The Gilded Cage and the Iron Web: Sultan Abdul Hamid II and the Agony of the Late Ottoman Empire

Introduction: The Hamidian Paradox

The long reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876–1909) stands as the most complex, controversial, and pivotal epoch in the late history of the Ottoman Empire. Spanning thirty-three years, his rule bridged the gap between the traditional, dynastic empire of the nineteenth century and the radical, nationalist modernity of the twentieth. To his contemporaries in the West and his liberal critics at home, Abdul Hamid was the "Red Sultan" (*Kızıl Sultan*), a blood-soaked tyrant who suspended the constitution, presided over the massacres of Armenians, and ruled through a suffocating network of spies and censors.[1] Yet, to his supporters and a growing revisionist historiography, he was the "Great Khan" (*Ulu Hakan*), a pious genius who delayed the inevitable collapse of the state by a generation through diplomatic cunning, the strategic use of the Caliphate, and a modernization drive that laid the physical and educational foundations of modern Turkey.[3]

This report provides an exhaustive analysis of this polarizing figure and the empire he ruled. It moves beyond the binary of tyrant versus savior to examine the structural, psychological, and geopolitical realities of the Hamidian era. The analysis is divided into two primary spheres: the first dissects the Sultan himself—his psychology, his fortress-world at Yıldız Palace, and his method of rule; the second analyzes the Empire—its governance, its economic strangulation by European powers, its frantic military reforms, and the explosion of ethno-religious violence that characterized the era. The evidence suggests that the Hamidian era was not a period of stagnation, as often claimed by early republican historians, but a frenetic era of autocratic modernization where railways, telegraphs, and schools were deployed as tools of absolutist control, ultimately creating the very class of men who would overthrow the Sultanate.

Chapter 1: The Man in the Shadow: Psychology and Persona

To understand the governance of the Ottoman Empire between 1876 and 1909, one must first understand the psychology of the man who concentrated all its power into his own hands.

Abdul Hamid II's character was not merely a personal quirk; it was a geopolitical factor. His fears, his habits, and his worldview became the state's policy.

1.1 The Trauma of Succession and the Roots of Paranoia

Abdul Hamid II ascended the throne on August 31, 1876, in an atmosphere of profound instability that would permanently scar his psyche. He was the third Sultan to sit on the throne in a single year. His uncle, Sultan Abdülaziz, had been deposed and died under suspicious circumstances—officially ruled a suicide by scissors, but widely believed by the Ottoman elite, and Abdul Hamid himself, to be a political murder.[5] His elder brother, Murad V, reigned for only 93 days before being deposed due to a severe mental breakdown.[5]

This turbulent succession instilled in Abdul Hamid a deep-seated, lifelong insecurity. He ascended the throne with the conviction that the seat of power was a death trap. Psychological assessments of the Sultan by historians and contemporaries alike point to a personality dominated by "chronic delirium" or paranoia—a condition characterized by an illogical but unshakable loss of confidence in others and a pervasive suspicion of conspiracy.[7] Unlike his predecessors, who often delegated vast powers to the Grand Vizier and the Sublime Porte (the central bureaucracy), Abdul Hamid viewed the bureaucracy as the very apparatus that had destroyed his uncle and brother. He famously remarked to the British Ambassador Henry Layard that there was "no one whom he could trust," a sentiment that led him to micromanage the empire to a paralyzing degree.[6]

This lack of trust extended to his immediate family. Having witnessed the perceived meddling of the imperial harem in the reigns of his father Abdülmecid I and his uncle Abdülaziz, Abdul Hamid enforced a strict separation between his family and the state. He allowed none of his consorts to have political influence, explicitly barring even his adoptive mother, Rahime Perestu Sultan, from the corridors of power.[1] The only exception to this isolation was his half-sister and adoptive sister, Cemile Sultan, whose counsel he occasionally sought, perhaps because she shared his traumatic lineage.[1]

1.2 The Architecture of Isolation: Yıldız Palace

The physical manifestation of Abdul Hamid's psychology was the Yıldız Palace. While his predecessors had embraced the waterfront grandeur of Dolmabahçe and Çırağan palaces, which left them vulnerable to naval bombardment or amphibious coups, Abdul Hamid retreated inland. He expanded the Yıldız estate, located on a defensible hill, into a fortified city-within-a-city.

Yıldız was more than a residence; it was a labyrinth designed for security. It housed not only the imperial family but also the *Mabeyn* (the Imperial Secretariat), a theatre, a carpentry workshop, a porcelain factory, and barracks for his trusted Albanian guard units. From this citadel, the Sultan ruled as a recluse, rarely venturing into the city of Istanbul except for the

mandatory Friday prayer procession (*Selamlık*), which itself became a heavily guarded security operation.[5]

The centralization of power at Yıldız meant that the traditional seat of government, the Sublime Porte, was reduced to an executive agency carrying out orders emanating from the Palace. The Sultan demanded that all decisions, no matter how trivial, be referred to him. Ambassador Layard recounted finding the Sultan personally scrutinizing the regulations for cabarets in the Pera district—a task typically suited for a low-level municipal clerk.[6] This obsession with detail resulted in a massive bottleneck; mounds of paperwork, reportedly up to 1,200 documents a day, stacked up on his desk. The empire's administration often ground to a halt waiting for the Sultan's *irade* (decree), as his fear of delegating authority paralyzed the state machinery.[6]

1.3 Daily Rhythms: The Carpenter and the Detective

Contrary to the Orientalist caricature of the idle despot whiling away hours in the harem, Abdul Hamid II was a disciplined workaholic with a regimented daily routine. His daughter, Ayşe Osmanoğlu, in her memoirs *My Father, Sultan Abdülhamid*, provides a rare and humanizing glimpse into his private life. She describes a father who rose before sunrise, performed the *fajr* prayer, took a cold bath, and dressed simply before beginning a workday that often lasted well into the night.[8]

The Solace of Craft

The Sultan sought psychological refuge in tangible, controllable tasks. He was an accomplished carpenter and cabinetmaker, a hobby he pursued with professional seriousness in his private workshop at Yıldız. Woodworking offered something politics could not: a problem with a clear solution, materials that did not lie, and a finished product that was solely the result of his own labor.[1] Some of his finely crafted furniture remains in the imperial collections today, a testament to the artisan who wore the crown.[9]

The Detective Fiction Obsession

Perhaps the most revealing of his private habits was his obsession with Western detective fiction, particularly the Sherlock Holmes stories of Arthur Conan Doyle. The Sultan found the logical deduction of the detective genre soothing to his anxious mind. In a world of opaque political conspiracies, the detective novel offered a universe where crimes were solved, the guilty were punished, and order was restored through the application of reason. He had these novels translated by a dedicated bureau at the palace and read to him at night by his *Esvapçıbaşı* (Chief of the Wardrobe) to help him sleep. He explicitly stated that he avoided

"deep, thought-provoking books" at bedtime, fearing they would stimulate his mind and worsen his chronic insomnia.[8] This literary taste underscores a fundamental aspect of his rule: a desire for a legible, ordered world where the sovereign could act as the ultimate detective, uncovering the plots against him.

Western Tastes and Personal Wealth

Despite his public cultivation of Pan-Islamism and conservatism, Abdul Hamid's personal tastes were decidedly Western. He was a devotee of Western opera and theater, maintaining a private opera house at Yıldız where he enjoyed performances of Verdi and Rossini.[4] He drank coffee in the European style and enjoyed walking in the palace gardens with his officials, discussing state affairs in a relatively informal manner.[8]
Financially, Abdul Hamid was astute and fiercely protective of his personal assets. Over his long reign, he amassed a personal fortune estimated at $1.5 billion (in adjusted terms). He treated the empire's lands, particularly the oil-rich regions of Mosul and Kirkuk, as his private property (*Emlak-ı Şahane*), a move that arguably preserved them from immediate foreign concession. Following his deposition and death, his estate became the subject of a massive, five-year lawsuit in 1930, where his nine widows and thirteen children sued for a share of his vast wealth, eventually being granted $50 million.[1] This separation of personal wealth from state treasury indicates a ruler who, perhaps anticipating his own fall, sought to secure his family's future independent of the Ottoman state's survival.

Chapter 2: The Apparatus of Absolutism: Governance and Control

Abdul Hamid II's governance strategy was a response to the perceived failures of the *Tanzimat* era (1839–1876). The *Tanzimat* bureaucrats had sought to save the empire through liberalization and the imitation of European legal norms. Abdul Hamid, conversely, believed that the empire was too heterogeneous and fragile for liberal democracy. He argued that a strong center was required to hold the fracturing mosaic of ethnicities together.

2.1 The Suspension of the Constitution: A Modern Autocracy

The Sultan ascended the throne during the "First Constitutional Era," having promulgated the *Kanûn-ı Esâsî* (Constitution of 1876) to placate the Young Ottomans and European powers. However, the disastrous Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 changed the calculus. The war resulted in the loss of vast territories in the Balkans (Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania) and the Caucasus, and brought Russian troops to the gates of Istanbul.[5]

Abdul Hamid used the chaos of the war and the bickering of the parliament as a pretext to suspend the constitution in February 1878 and dissolve the parliament. He did not abolish the constitution formally; he simply "suspended" it, maintaining the legal fiction that the state was still a constitutional monarchy, merely one under a temporary state of emergency that happened to last thirty years.[2] This marked the beginning of the period known as *Istibdad* (autocracy).

However, to characterize Hamidian rule as a return to medieval despotism is a mistake. It was a *modern* autocracy. Abdul Hamid utilized the new technologies of the telegraph and the railway to centralize power in a way no previous Sultan could. The telegraph allowed him to bypass provincial governors and communicate directly with local military commanders and district officials, tightening the center's grip on the periphery to an unprecedented degree.[5]

2.2 The Mabeyn Secretariat: The Shadow Government

With the parliament dissolved and the Sublime Porte distrusted, the locus of power shifted to the *Mabeyn-i Hümayun* (Imperial Secretariat) at Yıldız Palace. The Grand Vizier, traditionally the Sultan's executive deputy, was reduced to a figurehead. Real power lay with the Sultan's private secretaries, who controlled access to the sovereign and filtered the information he received.[11]

Table 1: The Architects of the Shadow State

Figure	Position	Function and Influence
Tahsin Pasha	First Secretary (Chief Clerk)	Known as "Black Tahsin" (*Kara Tahsin*). Serving from 1894 to 1908, he was the gatekeeper of the Sultan. His power exceeded that of the Grand Vizier. He was appointed for his loyalty and "good character" rather than administrative brilliance, reflecting the Sultan's preference for obedient servants over independent statesmen.[12]
Izzat Pasha al-Abid	Second Secretary	A Syrian Arab, he was nicknamed "Arab Izzat." He was a crucial advisor on Arab affairs and the primary driver behind the Hejaz Railway project. His prominence signaled the Sultan's strategy

		of integrating Arab notables into the core of the Ottoman state to counter Arab nationalism.[14]
Fehim Pasha	*Serhafiye* (Chief of Intelligence)	A feared figure who ran the *Umur-u Hafiye* (intelligence service). He used his position for rampant corruption, blackmail, and terrorizing the Istanbul elite. His unchecked power symbolized the rot at the heart of the Hamidian police state.[15]
Ahmed Cevdet Pasha	Jurist & Scholar	Although from the Tanzimat generation, he was instrumental in the Hamidian era as the architect of the *Mecelle* (Civil Code). He represented the conservative modernization the Sultan favored—modernizing law without abandoning Islamic foundations.[16]

The rise of men like Tahsin Pasha created a dual structure of government. There was the official ministry, which handled routine administration, and the Palace clique, which made the actual decisions. This structure fostered intense factionalism. Tahsin Pasha, for instance, was in a constant power struggle with other palace favorites and the Grand Vizier Mehmed Ferid Pasha, often accusing rivals of incompetence or disloyalty to maintain his own position.[12]

2.3 The Hafiye System: The Psychology of Surveillance

To maintain control over this fractured system, Abdul Hamid constructed the *Yıldız Intelligence Organization* (*Yıldız İstihbarat Teşkilatı*), a vast, informal network of spies known as *hafiyes*. This was not a professional intelligence agency in the modern sense but a sprawling patronage network. The Sultan encouraged subjects from all walks of life—bureaucrats, army officers, merchants, and even street sweepers—to submit "jurnals" (reports) on their colleagues and neighbors directly to the palace.[5]

This system created a culture of profound paranoia. An estimated tens of thousands of *jurnals* flooded the palace, many of them baseless denunciations motivated by personal vendettas or the desire for reward. Yet, the Sultan read them voraciously, convinced that this flow of raw information protected him from the "trap" of the bureaucracy.[6] The *Hafiye* system was less

about gathering actionable intelligence and more about creating an atmosphere of fear; when anyone could be a spy, organized opposition became incredibly difficult.

2.4 Censorship and Intellectual Suffocation

Complementing the spy network was a rigorous censorship regime. The Public Education Ministry and the Press Directorate scrutinized every publication. A list of banned words was developed, reflecting the Sultan's specific anxieties. Words like "constitution," "parliament," "liberty," "assassination," "dynamite," and even "nose" (allegedly, due to the Sultan's sensitivity about his own prominent nose) were excised from newspapers and books.[5]
This intellectual suffocation drove the Ottoman intelligentsia underground or into exile. The poet Tevfik Fikret captured the mood of the era in his famous poem *Sis* ("The Fog"), which described Istanbul not as the glorious capital of the world, but as a cursed, suffocating city shrouded in a "veiled, black, darkness." Fikret's work, distributed secretly, became an anthem for the opposition, symbolizing the profound alienation of the educated elite from the Hamidian state.[18]

Chapter 3: The Ideological Fortress: Pan-Islamism

While Abdul Hamid used repression at home, he deployed a sophisticated ideological weapon on the global stage: Pan-Islamism (*Ittihad-ı Islam*). Following the loss of the Christian-majority Balkan provinces in 1878, the empire's demographic center of gravity shifted decisively to the Muslim populations of Anatolia and the Arab Middle East. Abdul Hamid recognized that the old "Ottomanism" (the idea of a shared citizenship regardless of religion) was dead. To hold the remaining empire together, he needed a new glue: Islam.

3.1 The Caliphate as Geostrategy

Abdul Hamid emphasized his title of **Caliph** (*Amir al-Mu'minin*) more than any Ottoman Sultan since the 16th century. This was not merely religious piety; it was a calculated geopolitical strategy.

1. **Internal Cohesion:** By emphasizing his role as the spiritual leader of all Muslims, he sought to bind the Kurds, Albanians, and Arabs to the Turkish center. The loyalty of these groups was fraying under the pressure of rising nationalism. The Caliphate offered a supranational identity that could override ethnic differences.[4]
2. **External Leverage:** The Great Powers—Britain, France, Russia, and the Netherlands—ruled over millions of Muslim subjects in India, North Africa, Central Asia, and the East Indies. Abdul Hamid cultivated the image that he held the loyalty of these subject populations. The implication was clear: if the European powers pushed the

Ottoman Empire too far, the Caliph could issue a call for *Jihad*, igniting a global Muslim uprising across their colonial empires.[5]

3.2 The Global Reach: From Java to Beijing

The Sultan's emissaries and propaganda reached far beyond the empire's borders. He distributed printed Qurans and sent scholars to Muslim communities in South Africa, Japan, India, and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). In Indonesia, Ottoman consuls distributed images of the Sultan and spread the idea that the Caliph was the protector of the faithful against Dutch colonialism, inspiring local resistance movements.[22]

The Mission to China (1901):

A striking example of this global strategy was the Ottoman mission to China during the Boxer Rebellion. In 1901, Kaiser Wilhelm II, alarmed by the participation of Chinese Muslims (the Kansu Braves) in the anti-Western rebellion, asked Abdul Hamid to use his spiritual authority to pacify them. The Sultan agreed, seeing an opportunity to assert his global leadership. He dispatched a delegation led by Enver Celalettin Pasha to Beijing. Although the rebellion ended before the delegation could have a military impact, the mission was a diplomatic success. Enver Celalettin Pasha established contact with Chinese Muslim leaders, distributed gifts, and explored the establishment of an Ottoman university in Beijing. This move signaled to the world that the Sultan's influence extended to the walls of the Forbidden City.24

The Complex Case of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani:

The Sultan's relationship with the famous Pan-Islamist ideologue Jamal al-Din al-Afghani illustrates the tension in his policy. Abdul Hamid invited al-Afghani to Istanbul in 1892 to harness his prestige. However, the Sultan was deeply suspicious of al-Afghani's revolutionary and constitutionalist ideas. While they shared the goal of Islamic unity against the West, their methods differed. Consequently, Abdul Hamid kept al-Afghani as an "honored guest" who was, in reality, a prisoner. Al-Afghani was prevented from leaving Istanbul until his death in 1897, his voice amplified when it served the Sultan but silenced when it threatened his autocracy.23

3.3 The Hejaz Railway: Steel for the Faithful

The physical embodiment of Hamidian Pan-Islamism was the Hejaz Railway. Constructed between 1900 and 1908, the line connected Damascus to Medina. Unlike other Ottoman railways which were built by foreign companies for economic extraction, the Hejaz Railway was financed largely by donations from Muslims worldwide—a deliberate "crowdfunding" campaign to prove that the Islamic world could build modern infrastructure without European capital.[14]

The railway had a dual purpose:

- **Religious:** It facilitated the Hajj pilgrimage, reducing the arduous camel journey of

weeks to a few days of train travel. This reinforced Abdul Hamid's legitimacy as the "Servant of the Two Holy Sanctuaries".[20]

- **Strategic:** It allowed the Ottoman army to rapidly deploy troops to the Hijaz and Yemen, strengthening central control over the rebellious Bedouin tribes and countering British influence in the Red Sea.[14] It was a project of integration, using steam and steel to stitch the Arab provinces firmly to Istanbul.

Chapter 4: The Economic Stranglehold

While Abdul Hamid projected power through the Caliphate, the economic reality of his empire was one of dependency and strangulation. The Ottoman economy was agrarian, undercapitalized, and heavily indebted to European banks.

4.1 Bankruptcy and the Decree of Muharrem

The fiscal crisis began before Abdul Hamid's reign. In 1875, the empire had declared a sovereign default via the *Ramazan Decree*, suspending interest payments on its colossal foreign debt, which had ballooned due to war expenses and the lavish spending of the palace in the mid-19th century. By 1881, the empire was effectively insolvent.

Bowing to pressure from European creditors, Abdul Hamid's government issued the *Decree of Muharrem* in December 1881. This decree reduced the nominal debt from £191 million to £106 million but came at a terrible price: the surrender of financial sovereignty.[28]

4.2 The Ottoman Public Debt Administration (OPDA): A State Within a State

The Decree of Muharrem established the Ottoman Public Debt Administration (OPDA). This organization was controlled by a council representing British, French, German, Italian, and Austro-Hungarian bondholders. It was completely independent of the Ottoman Ministry of Finance.

The OPDA was granted the right to directly collect and manage specific imperial revenues to service the debt. These included the taxes on the "Six Indirect Contributions": salt, tobacco, spirits, stamps, fisheries, and the silk tithe. By 1909, the OPDA controlled nearly 10% of the empire's total revenue and employed a vast staff of over 5,000 officials, mostly Ottoman subjects but managed by Europeans.[30]

The OPDA functioned as a parallel bureaucracy. It was often more efficient and honest than the Ottoman government itself, and its creditworthiness allowed the empire to continue borrowing. However, it meant that the Ottoman state had lost control over its own fiscal policy.

The empire was essentially in receivership, its economic surplus siphoned off to pay European rentiers rather than being invested in domestic development.[28]

4.3 Infrastructure as Imperialism: The Railway Boom

Despite this financial straitjacket, the Hamidian era saw a railway boom. The Sultan understood that railways were essential for moving troops and goods. Since the state had no capital, he granted concessions to foreign companies, often guaranteeing them a "kilometric guarantee"—a minimum profit per kilometer of track laid.

- **The Berlin-Baghdad Railway:** The most significant project was the concession granted to German banks (led by Deutsche Bank) to extend the Anatolian Railway to Baghdad. This project integrated the Ottoman economy into the German sphere of influence, alarming Britain and Russia. It facilitated the export of Anatolian grain and minerals to Europe but also deepened the empire's economic dependence on Germany.[2]
- **Economic Dislocation:** The railways integrated the Ottoman interior into the global market, benefiting coastal merchants and foreign investors. However, this often hurt local artisans who could not compete with cheap European manufactured goods flooding the interior via the new train lines.[31]

4.4 The Agrarian Crisis and Peasant Tax Revolts

The burden of the debt fell heaviest on the peasantry. The OPDA was ruthless in collecting the tithe (*aşar*) and other ceded revenues. Unlike the flexible (and often corrupt) Ottoman tax farmers of the past, the OPDA demanded payment in cash and on time.
In regions like the Balkans and the Black Sea coast (Canik), this fiscal pressure, combined with the global depression of 1873–1896 which depressed agricultural prices, led to severe peasant unrest. In Bulgaria (an autonomous Ottoman vassal), the imposition of the tithe led to peasant riots in 1899–1900. In Anatolia, tax strikes became a common form of resistance. The state, desperate for revenue to pay the OPDA and fund the army, often responded with gendarmerie violence, further alienating the rural population.[32]

Chapter 5: The Reformer’s Paradox: Education and Law

It is one of the great ironies of history that the "reactionary" Abdul Hamid II was the greatest educational reformer in Ottoman history. He believed that to survive, the empire needed a technocratic elite capable of matching the West in science and administration. He did not

foresee that this new elite would inevitably demand political power.

5.1 The Explosion of Schools

The Hamidian era witnessed a dramatic expansion of the public school system. The number of *Rüştiye* (middle schools) and *İdadi* (high schools) skyrocketed.

- **Professional Schools:** The Sultan invested heavily in higher education, establishing or expanding the School of Civil Administration (*Mekteb-i Mülkiye*), the School of Law (*Mekteb-i Hukuk*), the School of Fine Arts, and the School of Finance. The curriculum in these schools was modernized, with a heavy emphasis on French, science, and engineering.[17]
- **The Tribal School (*Aşiret Mektebi*):** Founded in 1892, this unique boarding school in Istanbul was designed to educate the sons of Arab, Kurdish, and Albanian tribal leaders. The goal was to instill Ottoman patriotism in the sons of the peripheral elite, turning them into loyal bureaucrats who would integrate their tribes into the state structure. It was a project of social engineering, attempting to turn feudal chiefs into Ottoman gentlemen.[34]

5.2 Women's Education and the Literary Sphere

Contrary to his conservative image, women's education made significant strides. The first secondary schools for girls and female teacher training colleges (*Darülmuallimât*) were expanded. This era saw the emergence of the first generation of Ottoman women writers. **Fatma Aliye**, the daughter of Ahmed Cevdet Pasha, became a prominent novelist and intellectual. She corresponded with Western feminists but argued for women's rights within an Islamic framework, asserting that true Islam guaranteed women's education and status. The Sultan himself supported her work, using her as an example to show the West that Ottoman women were not oppressed chattel.[1]

5.3 The Mecelle: Codifying the Sharia

In the legal realm, the Hamidian era saw the completion and implementation of the *Mecelle-i Ahkâm-ı Adliye* (The Ottoman Civil Code). Work on the *Mecelle* began in the late Tanzimat under the leadership of the great jurist **Ahmed Cevdet Pasha**, but its final books were completed and it became the law of the land under Abdul Hamid.[16]
The *Mecelle* was a monumental achievement: it was the first attempt to codify Islamic Sharia law into a modern, European-style statutory code. It covered contracts, property, and civil obligations. By standardizing the law, it reduced the arbitrary power of local *qadis* (judges) and facilitated modern commerce. It represented the "Hamidian compromise": using modern

forms (codification) to preserve traditional substance (Islamic law).[37]

Chapter 6: The Iron Fist: Military and Violence

Abdul Hamid knew that diplomacy and spies were not enough; the empire needed a modern army. Following the defeat of 1878, he turned away from Britain and France and looked to the rising military power of Europe: Prussia.

6.1 The Prussian Connection: Von der Goltz and the "Nation in Arms"

In 1883, **Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz** (Goltz Pasha) arrived in Istanbul to head the German military mission. He remained for twelve years and transformed the Ottoman military education system. Von der Goltz introduced the doctrine of *Das Volk in Waffen* ("The Nation in Arms"), which viewed the army not just as a fighting force but as a school for the nation. He advocated for universal conscription and the mobilization of all society's resources for war.[39] The German mission introduced the Mauser rifle, Krupp artillery, and German staff procedures. But its most lasting impact was intellectual. The new military academies taught Ottoman officers to think like German staff officers: expecting efficiency, valuing order, and viewing the state as a biological organism that needed to be strengthened. These officers—including the future leaders of the Young Turk revolution—came to view the Sultan's chaotic and personal rule as the primary obstacle to the efficient "Nation in Arms" they were trained to build.[39]

6.2 The Hamidian Massacres (1894–1896): Anatomy of Violence

The darkest shadow over Abdul Hamid's reign is the violence inflicted upon the Armenian population. By the 1890s, Armenian political parties (the Hnchaks and Dashnaks) were agitating for reforms and autonomy, encouraged by the promises of the Treaty of Berlin. Abdul Hamid viewed this as an existential threat, fearing that an independent Armenia in eastern Anatolia would lead to the total dissolution of the empire.[42]
The Hamidiye Regiments:
In 1891, the Sultan created the Hamidiye Light Cavalry regiments. Modeled on Russian Cossacks, these were irregular units recruited exclusively from Kurdish tribes. Their official purpose was frontier defense against Russia, but in practice, they were used to police and terrorize the Armenian peasantry. By arming the Kurds and giving them legal immunity, the state tipped the balance of power in the east, encouraging land grabs and violence.43
Between 1894 and 1896, a wave of massacres swept through Eastern Anatolia, triggered by a tax revolt in Sasun. The violence was often state-condoned if not explicitly state-ordered. In Diyarbakır, the violence broadened into a general anti-Christian pogrom, targeting Assyrians

as well as Armenians.[45] Estimates of the dead range from 80,000 to 300,000. These events horrified European public opinion, cementing Abdul Hamid's reputation as the "Red Sultan" and the "Great Assassin." While the Sultan may not have ordered every killing, his policy of arming the *Hamidiye* and his rhetoric of pan-Islamism created the permissive environment for the slaughter.[46]

Chapter 7: The Collapse: Revolution and Deposition

By 1908, the contradictions of the Hamidian system had reached a breaking point. The educated elite despised the censorship; the army officers despised the spies; and the minority populations despised the repression.

7.1 The Macedonian Pressure Cooker and the Reval Meeting

The spark came from Macedonia, the empire's most turbulent province, where guerilla bands of Bulgarians, Greeks, and Serbs were fighting each other and the Ottoman state. The Ottoman Third Army, stationed in Salonika to quell this unrest, became a hotbed of opposition. Its officers, educated in the Sultan's modern schools, were humiliated by their inability to restore order and by the constant interference of European powers.[48]
In June 1908, King Edward VII of Britain and Tsar Nicholas II of Russia met at the Baltic port of Reval (Tallinn). The Ottoman officers in Macedonia interpreted this meeting as the final seal on a deal to partition the Ottoman lands in Europe. They believed that only the immediate restoration of the constitution could save the empire from dismemberment.[49]

7.2 The Young Turk Revolution (1908)

On July 3, 1908, Major Ahmed Niyazi Bey took to the hills of Macedonia in revolt, followed by Enver Bey. The "Young Turk" revolution had begun. The Sultan tried to suppress it, but the troops sent from Anatolia refused to fire on their brother officers. Realizing that the pillar of his power—the army—had crumbled, Abdul Hamid capitulated. On July 24, 1908, he announced the restoration of the Constitution of 1876. The "Era of Freedom" was declared, and jubilant crowds of Turks, Armenians, and Greeks danced together in the streets of Istanbul.[49]

7.3 The 31 March Incident and the End of an Era

Abdul Hamid remained on the throne as a constitutional monarch, but the coexistence with

the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) was uneasy. On April 13, 1909 (March 31 in the Rumi calendar), a counter-revolutionary uprising exploded in Istanbul. Religious students (*softas*) and soldiers from the First Army Corps mutinied, demanding the restoration of Sharia and the Sultan's absolute authority. They hunted down CUP officers and deputies; the Minister of Justice was killed, and deputies were lynched in the streets.[52]

The CUP response was swift. The "Action Army" (*Hareket Ordusu*), commanded by **Mahmut Şevket Pasha**, marched from Salonika to Istanbul. They crushed the rebellion in fierce street fighting. Although Abdul Hamid's direct role in instigating the mutiny remains a subject of historical debate, the CUP held him responsible.

On April 27, 1909, the National Assembly convened. A fatwa was issued sanctioning the Sultan's deposition on the grounds that he had squandered public wealth, burned holy books (a fabrication referring to his censorship), and caused civil strife. A delegation of four—including an Armenian and a Jew, symbolizing the constitutional coalition—went to Yıldız Palace to inform the Sultan of his dethronement. He was bundled onto a train and sent into exile in Salonika.[2]

Conclusion: The Shadow of the Sultan

Abdul Hamid II died in 1918, a prisoner at the Beylerbeyi Palace, witnessing the final collapse of his empire in World War I from across the Bosphorus. His legacy remains fiercely contested. He was a paradox: a paranoid recluse who connected his empire to the world; a censor who expanded education; a tyrant who avoided the death penalty for political opponents (preferring exile); a "Red Sultan" to the Armenians and a "Great Khan" to the Islamists.

The Hamidian era was the crucible of modern Turkey. The schools he built educated the generation of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The railway network he laid defined the logistical skeleton of the War of Independence. The authoritarian state structure he perfected—the centrality of the leader, the suspicion of the periphery, the conflation of state security with regime security—became a lasting feature of the region's political culture. Abdul Hamid II failed to save the Ottoman Empire, but in his frantic, thirty-three-year struggle to delay the end, he inadvertently built the infrastructure of the nation-states that would succeed it.

Table 2: Key Statistics of the Hamidian Era

Metric	Start of Reign (1876)	End of Reign (1909)
Population	~24 Million (est.)	~25 Million (est., despite losses)
Public Debt	~£200 Million (Defaulted)	~£100 Million (Managed by OPDA)
Railways	~1,000 km	~6,000 km
Public Schools	~200 (Secondary)	~5,000+ (Primary & Secondary)
Territory	~1.7 million sq km (in Europe)	~160,000 sq km (in Europe)

Works cited

1. Abdul Hamid II - Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abdul_Hamid_II
2. Abdülhamid II | Research Starters - EBSCO, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/abdulhamid-ii
3. Changing Historiography: Case Study of Abdulhamid II, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.historystudies.net/eng/sultan-ii-abdulhamid-orneginde-tarihsel-algilamanin-degisimi_622
4. Abdulhamid II: An autocrat, reformer and the last stand of the Ottoman Empire, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.middleeasteye.net/discover/abdulhamid-ii-last-stand-ottoman-empire
5. Abdulhamid II | Biography, History, & Facts - Britannica, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abdulhamid-II
6. The Pivotal Era of Abdulhamid II, 1876–1909 (Chapter 5) - A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/history-of-muslims-christians-and-jews-in-the-middle-east/pivotal-era-of-abdulhamid-ii-18761909/468D25CC6A5ED9BAD65F1B0EAF76714F
7. The Red Sultan (1) - Issue 11 - حبر أبيض, accessed November 21, 2025, https://whiteink.info/1-2/?lang=en
8. My father Sultan Abdülhamid II - Daily Sabah, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.dailysabah.com/feature/2014/02/26/my-father-sultan-abdulhamid-ii
9. The Carpenter Sultan and His Passion for Detective Fiction: Sultan, accessed November 21, 2025, https://dolmabahcepalace.com.tr/article/the-carpenter-sultan/
10. Sultan meets Sherlock Holmes: Abdülhamid II's passion for mystery | Daily Sabah, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.dailysabah.com/feature/2018/07/28/sultan-meets-sherlock-holmes-abdulhamid-iis-passion-for-mystery
11. THE THIRD ADMINISTRATIVE CENTER - OF OTTOMAN ISTANBUL: YILDIZ PALACE, accessed November 21, 2025, https://istanbultarihi.ist/450-the-third-administrative-center-of-ottoman-istanbul-yildiz-palace
12. Tahsin Pasha (civil servant) - Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tahsin_Pasha_(civil_servant)
13. From Prosperity to Exile: Abdul Hamid's Chief Clerk, Tahsin Pasha - Politurco.com, accessed November 21, 2025, https://politurco.com/from-prosperity-to-exile-abdul-hamids-chief-clerk-tahsin-pasha.html
14. Birth of an Idea - Hejaz Railway, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.thehejazrailway.com/birthofidea

15. Full article: Traces of fear, 'tracking, surveillance, reporting': spies in Late Ottoman Modernisation Literature - Taylor & Francis Online, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00263206.2025.2578814?src=
16. Mecelle - Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mecelle
17. An Overview of the Universities Founded During the Reign of Abdulhamid II and Their Relations With Translation - DergiPark, accessed November 21, 2025, https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/2313267
18. Bosnian Muslim Reformists between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, 1901-1914 Harun Bulj - CORE, accessed November 21, 2025, https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/210999722.pdf
19. NATION AND NATIONALISM ACCORDING TO ISLAMISTS DURING SECOND CONSTITUTIONAL PERIOD, A CASE STUDY: SIRAT-I MÜSTAKİM-SEBİLÜRRE, accessed November 21, 2025, https://repository.bilkent.edu.tr/bitstreams/458ca095-64fb-42ec-8813-cdc5b8408cd1/download
20. The Hejaz Railway and Sultan-Caliph Abdülhamid II - Ammar ibn Aziz Ahmed, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.ammaribnazizahmed.com/home/the-hejaz-railway-sultan-caliph-abdulhamid
21. Pan-Islamism - Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pan-Islamism
22. Before the Ethical Policy: The Ottoman State, Pan-Islamism, and Modernisation in Indonesia, 1898–1901 - ResearchGate, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315906152_Before_the_Ethical_Policy_The_Ottoman_State_Pan-Islamism_and_Modernisation_in_Indonesia_1898-1901
23. Pan-Islamism and Nationalism (Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries) (Chapter 4), accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/islam-and-asia/panislamism-and-nationalism-nineteenth-and-twentieth-centuries/9F0A5612F6770E46C4E5BA26F8CAD604
24. ENVER PASHA'S TRIP TO CHINA: AN INVESTIGATION OF OTTOMAN-CHINESE RELATIONS1 - DergiPark, accessed November 21, 2025, https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/4436892
25. A century-old Ottoman legacy in China | Islamic Civilization, accessed November 21, 2025, https://islamciv.com/2010/01/20/a-century-old-ottoman-legacy-in-china/
26. A pan-Islamist in Istanbul: Jamal Ad-Din Afghani and Hamidian Islamism, 1892-1897, accessed November 21, 2025, https://open.metu.edu.tr/handle/11511/19968
27. Forgotten History: The Hamidiye Hijaz Railway – A Trans-Ottoman Railway, accessed November 21, 2025, https://traversingtradition.com/2022/08/31/forgotten-history-the-hamidiye-hijaz-railway-a-trans-ottoman-railway/
28. Ottoman Empire - 1875 Crisis, Reforms, Decline | Britannica, accessed November

21, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/place/Ottoman-Empire/The-1875-78-crisis
29. Ottoman public debt - Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ottoman_public_debt
30. Economic Policy and Budgets in Ottoman Turkey, 1876-1909 Author(s) - PSI427, accessed November 21, 2025, https://psi427.cankaya.edu.tr/uploads/files/Akarli%2C%20Econ%20Policy%20and%20Budgets%2C%201876-1909%20%281992%29%281%29.pdf
31. The Political Economy of Ottoman Public Debt - Levantine Heritage ..., accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/Murat_Birdal-The_Political_Economy_of_Ottoman_Public_Debt__Insolvency_and_European_Financial_Control_in_the_late_Nineteenth_Century.pdf
32. Tax Revolts During the Tanzimat Period (1839–1876) and Before the Young Turk Revolution (1904–1908): Popular Protest and State Formation in the Late Ottoman Empire | Journal of Policy History, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-policy-history/article/tax-revolts-during-the-tanzimat-period-18391876-and-before-the-young-turk-revolution-19041908-popular-protest-and-state-formation-in-the-late-ottoman-empire/8E48E4F66BA3CC040AAE1E171A2B72A4
33. 1899–1900 peasant unrest in Bulgaria - Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1899%E2%80%931900_peasant_unrest_in_Bulgaria
34. Aşiret Mektebi: Abdülhamid II's School for Tribes (1892–1907) | International Journal of Middle East Studies | Cambridge Core, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-journal-of-middle-east-studies/article/asiret-mektebi-abdulhamid-iis-school-for-tribes-18921907/E6FD81B43811433B140F98CA55DABBAE
35. (PDF) THE TRIBE SCHOOL OF ABDULHAMID II: LOYALTY TO THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE AND THE SULTANII.ABDÜLHAMİD'İN AŞİRET MEKTEPLERİ: OSMANLI İMPARATORLUĞU'NA VE SULTANA SADAKAT - ResearchGate, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369253635_THE_TRIBE_SCHOOL_OF_ABDULHAMID_II_LOYALTY_TO_THE_OTTOMAN_EMPIRE_AND_THE_SULTANIIABDULHAMID'IN_ASIRET_MEKTEPLERI_OSMANLI_IMPARATORLUGU'NA_VE_SULTANA_SADAKAT
36. Fatma Aliye Hanım and Historiography - Ahmet Yesevi Üniversitesi, accessed November 21, 2025, https://bilig.yesevi.edu.tr/yonetim/icerik/makaleler/2671-published.pdf
37. "The Garden of Forking Paths": Islamic Legal Transformations in the Ottoman Empire During the Nineteenth Century - DigitalCommons@Providence, accessed November 21, 2025, https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=history_undergrad_theses
38. 18.12.4 Attempts at Internal Reform and Modernisation in the Ottoman Empire - TutorChase, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.tutorchase.com/notes/ib/history/18-12-4-attempts-at-internal-refor

m-and-modernisation-in-the-ottoman-empire
39. The Influence of Field Marshal Colmar Von Der Goltz on Ottoman Military Effectiveness in Mesopotamia - DTIC, accessed November 21, 2025, https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA601454.pdf
40. Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz - Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colmar_Freiherr_von_der_Goltz
41. Reforming the Army - - Turkey in the First World War, accessed November 21, 2025, https://turkeyswar.com/army/reforming-the-army/
42. The Origins and Evolution of the Armenian Genocide | AGBU, accessed November 21, 2025, https://agbu.org/remembering-past-redefining-future/origins-evolution-armenian-genocide
43. Hamidiye (cavalry) - Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamidiye_(cavalry)
44. Armenian genocide - Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armenian_genocide
45. Hamidian massacres - Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamidian_massacres
46. Hamidian massacres | Armenian Genocide, Ottoman Empire & Sultan Abdul Hamid II | Britannica, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hamidian-massacres
47. The Ottoman Massacres of Armenians, 1894–1896 and 1909 (Chapter 25) - The Cambridge World History of Genocide, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-world-history-of-genocide/ottoman-massacres-of-armenians-18941896-and-1909/81A9DF0AD37185DBCB8BB02DDC44D10C
48. Full article: The Young Turk revolution: comparisons and connections, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00263206.2019.1566124
49. Young Turk Revolution - Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Young_Turk_Revolution
50. young turk revolution 1908, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.lkouniv.ac.in/site/writereaddata/siteContent/20200512120900151 1archana-YOUNG%20TURK%20REVOLUTION%20LU%20WORK%20WESTERN%20HISTORY.pdf
51. 179 “WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE 1908 YOUNG TURK REVOLUTION? A CRITICAL HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT IN 2008” Fatma Müge GÖÇEK*, accessed November 21, 2025, https://cdn.istanbul.edu.tr/file/1CD58DF90A/C0FCDC1797B742318CB4CE67471CCE18?doi=
52. 31 March incident - Wikipedia, accessed November 21, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/31_March_incident
53. 31st March Incident | Ottoman history - Britannica, accessed November 21, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/event/31st-March-Incident