

The Pious Sultan and the Porous Empire: A Deep Analysis of Abdul Hamid I and the Ottoman State, 1774-1789

The reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid I (1774–1789) represents a critical and tragic juncture in the history of the Ottoman Empire. Ascending to the throne at a moment of profound military and financial catastrophe, Abdul Hamid I inherited a state on the brink of systemic collapse. His 15-year rule was defined by a desperate, and ultimately failed, struggle to manage the consequences of the disastrous Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1774, which concluded just months into his reign with the humiliating Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca.

This report provides a bifurcated analysis of the period. Part I examines the Sultan himself—a man shaped by decades of confinement, whose pious, gentle, and pacifist character was fundamentally mismatched for the existential crisis he faced. Part II analyzes the state of the Ottoman Empire during his rule, detailing the catastrophic diplomatic, military, economic, and internal crises that defined this era of accelerating decline.

Part I: The Sultan – Portrait of Abdul Hamid I, The Saint in the Cage (1725-1789)

To understand the reign of Abdul Hamid I, one must first understand the man. His policies, his passivity, his piety, and his paranoia were all forged not in the halls of power, but in a palace prison.

From Prince to Prisoner: The Formative Years in the *Kafes*

Born on March 20, 1725, Abdul Hamid was a younger son of Sultan Ahmed III.¹ His life was irrevocably altered at the age of five when his father was deposed in the Patrona Halil revolt of 1730.³ As a potential (though distant) heir to the throne, he was immediately placed in the *Kafes* (literally, "the cage")—the part of the Imperial Harem in the Topkapı Palace where possible successors were kept under comfortable house arrest and constant surveillance.¹ This confinement was an institutional evolution. The early empire was plagued by succession wars between rival sons, a problem "solved" by the brutal practice of institutional fratricide, where a new sultan would often have his brothers executed.⁵ The *Kafes* system, adopted in

the 17th century, was a more humane solution that "provided security for an incumbent sultan and continuity of the dynasty".⁵ However, this solution created a new, devastating problem: it ensured that sultans came to the throne with zero practical experience.

Abdul Hamid's imprisonment lasted for 44 years.¹ He remained sequestered throughout the reigns of his cousins, Mahmud I and Osman III, and his older brother, Mustafa III.¹ His education, a critical factor in his later character, was provided entirely within this bubble by his mother, Rabia Şermi Kadın.¹ The curriculum was "safe" for a potential rival: he was taught history, calligraphy, and religious studies.¹ He was permitted "no contact with the outside world"⁶ and had "limited exposure to state affairs".³

The psychological impact of this 44-year isolation cannot be overstated. The *Kafes* produced a man who was scholarly and artistic, but not political or military. When he finally emerged to take the throne on January 21, 1774, at the age of 49, he was a stranger to the empire he was now required to rule.³ This profound lack of experience dictated his leadership style; his tendency to entrust "wide powers" to his grand viziers⁷ was not a choice of delegation, but a necessity born of a four-decade void in practical knowledge.

The Character of the Padishah: Piety, Pacifism, and Paternalism

The man who emerged from the *Kafes* was, by all contemporary accounts, a man of gentle and devout character. He is described as "deeply religious, charitable, and modest"³, "gentle, good-hearted, well-intentioned... with a lot of compassion and mercy for his people," and possessing an "angelic character".⁸ This intense personal piety was the central feature of his public persona. His devout conduct and charitable works were so well known that contemporaries often referred to him as a *Veli* (saint).³

This reputation was not merely abstract. Abdul Hamid I actively performed the role of a paternalistic guardian for his people. The most famous example occurred during the great Constantinople fire of 1782. The Sultan did not remain isolated in his palace. Instead, he "ran from one fire to another"⁸, "personally oversaw firefighting efforts"³, and "personally helped direct the fire brigade".⁴ This direct, personal intervention in a civic crisis was a powerful gesture that "enhanced his popularity".³

This performance of paternal compassion (*şefkat*)⁸ was a crucial source of popular legitimacy. The traditional basis of a Sultan's power was his role as a *Gazi*, or victorious warrior. By 1774, with the army in tatters and the state bankrupt¹, this role was untenable. Abdul Hamid I had failed as a *Gazi* from the first day of his reign. He therefore leaned on the one role he could successfully perform: that of the *Veli*. He could not protect his people from the Russians, but he could, and did, demonstrate personal compassion in protecting them from a fire.

This disposition, however, had a crippling political downside. He is described as a "pacifist by temperament".¹ He found the traditional, brutal necessities of Ottoman statecraft, such as political executions, to be "barbaric".⁶ This pacifism made him psychologically unequipped to

manage the ruthless geopolitical world he inhabited. His passivity was a direct liability. The most telling evidence of this mismatch between the *Veli* and the world of the *Gazi* is the manner of his death. On April 7, 1789, Abdul Hamid I, his health already failing from the stress of a new war, was reading the *kâime* (official report) from his Grand Vizier. The report detailed the fall of the Özi (Ochakov) fortress to the Russians, a catastrophic defeat and massacre.¹ Upon reading the news, the 64-year-old Sultan suffered a fatal stroke. He was a man so sheltered from the realities of war that the *news* of its brutality, not the war itself, is what killed him.

The Sovereign as Patron: Architectural and Cultural Legacy

Abdul Hamid I's architectural program was a direct extension of his "Veli" persona. His patronage was not focused on imperial grandeur but on public welfare, piety, and personal devotion. He left behind numerous architectural works, primarily in Istanbul.¹

His most significant project was the complex (or *külliyesi*) built in Bahçekapı, Sirkeci (1776–1777). This complex was a monument to public charity, containing the Sultan's own tomb (*türbe*), a public fountain (*çeşme*), a soup kitchen (*imaret*), a madrasa (school), and a library.¹ The books from this library are today preserved in the Süleymaniye Library, and the madrasa building was later repurposed as the Istanbul stock exchange.¹

In 1778, he built another complex in Beylerbeyi, which included a mosque, fountain, and bathhouse. This project was not for himself, but was dedicated to his mother, Râbia Şermi Sultan—a deeply personal act honoring the woman who had been his sole tutor and companion during his 44 years in the *Kafes*.¹ His other works included various public fountains and repairs to the Yedikule walls. This entire building program was a legacy of "soft power," projecting an image of a charitable and pious sovereign at a time when a "hard power" military legacy was impossible to achieve.

The Tragedy of Reform: The Sultan and His Viziers

Abdul Hamid I "favoured reform"³ and understood the "necessity of a reform"¹⁰ to save the state. However, his "pacifist temperament"³ and "lack of governance"⁶ meant his approach was vicarious. He "initiated army reforms"⁷ by appointing "able grand viziers" and "entrust[ing] wide powers" to them.⁷

His two most important agents of reform were the Grand Admiral Gazi Hasan Pasha⁸, who focused on the navy, and the "progressive"¹¹ Grand Vizier Halil Hamid Pasha.⁸ Halil Hamid Pasha was a crucial figure who led efforts to modernize the artillery¹⁴ and, significantly, revived the İbrâhim Müteferrika Printing House, which had been dormant, thus reviving Turkish printing.¹¹

This vicarious model of reform was fragile, as it depended entirely on the Sultan's personal

trust. In 1785, that trust catastrophically collapsed. Halil Hamid Pasha, after just over two years as Grand Vizier, was suddenly arrested, exiled, and beheaded (S84, S112). The reason for his downfall reveals the Sultan's core vulnerability: his *Kafes*-induced paranoia. "Secret correspondence between Selim III and Louis XVI was discovered".¹⁶ Selim III was Abdul Hamid's nephew and the popular, talented, and reform-minded heir to the throne. The Sultan, having spent 44 years as a potential heir waiting for his relatives to die, was pathologically paranoid about his own heir doing the same. When he discovered his top reformer (Halil Hamid) was in contact with his top rival (Selim III), he interpreted it as a plot.¹² The execution of Halil Hamid Pasha in 1785 was the critical turning point of Abdul Hamid I's reign. It was the moment his paranoia overcame his reformist inclinations. The consequences were immediate and disastrous. The execution was not just the death of a man; it was the death of the "peace faction" at court.¹⁶ states explicitly that in the power vacuum, "the war party rose to power, leading the Ottoman Empire to war with Russia".¹⁶ This "war party," led by the "aggressive" Koca Yusuf Pasha and Gazi Hasan Pasha⁶, would get their war two years later—a war that would destroy the army and kill the Sultan.

Part II: The Empire – The Great Unraveling (1774–1789)

Sultan Abdul Hamid I reigned over an empire in a state of advanced crisis. The 15-year period from 1774 to 1789 was not one of slow decline, but of rapid, cascading failures—diplomatic, military, economic, and internal.

The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774): Anatomy of a Catastrophe

Abdul Hamid I ascended the throne on January 21, 1774, in the final, disastrous months of the Russo-Turkish War.³ The Ottoman army was defeated and scattered at Kozluka and Şumnu. The new, inexperienced Sultan had no choice but to sue for peace. The resulting Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, signed on July 21, 1774, was arguably the most humiliating treaty in Ottoman history and the single most important event of the reign.⁷

It was not merely a peace treaty; it was a systemic re-engineering of Ottoman sovereignty. The treaty's provisions centered on three dominant issues:

1. **The Status of the Crimean Khanate:** The Ottomans were forced to recognize the "political independence" of the Crimean Tatars (Article 3).¹⁸ This was a devastating psychological and political blow, as it was the *first Muslim territory* to be lost by the empire. As a "face-saving" measure, the Sultan was permitted to remain the *religious* leader of the Tatars as the Muslim Caliph. This was a diplomatic trap. This clause, the first of its kind, conceded the principle that a Muslim population could be *politically* severed from the Caliphate, legalizing the creation of Russian puppet states. The Tatars themselves knew it was a sham and immediately sent envoys to Istanbul "requesting

that they 'destroy the conditions of independence'.¹⁹

2. **Trade and Navigational Affairs:** Russia gained "unlimited sovereignty" over the strategic ports of Azov, Kerch, and Yenikale²⁰, giving it a "permanent foothold on the Black Sea".²¹ Article 11 granted Russian *merchant* ships the right of free navigation on the Black Sea and, crucially, passage through the Dardanelles Straits.²⁰ This provision single-handedly ended the Ottoman "exclusive use" of the Black Sea, which had for centuries been an "Ottoman lake".²⁰
3. **The Rights of Christian Subjects:** This was the "most far-reaching"²³ and "momentous"²⁴ provision, a "poison pill" for Ottoman sovereignty. Article 7 obligated the Porte to "protect constantly the Christian religion and its churches".²² Article 14 granted Russia the specific right to build a "Greco-Russian" Orthodox church in Istanbul.²² Russia would subsequently "freely interpret"²³ these clauses as granting it a protectorate over *all* Greek Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire.²²

The treaty was a "milestone in the history of the decline".¹⁷ For the first time, a foreign power had been granted a *legal* and *permanent* pretext to interfere in the governance of the Porte and its domestic affairs.¹⁷

The Crimean Question: From Vassal to Annexation (1774-1784)

The "independence" granted to Crimea in 1774 was a "puppet regime"¹⁹ from the start. Russia immediately began a 10-year "salami-slicing" strategy to absorb the peninsula, which the Ottomans, and their European allies, were powerless to stop.

- **Phase 1: Subversion (1774–1779):** Russia immediately violated the treaty by interfering in Crimean internal affairs, installing its own protégé, Şahin Giray, as Khan.¹⁹
- **Phase 2: Diplomatic Humiliation (1779):** This interference led to a new crisis. The Ottomans, encouraged by a populace in revolt against Şahin Giray, prepared for war. However, their traditional ally, France, mediated the crisis.²⁶ The resulting **Convention of Aynalıkavak (1779)** was a total Russian victory. In exchange for a Russian "promise" to withdraw its troops, the Ottoman Empire was forced to officially recognize the Russian puppet, Şahin Giray, as the legitimate Khan.²⁶
- **Phase 3: Annexation (1783):** When Şahin Giray's unpopular reforms (encouraged by Russia) caused new revolts, Russia used the instability as a pretext to formally **annex the Crimean Khanate** on April 19, 1783.¹⁹
- **Phase 4: Recognition (1784):** The Ottomans, "recognizing the army's poor state and lack of preparedness", were forced to acquiesce. They signed the **Treaty of Constantinople (1784)**, formally recognizing Russia's annexation.¹⁹

This 10-year process, detailed in Table 1, demonstrates the complete collapse of Ottoman geopolitical power, as a territory was systematically dismantled and annexed in full view of the world.

Table 1: The Phased Loss of Crimea (1774-1784)

Treaty / Event	Date	Key Terms Regarding Crimea	Consequence / Impact
Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca	1774	"Political Independence" (Art. 3) granted to Crimean Tatars. Sultan retains <i>religious caliphal authority.</i> ¹⁷	Creates a legal vacuum and a Russian puppet state. The first loss of Muslim territory. ¹⁹
Convention of Aynalıkavak	1779	Ottomans forced to recognize the Russian-backed khan, Şahin Giray, in exchange for a promised Russian withdrawal. ²⁶	Legitimizes Russian interference. French-mediated diplomacy proves a failure for the Ottomans. ²⁶
Russian Annexation	1783	Russia, citing instability, formally annexes the "independent" khanate. ¹⁹	Total violation of both previous treaties. Crimea is incorporated into the Russian Empire. ¹⁹
Treaty of Constantinople	1784	Ottoman Empire formally "acquiesces" and recognizes the Russian annexation of Crimea. ¹⁹	Final, humiliating capitulation and legal recognition of the territorial loss. ²⁰

The Desperate Quest for a New Army

The primary impetus for reform under Abdul Hamid I was the catastrophic failure of the Ottoman military, most notably the "total annihilation" of the fleet by Russia at the **Battle of Çeşme in 1770.**¹¹ The 1774 defeat on land reinforced the "obvious need for military reform".¹⁵ The reform efforts proceeded on two main tracks:

1. **Naval Reorganization:** This was the domain of the energetic Grand Admiral **Gazi Hasan Pasha.**¹¹ His reforms were practical and institutional. He established a new shipyard with the help of French naval engineers and, most importantly, founded the **Imperial Naval Engineering School (Mühendishâne-i Bahri-i Hümâyûn)** in 1775 to train a new generation of officers in modern sciences.⁷
2. **Army and Artillery Modernization:** This effort was heavily dependent on a **French Military Mission.**²⁹ The most prominent advisor was the Hungarian-French officer

François Baron de Tott.¹¹ De Tott's contributions were technical: he built a new foundry to cast modern howitzers, created mobile artillery units, and built new fortifications on the Bosphorus.³⁰ His most notable creation was the **Sürat Topçuları Ocağı** (Rapid Fire Artillery Corps), staffed by 250 men.⁸ Other French advisors, such as Aubert, André-Joseph Lafitte-Clavé, and even the future Marquis de La Fayette, were involved in these schools and corps.⁸

Despite these efforts, the reforms were ultimately a "thin veneer of westernization".¹⁵ They failed because they could not fix the "software" of the Ottoman military: the human and institutional rot of the Janissary corps. The Janissaries, long since devolved from an elite fighting force into a powerful, tax-exempt political class, resisted these reforms. De Tott found it "almost impossible for him to divert soldiers from the regular army [the Janissaries] into the new units".³⁰ The new corps were built *alongside* the old ones, rather than *replacing* them, creating a parallel, underfunded, and socially resented modern army. This over-reliance on *French* advisors was also a critical strategic vulnerability. The Ottomans were being "reformed" by men whose loyalties were divided; Baron de Tott himself would later become an "ideologue" for the French *colonization* of Ottoman Egypt.³³ This vulnerability became a reality in 1788 when, at the start of the new war with Russia, France recalled all its experts, effectively sabotaging the Ottoman army at its moment of greatest need.¹⁶

The Failing State: Internal Fissures and Provincial Challenges

While the empire faced existential threats from without, it was simultaneously hollowing out from within. The 18th century was defined by a "decentralizing trend"³⁴ that saw power flow from the central government in Istanbul to powerful provincial notables, the *ayan*.³⁴

The *ayan* class (wealthy merchants, guild leaders, and local Janissary commanders)³⁴ built their power on the **Malikane system**. Introduced in 1695, the *malikane* was a "deal with the devil" by a state desperate for short-term cash. The state sold *iltizam* (tax-farming) rights not for a few years, but for an individual's *lifetime*.³⁵ The *ayan* bought these *malikane*, giving them vast economic power, which they quickly translated into political and military power. They became "effectively autonomous in their home districts"³⁴, raised "their own armies"³⁴, and "challeng[ed] the central authority".³⁵

This led to "intense factional strife" and "new types of power struggles"³⁸ in the provinces, as *ayan*, local Janissaries, and state-appointed governors fought for control. Abdul Hamid I "endeavoured to strengthen the central government"⁷ by dispatching armies to suppress the most egregious revolts, such as that of Zâhir el-Ömer in Syria (1775) and others in Egypt and the Morea.⁷

A new, more insidious threat also emerged during his reign: the **Wahhabi movement** in the Arabian Peninsula.⁸ Initially a puritanical "religious initiative"⁴¹, it transformed into a potent political movement under the Emir of Najd, Muhammad ibn Su'ud, who "dominated the middle region of Arabia".⁸ This was an ideological threat the Ottoman state was unequipped to

understand. While the Sultan "realized the gravity of the Wahhabi threat," his "other state officials underrated the movement because they did not consider it as a political movement".⁴⁰ They were wrong. The Wahhabi-Saudi alliance was not just a typical *ayan* revolt; it was a new, rival ideological-political state that directly challenged the Sultan's religious legitimacy.⁴³

The Economy of Crisis: Debasement, Debt, and the *Esham*

Abdul Hamid I inherited a "bankrupt empire"¹ facing "financial hardship".³ The catastrophic 1768–1774 war, with its "rising military expenditures"⁴⁴, had "accelerated inflation".⁴⁵ The state's response to this fiscal crisis was twofold and deeply contradictory.

- The *Esham* System (c. 1775):** This was a major financial innovation, implemented "after the end of the war"⁴⁴ to raise "cash for wars and modernization".⁴⁶ It was a new system of "long-term domestic borrowing".⁴⁴ The state would identify a tax source (*mukataa*), divide its net annual income into shares (*sehimler*), and sell those shares to the public, including "small savers".⁴⁷ The buyer would receive that share of the income as an annuity *for their lifetime*.⁴⁴ Unlike the *malikane*, the *esham* share was *not* inheritable; it reverted to the Treasury upon the owner's death.⁴⁷ This was the Ottoman state's first step toward a modern, domestic public debt market.⁴⁶
- Currency Debasement:** Simultaneously, the state resorted to "monetary expansion"⁴⁵ by debasing the *kuruş* (piaster) and other coinage, reducing their silver content to "print" money.⁴⁹ This led to a "rapid rise in the general price level".⁴⁹ This policy was so notorious that the Russians, in the 1774 treaty, specifically "demanded that the sum [of war indemnities] be paid in old *kuruş*, not new and debased currency".⁵⁰

These two policies were fundamentally contradictory. The state was trying to build a new credit system (*esham*) based on public trust with one hand, while destroying that same trust with the other by inflating the currency (debasement) that the *esham* annuities were paid in.

Table 2: Key Military and Financial Reforms (1774-1789)

Reform Initiative	Date	Key Individuals	Purpose & Function
MILITARY REFORMS			
Imperial Naval Engineering School (<i>Mühendishâne-i Bahri-i Hümâyûn</i>)	1775	Gazi Hasan Pasha ¹¹	To train naval officers in modern (French) engineering, geography, and mathematics. ⁷
Rapid Fire Artillery Corps (<i>Sürat Topçuları Ocağı</i>)	c. 1773-76	Baron de Tott, Halil Hamid Pasha ¹¹	To create modern, mobile artillery units based on French models; staffed with

			250 men. ¹¹
French Military Mission	c. 1774-88	de Tott, Aubert, Lafitte-Clavé ¹¹	To modernize cannon foundries, build Bosphorus fortifications, and establish engineering schools. ¹⁵
FINANCIAL REFORMS			
Esham System (Domestic Debt)	c. 1775	State Financial Bureaucracy ⁴⁴	To raise cash by selling "shares" (<i>sehimler</i>) of state revenue to the public as lifetime annuities. A new form of long-term domestic borrowing. ⁴⁴
Currency Debasement	Ongoing	State Treasury	To raise funds by reducing the silver content of the <i>kuruş</i> (piaster), which "accelerated inflation". ⁴⁵

The Final War and Diplomatic Isolation (1787-1789)

The execution of the reformist Grand Vizier Halil Hamid Pasha in 1785 unleashed the "war party" at court.¹⁶ Led by Grand Vizier Koca Yusuf Pasha ⁸, they were eager for a war of revenge to "regain lands lost," specifically Crimea.⁵¹ They declared war on Russia in August 1787.⁵¹

The decision was a diplomatic catastrophe. The Ottomans immediately found themselves in a **two-front war** when Russia's powerful ally, the Habsburg Monarchy (Austria), declared war on the Ottomans in February 1788.⁵¹

The Ottomans were diplomatically isolated. Their gamble on war had been "encouraged" by Prussia and Great Britain. They were counting on the newly formed **Triple Alliance (1788)** of Great Britain, Prussia, and the Dutch Republic, which was *aimed at Russia*, to intervene on their behalf.⁵⁵ The alliance "fell apart before it was ready to engage".⁵⁵ In a "major success of... Russian diplomacy," Russian agents "foster[ed] parliamentary dissent in Great Britain," causing the British Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, to lose support and back down.⁵⁵ The Ottomans were left to fight two empires alone.

The war was an immediate disaster. The main event was the brutal, six-month **Siege of Ochakov (Özi)** (1788).⁵¹ The Ottoman naval force, under Gazi Hasan Pasha, failed to relieve

the fortress. On December 6, 1788, in temperatures so cold soldiers sickened and died, the Russian General Potemkin ordered the final assault.⁵⁶

It was a massacre. The fortress, the key to the Black Sea, was the ultimate test of all the Ottoman artillery and fortification reforms. It failed completely. **More than 9,500 Turks were killed** in the fighting, and **over 4,000 were taken prisoner**.⁵⁶ The total number of Ottoman dead, including the garrison and civilians, was estimated at **20,000**.⁵⁶ Russian losses, by contrast, were approximately 956 killed.⁵⁶ The disparity in casualties was a horrifying testament to the failure of the Ottoman military. It was the report of this specific, catastrophic failure that landed on the Sultan's desk in April 1789, and killed him.

Conclusions

The 15-year reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid I was an era of catastrophic failure, defined by the profound mismatch between the man and the moment.

Part I, The Sultan: Abdul Hamid I was a product of the *Kafes*. His 44-year confinement created a man who was pious, charitable, and paternalistic—a *Veli* (saint) who was beloved by his people for his personal compassion, as shown by his actions during the 1782 fire. But this same confinement also made him a "pacifist" who was pathologically paranoid and wholly inexperienced in statecraft.

Part II, The Empire: He inherited an empire in systemic collapse. The 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, which he was forced to sign upon his accession, was not a simple territorial loss; it was a fundamental re-engineering of Ottoman sovereignty, granting Russia permanent pretexts to interfere in Ottoman domestic affairs and ending Ottoman control of the Black Sea. His reign was a cascade of the consequences of this treaty: the "salami-slicing" and final annexation of Crimea by 1784; the desperate, contradictory financial policies of a bankrupt state (the innovative *Esham* system versus the destructive debasement of currency); and the hollowing out of central authority by provincial *ayan* (who were empowered by the *Malikane* system) and new ideological threats like Wahhabism.

Synthesis: The tragedy of the reign lies in the intersection of these two parts. The Sultan's *Kafes*-induced paranoia (Part I) led him to execute his most competent reformer, Halil Hamid Pasha, in 1785. This act empowered the "war party," which dragged the empire into the disastrous 1787 war (Part II). This war, in turn, led to the Siege of Ochakov, a battle that proved the utter failure of the military reforms (Part II).

The final, fatal synthesis occurred on April 7, 1789. When the official report (*kāime*) detailing the 20,000 dead at Ochakov reached the palace, the brutal reality of his collapsing empire (Part II) collided with the sheltered, pacifist psychology of the *Veli* Sultan (Part I). The man was psychologically and physically destroyed by the state, and his death by stroke is the perfect, tragic epitaph for a reign defined by a crisis he could neither escape nor comprehend.

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