in the different societies situated in former Ottoman lands. An important aspect of this process of delegitimization of the Ottoman past is the implementation a policy of "de-Ottomanization" of the Ottoman heritage as reflected in institutions, architecture, language and popular culture. We would like to suggest the comparative study of the sometimes contesting memories regarding the perception of the Ottoman past as constantly debated and challenged in different parts of the two regions. A special emphasis will be given to explore the (re-)shaping of public spaces in post-Ottoman societies and to discuss the perceptions of the Ottoman legacy as a source for contemporary conflicts in the Balkans and the Middle East.

Topics we would like contributors to address include:

- The location and relocation of the Ottomans in national and alternative historiographies – the so-called “Turkish yoke”.
- The image of the Ottomans in literature, cinema and art (e.g. monuments).
- Restoration versus demolition of Ottoman architectural complexes and sites. Integrating Ottoman sites to the tourist infrastructure.
- The imagining and use of the Ottoman past and legacy in contemporary discourses and narratives.
- Politics of memory among the former religious minorities: Armenians, Greeks and Jews.
- Contemporary Turkey and its Ottoman past: can we speak about “neo-Ottomanism” in today’s Turkey?
- The Ottoman past as shaped in family history and memory
- “Bringing back the Ottomans to the European arena”: Istanbul – the imperial city as Europe’s Capital City in 2010