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The Young Turk revolution: comparisons and connections

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The constitutional revolution that took place in the Ottoman Empire in July 1908, often called the ‘Young Turk’ revolution, was one of a series of revolutions that rocked old-established empires in the decade before the outbreak of the First World War: the Russian revolution of 1905, the Persian revolution of 1906, the Ottoman one in 1908, the Portuguese revolution of 1910 and the Chinese revolution of 1911. The close chronological proximity of these revolutions invites comparison to see whether common factors can be discerned in the underlying causes and/or in the actual execution.¹

A decade ago, Nader Sohrabi looked at three of these revolutions (the Russian, the Persian and the Ottoman) in a seminal article.² His comparison was at the same time one of similarity and one of difference. The similarity, which established the a priori case for a comparative approach, was that the three revolutions were all unleashed in the name of constitutionalism. Sohrabi convincingly shows the degree to which the constitutional ideal dominated the ideas of those aiming for political change throughout the long nineteenth century. As a result, the call for the (re)introduction of a constitution basically circumscribed the political imagination of most revolutionaries of the pre-war decade in the Near East and in Russia.

The difference lies in the degree to which the revolutionary movements were successful in establishing a new political order. Sohrabi sees the Ottoman Young Turks as most successful, and the Russian constitutionalists as least successful, with the Persian in between. In his analysis, the deciding factor here was the degree to which the constitutionalists could depend on extra-parliamentarian and extra-constitutional forces to defend them, once the reactionaries regrouped and attacked the new constitutional regime. Here, the Young Turks’ control over the army gave them a decided edge.

This article aims to revisit the Young Turk revolution of 1908 from a comparative perspective, but it goes beyond Sohrabi’s approach in four different aspects. In the first place, and in line with contemporary developments in comparative history, it also looks into possible connections between the different cases and at the influence of possible common factors (something that Sohrabi also does, of course, but only for the shared ideology of the movements, not for their revolutionary methods). In the second place, it broadens the comparison to also include the Portuguese and Chinese revolutions. In the third place, it explores the influences that shaped the Young Turk revolution, both in terms of ideology and in those of methodology, and, finally, it aims to say something about the legacy of the Young Turk revolution.

In using a comparative approach, this article also follows in the footsteps of Charles Kurzman in his *Democracy Denied* but it differs in its conclusions.³ As the reader will see, I argue that Kurzman in the Ottoman case overestimates the role of intellectuals in bringing about and shaping the revolution as well as the degree to which the Young Turk revolutionaries were genuinely

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committed to democracy. This latter aspect fundamentally undermines a key part of Kurzman's narrative, where he sees a democratic revolution being 'hijacked' by the military under the leadership of Mahmud Şevket Pasha after the suppression of the counter-revolution in Istanbul in April 1909.

Before attempting any comparative analysis, however, let us briefly summarise the history of the Young Turk revolution.

The events of July 1908

On the face of it, the actual events of July 1908 were so small-scale as to be hardly noticeable. In the vast area that still composed the Ottoman Empire in that year, local and regional rebellions motivated by resistance to taxation and conscription, or corrupt and oppressive administrators, were commonplace, and had been for decades. In the preceding years, there had been a wave of protest, sometimes verging on rebellion, in the Eastern Anatolian provinces.⁴ The fact that in early July a handful of army officers took to the hills in Macedonia and declared themselves to be in rebellion against the government in Constantinople, was not exactly earth-shattering. Macedonia had been an area of violent unrest for a generation. There were no high-ranking military figures involved (the rebels were an adjutant-major, and a few captains and lieutenants) and the strength of the troops involved was a few hundred. It was clearly a mutiny, but mutinies had also been commonplace for decades, nearly always motivated by arrears in soldiers' pay, which were the rule rather than the exception.

Yet, this rebellion was different. It brought about a change in the political regime that was so profound that it was immediately recognised as, and termed, a *revolution* in the international press, rather than just a revolt or a mutiny. On 25 July 1908, the day after the revolution, the Paris daily, *L'Aurore*, already stated 'Ce n'est déjà plus une insurrection. C'est la vraie révolution' and similar statements can be found in German and Dutch newspapers of the day.⁵ The European newspaper that was generally best informed about Ottoman matters, the Viennese *Neue Freie Presse*, devoted the first four pages of its issue of Saturday 25 July to the revolution.⁶ This interpretation of 24 July 1908 as a moment of fundamental change has persisted. It has even been considered by some historians as the real birthdate of modern Turkey.⁷ It is this contrast between a lack of dramatic events and great historic significance that makes the Ottoman constitutional revolution unusual.

The rebellion in Macedonia was triggered by newspaper reports that during the meeting of King Edward VII and Tsar Nicholas II in Reval (modern Tallinn) on 9–10 June 1908, Great Britain and Russia had agreed on intervention in the Ottoman Balkans to force through reforms and the establishment of an autonomous regime under a Christian governor. This confirmed the worst fears of Ottoman patriots in the civil bureaucracy and the army. Macedonia had long been a fiercely contested area. Serb, Greek and particularly Bulgarian agitation had started almost immediately after the return of the area called 'Macedonia' in European parlance (actually the Ottoman provinces of Selanik [Thessaloniki], Manastir [Bitola] and Üsküp [Skopje]) to the Ottoman Empire at the Peace of Berlin in 1878. At the time, only British opposition to Russia had prevented the inclusion of the whole area in a newly independent Bulgaria under Russian protection. That is why the spectre of British–Russian agreement was such a nightmare for the Ottomans.

The first reaction of the underground opposition to the news from Reval was to draw up a long memorandum on the situation that was delivered to the consulates of the European powers (with the exception of Russia) in Manastir [Bitola]. In the memorandum, signed by the 'Ottoman Committee of Union and Progress', the members of this organisation rejected foreign intervention in Macedonia, pointing out that the Russian promotion of nationalist agitation on the part of the Bulgarians, Serbs and Greeks was making matters worse and that the real solution lay in the ending of oppression of *all* Ottomans, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, in the

empire as a whole through the restoration of constitutional and parliamentary government that the empire had enjoyed in 1876–78. The memorandum also announced that the Muslims of Macedonia were running out of patience and were ready to take up arms against both foreign interference and separatist agitation. In this way, the memorandum was illustrative of the Janus-faced nature of the Unionists (as the members of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) were known). On the one hand, they advocated a return to constitutional–parliamentary rule on the basis of equality for all, but on the other hand, they also made themselves the voice of the Muslim part of the population, and advocates of its dominant position.

When the memorandum did not elicit a response, a total of five young Ottoman officers, who were members of the Unionist underground, started an armed rebellion in the first week of July. In a number of places they ‘took to the mountains’ as the expression went: Niyazi in Resne [Resen], Eyüp Sabri twenty kilometres to the west in Ohri [Ohrid], Selahattin en Hasan fifty kilometres to the north in Kırçova [Kicevo] and Enver eighty kilometres to the east, in Tikveş. The most important action, and the one considered most threatening by the Ottoman authorities, was that of Niyazi. On 3 July, he raided the armoury of the local garrison (of which he was himself the commanding officer), and took money, rifles and ammunition, with which he equipped an improvised force of some 160 volunteers, whom he then led into the hills above Resne. It is important to note that he did not start his rebellion at the head of the regular army units he commanded, but at the head of a ‘national detachment’ (milli müfreze) of volunteers. It indicates that the Unionist officers did not feel they could trust the rank and file in a rebellion against the sultan. In this they were probably right, as the secret organisation of the CUP in the Balkans consisted entirely of officers and civil servants and had not spread among the soldiers.

What he did over the next days and weeks is typical of the *modus operandi* of the Unionist rebels. With his armed following he moved from one village to the next, concentrating in the first two weeks on Muslim Albanian villages in this ethnically and religiously mixed area. As a member of a wealthy Albanian landowning family himself, Niyazi already had a network of contacts in these villages.

Once his unit had entered any given village, Niyazi would convene the elders and hold a speech in which he warned the villagers of the impending danger of foreign intervention and of the Muslims of Macedonia coming under Christian rule. He then blamed this on the weakness and corruption of the government in Constantinople (but never on the sultan himself) and said that there was only one solution: the reintroduction of parliamentary and constitutional rule. Later on in his campaign Niyazi also addressed Christian (Serb and Bulgarian) villages. There his discourse was slightly different, emphasising that constitutional and parliamentary rule would bring true equality and brotherhood among Muslims and Christians, but also threatening the villagers with severe punishment if they did not join the revolution.⁸

At the same time as he was trying to raise the local population, Niyazi also addressed a second audience: every time his unit came across a post office, he sent off telegrams to provincial officials and to the government in Istanbul, repeating the demands of the revolutionaries: reinstatement of the constitution of 1876 and reconvening of parliament. The government was receiving similar telegrams from Niyazi’s Unionist colleagues, who had ‘gone into the hills’ in other parts of Macedonia and in the course of three weeks the demands became more and more peremptory: if the demands had not been met by 26 July, the Unionists threatened to march on the capital.

At the same time that the officers were roaming the hills with their growing bands of volunteers, another event also caused anxiety in the capital: in Firzovik [Ferisovic], between Üsküp [Skopje] and Prištine, rumours that the Austrian army was coming (triggered by a picnic for employees of a company doing survey work for a planned Austrian railway into Macedonia) had caused a protest meeting of thousands of local Albanians. An officer, Galip Bey, was sent there to persuade the demonstrators to go home, but instead Galip, who was a secret member of the Union and Progress, convinced the Albanians to take a collective oath to the constitution. A

petition signed by 194 clerics, notables and tribal leaders was sent to Constantinople by telegram on 21 July.

Although the actual insurrection was still relatively small-scale, it was spreading and the government quickly took countermeasures. It was already aware of the existence of a widespread underground organisation, although not of its precise extent. According to some sources, the increasingly successful penetration of the Unionist network by government agents had been an additional reason, alongside the Reval talks, why the Unionists decided on action in late June.⁹ When the news of the insurrection of Niyazi Bey and his fellow officers on 3 July reached the capital, the government ordered General Şemsi Pasha, the commander of the northern border town of Mitroviçe, to the south with two Albanian volunteer battalions. This was a calculated move. Şemsi Pasha was an ethnic Albanian himself with excellent contacts among the northern Albanians, so he could make life very difficult for people like Niyazi and Eyüp Sabri, who were operating in largely Albanian areas. He arrived in the provincial capital Manastır on 7 July and went to the post office to report to Constantinople on his arrival and submit his further plan of action. When he emerged from the building he was shot and killed by a Unionist officer. This was a turning point in the revolution. From 12 July reserve troops from western Anatolia started to deploy in Macedonia, but Unionist agents had been active among them and they proved very reluctant to fight the constitutionalists. Several loyalist officers and also police officials were shot in different towns in Macedonia and on 22 July the united bands of Resne and Ohri, reinforced with Albanian guerrilla bands, marched on Manastır, occupying the town and taking Tatar Osman Pasha, the successor to Şemsi Pasha, prisoner.

Resistance to the rebels now quickly collapsed. Manastır was the military centre of the western Ottoman Balkans, with a large garrison and the Union and Progress had infiltrated its officer corps on quite a large scale since late 1906. On 23 July, the restoration of the constitution was already greeted with gunfire there and in other Macedonian towns. During the night of 23 to 24 July, the government in Constantinople surrendered to the demands of the rebels and decided to reconvene parliament. The next morning Istanbul newspapers carried the text of the cabinet decision as well as a short imperial *irade* (order) approving it.¹⁰ In a formal sense this was a small step, as the constitution which had been granted by the Sultan in 1876, had been disregarded since 1878, but had remained on the statute book, and parliament had been suspended, but not completely abolished. It remained part of the official constitutional order.

Nevertheless, the popular reaction was euphoric. There was a strong feeling that something quite fundamental had changed – that it was, in fact, a revolution. Masses of people filled the streets in the towns and cities of European Turkey and Western Anatolia. There was public fraternisation between members of the different religious communities and armed Bulgarian, Albanian and Serb bands came down from the hills to take part in the celebrations. The main Armenian organisations took an active part in the celebrations. The slogan that was propagated by the CUP and that was visible everywhere in these days, was ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and Justice’.

‘Liberty’ (Hürriyet) was the term with which the revolution was most closely associated, to the extent that ‘liberty’, or ‘the proclamation of liberty’ (ilan-i hürriyet) became synonymous with the July revolution during the following decade, and, in fact, beyond. The officers who had taken to the hills, were now known as the ‘Heroes of Liberty’ (hürriyet kahramanları) and described as such on postcards that were sold in the streets. Those who died in the suppression of the counter-revolutionary movement of 1909 would be buried in the ‘Liberty Monument’ (Abide-i Hürriyet) on ‘Liberty Hill’ (Hürriyet Tepesi) in Istanbul. What Liberty meant to the Young Turks and where the concept originated will be discussed below.

In a way, the contrast between the limited nature of the actual revolution – a provincial insurrection by a handful of officers leading to a reinstatement of parliament and constitution – and the reaction – the exuberant celebration of ‘liberty’ by a large part of the urban population – is what makes the constitutional revolution such a curious phenomenon. There was no fighting in the streets or storming of barracks and palaces in the capital. There would be, later, during the

suppression of the counterrevolution in April 1909, but not now. There also was no takeover of power by the revolutionary leaders. The sultan remained on the throne and the new constitutional cabinet was one of elder statesmen. The revolutionaries set themselves up as watchdogs over the new constitutional order, and it was only five years later, in the coup d'état of January 1913 that they would take over power themselves. They declared that they had established liberty and it was now left to a multitude of actors to determine what exactly that meant. Gradually, over the next two months, it became clear that Armenians, Greeks and Turks; centralists and liberals, nationalists, Islamists and socialists all had very different interpretations of what 'liberty' meant and the euphoria was replaced by bitter arguments.

The strict censorship before 24 July meant that outside the European provinces only few people were aware that the restoration of the constitution was not the initiative of the sultan, but the result of an armed insurrection led by an underground organisation, but in the cities and towns of European Turkey (places like Salonika, Manastır, Üsküp, or Edirne), the leaders of that underground organisation now came to the fore. The 'Heroes of Liberty' proclaimed the revolution from the balconies of municipal buildings and had the troops swear an oath on the constitution.

The organisation, whose leaders now emerged as public figures, had been founded two years before in Salonika under the name Ottoman Liberty Society (Osmanlı Hürriyet Cemiyeti). In 1907, it had merged with a much older opposition group, the Committee of Union and Progress, that had been founded in 1889 and was headquartered in Paris. After the merger it adopted the name of the older, better-known, organisation. By the time of the rebellion in July 1908 it had some 1500–2000 members, of whom around 500 were in the city of Salonika.¹¹

The older CUP had been a Paris-led network of cells in neighbouring countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Egypt and Greece). Between 1905 and 1908 it had steadily been building a network of agents in the empire as well, mostly in Eastern Anatolia, but in the eastern provinces another Young Turk opposition group, the 'League for Private Initiative and Decentralisation' was actually more successful, because it had good relations with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), which had been building an effective underground network in the east since 1900. Neither Young Turk organisation had much presence in European Turkey, but there the home-grown Ottoman Liberty Society had been extremely successful in building a network, particularly among the officer corps of the Second and Third Ottoman field armies.

The main reason for its success was that it appealed to the anxieties and ambitions of the officers. Macedonia was the area where the competing nationalisms of the Christian populations seemed to threaten Ottoman rule most urgently. It was a very violent place. In the early years of the century, the Bulgarian–Macedonian Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (IMRO) had been most active, using both terrorism and guerrilla tactics. Its resistance had culminated in the Ilinden (St Elias Day) uprising in August 1903, which had led to the proclamation of a short-lived independent Macedonian republic, but had been brutally suppressed by the Ottoman army. The violence of guerrilla and counter-insurgency were everyday realities for the Unionist officers who served in the region. Enver alone had fought 54 engagements with guerrilla bands in the three years before the revolution.¹² But the violence was as much between the different Christian communities as between them and the Ottoman state.

Bulgarian-speaking orthodox Christians had agitated for an independent Bulgarian church, independent of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople since the 1850s and in 1870 the Ottoman government had recognised the Bulgarian Exarchate. From then on, every village and neighbourhood in the Ottoman Balkans faced a choice: either to define itself as Greek (Rum) or as Bulgarian. This led to continuous bloodshed and in the years before the revolution it was the Greeks who seemed to have the upper hand. In 1908, for example, 1080 people were killed for political reasons in Macedonia, but of these, 212 were Bulgarians killed by Greeks and 72 were Greeks killed by Bulgarians. Of the 1080 only 116 were Ottoman soldiers or police officers.¹³

Under the Müzzsteg Agreement of 1903 Austro-Hungary and Russia, supported by the other European powers, imposed on the Ottoman government a set of reforms in Macedonia under foreign supervision in order to end the bloodshed. The most visible element of this foreign supervision was the reform of the gendarmerie, which was to be composed of Christians and Muslims equally, and which was commanded by fifty European officers under the command of an Italian general. In 1905, the European great powers with the exception of Germany demanded further reforms and control over the finances of Macedonia. When the Ottoman government refused, they jointly occupied the Ottoman islands of Lemnos and Lesbos to force it into submission.

The attractiveness of the Committee of Union and Progress to the young Ottoman administrators and officers in the Balkans was first and foremost based on the fact that it wanted to take action to prevent the loss of Macedonia and to make the Ottomans masters in their own home once more.¹⁴ How, then, is this linked to their demand, voiced over and over again, for constitutional and parliamentary rule, for 'liberty'? The thinking behind this was that, under the influence of the agitation from Paris that had been going on for nearly twenty years, the Unionists believed that it was the repressive policies, or 'tyranny' (istibdad), of the government that sowed discontent among the different minorities of the empire. This in turn led to unrest and bloodshed, which gave both the nation states of the Balkans (Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria) and the great powers an excuse to intervene. In other words, and paradoxically, in the eyes of the Unionists it was state repression that weakened the empire and a constitutional revolution, by turning the subjects into citizens and establishing the rule of law, would turn them into stakeholders in the Ottoman state. This would remove all pretext for foreign intervention. So, while it is true, as Sohrabi says, that constitutionalism defined their political thinking, from the start the Unionists saw constitutional rule as a means to an end – to strengthen the state. Somewhat like the Chinese nationalists of Sun Yat-sen, they were revolutionaries whose aim was to strengthen the state, not to weaken or replace it.

The role of social protest, so central to the understanding of revolutions for scholars in the tradition of Tilly and Skocpol,¹⁵ is notably absent in the case of the revolution of 1908. It is undoubtedly true that there was an upsurge in public unrest, leading to demonstrations, occupations and mutinies in 1906–1907, particularly in the eastern Anatolian provinces. It was caused by the government's attempts to introduce new taxes after bad harvests, high bread prices and by payment arrears, particularly among the military. The unrest had started in Kastamonu and later spread to Trabzon, Erzurum, Van and Diyarbakır. Particularly in Kastamonu, Young Turks living in exile in the province seem to have played a role in the agitation. Opposition agents sent to the east tried to politicise the protests, but the League for Private Initiative and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation were much more visible than the Committee of Union and Progress. The unrest never developed into a revolutionary movement aiming for regime change, however, and after the retraction of the new taxes and the removal of a number of unpopular administrators by the central government, the unrest died down.¹⁶ There is no traceable link between this wave of social unrest in the east in 1906–7 and the 1908 revolution.¹⁷ As the *Neue Freie Presse* of 25 July 1908 correctly analysed, the revolutionary movement in Macedonia was indeed 'purely political'.

The Young Turks as part of the revolutionary tide: the comparative approach

The revolution of July 1908 in the Ottoman Empire fits within a tidal wave of constitutional revolutions that hit the world in the years 1905–12: the Russian revolution of 1905, the Persian one of 1906, the Ottoman one of 1908, the Portuguese revolution of 1910 and the Chinese revolution of 1911–12. The close proximity of these revolutions to each other warrants an investigation into the twin questions to what extent they were similar and to what extent they influenced each

other. The Mexican revolution that broke out in 1911 and lasted for a decade obviously is also one of the great revolutionary moments of the pre-war era, but in many ways its characteristics were so different from those of the other four that the case for comparison seems weak: Mexico was already a republic, and not an empire; its revolution evolved into a long and very bloody civil war; and the direct and indirect involvement of its neighbour the United States was a factor unique to the Mexican revolution.

So, we are left with a comparison of five revolutions: a struggle against autocracy. How does the Young Turk revolution figure in this landscape?

One characteristic that the five revolutions undoubtedly shared was that they were carried out against autocratic or authoritarian regimes. The monarchies of the Romanov, Qajar and Qing dynasties were officially autocratic, and their legitimacy rested on a combination of religious and dynastic arguments rather than on any notion of social contract. The Ottoman state was already officially a constitutional state (as its 1876 constitution had never been officially revoked) but in practice Sultan Abdülhamid II's regime had been every bit as autocratic in the last thirty years and it, too, had promoted a state ideology that emphasised dynastic and religious legitimation since the 1880s.¹⁸ Portugal, equally, was a constitutional monarchy under the de Braganza dynasty and had been such since 1822, but its representative parliamentary system was largely fictitious, with competing networks of landowners and high bourgeoisie sharing power under the regime of 'rotativismo' (under which different 'parties' regularly alternated according to a pre-arranged schedule). It was also, of course, a large empire, with widespread possessions in Africa and Asia.

The legitimacy and prestige of these imperial regimes were closely linked to their perceived ability to protect the subjects. It was not coincidental that the designation for their state most frequently used by the Ottomans themselves was 'Memalik-i Mahruse', or 'Well-protected Domains'. This is where, by the early twentieth century, the legitimacy of the regimes was challenged more and more. In the run up to the revolutions, the legitimate status of each of the monarchies was made vulnerable by a perceived inability to protect their people. What triggered the revolutions was a perception of imperial weakness as much as of resentment against autocratic rule. In the case of Portugal, the British ultimatum of 1890, which peremptorily forced the Portuguese empire to give up its attempts to link Angola with Mozambique, was felt as a national humiliation without precedent and it destroyed the credibility of the monarchy. The immediate effect was a republican insurrection in Porto in 1891, which was brutally suppressed, but the long-term effect was an increase in support for the republican movement, especially among the urban middle class.¹⁹

In the case of Russia, it was the series of totally unexpected defeats of the Russian army and navy in the war with Japan that had broken out in February 1904, that undermined the regime's legitimacy. The outbreak of war had been accompanied by a wave of patriotic enthusiasm, but by late 1904 a series of heavy defeats on land and sea as well as grave economic dislocation caused by the war effort undermined the government's prestige, especially because these defeats contrasted sharply with the self-confidence and contempt for the Japanese expressed by the representatives of the government and the army.

In the case of Iran, it was the readiness of the government to hurt the interests of its own subjects in order to comply with the demands of foreign creditors that fatally undermined the Qajar state's legitimacy. The coalition of merchants, artisans and religious leaders (ulema) that had successfully thwarted the establishment of a British tobacco monopoly in Iran ten years before re-emerged in 1906²⁰ and organised mass protests against the government, when it introduced new taxes and granted concessions to foreign business interests to pay for the two large loans the Shah had contracted with Russia. The fact that the reform of the system of taxation had been entrusted by the Qajar government to Belgian specialists added to the feeling that the regime was selling out Iran to foreign interests.²¹

The Iranian case bore some similarities to that of China, where the unrest that led to the revolution was triggered by a decision of the government to nationalise provincial railways (in which many Chinese merchants and landowners had invested) in order to be able to sell them off to foreign interests, thus raising income to pay for the huge war indemnities imposed by six European powers and Japan after the Boxer Rebellion of 1908, as well as for its own reform programme. Like the Qajar court in Iran, the Qing court in Beijing seemed ready to sacrifice the interests of its subjects in order to appease foreign interests. The defence of the interests of local investors in railways in Sichuan through the creation of a 'railway protection movement' turned into a 'national' issue.

In the Ottoman case, the fact that the government had not been able to resist the imposition of the autonomy of the island of Crete by the great powers in 1898 and subsequently had had to accept a programme of reforms imposed on the initiative of Austria and Russia in Macedonia in 1904, had undermined confidence in the ability of the state to protect the country from foreign encroachments. The submission to yet more European demands after the occupation of Lemnos and Lesbos in 1905 was a further blow to the state's prestige. This loss of confidence in the state's ability to protect its subjects was particularly visible in the officers and civil servants of the state in the most affected areas; they were directly confronted with the weakness of the state they served. As mentioned above, it was the assumption that the Ottoman government would be equally incapable of resisting a regime of full autonomy in Macedonia that would be imposed by Russia and Britain after their talks in Reval, that triggered the Young Turk rebellion in 1908.

There is a paradox here: in all five cases the revolutionaries rejected the autocratic or authoritarian nature of the existing monarchic regimes, but they did so not because of the overwhelming power of these regimes, but, on the contrary, because of their weakness; because of the inability of the Russian, Ottoman, Persian and Chinese empires to compete effectively in the fierce inter-imperial rivalry of the Edwardian age and protect the interests of their subjects. This seems to have been a common factor that undermined the legitimacy of the imperial regimes and thus set the stage for revolution. Perhaps, it is here that we can find the kind of 'horizontal continuity' that Jack Goldstone argued for the early modern revolutions in England, China and the Ottoman Empire.²² The historical phenomenon jointly affecting these states and societies seems to have been that the emergence of strong states engaged in imperialist rivalry forced the old monarchies into concessions that made their weakness very visible to their own populations. Some modernist and constitutionalist circles in Portugal, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, Iran and China had been arguing that their political systems were out of date for at least half a century, but these events vindicated them and increased their support.

Another similarity between the four revolutions is that of the set of demands voiced by the opposition, or in other words, the revolutionary programme. The key issue in each case was the introduction of 'liberty', which meant representative government, with civic rights being guaranteed through a constitution. Here Sohrabi is undoubtedly right: the issues of the right of assembly, the lifting of censorship, abolition or curbing of the secret police and amnesty for political prisoners were all part of the set of demands of the revolutionaries in each country. In other words: the main set of demands was rooted squarely in the European liberal tradition. As we will see below, this was very much the case for the Young Turk revolution as well, where this pedigree can be clearly traced.

There were programmatic differences, too: a representative system and constitutional guarantees may have been the core programme of the Russian liberals, the Constitutional Democrats or 'Kadets', both the Social Revolutionaries and the Bolshevik and Menshevik wings of the Social Democrat Party aimed for a much more radical regime change, including an end to 'tsarism'. The importance of a radical revolutionary movement side by side with one that embraced classical liberal demands distinguished the Russian revolution from those in China and the Ottoman Empire, where forms of socialism only had a tiny following at this stage. Iran was somewhere in

between. Because of the close links with Russia and particularly with Russian Azerbaijan and the important industrial centre of Baku, radical socialism was already spreading in northern Iran in the first decade of the twentieth century,²³ but it was not powerful enough to influence events in 1905–6 decisively. Likewise, in Portugal, socialism and anarchism had been spreading in industrial centres, but the movements were weak and took shelter within the Republican Party, and within its underground arm, the ‘Carbonaria’ secret society. The 1910 revolution was waged in the name of a liberal political programme (the establishment of a democratic republic). Only in Russia, the radical revolutionaries had a social as well as a political agenda, which they could voice openly. Only there, calls for improvements in working and living conditions were an important part of the revolutionary demands, whereas in the other four countries the demands were exclusively political, even if – as in the Iranian and Portuguese case – the causes of the discontent were partly socio-economic.

In both Iran and China, anti-foreign sentiment played an important part. Both countries had recently experienced armed invasions from European powers, even in their own capitals, but there was an important difference in the role played by ethnic nationalism in the respective revolutions: the ruling Qajar dynasty was ethnically Turkish, but while Iranian nationalism and romantic Aryanism had been slowly spreading among the Iranian intellectual elite since the writings of Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani in the 1890s,²⁴ some of the spokesmen for this nationalism were themselves of a Turkish-speaking background and there seems to have been little attempt to capitalise on the non-Persian character of the dynasty during the revolution. In China, the picture was different. Chinese nationalists had been developing a discourse in which the anti-colonial sentiment originally directed against European imperialism was also directed at the Qing dynasty.²⁵ Denouncing its rule as a foreign, Manchu colonial occupation and demanding the liberation of the Han Chinese was a core element in the discourse of the Chinese revolutionaries. As a result, the 1911 revolution witnessed widespread killing of Manchu officials and even massacres of local Manchu communities. This kind of ethnic violence was absent in the Iranian case. The Portuguese revolution had no ethnic dimension at all.

In the case of the Young Turks, anti-foreign sentiment, and particularly a strong Russophobia, was very much in evidence, as their manifestos of 1908 show, but they identified themselves as Muslims and Turks (using the terms interchangeably – even if ethnically they were of Albanian, Bosnian, Kurdish, Arab or Circassian extraction) and at the same time as Ottomans. Even though they resented and vilified the incumbent Ottoman sultan, Abdülhamid II, they could not imagine any other political construct than the Ottoman sultanate. A systematic distinction between ‘Ottoman’ rulers and ‘Turkish’ nation developed only much later, in the early Turkish republic of the 1920s.²⁶

Another result of the close identification of the Unionists with the Ottoman state was that republicanism, dominant in the Portuguese revolution, important among the Russian radicals and in the Chinese revolutionary movement, and present, although much weaker, in the Iranian case was almost completely absent among the Young Turks.

When we look at the groups actively involved, the ‘agents of change’, we see fundamental differences between the five revolutions. The ideological content and the programme of the revolutionary movement in each case were provided by intellectuals of varied backgrounds, literate, well-read and aware of political developments in the wider world. These were the people with a strong grasp of the meaning of liberal constitutionalism. Often these intellectuals had spent long periods abroad. Some (Ahmet Rıza, Sun Yat-sen) were in fact abroad at the time of the revolution and only heard about their outbreak afterwards. Intellectuals provided the inspiration and the programme, but nowhere were they in a position to unleash a revolution on their own and in each of the four cases they had to rely on other forces in society. The composition of the revolutionary coalitions varied a great deal between the five cases, however.

On the one end of the scale is the Russian revolution, which saw mass action that was totally incomparable to the other cases. In the Russian Empire, which had been industrialising fast since

the 1890s, urban industrial workers played a key role. Middle class intellectuals, both professionals and students, were a vital component of the revolutionary coalition, but the momentum was created by workers. Hundreds of thousands of workers took part in demonstrations and large-scale strikes in all major industrial centres. The Russian revolution, in other words, was the result of mass action by social movements. The army, on the other hand, by and large remained loyal to the tsarist regime and mutinies, even the takeover of the battleship *Potemkin* immortalised by Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film, remained isolated events.²⁷ The ability of the opposition – both liberal and radical – to penetrate the Tsarist state machinery and particularly the army seems to have been limited. Sohrabi sees this as the main cause of the failure of the revolution after 1906.

The Iranian constitutional revolution also was the result of a social movement, although in pre-industrial Iran the revolutionary coalition predominantly consisted of merchants and artisans on the one hand and Muslim clerics, the *ulema*, on the other hand. At the time, the Iranian working class was still largely concentrated in the Baku oilfields in Russia, not in Iran itself. The modernist and nationalist intellectuals who had been active since the 1890s in Russian and Iranian Azerbaijan were important in formulating the constitutionalist programme, but it was the coalition of merchants, artisans and clerics that managed to force the government's arm. Their repertoire of actions included strikes by merchants and artisans (the closing down of the bazaar that paralysed economic life), walk-outs by clerics that halted religious and legal proceedings and 'bast', the seeking of sanctuary in mosques and later in the British legation, to mobilise public opinion. The Qajar state hardly had a centralised army and different army units took different sides in the conflict, without playing a decisive role on either side.

This was very different in the cases of Portugal, China and the Ottoman Empire. While the Portuguese monarchy was already in a kind of twilight zone after the assassination of King Carlos in February 1908, it was the fact that the secret arm of the Republican Party, the 'Carbonaria', had been able to penetrate the officer corps of the Portuguese army units in Lisbon that made the revolution possible. These officers launched the revolution in October 1910, but their influence was limited. On the day of the revolution most army units in and around the capital actually abstained from interfering and it was the armed support of revolutionary sailors and warehouse workers that tipped the balance.²⁸

The trigger for the Chinese revolution of 1911–12 was the protest against the nationalisation of the railway in Sichuan. This involved mass protest in the form of demonstrations and attacks on Qing garrisons, but it was the rebellion of the New Army garrison in the city of Wuchang in the adjacent province of Hubei that really turned the revolt into a revolution. The army units had been infiltrated over the previous decade by nationalist Han Chinese opposition groups, which had spread the ideas of Sun Yat-sen and other activist intellectuals, a process that can be compared to the infiltration by the Unionists in the Ottoman Empire and the Carbonaria in Portugal (and whose equivalent was largely lacking in Iran and Russia). Their open resistance to orders on 10 October 1911 may still be regarded as a mutiny, but one day after the start of the mutiny they called on all southern and central Chinese provinces to reject the Qing and proclaim a republic, thereby definitely unleashing a revolution.²⁹

This is in many ways very similar to what happened in the Ottoman Empire. There, too it was the action of relatively small provincial army units whose officer corps had been infiltrated by a secret opposition movement that brought about the revolution. In the Ottoman case, it was not preceded by significant social protest, but the fact that discontent was widely felt was shown by the widespread support for the revolutionary troops from other social groups once the revolution had started. In both the Chinese and the Ottoman cases (and indeed in the Portuguese revolution), the revolutionary army units did not gain decisive victories over those of the state, but the fact that they remained in being and that units sent against them often refused to fight, was enough. The morale of the Ottoman government and the palace collapsed after three weeks when troops sent from Asia Minor refused to fight the rebels, and in China the powerful

commander of the northern armies, Yuan Shi-kai decided to switch sides when confronted with the stubborn resistance of the republicans, leaving the Qing regime without effective protection. The role of intellectuals seems to have been very similar in the cases of China and the Ottoman Empire: the army units rebelled because they were successfully infiltrated by secret opposition groups within the country. These were inspired, but not led, by the intellectuals like Ahmet Rıza or Sun Yat-sen and their circles, who had been active and to a degree successful abroad, but who were not in a position to steer events in the country.

So, having looked at these five variables, where do we place the Ottoman constitutional revolution in this comparative framework?

When we combine the results from the different axes of comparison proposed here (causes for disaffection, social dimensions, programme and ideology, the revolutionaries themselves), we see that it was in some ways the most limited as well as the least radical of these revolutions. Like the other revolutions it was motivated by a combination of resentment against autocratic government and anger at its weakness on the international stage. It lacked the broad social make-up of the revolutionary coalitions in Russia and Iran, and it was less immediately associated with preceding social unrest than was the case for the Portuguese and Chinese revolutions. Its programme was purely political with no trace of the demands for social justice that were so important in Russia. Its active core consisted of young civil servants and – primarily – low- to mid-ranking army officers and the revolution was brought about by army units that had been infiltrated by the constitutionalists. In this sense it most closely resembles the later Chinese revolution, but it lacked both the ethnic (anti-Manchu) and republican dimensions of the latter. The repertoire of actions of the Ottoman revolutionaries reflects the difference. Where in Russia and Iran the primary forms of action were strikes and public demonstrations (in the form of marches in Russia and Bast in Iran), in Portugal armed resistance by sailors and workers saved the revolution when it was about to fail, and mass demonstrations played an important part in the railway protests that preceded the Chinese revolution, in Ottoman Macedonia the repertoire was limited to small-scale military rebellion, assassinations and the posting of proclamations. The mass demonstrations of support came *after* the restoration of the constitution, but were not part of the revolutionary struggle.

Transnational connections

One question that has to be answered is, of course, whether the above is a comparison between independent phenomena or whether we can also speak about connected events. Above, it was already suggested that the combination of authoritarian rule that was increasingly seen as outmoded *and* weakness on the international stage of the imperial regimes, resulting in loss of legitimacy, are the underlying factors that connect them on a causal level. They constitute the 'horizontal continuities'. The same can probably be said for the growth of literacy and the emergence of a reading public that was aware of worldwide developments. But one can, of course, also ask to what extent the revolutions directly influenced each other. In other words, and focusing once more on the Ottoman constitutional revolution: was the Ottoman revolutionary movement influenced significantly by the upheavals in neighbouring Russia and Iran in 1904–1906? (The later Portuguese and Chinese revolutions are obviously irrelevant for this question.)

The Muslim parts of the Russian Empire, in particular the Crimea, Kazan and Trans-Caucasia had become centres of both Muslim modernism and nationalism since the mid-nineteenth century with figures like Mirza Feth Ali Ahundzade and Ismail Gasprinski. Azeri intellectual Hüseynzade Ali had been among the founders of the Young Turk movement in 1889 and other Muslim intellectuals from the Russian Empire like Mizancı Murat, Ahmet Agaev and Yusuf Akçura were prominent in the Young Turk movement in exile in the period 1896–1906. There is, therefore, a traceable influence of Russian Muslim intellectuals on the Young Turk movement in

general. There is little evidence of direct influence from the Russian revolution, however. Some of the Russian Muslim intellectuals: most notably Agaev and Akçura, were involved in one aspect of the Russian revolution, the organisation of the All-Russian Muslim Congresses of August 1905 and January 1906, which – although officially illegal – were tolerated by a Russian regime under pressure. This activism of the Turkish Muslim intellectuals in Russia during the Russian revolution did not go unnoticed among the Young Turks. The opposition newspapers that were smuggled into the empire from France and Egypt carried articles by some of them. It was the Japanese victory over the Russians, however, rather than the unrest in Russia itself, that had the strongest impact in 1905. The fact that an Asiatic empire could defeat one of the great powers of Europe, and that this state was modern, also in the fact that it was already a constitutional monarchy, made a deep impression and turned Japan into a role model for the Young Turks.³⁰

The influence of the Russian revolution on that in Iran, thanks to the close ties between northern and southern Azerbaijan, was much greater.³¹ But the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1906 seems to have had less impact on the Ottoman revolution. The Young Turks were aware of events in Iran, and one of the core members of the Committee of Union and Progress, Ömer Naci, was even sent from Paris to Iran in 1907, to gather first-hand information and establish contacts.³² The revolution was commented on in the Young Turk press in Paris, but more in the sense of a lament, that ‘even backward Persia now had a constitution’. The fact that the Unionist underground in Macedonia started to organise from September 1906 onwards (with the founding of the Ottoman Freedom Society in Salonika) was not connected to events in Iran, but to the rumours that Sultan Abdülhamid was terminally ill and fears that this would form a pretext for the European powers to put a favourite on the throne or carve up the empire.³³

The claim, put forward by Soviet historians and Turkish ones influenced by Soviet historiography, that the Young Turk revolution was the result of the export of revolutionary fervour after the Russian revolution, has to be rejected. There is no real evidence that the social unrest in 1906–7 in Eastern Anatolia was influenced by events in Russia and, anyway, there is no visible link between that wave of unrest and the revolution in Macedonia a year later.³⁴ Hourı Berberian has argued that Armenian revolutionary networks were active in the political agitation in Russia, the Ottoman Empire and Iran and that therefore the events in these three empires should be seen as ‘connected revolutions’. While this is true for Russia and Iran and to a certain extent for the unrest in Eastern Anatolia in 1906–7, there is no indication whatsoever that Armenians played a role in the 1908 revolution in Macedonia (as Berberian also recognises).³⁵

The direct impact of the Russian and Iranian revolutions on events in the Ottoman Empire in 1908 was limited, therefore, even if the influence of the Muslim modernists and nationalists from the Russian Empire on Young Turk thinking, as well as that of the excitement over Japan’s victory over Russia should not be overlooked. So what *did* shape the Ottoman constitutional revolution? In answering this question we have to distinguish between the ideology of the Committee of Union and Progress, its organisational patterns and its repertoire of actions.

Influences on the Young Turks

When we look at the ideological inputs, we see that, on the one hand, the Committee followed in the footsteps of the earlier ‘Young Turk’ opposition that had been active since 1889, in advocating equality and unity of all the different ethnic and religious communities of the empire. This ideal, ‘Unity of the Elements’ (‘İttihad-ı anasır’) was to be achieved through the restoration of constitutional–parliamentarian rule. This would produce a strong state that could ward off the danger of foreign intervention, because it would turn all communities in the Empire into stakeholders. At the same time, however, the Committee also positioned itself as the defender of Muslim rights. In this, too, it followed the example of the older Young Turk movement. When we look at the newspapers published in Paris and Geneva, we see that the defence of Islam was an

important theme throughout the decade before the constitutional revolution. It was no coincidence that the party newspaper of the Committee of Union and Progress was called 'Şura-yı Ümmet' or 'Council of the Muslim Community'. This referred to the idea, current in the first Ottoman constitutionalist movement of the 1860s, that parliamentary and constitutional government had been present in an embryonic form in the Muslim community in the days of the prophet Muhammad and therefore was not an alien concept that had to be imported from Europe. The early Ottoman constitutionalist movement had itself been strongly influenced by the liberalism of 1848 and the 'Young' movements of the eighteen thirties and forties ('Young Italy', 'Young Germany' and 'Young Poland'). This was reflected in the name under which they presented themselves to the international public, 'La Jeune Turquie', a name also adopted by the constitutionalists of a later generation. The central place of the concept of 'hürriyet' ('liberty') in the Ottoman revolutionary movement was also a legacy of the 1860s activists, who had introduced the term in its modern meaning in the Ottoman vocabulary.³⁶

The later Young Turks, and the Committee of Union and Progress in particular, were strongly influenced by positivism. They advocated a ruling system that would be 'just', but at the same time orderly, rational and scientific. When we compare them with their contemporaries, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) and the Armenian Henschak party, the thing that stands out is the almost complete lack of interest in any kind of socialism or anarchism among the Unionists. The main Armenian organisations were explicitly socialist (the ARF was even a member of the second international) and they combined advocacy of Armenian national rights with an explicitly socialist programme. For them the concept of 'liberty' referred to resistance against political as well as social oppression. At times they collaborated with European anarchists (as in the bomb attack on Sultan Abdülhamid in 1905). The Unionists and their Kemalist successors on the other hand saw socialism either as irrelevant (because of the lack of an industrial working class in the Ottoman Empire) or as contrary to the unity of the country they strove for. For them the solidarism of Emile Durkheim and Léon Bourgeois held more attraction than any form of socialism.

In terms of its organisational patterns, the CUP was a typical nineteenth-century secret organisation, the archetype of which had been the Carbonari of early nineteenth-century Italy. Like the Carbonari, the CUP had a cell structure in which, at least in theory, only one member of any given cell would know one member of another cell, thus limiting the risk of penetration by government spies. The original Carbonari had had their roots in Freemasonry and many of the influential early members of the CUP were also known to be masons. Masonic lodges like the Italian 'Macedonia Risorta' lodge in Salonika sheltered the Unionists and gave them a place where they could freely speak their mind and before they founded their own secret organisation in September 1906, they had been meeting in these lodges.

Like most European secret organisations, the Committee introduced a set of rituals, particularly surrounding the induction of new members: contact through a 'guide', who would make the candidate aware of the existence of a secret society, an appointment in an empty house where the candidate is taken while being blindfolded, interrogation by masked members dressed in gowns, an oath of loyalty on a Koran and a revolver, which imposed secrecy on pain of death. Members recognised each other through the use of passwords and symbols.³⁷ Correspondence was encrypted. While all of this is part of the standard toolkit of European secret societies, some elements have a more specific origin, notably the existence within the organisation of members who had signed up as 'fedai' ('self-sacrificing volunteer'). These were the people who were ready to execute dangerous missions, which could easily cost them their lives. Their existence was probably copied from similar volunteer units formed by the Armenian organisations ARF and Henschak. During the revolution it was a fedai who killed Şemsi Pasha, an assassination that formed the crucial turning point. From 1913 onwards the fedais would make up the core of what came to be known as the 'Special Organisation' ('Teşkilati Mahsus'). This organisation

played an important but not yet fully clarified role in the persecution of Greeks and Armenians in 1914–16.³⁸

When we compare the repertoire of actions that the Committee used to that of the other secret organisations active in the empire, we see some interesting similarities and differences. Like its Armenian and Bulgarian counterparts, the committee had no hesitation in ordering assassinations and kidnappings. Even before the revolution there were attacks on suspected government spies or loyalists who refused to collaborate with the Unionists. During the revolution the assassination of Nazım Pasha by a Unionist fedai was a crucial turning point, as was the abduction of his successor Osman Pasha. After the revolution there were assassinations of journalists who opposed the committee. But unlike the Armenians and Bulgarians, the Unionists never resorted to high-profile terrorism. The ARF had carried out the spectacular occupation of the head office of the Imperial Ottoman Bank in Constantinople in 1896 and carried out a bomb attack on Sultan Abdülhamid II in 1905, that only narrowly missed its goal. Bulgarian anarchists had carried out bloody bomb attacks in Salonika in 1903. The reason the Unionists rejected these tactics is that they were fundamentally opposed to foreign intervention as a means to topple the regime of the sultan, while Bulgarians and Armenians took up a contrary position: their high visibility acts of terror and resistance were specifically aimed at internationalising their cause and eliciting great power intervention. The Unionists' aim was to strengthen the state they served, not to weaken or destroy it and in this they differed from all the other revolutionary groupings in the Ottoman Empire of their day.

But even if they ultimately pursued different aims, the way the Unionists actually executed their revolution in July 1908 owes a great deal to the example of the militant organisations of the minorities, particularly the Bulgarians. The young officers who raised the standard of revolt were intimately familiar with the way the Serb Chetes, the Bulgarian Komitajis and the Greek Andartes worked and they copied their *modus operandi*. When Niyazi, Enver and the others 'went into the hills' they did so at the head of 'National Detachments' ('milli müfreze') composed of both military and civilian volunteers. They did not dare to risk starting a rebellion at the head of their own regular army units as they feared that these might turn against them once they discovered they were fighting the sultan's government. Niyazi took good care to make sure that the garrison, of which he was himself the commander, was sent on a wild goose chase after imaginary Bulgarian bandits, before he raided the local arsenal to arm his band of volunteers. The whole idea of an irregular 'national detachment' of volunteers was copied from the minority movements and so were its actions: constantly moving from village to village to spread propaganda, raise volunteers and collect provisions, while at the same time threatening those who would not join the cause.³⁹ This was the way Bulgarian and Greek bands had been operating for decades and it is interesting that the leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress, an organisation with an urban support base in the garrison towns of Salonika, Manastır and Edirne should prefer this type of action over a direct challenge to the government in those urban centres. The explanation is probably that they felt government control in the towns was too strong and that it could suppress the revolution in its early phase, if it took place there.

The emergence of a group of politically active and dashing young officers in an empire that was widely considered decrepit and moribund in Europe, spoke to the imagination. The very fact that 'Young Turk' became a generic term that is used to describe a young, progressive or insurgent member of an institution, movement or political party even today, shows this to be the case. At the time of the constitutional revolution, it was a source of inspiration to the Muslims in Russia who were suffering increased oppression after the restoration of 1907. The Russian Modernists ('Jadidis') who had originally influenced the Young Turks in the 1890s, now in turn tried to emulate the success of the Young Turks. Even in far-off Central Asia, the 'Young Bukhara' movement was inspired by the example of the Unionists. It is also known that in China the Young Turk movement and its revolution was studied and discussed extensively by moderate and radical Chinese nationalists in 1909–10. They were interested in their organisational patterns

and *modus operandi* as much as in their programme.⁴⁰ In the case of the Portuguese revolution, the Ottoman example was not directly influential, but the Young Turks were popular, as witnessed by the fact that a society of young officers and parliamentarians that was active in 1911–1915, called itself ‘Jovem Turquia’.

In a much more concrete fashion the example of the Young Turks left a legacy in the Republic of Turkey (where former Young Turks who had participated in the 1908 revolution continued to dominate the political system until the 1950s)⁴¹ and among early generations of Arab nationalists. The secret society formed by Arab officers in the Ottoman army in 1914, ‘al-Ahd’ (‘The Oath’) was led by former Unionists. After transferring their loyalty to the British-sponsored Arab revolt in 1916, some of them became key political figures in the post-war landscape, such as Nuri al-Said and Jafar al-Askeri, both of whom served as prime ministers of Iraq several times. The most interesting example is perhaps that of Aziz Ali al-Misri, an Ottoman officer of Circassian extraction born in Egypt, who became an early member of the Committee of Union and Progress while he was stationed in Manastir (Macedonia) in 1906–7. He later fell out with the Unionist leader Enver (who had been a contemporary and close acquaintance in Manastir), was tried for treason in February 1914, but acquitted, and became one of the founders of al-Ahd. After the war, he settled in his native Egypt. By 1938, he was inspector-general of the Egyptian army but his promotion to chief of staff was blocked by the British, who suspected his loyalties. During the Second World War, he was interned as an Axis sympathiser. A group of officers led by Anwar al-Sadat tried to smuggle him across the lines to the Germans, and in 1947 a plot was uncovered to kill the Chief of the General Staff and appoint Aziz Ali in his place.⁴² In 1952, he played an important behind-the-scenes role in the preparation of the coup d’état of the Free Officers, the ‘Egyptian Revolution’. After the takeover by Nasser and Naguib he was appointed Egypt’s ambassador to Moscow and even seems to have been considered for the presidency. In his person, we see a direct link between the constitutional revolution of 1908 and the first of the ‘Arab socialist’ revolutions that transformed the Middle East in the 1950s.⁴³

Conclusion

The constitutional revolution of July 1908 in the Ottoman Empire formed part of a global revolutionary wave that occurred in the decade before the First World War and whose common denominators were a) that they were triggered when monarchic regimes that were authoritarian or even autocratic on the *inside* proved incapable of defending the empire against *external* threats from stronger European imperialist powers, and thus lost their legitimacy, which ultimately was based on the patriarchal claim of offering protection; and b) that the revolutionaries sought a solution in a form of liberal constitutionalism that was seen as a panacea for the country’s ills.

There were important differences too. When compared to other revolutions that occurred in the decade before the First World War, the Ottoman constitutional, or ‘Young Turk’ revolution had a very limited scope. The fact that it was executed by an underground organisation of Ottoman Muslim military officers and civil servants, and not by broad social coalition as in Russia or Iran, had an effect both on its programme and on its repertoire of actions. Unlike the Russian, Iranian, Portuguese and Chinese revolutionary movements (or, indeed, the Armenian one), the Young Turk movement did not contain a radical, socialist or republican wing. Its revolutionary programme was strictly political and limited to the introduction of basic freedoms (of the press, of speech, of assembly), parliamentary rule and constitutional guarantees. It did not include calls for social reform or social justice. As Nader Sohrabi has pointed out, its programme – like that of the other revolutions presented here – was constitutionalist. It is important, however, to note that ultimately its constitutionalist programme was instrumentalist, the ulterior aim being the

preserving and strengthening of the Ottoman state. Perhaps, therefore, it is right to say that of the five revolutions, the Young Turk one was actually the most conservative.

One could also argue that it was the least revolutionary. It did not bear any of the hallmarks of a classic 'revolution'. It was not the result of social protest, it was a relatively small-scale event, that took place in provincial areas rather than in the big cities or the capital and it did not lead to either large-scale violence or a full-blown regime change. Even so, its direct result, the reconvening of parliament and enforcing of the constitution, was generally interpreted as a true revolution and widely celebrated as the start of a new era, at home and abroad.

The influence of the Russian and Iranian revolutions on the Ottoman one seems to have been limited to that of a source of encouragement in a general sense. Ideologically, the Unionists were primarily influenced by the Young Turk constitutionalists who had been active since 1889, and who in turn were inspired by contemporary European positivism and materialism as well as by the European liberalism of the 1830s and 40s, which was transmitted to the empire by the first generation of Ottoman constitutionalists in the 1860s. In their organisation and activities, they largely copied the model developed by the Carbonari in Italy and generalised throughout Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but some specifics were copied from contemporary Bulgarian and Armenian secret societies. What set the Unionists apart from them, was their paramount interest in strengthening the Ottoman state, which explains their rejection of forms of activism that might invite foreign intervention, where the Bulgarians and Armenians embraced them.

The Young Turk revolution itself aroused a lot of interest among opposition groups worldwide, even as far away as China and Portugal, but its most direct influence (obviously, apart from Turkey itself) was in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and particularly in the Arab Middle East, where former Unionists continued to play important roles in politics until the 1950s and sometimes imitated the revolutionary methodology of the Committee of Union and Progress.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. This article is the outcome of two conferences organised by Mark Jones at University College Dublin in 2015 and 2016, which had as their theme 'Globalising the History of Revolutions'.
2. Nader Sohrabi, 'Historicizing Revolutions: Constitutional Revolutions in Russia, Iran and the Ottoman Empire, 1905–1908', *American Journal of Sociology* Vol.100, No.6 (1995), pp.1383–447.
3. Charles Kurzman, *Democracy Denied 1905–1915: Intellectuals and the Fate of Democracy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
4. Aykut Kansu, *The Revolution of 1908 in Turkey* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp.29–72.
5. *De Tijd* of 27 July 1908 called it 'a real evolution'. For its information it, like many European newspapers of the day, relied on *Berliner Tageblatt*, which had already reported on the revolution on 24 July (no. 372) and published an interview with Young Turk leader Ahmet Rıza in Paris the next day.
6. <http://anno.onb.ac.at/cgi-content/anno?aid=nfp&datum=19080725&seite=1&zoom=40> (accessed 9 October 2016)
7. The pioneer of this point of view was Yusuf Hikmet Bayur in the 1940s. His *Türk İnkılabı Tarihi* (History of the Turkish Revolution) started with the origins of the 1908 revolution. In the 1950s and 60s, Tarık Zafer Tunaya, adopted a similar approach. I myself have strongly advocated this view. That is why in my 1993 *Turkey A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris) the second part of the book was called 'The Young Turk Period 1908–1950'. This was a controversial view at the time, but has since become mainstream.
8. On the problematic 'double message' of the Unionists (advocating equality of all communities and speaking on behalf of the Muslim Ottomans at the same time), see Erik Jan Zürcher, 'Macedonians in Anatolia: The Importance of the Macedonian Roots of the Unionists for their Policies in Anatolia after 1914', *Middle Eastern Studies* 50/6 (2014), pp.960–75.

9. This is the interpretation preferred by Feroz Ahmad in his *The Young Turks. The Committee of Union and Progress in Turkish Politics 1908–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp.1–4.
10. The cabinet decision and imperial order are in *Düstur Tertip-i Sani*, Cilt 1, pp.3–4. Accessed through <http://acikerisim.tbmm.gov.tr:8080/xmlui/handle/11543/71> on 3 October 2016.
11. According to Kazım Karabekir, an early member and later a prominent general, the last membership number handed out before the revolution was 6436. This does not tell us how many members there were, however, as the Unionists often intentionally awarded high numbers to give new recruits the impression they were part of an impressive organisation. The most secure number seems to be that in Salonika 505 people had been initiated, of whom 360 were actually in Salonika at the time of the revolution. (Kazım Karabekir, *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti Neden Kuruldu, Nasıl Kuruldu ve Nasıl İdare Olundu*), İstanbul, 1982, p.180. Salonika at the time had a population of about 120,000.
12. H.E. Cengiz, *Enver Paşa'nın Anıları 1881–1908* (İstanbul: İletişim, 1991), pp.11–12.
13. Yusuf Hikmet Bayur, *Türk İnkılabı Tarihi 1/1* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1983), p.230.
14. Kâzım Nami Duru, *İttihat ve Terakki Hatıralarım* (İstanbul, n.p., 1957), p.14.
15. Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions 1492–1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
16. M. Şükrü Haniöğlü, *Preparation for a Revolution. The Young Turks, 1902–1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.104–24.
17. This part of the argument of Aykut Kansu in his otherwise valuable *The Revolution of 1908 in Turkey* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), has to be rejected. Forcing the Young Turk revolution into the mould of a social movement is artificial.
18. Cf. Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains. Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1909* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), chapter 1.
19. Douglas L. Wheeler, 'The Portuguese Revolution of 1910', *Journal of Modern History* Vol.44, No.2 (1972), pp.172–94.
20. Mangol Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution. Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1909* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.31.
21. Although the outbreak of the Iranian revolution is usually dated August 1906, there had been three strike waves between April 1905 and August 1906 in protest against the customs tariffs imposed by the Belgians on behalf of the government. Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp.50–1.
22. Jack Goldstone, 'East and West in the Seventeenth Century: Political Crises in Stuart England, Ottoman Turkey and Ming China', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol.30, No.1 (1988), pp.103–42.
23. Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution*, Chapter 4 'The Transcaucasian Connection'.
24. Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, 'Self-orientalisation and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the "Aryan" Discourse in Iran', *Iranian Studies* Vol.44, No.4 (2011), pp.445–72.
25. Barend ter Haar, *Het Hemels Mandaat. De Geschiedenis van het Chinese Keizerrijk* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), p.504 [Heavenly Mandate. The History of the Chinese Empire]. Edward J.M. Rhoads, *Manchus and Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861–1928* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).
26. Erik-Jan Zürcher, 'Young Turks, Ottoman Muslims and Turkish Nationalists: Identity Politics 1908–1938', in Kemal H. Karpat (ed.), *Ottoman Past and Today's Turkey* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp.150–79.
27. According to Abraham Ascher in his *The Revolution of 1905: Russia in Disarray* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), pp.167 ff, this is the consensus view, but he also notes that it has been challenged by those who emphasise social unrest in the army.
28. Douglas L. Wheeler, 'The Portuguese Revolution of 1910', *Journal of Modern History* Vol.44, No.2 (1972), pp.172–94.
29. Edmund S.K. Fung, 'Military Subversion in the Chinese Revolution of 1911', *Modern Asian Studies* Vol.9, No.1 (1975), pp.103–23.
30. Cf. Renée Worringer, *Ottomans Imagining Japan: East, Middle East, and Non-Western Modernity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).
31. Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution*, chapter 4. Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, pp.81–6.
32. Fethi Tevetoğlu, *Ömer Naci* (Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 1987), p.89.
33. François Georgeon, *Abdulhamid II: Le sultan calife* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), p.391.
34. Haniöğlü, *Preparation for a Revolution*, p.122.
35. Hourri Berberian, 'Connected Revolutions: Armenians and the Russian, Ottoman, and Iranian Revolutions in the Early Twentieth Century', in François Georgeon (ed.), *"Ivresse de la liberté": La révolution de 1908 dans l'Empire Ottoman* (Louvain: Peeters, 2012), pp.487–510.
36. The best study of 1860s Ottoman liberalism is still Şerif Mardin's *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernisation of Turkish Political Ideas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962).
37. Kazım Karabekir describes all of these extensively in his *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*.

38. Polat Safi, 'History in the Trench: The Ottoman Special Organisation – Teşkilat-i Mahsusa Literature', *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol.48, No.1 (2012), pp.89–106.
39. Niyazi describes his actions in detail in his *Hatirat-ı Niyazi Yahut Tarihçe-yi İnkılab-ı Kebir-i Osmaniden bir Sahife* (Istanbul: Sabah, 1326/1910), [Memoirs of Niyazi Or: A Page from the Great Ottoman Revolution]. The source is problematical as it was the only account of the revolution officially approved by the Committee. It therefore reflects the Committee's official viewpoint, but that pertains more to the overall picture of a carefully orchestrated campaign than to the everyday details Niyazi relates, and the many documents he includes.
40. Rebecca E. Karl, 'Revolution and Politics: The Young Turks and the Republican Chinese Revolution', in François Georgeon (ed.), *"Ivresse de la liberté": La révolution de 1908 dans l'Empire Ottoman* (Louvain: Peeters, 2012), pp.569–92.
41. Actually, 24 July (the day of the constitutional revolution) has been celebrated as 'Press Freedom Day' in Turkey since 1946.
42. Joel Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement. Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.41–44.
43. Arthur Goldschmidt, *Biographical Dictionary of Modern Egypt* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1999), p.130.