Mahmud II and the Re-Founding of the Ottoman Empire, 1808-1839

Part I: The Sultan – Mahmud II, the Architect of Modernity and Autocracy

Chapter 1: The Survivor of the Seraglio: Forging a Sultan (1785-1808)

1.1. The Prince of the *Kafes*

Mahmud II was born on July 20, 1785, in the month of Ramazan, at the Topkapi Palace in Constantinople.[1] He was the son of Sultan Abdülhamid I and his seventh consort, Nakşidil Kadın.[1] As a *şehzade* (prince), his early life was immediately subject to the persistent mythologies of the era. A popular but apocryphal rumor, circulated by English newspapers in 1807 and later favored by French journals, claimed that his mother Nakşidil was Aimee du Buc de Rivery, a French heiress captured by Algerian pirates and gifted to the Sultan's harem.[4] While historical consensus dismisses this claim—Sultan Abdülhamid I did marry Aimee, but she was not Mahmud's mother [4]—the rumor's endurance is itself significant. It reflected a European desire to project its own influence onto the Ottoman dynasty, to see the empire's potential for reform as a product of European "kinship" and aristocracy.[4]

Mahmud's father died when he was five.[4] Following tradition, he was then confined to the *Kafes* (the "Cage"), a section of the Imperial Harem designed to house potential heirs and prevent them from organizing rebellions.[1] However, Mahmud's confinement was not one of simple, isolating_ _privation. Critically, he shared this space with his older cousin, the reform-minded Sultan Selim III, who had been deposed.[1]

This shared confinement became the defining political crucible of Mahmud's life. Selim III, who had no children of his own, "protected and educated Şehzade Mahmud as if he were his own son".[4] Mahmud did not merely learn *about* Selim's ambitious *Nizam-ı Cedid* (New Order) reforms; he was a direct-line pupil of their author. He absorbed the philosophy of Western-style military and administrative modernization from the man himself.

More importantly, he received a traumatic, real-time education in political failure. From the *Kafes*, he watched as Selim's reforms—which threatened the established, corrupt order—led directly to his overthrow by reactionary forces.[4] This direct, personal observation of reform, rebellion, and failure is the psychological and political key to Mahmud II's entire 31-year reign. His political strategy was not just an imitation of Selim's; it was a cold, patient, and ruthless *correction* of Selim's fatal mistakes.

1.2. The Ascension: A Symphony of Blood (1807-1808)

The 1807 conservative coup, led by the Janissary corps, deposed Selim III and brought Mahmud's half-brother, Mustafa IV, to the throne.[1] This event terminated Selim's reforms.[1] The political turmoil reached its climax in 1808 when Alemdar Mustafa Pasha, a powerful *ayan* (provincial notable) from Ruse and a supporter of Selim's reforms, marched on Constantinople with his army to restore the deposed Sultan.[4]

As Alemdar's forces neared the palace, Mustafa IV, in a desperate bid to secure his throne by eliminating all other male heirs, ordered the execution of both Selim III and Mahmud II.[1] The executioners succeeded in murdering Selim III, who reportedly "resisted with his flute" but was ultimately strangled.[1]

The assassins then moved to Mahmud's chambers in the *Kafes*.[1] His life was saved by the quick-witted intervention of a concubine, Cevri Kalfa.[4] According to 19th-century historian Ahmed Cevdet Pasha, Cevri Kalfa "gathered ashes" and, as the assassins entered, "threw [the] ashes into their faces, blinding them".[1] This "temporarily kept them away" [1], allowing Mahmud to escape through a window and climb onto the roof of the harem.[1] By the time he was brought down, Alemdar Mustafa Pasha and his men had breached the palace gates.[10] Finding Selim's body, Alemdar wept, but his men quickly secured the surviving prince.[10] Alemdar Mustafa Pasha declared Mahmud the new sultan on July 28, 1808, as the 30th Ottoman Sultan.[3]

Mahmud's ascension was, therefore, not a mandate but a process of violent elimination. He was the last man standing in a room full of corpses. His reign was born from the direct observation of three critical failures: the failure of *reform from above* (Selim III, murdered by reactionaries); the failure of *reactionary conservatism* (Mustafa IV, a pawn of the Janissaries, immediately overthrown); and, as he would soon witness, the failure of *decentralized feudal power* (Alemdar Mustafa Pasha). This traumatic beginning forged his core, inflexible belief: the only path to the empire's survival was the total, ruthless elimination of *all* rival power blocs and the establishment of absolute, centralized autocracy.

Chapter 2: The Caged Monarch: The Politics of Patience (1808-1826)

2.1. The Kingmaker and the Charter: Mahmud's Initial Weakness

Upon his accession, Mahmud II was Sultan in name only. He was "a mere pawn in the hands of Alemdar Mustafa Paşa" [9], the man who had installed him. Alemdar became Grand Vizier [5], and "political authority was in [his] hands".[5] Mahmud's legitimacy was drawn not from the traditional Istanbul power centers like the Janissaries, but from the provincial *ayan* who had marched with Alemdar.[11]

This power dynamic was formalized in 1808 when Alemdar and the "Rumelian and Anatolian ayans, who had swarmed Istanbul," forced Mahmud to sign the *Sened-i İttifak* (Charter of Alliance).[5] This "Deed of Agreement" [13], often likened to the English Magna Carta [5], was a revolutionary document in Ottoman history. It attempted to formalize a power-sharing arrangement, explicitly shifting the "balance of power away from the sultan and towards government officers... and provincial notables".[9] The *ayan* promised loyalty, but the charter recognized their authority in their own lands.[5] For Mahmud, whose entire political education had pointed toward the necessity of centralization, this document was not a step toward constitutionalism; it was the formalization of the very "tyrannical administrators" [3] and decentralized *derebeys* (valley lords) [6] that were dissolving the empire.

2.2. The Double-Edged Sword of Alemdar's Fall

Mahmud would not be bound by the charter for long. Alemdar, acting with the "dictatorial attitude" of a kingmaker [5], immediately pursued his own reformist agenda, creating a new army called the *Sekban-ı Cedid* to replace the Janissaries.[5] This was a fatal repetition of Selim III's mistake: attempting to build a new army before destroying the old one.

The Janissaries, predictably, revolted in November 1808.[5] They besieged the Sublime Porte (the central government), and Alemdar Mustafa Pasha was killed in the uprising.[5] During this chaos, Mahmud II, fearing the rebels would depose him and restore his captive half-brother, acted with the ruthlessness he had learned. He "ordered the execution of his brother, the former Sultan Mustafa IV".[5]

This bloody and chaotic event, which Mahmud survived, was a "profit" for his political future.[16] In one stroke, he was "rid of" his last dynastic rival, Mustafa IV, and his over-mighty protector, Alemdar Mustafa Pasha.[16] With Alemdar's death, the *Sened-i İttifak* "never came into effect".[9] Mahmud had now learned his second crucial lesson: *ayan* power was as dangerous as Janissary power, and any attempt at reform *before* the total destruction of the Janissaries was suicide.

2.3. The Long Dissimulation (1808-1826)

For the next eighteen years, Mahmud II was a sultan in name but a prisoner in his own palace. He "temporarily abandoned the reforms" [1] and feigned acquiescence to the old order. He "endured continuous political harassment and humiliation at the hands of the Janissaries".[17] This long period of dissimulation, however, was not one of passivity. It was an 18-year "long game" of strategic patience, during which he quietly cultivated alternative power bases (like the artillery corps) and waited for the perfect moment to strike.

This period left "deep scars in Mahmud II's psyche and he developed a deep hatred for his tormentors".[17] This profound, trauma-induced paranoia became, in itself, a tool of statecraft. Even after he succeeded in destroying the Janissaries in 1826, Mahmud remained "hypersensitive" to conspiracy, "urg[ing] his ministers and officials to be vigilant for any signs of Janissary plots".[17] This was not merely a personal weakness; it was the mechanism he used to create a new, centralized police state. Government officials, realizing that "they had to appear more vigilant than the sultan if they were to protect their careers," began to exaggerate rumors and build an atmosphere of surveillance.[17] Thus, the Sultan's personal trauma was weaponized and institutionalized, transforming the diffuse, faction-ridden state into a centralized, paranoid security apparatus focused on absolute loyalty to the sovereign—a necessary prerequisite for the autocratic reforms to come.

Chapter 3: The 'Infidel Sultan': A Portrait of the Reformer

3.1. The New Image of the Sultan: Visibility and Autocracy

Often described by historians as the "Peter the Great of Turkey," Mahmud II was, above all, a revolutionary centralizer.[1] He understood that to remake the state, he first had to remake the very *concept* of the sultanate. He initiated what has been termed the "first shift in modern ruler visibility," transforming the Sultan from a secluded, semi-divine figure into an active, visible, and personal autocrat.[11]

His most radical act was his break with Islamic aniconic tradition. He had his own portrait painted and "had his pictures hung in government offices".[3] This was a profoundly shocking, and to conservatives, "infidel" act.[19] It was a visual declaration of war against the old order. Loyalty was no longer to be given to an abstract institution—the Caliphate, the Janissary corps, the *millet*—but to the *person* of Mahmud II. The bureaucracy would now be forced to conduct its business under the direct, unblinking gaze of its sovereign, a powerful psychological tool for enforcing centralization.

3.2. The Clothing Revolution

This "Westernization" (a term that in this context truly means *modernization* and

centralization) [11] was most visibly expressed in his "clothing revolution".[21] He personally adopted a "European-style dress code" of "jackets and trousers" (frock coat, trousers) and abandoned "traditional clothing".[3] He even "shortened his beard".[24]

This was not a matter of fashion; it was a political strategy. In the old empire, dress was a rigid "visual difference" [25] that defined one's religion, profession, and status.[21] The turban (sarık, kavuk) and robes (biniş) were symbols of the *ulema* (religious scholars) and the old elite. In 1829, Mahmud's edict (Kıyafet Nizamnamesi) "banned" the traditional turbans and robes for government personnel, replacing them with the "ceket, pantolon ve fes" (jacket, trousers, and fez).[23]

The choice of the fez was a masterstroke. It was not European, but it was also not traditional Ottoman. It was a *uniform*.[21] As analyzed by historians, the fez was intended to "enforce a visual uniformity and equality of all male subjects of the empire – Muslim, Christian, and Jew – in the eyes of the sultan".[25] It was the physical manifestation of his "Ottomanization" [11] policy: an attempt to erase old, fractured identities and create a single, modern "Ottoman" citizen, loyal only to the state and its monarch.

3.3. The Architect of the Tanzimat

Mahmud's personal vision was the creation of a centralized, "modern" [25] state capable of surviving in an "anarchic international order shaped by European great powers".[11] He sought to implement a form of "enlightened absolutism".[26] His reforms are not merely the *precursors* to the subsequent *Tanzimat* ("Reorganization") era; they *are* the beginning of the Tanzimat.[20] He "played a role in laying the foundations of the Tanzimat Edict" [2], which his son would formally proclaim shortly after his death.[2]

This relentless, 31-year struggle against a world of "turmoil and chaos" [3] wore the Sultan down. His reign was "so intense... it had worn out the sovereign".[20] A rare personal glimpse from this period records him as saying, "I am fed up with the troubles of the sultanate".[20] This quote reveals the immense personal burden of his project. He was fighting on every front simultaneously: against the provincial *ayan*, the *ulema*, the Janissaries, the Great Powers (Russia, Britain, France), and his own rebellious vassals. His notorious ruthlessness—the massacre of the Janissaries, the execution of his own brother, the suppression of all dissent—was born of a deeply held belief in the "vital necessity" [3] of his core mission: to save the state from total dissolution.[4]

Part II: The Empire – The Ottoman State in an Age of Crisis (1808-1839)

Chapter 4: *Vaka-i Hayriye*: The Destruction of the Old Order (1826)

4.1. The Obstacle: The Janissary Corps

For two centuries, the Ottoman state had been held hostage by its own elite military. The Janissary corps, once the most feared and disciplined army in Europe, had devolved into a "corrupt and politically powerful faction".[27] They had become a "privileged class" [29], exempt from taxes and entrenched in commerce, yet utterly "outdated" as a military force.[28] They were, simply, the "primary obstacle to reform".[27]

Their political power was absolute. They were king-breakers who "would rise in rebellion" at any hint of modernization.[28] They were responsible for the murder of the young reformer Osman II in 1622 [29] and, most recently, Mahmud's mentor Selim III.[27] Mahmud II knew from direct, traumatic experience that he could not reform the empire without first destroying them.

4.2. The "Auspicious Incident"

Unlike Selim III, Mahmud did not act until he was fully prepared. He spent the 18 years from 1808 to 1826 in "long dissimulation".[17] During this time, he "worked strategically to weaken" the Janissaries, while simultaneously "gaining the support of religious leaders" (*ulema*).[27] He also carefully cultivated the loyalty of other military units, particularly the new artillery corps.[27]

In 1826, he felt ready. He deliberately provoked the Janissaries by announcing the formation of a "new, Westernized" army, the *Eşkinci* corps.[27] As he had planned, the Janissaries revolted on June 15, 1826.[32]

Mahmud's response was swift, "brutal," and brilliant.[27] He unfurled the sacred "Standard of the Prophet" (*Sandgiak Sherif*) in the Hippodrome, calling on all "true believers" to rally to their Sultan.[35] This was a masterstroke of political theater. It immediately reframed the conflict not as a political coup, but as a religious war: the "Sultan and true Muslims" against the "rebels".[35] The *ulema* and the general public, who were "mainly happy" to see the end of the corrupt corps, rallied to his side.[27]

With this popular and religious mandate, Mahmud "declared war" on the rebels.[32] He "had cannon fire directed on their barracks," which were "burnt... in the Ahnudan".[32] The Janissaries were "crushed... with grape-shot".[35] The slaughter was systematic. Thousands were killed in the initial assault.[28] The survivors were hunted down, imprisoned, and "their possessions confiscated by the Sultan".[28] Many were executed by decapitation at the Thessaloniki fort that subsequently became known as the "Blood Tower".[28] Mahmud also "banned" the Bektashi dervish order, the Janissaries' spiritual allies, and "closed" their lodges,

completing the eradication of their entire socio-political structure.[37]
This event was officially named the *Vaka-i Hayriye* ("Auspicious Incident").[2] It was, in effect, a "revolution from above".[39] By liquidating a 500-year-old pillar of the state [34], Mahmud had achieved a "decisive break with the past".[27] He had "removed a major obstacle to his and his successors' reforms" [1], clearing the path for the total reconstruction of the Ottoman state.

4.3. The New Army: *Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediye*

With the Janissaries gone, Mahmud immediately established a "more modern military force" [36] on July 7, 1826.[40] It was named the *Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediye* ("The Victorious Soldiers of Muhammad").[28] This was a "new European-style army" [40], modeled on the armies he was fighting. It was a "conscription" force [42], manned by "ordinary Muslim villagers and the urban poor" [43], who were given "distinct uniforms" (Western tunics and trousers) [23] and trained in European discipline and tactics.[43]

4.4. The Short-Term Vulnerability Paradox

The creation of the *Mansure* army was a "singular event in Ottoman history" and an essential long-term political success.[27] However, its short-term military value was disastrously low. The new, untested army showed a "poor showing" in the wars that immediately followed: the Russo-Turkish War of 1828-1829 and the wars against Egypt.[27]
This created a critical "vulnerability window." In destroying the Janissaries in 1826, Mahmud had successfully eliminated his primary *internal* political threat, but he had also liquidated the empire's dysfunctional but still-existent *external* military backbone. He replaced it with a loyal but "in-training" force. This period of profound military weakness, from 1826 until his death in 1839, would be ruthlessly exploited by all of the empire's enemies—Russia, France, and, most humiliatingly, his own vassal, Muhammad Ali of Egypt.

Chapter 5: Rebuilding the State: The New Bureaucracy and Society

5.1. The Administrative Revolution

With the Janissary "veto" removed, Mahmud II unleashed a torrent of "sweeping changes to the bureaucracy".[1] His goal was to dismantle the "traditional institutions" [20] and rebuild the central government along a "European model" to "reestablish royal authority".[1]
He effectively dismantled the 400-year-old structure of the Imperial Council (Divan-ı

Hümayun), which had "lost its quality of being a council".[45] He replaced it with a modern, European-style executive branch:

- **Council of Ministers (*Meclis-i Vükela*):** Established in 1839, this was a "cabinet" created "to coordinate the executive activities of the ministry" and form policy.[1]
- **Prime Ministry:** He transformed the ancient and powerful office of the Grand Vizier (*Sadrazam*) into a "Prime Ministry" (*Başvekalet*), reducing its independent authority and making it a coordinating body for the new ministries.[20]
- **Ministries (*Nezaretler*):** He established distinct ministries for internal affairs, foreign affairs, and finance, similar to European models.[1]
- **Supreme Council of Judicial Ordinances (*Majlis al-Akhqam al-Adliyyah*):** Established in 1838, this body was a "supreme executive council" [45] and a first step toward separating legislative and judicial functions from the pure executive.[1]

Simultaneously, he "abolished military fiefs" (the *timar* system) in 1831 [22], ending the power of the *sipahi* cavalry and centralizing all state revenue. He launched a long campaign to "submission[...]" the provincial *ayan* and *derebeys* to "central authority".[1]

5.2. The Chaos of Rapid Modernization

This revolution from above was not without its problems. These reforms "were made very quickly" [20] and were "rather than a planned and programmed structure".[20] The result was often operational chaos, "many disruptions," and "struggle for influence" between liberal and conservative wings of the new bureaucracy.[20] The "customs and habits in the state's functioning ceased to exist," creating new problems.[20]

A primary reason for these difficulties was the "lack of trained statesmen" [20] to implement such a radical vision. Mahmud was, in effect, building a new state in the middle of a war, leading some to dismiss the changes as "useless imitation of Europe".[45] This administrative instability was a direct contributing factor to the empire's poor performance, even as it laid the essential groundwork for the more stable *Tanzimat* era that would follow.[20]

5.3. Forging the New Elite: Education and Propaganda

Mahmud understood that a new state required a new elite. He explicitly sought to "create [a] new educated elite along western lines as an alternative to the madrasa-educated elite (viz., the ulama)".[23]

- **Education:** He introduced "compulsory primary education" [22], though its implementation was limited. More concretely, he opened the first modern "medical school" in 1827 [22] and the *Mekteb-i Harbiye* (Imperial War College) in 1834 to train officers for his new army.[37] Critically, in 1827, he "sent the first group of 150 students to European countries" [23], planting the seeds for a future generation of Western-fluent

pashas and bureaucrats, such as Mustafa Reşid Pasha, the future architect of the 1839 *Tanzimat* edict.[26]

- **Propaganda:** In October 1831, Mahmud founded the *Takvim-i Vekayi* ("Calendar of Events") [47], the "first official newspaper of the Ottoman Empire".[48] This was a modern tool of statecraft. Its explicit purpose was to "manufacture and inform public opinion" [50], to be the official outlet for "new laws and decrees" [48], and to promote the "vocabulary of the reform".[51] By publishing in multiple languages (Ottoman Turkish, French, Armenian, Greek, and Arabic) [47], it served as a key instrument of his "Ottomanization" policy, attempting to create a single, unified "public" that received its information directly from the Sultan, bypassing the *ulema* and other traditional information-brokers.

5.4. Reforming the *Millets*

Mahmud's reforms aimed to create a single Ottoman citizenry. This directly impacted the traditional *millet* system, which had long granted non-Muslim communities (such as Greeks, Armenians, and Jews) autonomy over their own legal, religious, and educational affairs.[52] While the system was not dismantled, his reforms (like the universal fez) were designed to "eliminate the visual differences" [25] between subjects. His reign saw new arrangements, such as the Armenian Patriarchate being formally recognized as the "second religious community".[54]

This created a profound contradiction. Mahmud's reforms, which would lead to the 1839 Edict of Gülhane [25], offered non-Muslims a path toward *equality* as citizens. However, his centralization and "Ottomanization" policies simultaneously *undermined* the traditional *autonomy* and privileges these communities had enjoyed for centuries.[25] This tension—between the promise of new equality and the loss of old autonomy—would not dampen nationalism as Mahmud had hoped. Instead, it would be exploited by European powers and would, in many ways, fuel the very nationalist secessions (like the Greek revolt) that his reforms were designed to prevent.[53]

Reform Category	Key Institution / Law / Action	Year(s)	Stated Purpose / Significance
Military	*Vaka-i Hayriye* (Auspicious Incident)	1826	Abolition of the Janissary Corps, the main obstacle to reform.[27]
Military	*Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediye*	1826	Establishment of a new, modern, European-style conscript army.[28]
Military	*Mekteb-i Harbiye* (War	1834	To train a new,

	College)		Western-style officer corps for the *Mansure* army.[37]
Military	Abolition of Timar/Sipahi System	1831	Abolished military fiefs, centralizing military and state revenue.[22]
Administrative	*Meclis-i Vükela* (Council of Ministers)	1839	Creation of a European-style cabinet to coordinate government.[1]
Administrative	Reorganization of Ministries	1830s	Transformed old offices into modern ministries (e.g., Foreign Office, Internal Affairs).[1]
Administrative	*Majlis al-Akhqam al-Adliyyah*	1838	Supreme Council of Judicial Ordinances; first step to separating powers.[1]
Administrative	Re-centralization of *Ayan* Power	1810s-1830s	Long campaign to break the power of provincial notables.[1]
Social / Cultural	Clothing Reform Edict (The Fez)	1829	To "eliminate visual differences" and create a uniform Ottoman citizenry.[3]
Social / Cultural	Hanging of Sultan's Portrait	c. 1830s	Broke aniconic tradition; asserted personal, modern sovereignty.[3]
Educational	Compulsory Primary Education	c. 1820s	First attempt to create a modern, state-run education system.[22]
Educational	Students Sent to Europe	1827	To create a new, Western-educated elite loyal to the state.[23]
Educational	*Takvim-i Vekayi* (Official Newspaper)	1831	First official gazette; a tool for state propaganda and "manufacturing public

			opinion".[47]

Chapter 6: The Unraveling Periphery: War, Secession, and Intervention

Mahmud's internal revolution occurred against a backdrop of relentless external pressure and territorial disintegration. The "vulnerability window" he opened by destroying the Janissaries in 1826 was exploited by all.

6.1. The Russian Menace: 1812 and 1829

- **Russo-Turkish War (1806-1812):** Mahmud inherited this conflict. He was forced to conclude it with the **Treaty of Bucharest (May 28, 1812)**.[55] This was a tactical necessity for both sides: Russia, led by General Mikhail Kutuzov, needed to free up its southern army to face Napoleon's impending invasion.[56] The price for peace was high: the Ottoman Empire "ceded" the province of Bessarabia to Russia [1] and was forced to grant an "amnesty and a promise of autonomy for the Serbs".[58]
- **Russo-Turkish War (1828-1829):** This war was a direct consequence of the Greek crisis [59] and Mahmud's military weakness post-1826. Russia, posing as the protector of Orthodox Greeks, declared war.[60] The new, untested *Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediye* army [27] was no match for the Russian forces, which "invaded through the Balkans" [59] and advanced as far as Adrianople (Edirne), threatening the capital.[59]
- **Treaty of Adrianople (1829):** The resulting peace was a catastrophe.[60] The Ottomans were forced to:
    1. Accept Greek autonomy (leading to full independence).[61]
    2. Reaffirm autonomy for Serbia.[62]
    3. Cede the Danubian Principalities (Moldavia and Wallachia) to a *de facto* Russian protectorate, "for all practical purposes... independent".[61]
    4. Cede further territory in the Caucasus (Anapa, Poti, Akhaltsikhe) to Russia.[60]
    5. Open the Dardanelles and Bosporus "to all commercial vessels," undermining Ottoman sovereignty over its own straits.[61]

6.2. The Greek Revolution and the "Accident" at Navarino

The Greek War of Independence (1821-1829) was the first successful nationalist secession of Mahmud's reign, setting a dangerous precedent.[63] Unable to suppress the revolt with his own forces, Mahmud made a "faustian bargain" by summoning the aid of his powerful, modern-army-wielding vassal, Muhammad Ali, the governor of Egypt.[22]
The brutal "atrocities" committed by the combined Ottoman-Egyptian forces (such as the

massacres at Chios and Missolonghi) [65] provoked outrage in Europe, leading the Great Powers—Britain, France, and Russia—to intervene.[63]

On October 20, 1827, at the **Battle of Navarino**, the "devastating" [65] engagement occurred. The Allied European fleet, under the command of Admiral Edward Codrington, entered Navarino harbor, claiming "there was no intention to engage in battle" but only to "make a show of force".[67] A shot was fired, and in the ensuing battle, the allied fleet, with its "superior firepower and gunnery," completely annihilated the combined Ottoman-Egyptian armada.[22] The Ottomans lost "three quarters" of their fleet [70], with "sixty out of eighty-nine vessels" destroyed and 8,000 men killed.[71]

The Greek crisis perfectly illustrated the "Eastern Question" trap that defined Mahmud's reign. He was too weak to defeat his own rebels, too weak to refuse the "help" of his ambitious vassal, and too weak to defy the "interference" [25] of the Great Powers.

6.3. The Loss of Algeria (1830) and the Cascade of Failures

The empire's prostration was complete. In 1830, reeling from the defeat at Navarino (1827) and the disastrous Russian War (1829), the empire was powerless to stop France from invading and seizing Algeria.[3]

These events were not isolated; they were an interconnected "cascade of failures" occurring within a four-year window. The *Vaka-i Hayriye* (1826) created the military power vacuum. This vacuum was immediately exploited by the Great Powers at Navarino (1827). That naval defeat was exploited by Russia in the 1828-1829 War. And this total military and political prostration was exploited by France in Algeria (1830).

Year(s)	**Conflict**	**Key Battle(s)**	**Treaty**	**Outcome / Significance**
1806-1812	Russo-Turkish War	(Ongoing)	Treaty of Bucharest (1812)	Inherited war. Loss of Bessarabia. Autonomy for Serbia.[22]
1821-1829	Greek War of Independence	Siege of Missolonghi	(Intervention)	Successful nationalist secession. Triggers European intervention.[63]
1827	Great Power Intervention	**Battle of Navarino**	(N/A)	Annihilation of Ottoman-Egyptian fleet by Allied (UK, FR, RUS) navy.[22]
1826	Internal Conflict	**Vaka-i Hayriye**	(N/A)	"Auspicious

				Incident." Destruction of the Janissary Corps.[32]
1828-1829	Russo-Turkish War	Battle of Kulevicha	Treaty of Adrianople (1829)	Catastrophic defeat. Greek independence confirmed. Russian protectorate over Danubian Principalities.[60]
1830	French Imperialism	(Invasion)	(N/A)	Loss of Algeria to France.[3]
1831-1833	First Egyptian-Ottoman War	**Battle of Konya (1832)**	Convention of Kütahya (1833)	Humiliating defeat by vassal. Muhammad Ali gains Syria.[22]
1833	Diplomatic Crisis	(N/A)	Treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi	Sultan, desperate for aid, makes empire a *de facto* Russian protectorate.[22]
1839	Second Egyptian-Ottoman War	**Battle of Nizip**	(N/A)	Final, crushing defeat of new Ottoman army.[22]

Chapter 7: The Final Crisis: The Rebellious Vassal, Muhammad Ali (1831-1839)

The greatest threat Mahmud II faced came not from a foreign power, but from within. The "empire-wide civil war" [74] with his own vassal, Muhammad Ali of Egypt, defined the final, humiliating decade of his reign.

7.1. The First Egyptian-Ottoman War (1831-1833)

Muhammad Ali, having lost his fleet at Navarino in the Sultan's service [66], demanded Syria as compensation.[22] Mahmud "refused".[22] In 1831, Muhammad Ali's son, Ibrahim Pasha, invaded Syria with his "well-trained western-style army".[72]
This was the ultimate humiliation: the "student" humiliating the "master." Mahmud's new

Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediye was utterly "routed" at the **Battle of Konya (1832)** [22] by the *superior* modern army of his own vassal. Ibrahim Pasha's army was now advancing on Constantinople itself.[22]
In total desperation, Mahmud "sought British aid".[22] Britain, with France "supporting Egypt," "refused".[22]
This forced the ultimate humiliation. Mahmud "then turned to" his arch-nemesis, **Russia**, for help.[22] Russia, seeing a golden opportunity to dominate the Ottoman Empire, "sent its fleet to the Bosporus" [22] and "saved" the Sultan from his own vassal. The price for this "aid" was the **Treaty of Hünkâr İskelesi (1833)** [22], a "mutual defense" pact that effectively made the Ottoman Empire a Russian protectorate.
The war was temporarily paused by the **Convention of Kütahya (1833)**, which "forced" Mahmud to grant Muhammad Ali control of Syria, ceding the provinces to his rebellious vassal.[72]

7.2. The Final Defeat and Death (1839)

Mahmud II, "determined to take revenge" [22], spent the last six years of his life rebuilding his army for a "second war".[73] In 1839, he launched his attack.
The result was the final, crushing defeat of his reign. On **June 24, 1839**, his army was annihilated at the **Battle of Nizip**.[22] In a final, "heavy blow" [20], the entire Ottoman fleet, dispatched to fight, instead "desert[ed]... to Muḥammad ʿAlī" in Alexandria.[66]
Sultan Mahmud II died of tuberculosis on July 1, 1839.[1] He died "a few days before" [22] the news of his army's complete destruction at Nizip reached the capital.

7.3. The "Successful Failure"

Mahmud II died at the absolute nadir of his reign. By every immediate metric, his 31-year project was a failure. His empire was only "saved" by the intervention of the "Great Powers" (Britain, Russia, Austria, Prussia) [76], who would settle the Egyptian crisis *after* his death, forcing Muhammad Ali out of Syria. His new army was destroyed. His new navy had defected. His rebellious vassal had won.
This narrative of failure, however, obscures his true, monumental success. His life's work was not to win wars—he failed at that. His life's work was to "eliminate a significant obstacle to reform".[27] In this, he had succeeded spectacularly.
He was the *architect* [26] who had, through "drastic change" [20] and ruthless determination, "laid the foundations of the Tanzimat Edict".[2] He had created the *centralized state apparatus*—the ministries [1], the schools [23], the press [48], and the very *idea* of a modern "Ottoman citizen" [25]—that his son, Abdülmecid I [1], would inherit. Just months after Mahmud's death, his son would use this new state machine to proclaim the *Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane* (Noble Rescript of

the Rose Chamber) [25], initiating the *Tanzimat* era and the empire's last great project of survival. Mahmud II lost nearly every battle, but in destroying the old order, he created the modern state that allowed the Ottoman Empire to endure for another 80 years.

Conclusions

The 31-year reign of Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839) represents a violent and paradoxical turning point in Ottoman history. His legacy is one of profound, intertwined success and failure.

1. **The Architect of Autocracy:** Mahmud II, the *man*, was forged by the trauma of the *Kafes* and the bloody 1808 coup that brought him to power. His observation of the failures of his reformist predecessor (Selim III), his reactionary half-brother (Mustafa IV), and his over-mighty *ayan* protector (Alemdar Mustafa Pasha) convinced him that the only path to survival was absolute, centralized autocracy. His 18-year "long dissimulation," his calculated ruthlessness (the execution of his brother, the massacre of the Janissaries), and his "infidel" projection of personal power (hanging his portrait) were the necessary tools of a survivor determined to break all rival power centers.
2. **The Internal Revolution:** His greatest success was purely internal. The 1826 *Vaka-i Hayriye* (Auspicious Incident) was not merely a military reform; it was a revolution from above. By liquidating the 500-year-old Janissary corps, he removed the primary "obstacle" to modernization. In its place, he built the *entire* infrastructure of a modern state: a European-style cabinet (*Meclis-i Vükela*), a new conscript army (*Asakir-i Mansure-i Muhammediye*), a new Western-style officer corps (*Mekteb-i Harbiye*), a state propaganda arm (*Takvim-i Vekayi*), and a new, secular-minded elite. He was, in every sense, the "architect" of the *Tanzimat* reforms that would define the next generation.
3. **The Vulnerability Paradox:** However, this internal revolution was the direct cause of his external failures. The destruction of the Janissaries created a "vulnerability window" (1826-1839) where the empire possessed a loyal, but untrained, new army. This weakness was immediately and ruthlessly exploited, leading to a "cascade of failures": the humiliation at Navarino (1827), the catastrophic Treaty of Adrianople (1829), the loss of Algeria (1830), and, most painfully, the military routs at Konya (1832) and Nizip (1839) at the hands of his *own vassal*, Muhammad Ali, who had modernized *faster and better*.

Mahmud II's reign is the story of a man who successfully tore down a 500-year-old building, but died in the rubble just as the foundations for the new one were laid. He died at the moment of his empire's greatest humiliation, his armies and navy defeated. Yet, in failing, he had succeeded. He bequeathed to his son not a powerful empire, but a *functional modern state*—the only tool that could give the "Sick Man of Europe" a fighting chance for survival in the century to come.

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