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Urban Property and Administration in Dispute in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire: Ayvalık, 1877-1914

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In the second half of the nineteenth century conflicts centred on issues of landed and urban property proliferated at the coastal towns and the inner countryside of Anatolia. Mass migration from the Balkans and the Caucasus culminating in the aftermath of the Ottoman-Russian wars and resulting in millions of displaced and dispossessed refugees on the one hand, and the rules of a new property regime designed with the aim of providing more exclusive rights of ownership to property-holders and the ensuing registration of urban and landed property, on the other, were major instigators behind a variety of property conflicts. In north-western Anatolia, the coast facing the island of Mitylene, from the town of Edremid to the north, to Burhaniye and Ayvalık down to the south saw an even higher amount of property disputes. Conflicts around both landed and urban property in this region in the 1890s made it ‘the black spot of western Asia Minor,’ in the words of a British consul. At the heart of this region was the port-town of Ayvalık, situated on the southern edge of the bay of Edremid, which was a prosperous port town of mostly olive growers and olive oil merchants.

The property-holders, mostly local merchants and artisans, resident in the town had important landholdings in the surrounding countryside and towns in the region, but equally important were the absentee property-holders with a stake in the urban and landed property in and around the town, who were international merchants, industrialists, financiers and various state officials. The town was well-connected to larger port towns of the eastern Mediterranean such as İzmir, Salonica, Beirut, and Alexandria, but also to ports on the Black Sea, as well as to major port cities of western Europe such as Marseille, Liverpool and London. It had a large degree of local autonomy, which involved a prohibition on the settlement of Muslims within the town, a high degree of self-government and special tax privileges. The town was the capital of an administrative district of the same name within the sub-province of Karesi. Administratively it was an oddity as the whole district consisted of the town of Ayvalık and one village, Küçükköy, to the south of the town. The district lay on the northern border of the province of Aydın, and its economic and social links stayed much stronger with the latter province than with the Hüdavendigâr province, of which it was a part. In fact, an important part of its trade was through İzmir, the capital of Aydın province, and its inhabitants looked more towards the cosmopolitan life and burgeoning Greek urban class of this major port city of the Ottoman empire. The entire population of Ayvalık – with the exception of a few hundred workers in its oil and soap factories and tanneries – was Greek.

Precisely in its unusualness lay the importance of this port town and its immediate surrounding as it condensed in a small area the nature and impact of many of the

changes which together constituted the nineteenth century transformation in the Anatolian countryside, in Ottoman society and in the nature of Ottoman state power: a history of customary nomadic claims to land in the region; a high presence of refugees in the surrounding countryside from immensely diverse backgrounds and geographies; an acute scarcity of settlement land and urban housing; an unusual concentration of Greek population resident in a town with which the Ottoman state was not, administratively speaking, at ease. The ethnic/religious exclusivity, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, introduced a certain nationalist vocabulary to the claims and counter-claims of the various parties to a myriad of urban and rural conflicts in the region. The lack of a common life experience between the Ayvalık inhabitants and other residents in the surrounding countryside or indeed in other towns in the region no doubt contributed to mutual distrust and opposing and hostile perceptions. However, such hostile perceptions and understandings were not only limited to Ayvalık, but were also a source of deep - and perhaps more immanent and pressing - concern in the mixed towns of the region such were Edremid and Burhaniye, where Greek and Muslim/Turkish communities were sharing the same urban space. In the late nineteenth century when the empire was rapidly disintegrating into separate nation states, it did not require much effort to translate the terms of a property conflict into one of ethnic and/or confessional animosity.

But how did Ayvalık come to be such an unusual urban settlement? The town was the creation of the nineteenth century. During the course of the century, Ayvalık was transformed into a booming commercial and industrial town – primarily because of its special status granted when the Russian empire assumed the role of the protector of the Greek Orthodox in Ottoman lands at the end of the eighteenth century. It was after this period that the Greek immigrants (labourers as well as entrepreneurs) from inland Anatolia, the Aegean islands, and Morea (the Peloponnese) surged into the town, attracted by the economic opportunities offered by the booming trade during the century. There are indications that it was not only Ayvalık in western Anatolia which enjoyed a special economic and administrative status. Some other small port towns along the coast of the Marmara Sea in addition to some of the islands in the Aegean turned special privileges granted much earlier to a relative commercial autonomy in the nineteenth century, which gradually transformed into self-asserting urban communities with a local and nationalist political agenda¹.

In this paper, I concentrate on a number of conflicts over urban issues, centred around two fundamental and related problem areas, namely: urban property and urban administration. The transformation in the legal framework that governed property relations and the continuous reorganisation of the provincial administration of the empire were central parts of the modern administrative practice of the central state at the second half of the nineteenth century. These administrative practices were challenged both at the level of the constitution of a new property regime and at the level of the urban community organisations. Here I draw on a number of urban conflicts to look in detail to the themes and questions that they raise about the changing nature and different understandings of urban property and administration in

¹ It is important to distinguish here between the rights and privileges granted to communal organisations in the pre-modern empire on the basis of the *millet* system, and the urban corporate rights and privileges demanded by the port towns in the nineteenth century. Both the institutions and rules governing the relationship between the central administration and its subjects, and the internal communal organisations were in a fundamental process of transformation in the nineteenth century.

the late nineteenth century. The focus on the process of the interaction and confrontation of a variety of urban actors who were - directly or indirectly - parties to urban conflicts in this period in and around the town of Ayvalık brings out the variety of urban interests and the multitude of claimants over urban property, as well as the dynamism inherent in the contestations over urban government and space. It is also the aim that the worm's eye view, i.e. the perspective of several parties confronting each other over a piece of property, would restore at least part of the voice of those historical actors who are often neglected in mainstream historiography². The study of claims and counter-claims during the settlement of a conflict lays bare the way interests were articulated by historical actors, the ways with which they interacted with political authority, and the changing identity of property-holders in the process of the nineteenth-century transformation.

Urban Property Contested

The arrival in the last quarter of the nineteenth century of refugees and the problem of their settlement had transformed property disputes in urban and rural Anatolia in a way that turned, in a multi-ethnic empire, property conflicts around ownership rights into property conflicts around the ethnic and confessional identity of the property holder. Muslim immigration and settlement were expected to retrench Anatolia as an increasingly homogeneous territory, a homeland for the Muslim subjects of the empire. The retreat from the Balkans was to be offset by re-strengthening Anatolia with a Muslim population against the many national states that had developed out of the former Christian communities of the empire and tore apart the empire's lands in the Balkans.

Under these circumstances a property conflict was no longer only a matter of property as such, it had become more of a 'national' issue. At a popular level, differing meanings ascribed to land manifested itself in the language of claims to land by parties from different religious communities, and how urban space came to be politicised. The establishment of the nationality of the property-holder had by this time took precedence over the establishment of the rightful owner of a piece of land. It was still a question of "who owned property" but the ethnic and confessional identity of the title holder became an important criterion. The name written on the title deed had become as important as the deed itself.

The boycott movement, in response to the events in Crete, which initially started against Greek trade in western Anatolia but which soon turned into a blockade against farms owned by Greeks; the imparting of opposing meanings on urban property; and the role of the local notables in this process were examples, at a popular level, of the increasingly politicised nature of property disputes at the turn of the twentieth century. The last issue was evocative of what lied at the background of ethno-politics in the

² It may be high time to take up 'the challenge thrown down to historians by a novelist like Balzac' (Carlo Ginzburg, *The Judge and the Historian: Marginal Notes on a Late Twentieth-Century Miscarriage of Justice*, London, Verso, 1999, p. 112). This in spite of the obstacles, underlined by Ginzburg, in the study of the nineteenth century which witnessed the transformation of the countryside, of property relations, and the triumph of the bourgeoisie in different parts of the world: 'the lack of evidence; the lack of importance of the subject (peasants, witches) according to commonly accepted criteria; and the absence of stylistic models.' Ibid.

1910s: A political distribution and re-distribution of property. This can be followed from the change in the identity of the landholders in the Edremit-Burhaniye-Ayvalık area. The local Muslim notables in many of the western Anatolian towns, within the general context of the policies of the ruling Committee of Union and Progress for the creation of a 'national economy' and a 'Muslim/Turkish bourgeoisie', seemed to have been involved in a process of rural and urban property acquisition through the opportunities provided by the deterioration of inter-communal relations and the increasing prevalence of a nationalistic vocabulary in the empire.

Urban Administration Contested

Alongside inter-communal problems spurred on by refugee settlement, and its wider implications in terms of the meaning ascribed to land and disputes over its 'ownership', both central and local officials were also increasingly concerned about the spread of demands for local autonomy, and about the increased de facto power of the local administrative councils. One of the areas where such demands for local autonomy, especially in the coastal towns, materialised most blatantly was in the challenge they posed on the powers of taxation of the central state.

Thus, for example, the way a direct challenge on its revenue-raising capacity is dealt with illuminates several important aspects of the Ottoman central rule at this period. In the early 1860s local governors of some of the coastal towns reported the opposition of the Greek communal leaders to a set of new tax regulations, which changed the method of assessment and collection of taxes from one of communal assessment and collection through the communal leaders to one of individual assessment and collection through centrally-appointed state officials. In many coastal towns the implementation of the new regulation was postponed indefinitely due to the opposition and resistance of the communal leaders. The communal leaders argued that the new method of tax collection was against the customary practices of the towns. At the same time, there existed widespread complaints from individual taxpayers of irregularities and arbitrary practices in the assessment and allocation of taxes among the community by the communal leaders. For the local administrators, the spread of such 'unwanted habits' of some of the towns in the region could not be tolerated if law and order were to be maintained. In other words, the very power of the state to provide law and order; its monopoly over setting out rules and implementing them; and its authority for individual taxation were being challenged by the community leaders. The 'customary practices' for the urban communities were the 'unwanted habits' for an orderly local administration as it should be in the nineteenth century, and thus needed to be changed.

One way, with which the nineteenth-century Ottoman administration dealt with this challenge, was to redraw the administrative borders and to reorganise the provincial administrative structure. This was to be done predominantly by not allowing Greeks to constitute a majority in any one single district, and thus curb the autonomy of the increasingly self-assertive urban community leaders. The reformed makeup of the administrative councils with more Muslim members was expected to change the balance of power in local affairs. In spite of the fact that demands for urban autonomy by the Christian communities were interpreted by the Ottoman central administration in an wholesale fashion in the framework of a proto-nationalist irredentism, it is important to note that these urban communities were jealous of their urban powers

vis-à-vis other urban communities and frequently resorted to a variety of strategies to protect their privileges in terms of revenue sources against the encroachment of other urban Greek communities over the same sources of revenue.

Concluding Remarks

The division between the local administrative councils and the central administration in matters of property highlighted the variety of local interests, and the reflection of these interests in the makeup and workings of the local administrative councils, which became increasingly self-assertive and vociferous in their demands for local autonomy in matters of urban government and economy. In the 1910s, when the terms of property conflicts were increasingly being translated into ethnic and religious animosity in a contracting empire as a direct result of war, displacement and dispossession of refugees, and nation-state formation in the Balkans, inter-communal problems spurred on by refugee settlement, and its wider implications in terms of the meaning ascribed to land and disputes over its ownership, led to an increased sensitivity on the part of both the local and central administrative officials against the spread of demands for local autonomy, and against the increased de facto power of the local administrative councils throughout Anatolia, but most pressingly among the more commercialised towns along the Anatolian coastline.

From issues concerning urban and rural property, to the distribution of local revenue sources and the burden of taxation, the local administrative councils, made up of the notables and local communal leaders had started to accumulate powers pertaining to a wide range of local economic activity. The local and central officials had to keep guard against this self-styled expansion of authority. The increasing self assurance of the local councils, and their attempts at expanding their authority on a range of local issues was an indication of the expansion of the sphere of urban politics, of the increasing power and influence of an urban merchant class with substantial interests in landed property. After all it was the merchants and landowners who sat on the local administrative councils.

Initially, this aspect of local power was usually garbed under time-honoured customary practices enjoyed by these communities under special sultanic privileges, claimed to have been granted from time immemorial. In effect, these privileges were most of the time the result of the economic opportunities offered by the booming trade of the nineteenth century and were constituted in an ad hoc manner, as a consequence of power relations between the centre and the local interests. Such demands for local autonomy cloaked under time-honoured customary practice were especially disturbing for the central administration, which had, through the nineteenth century, embarked on a centralisation project and modernisation of its governing practices, and had, to a large degree, increased its level of penetration into many facets of the material and social life of its subjects.

The close interest in the ethnic makeup of the population, the shifting of the administrative borders of districts and provinces for the attainment of an ethnically integrated homeland, the growing unease with the increased power of urban communities as reflected in the makeup and workings of the local administrative councils in the second half of the century meant that ownership of property increasingly came to be linked by the central state to issues of sovereignty and

nationality.³ The questions that may be posed here then are: in what ways the struggle over property rights and urban communal demands were changed and ‘distorted’ by the spread of a proto-nationalist language, or by the increasing interpretation of such demands by the central administration in nationalist terms; the ways with which property conflicts cut through inter- and intra-communal lines; and how exactly land and property came to be associated with territorial sovereignty and the principle of nationality.

³ See Yücel Terzibaşoğlu, ‘Land Disputes and Ethno-Politics: North-Western Anatolia, 1877-1912’ in *Ethno-Nationality, Property Rights in Land and Territorial Sovereignty in Historical Perspective*, ed. S. Engerman and J. Metzger, London: Routledge, 2004.