

ARTICLE

# The Bulgarian connection: the Young Turks in exile and the making of radicalism in Ottoman Europe, 1895–1897

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## Abstract

Focusing on the years between 1895 and 1897, this article reconstructs what happened after the arrival of Young Turk revolutionaries into the cities of the Danubian hinterland, particularly centering on Rusçuk (Ruse in today's Bulgaria). In tracing the footsteps of İbrahim Temo and Mustafa Ragıp, two self-exiled figures from İstanbul, this study captures a particular moment when the Danubian cities became the hotbed of transnational radicalism, as a number of assassination plots began to be hatched by Muslim revolutionaries. A well-connected port city serviced by regular steamship links, Rusçuk was where professional revolutionaries met with the local Muslims, much to the ire of Ottoman diplomats in the region. In capturing their encounters, the goal is to point to the significance of Young Turk activities in the Balkans before the turn of the century, a phase which remains understudied in the existing literature. By focusing on a secondary port city that became home to failed assassination plots, this article also seeks to contribute to ongoing discussion in global history that warns against narratives of unhindered globalization. In studying *fin-de-siecle* radicalization, I hope to contribute to these debates by reflecting upon the limits of globalization as a productive field of historical inquiry.

**Keywords:** Young Turks; radicalism; revolution; Ottoman Empire; Balkans

## Introduction

In early 1904, Ethem Ruhi (Balkan) left Egypt, where he had been in exile publishing the newspaper *Osmanlı* (Ottoman) for the past year, and came to Rusçuk (modern Ruse), a Bulgarian town located on the banks of the Danube. In his later recollections, Ethem Ruhi described his exasperation publishing *Osmanlı* all alone in Egypt and his overwhelming feeling of isolation being so far away from fellow Young Turk revolutionaries spread across Europe. As his seclusion in Cairo led him to question if it were at all sufficient to publish newspaper articles alone in order to topple the repressive regime of Abdülhamid II, Ethem Ruhi recalled how it dawned upon him that tactics of terror were the only possible way for his political ideals to see the light

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of day. This is why he decided, traveling via Paris, Vienna, and Belgrade, to come to Rusçuk, where he first met local Young Turks and then visited the nearby Bulgarian cities for further contacts in search for individuals who could partake in a conspiracy to assassinate the sultan. “Let me pause here briefly,” Ethem Ruhi wrote, inserting into his otherwise flowing narrative an acknowledgement that he must have felt typically missing in later recollections:

[T]he individuals who belonged to the Committee of Union and Progress in Rusçuk, Vidin and Varna had played important roles in the realization of the constitutional revolution, and the fact that I came to these cities in pursuit of terror attacks also speak to how reliable the members of these local cells had been (Balkan 1947, 29).

Ethem Ruhi’s acknowledgement in passing of the revolutionary radicals active along the Danube becomes even more meaningful when we consider that the port cities dotting this river had been an important hub of revolutionary conspiracies long before the turn of the century. Rusçuk, for example, was the site of the very first dynamite plot hatched by Armenian revolutionaries in 1892 (Bayrak 2011; Yıldırım 2014; Popek 2021). Even though this plot was also a botched operation, just like Ethem Ruhi’s attempt in 1904, the obvious centrality of Danubian towns like Rusçuk to such radical revolutionary pursuits remains to be explained. To be sure, in the existing literature Bulgaria is readily acknowledged as an important site of revolutionary activity, particularly if one is interested in the study of Bulgarian, Macedonian, and Armenian revolutionaries (Perry 1988; Brown 2013; Yosmaoğlu 2014; Ketsemanian 2017; Alloul et al. 2018). What one may call “the Bulgarian connection” emerges much less forcefully, however, when the discussion shifts to Young Turks. This is all the more surprising, given that Bulgaria was home to a significant Muslim minority of around half a million (Şimşir 1986, 18)<sup>1</sup> and from the mid-1890s on, there were many Young Turks in exile who operated in their midst (Methodieva 2021). Even though these revolutionary activities resulted in long intelligence reports that are available in Ottoman archives today, why do the Danubian port cities continue to remain an outlier in the existing historiography on the Young Turks?

First and foremost, official party accounts – where they exist – or later ego documents are largely to be blamed for establishing what one may call a narrative of “revolutionary mainstream,” highlighting only those figures who remained politically relevant after the Young Turk Revolution (1908). This must have been why a figure such as Ethem Ruhi, who was sidelined after 1908, had been the one to point to the forgotten significance of Young Turks in Bulgaria. To be sure, the scholarship has long stopped framing the Young Turks as monolithic (Hanioglu 1995; Blumi 2002; Aydın 2009; Çiçek 2016). Nevertheless, our acceptance of their factionalized nature and internal struggles for power has yet to translate into studies that could help decenter and diversify mainstream narratives from Paris, Geneva, and Salonica on the making of the Young Turk Revolution. Second, the historiography of the Revolution of 1908 has provided very little room to explore bottom-up processes that could be at play in its making. Often choosing to approach the Young

<sup>1</sup> The size of the Muslim community in Bulgaria continues to be a source of historical debate. For an assessment, see Crampton (1990) and Turan (1998, 79–118).

Turks as actors external to the locales where they operated, the scholarship has tended to frame the 1908 uprising more as a coup than a revolution.<sup>2</sup> While such historiographical positions were very much informed by where one is located on the Cold-War narratives of revolution,<sup>3</sup> the broader tendency to reference the Turkish military and bureaucratic elites as the guardians of the establishment and therefore the only enforcer of change has lent further currency to narratives of a top-down revolution.<sup>4</sup> Third, such readings that downplayed the revolutionary potential of the region's Muslims also played well into Balkan historiographies, where Muslims have largely been seen as a proxy of the Ottoman state – hence a group lacking an independent political subjecthood of their own that must have remained inevitably loyal to the sultan (Anscombe 2012, 578–579). Finally, the growing popularity of global history has not helped much to remedy the situation, either. Our eagerness to embrace globalization not only led to a disregard of abortive episodes, but also brought an indifference to “nearby neighborhoods,” such as Rusçuk, whose historical significance is often clouded by the broader curiosity to study distant connections (Adelman 2017).

Motivated by such critical historiographical interventions, this study seeks to recalibrate our focus back onto such “nearby neighborhoods” and explore how the Danubian cities became an important hub for radical revolutionary conspiracies in the last decade of the nineteenth century, a decade before the arrival of Ethem Ruhi. The first part below contextualizes the emergence of Rusçuk as a well-connected port city and shows how this burgeoning city began to host refugee populations and exiled revolutionaries alike. The second part of the article explores a set of curious events that took place in Rusçuk between 1895 and 1897, focusing on the Young Turks who recently settled in the city. Inspired by earlier studies that situated the Muslim minority in Bulgaria in a more transnational lens (Turan and Evered 2005; Köksal 2010), I trace the activities of Mustafa Ragıp in Rusçuk and his evolving relationship with İbrahim Temo in Mecidiye, two Young Turks who were in self-imposed exile after the Hamidian crackdown in İstanbul. In exploring their transregional activities, the goal is to analyze a range of revolutionary activities from publishing newspapers and staging plays to plotting assassinations, and reflect upon what these activities and their timing suggest for broader revolutionary struggle in the late Ottoman Europe. The article concludes by considering the implications of these episodes of failed radicalism, arguing that revolutionary cooperation was not a given, but rather a contingent process shaped as much by state crackdown as intra-group or cross-organizational rivalries. Even though the Danubian cities indeed became yet another axis of a growingly transnational *fin-de-siècle* radicalism (Khuri-Makdisi 2010; Carminati 2017; Alloul et al. 2018; Berberian 2019; Hill 2021; Yenen 2023), it remains

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<sup>2</sup> For relevant historiographical discussions and attempts to offer alternatives, see Kansu (1995) and Sohrabi (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Conservative American narratives of revolution choose to explain away the grassroots appeal of third-world revolutionary leaders by emphasizing their tactics of terror and coercion. Marxist historiography, on the other hand, puts emphasis on the agrarian appeal of revolutionary movements, seeing these actors embedded in the local constituencies they came to represent. For two insightful revisionist accounts that are critical of Cold-War narratives of revolution in the study of Balkan revolutions, see Brown (2013, 41–69) and Kostopoulos (2016).

<sup>4</sup> For attempts to deconstruct such post-Kemalist narratives, see various contributions in Aytürk and Esen (2022).

important to consider the very real limitations to any revolutionary pursuit, even in the late nineteenth-century context of increasingly global and transregional connections that had made it much easier than ever before.

### The making of Rusçuk as a “nearby neighborhood”

The emergence of Rusçuk as an important Danubian river-port city was closely related to the broader developments that came to transform the Black Sea basin into an important center of commerce from the late eighteenth century onwards. Up until the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774), the Ottomans had enjoyed a monopoly of navigation and trade across the Black Sea, informed by its provisionist economic priorities and enabled by strict policies that controlled passage via the Straits. In the decades that followed, Russian conquest of the northern rim of the Black Sea – though challenged on a number of occasions by the Ottomans – soon led to the establishment of what would become notable port cities, such as Odessa, Kherson, and Sevastopol that, thanks to Russian reduction of tariffs and liberal economic policies, began to connect the grain-growing sectors of the Black Sea with the vectors of European trade (Ardeleanu 2014). While the constant warfare stalled the full integration of the region to the world economy, the signing of the Treaty of Adrianople in 1829, which ended the cycles of Russo-Ottoman wars, brought the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia under the Russian protectorate, making the Danube no longer an inland Ottoman waterway, but rather one open for international navigation and trade (Gatejel 2016, 166).

These developments quickly paved the way for the introduction of steamships to the Danube by the mid-1830s, which not only required considerable diplomatic maneuvering of Austrian, Ottoman, and Russian interests, but also involved addressing technological challenges presented by the rocky river surface and strong whirlpools along the Iron Gates (*Demirkapı*), the kilometers-long gorge that had historically been tricky to sail through. By 1836, in the footsteps of the rehabilitation work carried out on the riverbanks, the First Austrian Danube Steam-Navigation Company announced the introduction of services linking Vienna to Constantinople, though the passengers and goods had to change steamships in certain sectors along the Danube. From 1835 to 1842, the number of passengers registered an exponential growth from 17,727 to 211,401,<sup>5</sup> making the experience on the steamships “like a crowded bazaar, with all types of characters and languages, with carriages and innumerable piles of boxes of merchandize” (Ardeleanu 2009, 200). As the Danube became navigable and regularly serviced, Rusçuk became one of the Danubian ports that steamships began to call at, increasing the city’s regional commercial importance.

These developments in the Black Sea basin foreshadowed what was to come after the Anglo-Ottoman convention of 1838 which demolished Ottoman commercial protections, such as monopolies (*yed-i vahid*) and permits (*tezkere*) that had served to protect the Ottoman domestic market from any supply problems that could emerge due to increased demand from abroad. While the treaty opened up the Ottoman Empire for free trade in general, the abolition of export restrictions on wheat in

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<sup>5</sup> One must note that the traffic was particularly heavy in the upper Danube, while the lower Danube saw less circulation.

particular was significant for the Danubian ports that were well fed by a fertile hinterland producing grain in ideal conditions (Kütükoğlu 2013, 175–191).<sup>6</sup> The repeal of the Corn Laws in Britain in 1846 accelerated these trends, gradually turning the Black Sea basin into a wheat basket, supplied by Odessa, Braila, Galati, and Varna (Ardeleanu 2014; Lyberatos 2016). The continued Russian control of the Danube delta after 1829, however, prevented the full-fledged exploitation of the potential offered by the river and its hinterland. The Russian unwillingness to cooperate in the clearance of the Sulina bar – the sandy sediment that naturally accumulated at the Black Sea mouth of the Danube, coupled with strict quarantine measures imposed by the Russians along the Danube route, made many believe that Russia was seeking to protect its port of Odessa from competition at the expense of Danubian ports (Ardeleanu 2010). However, when the Congress of Paris ended the Crimean War (1853–1856), Russia was also forced to cede its control of the Danubian delta, where an international commission was set up to oversee the operation of this *porto franco* which, within a decade, would see a rapid growth of commercial navigation (Iordachi 2010, 167–168).

The Crimean War had also occasioned Ottoman entanglement with Western infrastructural projects, as the wartime needs for communication quickly resulted in the establishment of telegraph lines linking the Ottoman capital to the Balkans and to the European grid. The same engineers and prospectors that aided the war effort in the early 1850s began to seek concessions across the Danubian hinterland. The first railroad line ever built in the European territories of the Empire connected the Black Sea port city Köstence (Constanta) to Boğazköy (Cernavoda) in 1860, while also servicing Mecidiye located right in between (Antonova-Goleva 2020). The latter town – the namesake of the Ottoman sultan – was itself a recent creation in order to house the incoming Crimean Muslim refugees displaced by the war, 120,000 of whom were settled in various towns and villages across the Dobruca region (Karpat 1984–1985). The same British capitalists that built the Köstence line then secured the concessions to build another line, this time connecting Varna to Rusçuk, which opened in 1866, and in 1869 another line that linked Bucharest to Yergöğü (Giurgiu), the port city situated right opposite Rusçuk (Jensen and Rosegger 1968). The infrastructural penetration of the Danubian hinterland borne out of the war effort made the area more connected, providing alternative modes of transportation and communication across a region that was now home to a growingly specialized labor force and recently settled refugee communities that would stimulate agrarian production and consumption.

This was the long-winded background of the developments when the Sublime Porte announced in 1864 the creation of the province of Danube (*Tuna Vilayeti*), with Rusçuk as its center, encompassing the entirety of this geography from Sofia to Vidin, Varna to Tulcea, which was to be administered by the aspiring reformist governor Mithat Pasha. During his tenure in Rusçuk for the next three and a half years, he embarked upon an extensive road- and bridge-building program, complete with a coach company that carried mail, goods, and cash and a state-run steam ship

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<sup>6</sup> Even though the export restrictions were lifted, the Ottomans introduced renewed restrictions on the export of grains in times of war and scarcity. Yet, in general, the export of grains grew exponentially from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

company centered in Rusçuk. Gradually becoming a showcase of Tanzimat reforms, the city was dotted with gas lamps and streets now named and lined with trees, while also housing new government buildings, such as new hospital wards, a boarding school for orphans (*islahhane*), agricultural credit cooperatives, and government-run press (Petrov 2006, 111–159). With the expansion of public space, from the newly opened *Islahhane* hotel to literary coffeehouses (*kıraathane*),<sup>7</sup> the city began to host mixed forms of entertainment ranging from balls to theaters and festivities featuring traditional and Western music (Ianeva 2019).

Being the administrative center that benefited from all these reforms and investments, Rusçuk quickly became the most populous city in the province, reaching an estimated population of 20,644 by the mid-1860s (Todorov 1983, 348, 360). While Muslims constituted half of the city's population and remained the demographic majority in northeastern Bulgaria well into the 1890s (Şimşir 1986, 201), there also were dedicated Jewish and Armenian quarters, even though mixed neighborhoods outnumbered the homogeneous ones (Petrov 2006, 80). Thriving commercial prospects, particularly due to direct links to İstanbul, attracted Armenian merchants and families who began to settle across the Danubian province, particularly in Varna, but also Dobruca (Todorov 1983, 355). By the mid-1870s, Rusçuk city center was home to around 800 Ottoman Armenians, being the second largest Armenian community in the region after Varna (Yıldırım 2014, 16). When Bulgaria emerged as an autonomous entity after the Treaty of Berlin (1878), the country saw considerable levels of outbound Muslim immigration and inflows of Bulgarians from Austria–Hungary and Romania. Rusçuk also welcomed Macedonian refugees who were given the lands of Circassians and Tatars who had fled the region after 1878 (Popek 2018a, 54). Many streets named after Macedonian towns highlighted this growing Macedonian presence across the city (Ristovska-Josifovska 2015, 43). Featuring a mixed population of natives, migrants, intellectuals, and laborers – all in all a growing constituency receptive to revolutionary messages – Rusçuk therefore shared the destiny of many other fin-de-siècle port-cities.

These larger developments that transformed the political economy and demography of Danubian cities reached a conclusive point by 1894 and 1895 – i.e., the years that were critical for the making of radicalism in the Empire. This was when the Hunchakian revolutionary committee first organized the Sasun rebellion of 1894 and then the Bab-ı Ali demonstration in İstanbul in September 1895 – both of which were bloodily repressed – to push the sultan to a reform plan outlined by European powers (Nalbandian 1963, 120–126). These revolutionary activities in İstanbul created a climate of political competition and presented a set of opportunities for like-minded actors. Muslim revolutionaries in particular – active until then in underground student clubs across İstanbul's schools and academies – came out into the open.<sup>8</sup> Chief among them was İbrahim Temo, a recent graduate from the Imperial School of

<sup>7</sup> Literary coffeehouses were a response of Ottoman intellectuals to create a space alternative to ordinary coffeehouses (Kırlı 2016, 177).

<sup>8</sup> Similarly, it was not a coincidence that Macedonian revolutionaries in Sofia organized a cross-border raid in June 1895 which was an attempt to benefit from the turmoil created by the contemporaneous revolutionary episodes in the Ottoman East and İstanbul. The National Archives (TNA), FO 78/4661/62, May 15, 1895, ff. 231–232.

Medicine, who led the effort to pen, publish, and distribute the first proclamation of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) across the capital,<sup>9</sup> seeking to channel, if not mobilize Muslim public opinion, not against Ottoman Armenians, but rather towards the repressive regime of Abdülhamid II (Mardin 1994, 101; Temo 1987, 40–45). The latter soon responded by initiating a crackdown on suspected revolutionaries, and the ensuing arrests and investigations forced the Young Turk revolutionaries to flee and seek refuge abroad (Hanioglu 1995, 77). The cities along the Danube and its delta, in good proximity and with ready steamship connections, became one of the first points of arrival for the Young Turks on the run who either stayed there or journeyed on. As for Armenians from İstanbul, theirs was a more large-scale flight, with 8,300 refugees arriving in Varna, 2,800 in Rusçuk, and 900 in Burgaz (Popek 2021, 257).

The arrival of Young Turk revolutionaries and Armenian refugees in Bulgaria coincided with an opportune moment of new interstate alignments in the Balkans. In 1894, Stefan Stambolov, the prime minister of Bulgaria who had maintained warm relations with İstanbul while pursuing a hardline position *vis-à-vis* revolutionary organizations, stepped down from power. This was a development that marked the start of pro-Russian policies in Sofia and the return of all radical Macedonian and Bulgarian revolutionaries from places like Odessa or Belgrade back to Bulgaria, whereby the country quickly turned into a haven of associational activity and revolutionary print (Öztan 2021, 271–273). This was when “the number of Muslim periodicals increased dramatically, and Bulgaria’s Muslims made forays into political journalism,” and out of the twenty-seven Muslim newspapers that were published between 1894 and 1908, “about half of them were associated with the Young Turks” (Methodieva 2021, 106) and the publication scene in Rusçuk became largely dominated by those in opposition to the Hamidian regime (Turan 1998, 287). This type of transformation also held true in the public sphere. While one patron of Rusçuk’s main literary coffeehouse (*kıraathane*) had complained in 1874 that its “reading rooms often remained empty” despite its extensive library collections and Viennese furniture (Ianeva 2019, 135–137), the new *kıraathanes* that opened by 1895 in Rusçuk and Şumnu began to be referred to by some local Muslims as the “Young Turk hangout” (Methodieva 2021, 129, 157).

In sum, the decades-long transformations in the political economy of the Black Sea basin had resulted in a range of infrastructural projects that brought the Danubian cities even closer to İstanbul. Rusçuk emerged as the provincial center that benefited the most from these entanglements, becoming the nodal point for a number of cities nearby that became connected by steamboat, rail, and carriage services that brought individuals, commodities, and print in and out. The Danubian cities became a refuge for those displaced by various episodes of interstate conflicts and intercommunal violence that marked the post-1878 period in the Balkans, forming a constituency not only receptive to the politics of “home,” but also eager to take part in it via revolutionary parties that established local branches. It was this curious nexus of infrastructural entanglements, growingly vibrant local communities, and politics of

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<sup>9</sup> In 1889 İbrahim Temo established the first nucleus of the Young Turk organization known as the Committee for the Ottoman Union.



revolution that paved the way for the Young Turks to thrive along the Danubian cities, where they began to arrive and settle from the mid-1890s onwards.

### Making Rusçuk home: prospects of a revolution from below

“The smart ones among the graduates of Ottoman medical academies become revolutionaries, the stupid ones doctors,” wrote Orhan Pamuk (2013, 31) in his novel *Cevdet Bey ve Oğulları* (Cevdet Bey and his Sons). İbrahim Temo, though, defied the classification, being both a doctor and a revolutionary. Having founded the Ottoman Union Society (*İttihad-ı Osmani Cemiyeti*), the first organization of the Young Turks, he had to flee the Empire, just like many of his classmates from medical school, after rounds of arrests and continued harassment by the Hamidian regime due to their political activities. Temo arrived in Köstence (Constanta) in November 1895, having chosen to settle in the Balkans, where not only could his mails reach İstanbul within the same day, but he could also correspond with Young Turks located in Western Europe more freely. Mustafa Ragıp, who was some years younger than Temo but still knew him from the academy,<sup>10</sup> also left İstanbul around the same time (Temo 1987, 51–57). Ottoman intelligence later found out that he first came to Varna, where he stayed for about forty days, and then curiously “got funded by some youngsters from Rusçuk” to come and settle in their midst.<sup>11</sup> It is in Rusçuk where the paths of İbrahim Temo and Mustafa Ragıp would cross once again.

After İbrahim Temo spent his first few months in exile learning Romanian and getting his diplomas approved, he went ahead and wrote a pamphlet suggestively titled *Hareket* (Action). He could not get it published in Bucharest, however, since there was no moveable type in Arabic available in the city.<sup>12</sup> Temo decided to travel to Rusçuk, where there was already a printing house up and running, publishing a newspaper titled *Sebat* (Perseverance).<sup>13</sup> The moveable types for this journal were actually provided by İstanbul only a few months previously after a moving petition by its editor Mahmudzade İskender.<sup>14</sup> Even though Ottoman authorities were initially unsure about sending him a new set, Ali Şefik,<sup>15</sup> the Ottoman consul of Yergöğü (Giurgiu), reasoned that İskender was the former deputy in Sobranie where he represented the Muslims of Rusçuk numbering around 60,000; his newspaper could

<sup>10</sup> Ragıp was actually arrested for having copied Temo’s fiery poems and got Abdullah Cevdet into trouble in the process two years previously.

<sup>11</sup> Ottoman Archives of the Prime Minister’s Office (*Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi*; BOA). Reference BOA, A.} MTZ (04). 182-36, lef 2, 11 Mart 1312 (23 March 1896).

<sup>12</sup> One should note that while conservative authors chose to publish their work in lithography, secular ones preferred moveable type (Öztañ 2016, 240).

<sup>13</sup> While the stories narrated in Temo’s memoirs align with historical facts, the dates and certain details are mixed up. For example, he notes that the printing house in Rusçuk was publishing the newspaper *Tuna* when he arrived there, but the newspaper was in fact called *Sebat*. Temo later said that he decided to publish his pamphlet after 1897, but it in fact came out a year earlier sometime in November. To be sure, there were newspapers published in Rusçuk, titled *Tuna*. Yet, the first *Tuna* came out during Mithad Paşa’s tenure and the second one was published between 1905 and 1910.

<sup>14</sup> BOA, DH. MKT. 391-99, lef 1, 23 Mayıs 1311 (4 June 1895).

<sup>15</sup> Ali Şefik was a participant in the first Young Turk gathering in İstanbul organized by Temo and it is with him that he wrote the pamphlet titled *Action* (Temo 1987, 56).



help protect the rights of local Muslims, while also maintaining the sultan's prestige.<sup>16</sup> Such considerations must have weighed in, since İstanbul ultimately responded to İskender's petition favorably, probably in the hopes of keeping the editor on their side. This was how İskender had acquired the moveable type for his journal *Sebat*, which was what made İbrahim Temo come to Rusçuk. When he did, he also bumped into Mustafa Ragıp who, at the time, was living on the premises of *Sebat*'s printing house (Temo 1987, 57).

Even if Temo ultimately failed to convince İskender to publish his pamphlet, he at least became reconnected with Mustafa Ragıp who was already active in Rusçuk's revolutionary scene. The Ottoman commercial agent in the city had described Mustafa Ragıp to be "around twenty to twenty-on years old, walking around Rusçuk in civilian clothes, uttering things liberally against politics here and there . . . also seen to have been receiving money and letters addressed to different names."<sup>17</sup> The youngsters of Rusçuk who had apparently funded his travels to the city did so after Mustafa Ragıp agreed to do everything he could in putting Namık Kemal's *Vatan yahud Silistre* (1872) on stage "as splendidly as possible."<sup>18</sup> He had promised not only to play a part, but also deliver a tirade at the end of the performance.<sup>19</sup> "Clearly seeking to plot mischief against the sultanate through plays," he was even said to have prepared musical notes for the play and then contacted former *bashibozuks* (Ottoman irregulars)-turned-musicians to convince them to play for the occasion, but was turned down.<sup>20</sup> The episode illustrates well how theater had emerged by the late nineteenth century as an important medium that functioned like "a press for the masses," whereby revolution could first be acted out on the stage, complete with tirades delivered by intellectuals before and after the play (Khuri-Makdisi 2010, 62).

Namık Kemal's play was a crowd-pleasing one that always had the potential to bring Ottoman authorities in conflict with actors, spectators, and theater companies. In the first few times it was staged in İstanbul, it received a standing ovation from the audience who ended up pouring onto the streets of İstanbul shouting political slogans, much to the ire of the palace (And 1985, 1611). The play was particularly fitting to be staged in Rusçuk, too, as its plot revolved around the Ottoman defense against Russian assaults of Silistre (Silistra), another Danubian port just east of Rusçuk (Methodieva 2019). Since the early 1890s, however, Ottoman diplomats serving in their Danubian posts had grown particularly uneasy when locals tried to stage plays or when traveling troupes came to their cities, where they could help spread theater's subversive potential. Each episode led them to invite Bulgarian authorities to intervene, since the proceeds from such activities were claimed to go to the coffers of

<sup>16</sup> İskender also noted that he contacted İstanbul first when he could have actually purchased moveable type directly from Vienna, albeit with higher costs. BOA, DH. MKT. 391-99, lef 7, 10 Temmuz 1311 (22 July 1895).

<sup>17</sup> BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 2, 11 Şubat 1311 (23 February 1896).

<sup>18</sup> Mustafa Ragıp also published parts from Namık Kemal's corpus in *Sebat*'s printing house when he was in the city. See BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 23, 9 Mayıs 1312 (21 May 1896).

<sup>19</sup> BOA, A.} MTZ. 182-36, lef 2, 11 Mart 1312 (23 March 1896). In an earlier report, the Ottoman commercial agent in Rusçuk identified the play to be staged as "Musa bin Nusayr" which most probably referred to one of Abdülhak Hamit Tarhan's plays centering on the Muslim conquest of Andulus. See BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 8, 10 Mart 1312 (22 March 1896).

<sup>20</sup> BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 3, 27 Şubat 1311 (10 March 1896).

revolutionary committees or benefit some other seditious cause.<sup>21</sup> It was these types of diplomatic pressures that resulted in the imprisonment of Mustafa Ragıp. Yet, around sixty of his friends, including Muslims and Bulgarians, petitioned Sofia, which led to him being released from the prison on the condition that he would leave Bulgaria and never step back in.<sup>22</sup> Among those “wayward” Muslims who signed the petition were *Sebat*’s editor İskender and his friend Şevki, as well as Muameleci Emin Ağa and Ahmed Zeki who were called in for a reproach to the premises of Ottoman diplomatic representation in Rusçuk.<sup>23</sup> These individuals were in fact members of the local Young Turk branch in Rusçuk, some of whom were initiated into the organization by İbrahim Temo personally when he came to the city.<sup>24</sup>

Getting warned by the Ottoman representative did not seem to have put a stop to their activities, however. In fact, the assassination of Nasreddin Shah by Mirza Reza on May 1, 1896 presented them with a new opportunity.<sup>25</sup> İbrahim Temo in fact knew the assassin personally, having met him via İshak Sukuti when they were students in İstanbul and “Acem Rıza,” a book peddler in the Beyazıt Square and the distributor of revolutionary print in Persian under the counter. His assassination of a Muslim monarch who ruled Iran for nearly half a century was a symbolic moment that Temo and the local Young Turks could not have wasted, which quickly led them to pen a fiery proclamation to be distributed across the Empire (Temo 1987, 59–60). Titled *Darısi Abdülhamid’in başına* (May it be Abdülhamid’s Turn Next) and signed off by the epithet “your Iranian brothers,” the proclamation noted that the Shah was killed, “not out of a reactionary motive, but because of a desire for the progress and elevation of Iranian people,” a revolutionary platform also promoted “by the followers of Ottoman Union and Progress.” Having framed Abdülhamid II as a monarch much worse than the Shah, the proclamation called Ottoman Muslims to wake up and “rebel altogether” in the name of “re-establishing the honor of Islam,” promising that the committee in İstanbul is “ready to play its due role.”<sup>26</sup>

The proclamation’s fiery rhetoric calling the Muslims to rise up, couched in an Islamic language, brought to the fore a tension among Ottoman bureaucrats who were reporting on the activities of Young Turks in the midst of Bulgarian Muslims. Some had chosen to report in generic terms, downplaying the popular appeal of any revolutionary message among the locals. The case in point was Niyazi, the Ottoman commissar in Sofia at the time, who himself hailed from an important family in Rusçuk (Ayдын 1996, 77–78). In correspondence that reported on the signees of the petition for Mustafa Ragıp’s release, he wrote:

They [Emin, İskender and Şevki] are in fact damned by the Muslim community and apart from these three, the rest of the Muslims spend their time

<sup>21</sup> For example, see an Ottoman complaint from late 1893 and the response of the Bulgarian authorities: BOA, HR. SFR (04). 343-13, lef 3 (23 Teşrinievvel 1309; 4 November 1893) and lef 9 (26 November 1893).

<sup>22</sup> BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 8, 10 Mart 1312 (22 March 1896).

<sup>23</sup> BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 9, 8 Mayıs 1312 (20 May 1896).

<sup>24</sup> Their initiation into the organization was part of the larger push by Temo to create branches all across the Danubian cities (Temo 1987, 57, 95; Hanioglu 1995, 90, 109, 123–124).

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the assassination and its impact, see Lawrence (2018, 50–57).

<sup>26</sup> BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 13.

expressing utmost gratitude to the sultan. Emin, İskender and Şevki do not enjoy a modicum of significance even in Rusçuk, let alone Bulgaria. I am told by Halid Bey and the Mufti on the phone that in the eyes of the local Muslims, these three are in fact seen as if they had turned Christian. It has been eleven years since I left Rusçuk, but since then Emin and İskender were able to corrupt the minds of only Ahmed Bey and Şevki Efendi.<sup>27</sup>

The developments after the proclamation that called the Muslims to rebel, however, would push Niyazi to revise his conclusions, since his subordinate Refik, the Ottoman agent in Varna, began to report in ways that challenged such generic remarks. Quoted in a telegraph from the Yıldız Palace,<sup>28</sup> Refik described how İskender had actually opened up a literary coffeehouse in Rusçuk, where he read seditious literature to people; that Hacı Husumen from Şumnu (Shumen), Nuri, a teacher from the middle school in Pravadı (Provadia), and Şumnulu Ahmed who worked at Varna's gymnasium, in fact acted in tandem with İskender, not only distributing revolutionary literature, but also actively spreading propaganda among military academy cadets on the loose. The Palace not only requested Niyazi to hire a competent lawyer and launch a case against İskender,<sup>29</sup> but also asked him to do everything he could to ensure the continued loyalty of local Muslims.<sup>30</sup> In response, Niyazi once again ensured the unwavering attachment of local Muslims to the sultan, but also noted that he had heard that these seditious individuals were indeed raising funds and reading revolutionary literature to the public.<sup>31</sup>

While the Young Turk proclamation in Rusçuk made the Hamidian regime uneasy, as it openly threatened the Caliph's symbolic authority, conflicting remarks by Ottoman diplomats on the local appeal of such revolutionary propaganda remain to be explained. Even though such divergent interpretations could point to a potential intra-bureaucratic struggle, I suggest that they ultimately reflect the extent to which the Muslims in Bulgaria remained divided on the future direction of their communities. After all, even if the Ottoman palace had long sought to exert influence via the offices of the local muftis who were seen as the paramount Hamidian agents on the ground (Köksal 2010; Popek 2018b), some members of the Muslim bourgeoisie and intelligentsia remained allied with the local youth in embracing a streak of reformism and progress in ways that were independent of their kin state. The discrepancies in the Ottoman correspondence reflected as much these diverging local trajectories as they illustrated the generational shift between the senior and junior members within the diplomatic corps.

<sup>27</sup> BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 9, 8 Mayıs 1312 (20 May 1896).

<sup>28</sup> Ottoman commercial agents serving in Vidin, Rusçuk, and Varna were advised against communicating directly with the Ottoman commissariat in Sofia but with İstanbul, since Bulgaria had been an autonomous entity within the Empire and Ottoman authorities did not want to give the impression that its representatives in Bulgaria were organized just like a consulate would be in a country whose independence was recognized (Aydın 1996, 73).

<sup>29</sup> The court case is indeed ultimately brought upon him, and a certain lawyer named Markof is tasked with the case: BOA, HR. SFR (04). 352-26, 27 Temmuz 1312 (8 August 1896).

<sup>30</sup> BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 15, 18 Mayıs 1312 (30 May 1896).

<sup>31</sup> BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 11/2, 25 Mayıs 1312 (6 June 1896). Niyazi also credited İskender for preparing the proclamation.

At any rate, even those diplomats who were poised to minimize popular support for revolutionary activities included in their reports curious details that already suggested otherwise. As Şükri, a Young Turk in Lom Palanka, told two Ottoman officers on the run, “go to Rusçuk, where you would find, in addition to İskender and Ahmed Bey and Şevki Efendi, the majority of the local youth to be like-minded and on the same page.”<sup>32</sup> Mustafa Ragıp, too, was initially disappointed in Varna due to the lack of revolutionary prospects, but then was pulled in by Rusçuk’s youth, where a high number of signatures were collected for the petition asking for his release after his arrest.<sup>33</sup> After all, as Hanioglu noted, the list of subscribers in the Balkans to the Unionist publications included “many names of educated elite, grocers, slipper makers, and quilt makers as well as the names of the coffeehouses in which CUP publications were read aloud to illiterate people” (Hanioglu 1995, 109). As such, even though Ottoman diplomats operated within the bounds of an official discourse that framed revolutionaries as the source of sedition external to the locales where they operated, in some places like Rusçuk revolutionary situations seem to have been co-produced by professional revolutionaries and the locals alike.

### Explaining the radical turn

The fiery rhetoric of the Young Turks in exile emerged powerfully at a time when their umbrella organization was in the midst of an acute leadership crisis in Western Europe. Even though Ahmed Rıza acted as the leader of the movement after 1895, publishing the influential newspaper *Meşveret* (Consultation) in Paris, there were many who disliked his staunchly secular views, authoritarian tendencies, and politically moderate outlook. Those who preferred a more activist agenda soon discarded him with Mizancı Murad. Yet, he also was, just like Ahmed Rıza, from an older generation, and what he understood from action was simply limited to engineering palace coups. This was exactly what Mizancı Murad delivered after securing the goodwill of the Young Turks, but the coup attempt failed on September 17, 1896, which rendered the leadership crisis only more acute. “When and where nationalist movements fractured,” as Adria Lawrence (2010, 90) argued, “nationalist actors had incentives to adopt violent strategies ... to demonstrate their commitment to the nationalist cause, consolidate control over particular localities, and eliminate rivals.” This was precisely what took place among the Young Turks in exile, enabling the emergence of a truly revolutionary faction.

It is within the context of the failed coup that Ahmed Rıza received a letter from Mustafa Ragıp “which included pointed remarks insulting the revolutionary committee,” about which Ahmed Rıza complained to İbrahim Temo, asking him not to let the Balkan branches he had set up go unsupervised (Temo 1987, 68–69).<sup>34</sup> Ahmed Rıza also snubbed Temo’s suggestion to assassinate the sultan, urging him to set up a distinct committee and get into contact with Şefik (Kuran 2010, 170). This must be around the same time as when Temo, having earlier failed to secure a press

<sup>32</sup> BOA, HR. SYS. 1799-13, lef 7, 22 Mart 1312 (3 April 1896).

<sup>33</sup> BOA, A.} MTZ (04). 182-36, lef 2, 11 Mart 1312 (23 March 1896).

<sup>34</sup> Since Ahmed Rıza’s letter mentions the awaited arrival of İshak Sukuti in Europe, which happened in April 1897, it must be that he sent the letter to Temo on October 18, 1896.

with moveable type, began to dictate his pamphlet *Hareket* to Mustafa Ragıp and had it stone-printed into 500 copies which were then posted to various addresses in the Empire (Temo 1987, 58).<sup>35</sup> Ottoman authorities got hold of a copy in late November 1896.<sup>36</sup> Ninety-three pages long and printed in red ink, Temo's pamphlet was met with great interest among the Young Turks (Hanioglu 2000, 354–355). On December 21, 1896, an activist organization was established in Geneva which came to be known as *Osmanlı İhtilal Fırkası* (the Ottoman Revolutionary Party) whose members included individuals such as Tunalı Hilmi and İshak Sukuti (Kuran 2010, 223). İbrahim Temo was in close contact with this faction and suggested working together to assassinate the sultan. Initially, Temo, together with Kırımı Ali Rıza, secured dynamite cartridges from a nearby stone quarry, where he was a doctor, but after some rounds of trials, he had to ask the activists in Geneva to procure hand bombs instead (Temo 1987, 132–134).

As these preparations were underway, fiery placards began to be distributed in the streets of İstanbul from mid-February 1897 onwards. One of them remarked that “the Turkish Revolutionary Party which has till now abstained from bloodshed has now fully determined, arms in hand, to put the tyrants into their proper place and obtain vengeance for the oppressed,” calling Abdülhamid II “a mad dog” and promising that the revolutionaries “have dynamite sufficient to extinguish the Yıldız of our swinish Padishah and to blow its ashes to the stars of heaven” (see Figure 1).<sup>37</sup> Such proclamations in İstanbul created the expectation that an attempt on the life of the sultan could be made during that year's *Hırka-ı Şerif* ceremony – an annual celebration with the sultan present opening the crests containing the holy relics on the 15th day of the month of Ramadan. This meant that extra precautions were taken and the sultan travelled by boat to the Topkapı Palace, while his empty carriage surrounded by the imperial entourage promenaded on the road crowded by cheerful onlookers.<sup>38</sup> As Mustafa Ragıp noted in a letter to Temo, signed off with his alias “Murü Hicrani,”<sup>39</sup> the expectations were also high among the Young Turks: “God knows, I had thought that we would have succeeded in doing something improper in the month of Ramadan” (Temo 1987, 74).

Although nothing happened that day, the society continued to distribute proclamations, even in İstanbul's mosques,<sup>40</sup> and preparations were still underway to secure explosives. In January 1897, Mustafa Ragıp came to Vidin and he became, using “Raci bin İsmail” as his alias, the principal at the city's middle school for

<sup>35</sup> One should note that this was also when Tunalı Hilmi's began to publish his fiery *hutbes* (Ateş 2009, 16–45).

<sup>36</sup> BOA, HR. TO. 354-50, 11 Teşrin-i sani 1312 (23 November 1896).

<sup>37</sup> The original translation into English quoted above comes from the following report: TNA, FO 78/4798/108, February 16, 1897. The Ottoman original read: “Osmanlılar! Biliriz ki kudurmuş bir köpeği gebertmek farzdır! İşte bugüne kadar kan dökmekten sakınmış olan (Osmanlı İhtilal Fırkası) artık zalimlerin haddini silahla bildirmeye ve mazlumların intikamını almaya iyice karar verdi . . . Değil yalnız bir iki münafıkı tepelemek için lazım gelen kuvvetler, o canavar tabiatlı padişahın (yıldız)ını ve külünü yıldızlara doğru savuracak olan (dinamit)leriyle elde belde hazırdır. Halkın selameti her hangi noktayı gösterirse oraya atılacaktır.” BOA, Y. MTV. 153-72, lef 5.

<sup>38</sup> TNA, FO 78/4798/115, February 18, 1897.

<sup>39</sup> Ahmed Bedevi Kuran (2010, 227) misidentifies “Hicrani” as Mithat Şükrü (Bleda). In fact, Mithat Şükrü came to Vidin at a date later than Mustafa Ragıp.

<sup>40</sup> TNA, FO 78/4798/116, March 4, 1897.



عثمانلار !  
(بیاننامه)

وقدر آهله واهله و بوکاسی اولان ظالمه بویون اولدو و انجمن اتمک الیه کیمیکه  
 ناصر قوروق تیجه لچقشور کوروز ؛ هله و ماهه سی بوزوق عبدالحمد شوقیلده راست  
 کدیو داله به حق درجه دکی قوروغا نلغی الته هیمز ایشتمز در .

عثمانلار ! بیلیرنکه قودورمش برکوبکی کیمیکه فرزند ! .. ایشته بوکونه قورقان  
 دو مکندن صا قیش اولان (عثمانلی ایشتمز قوروق) آرتق ظالم ملک حدی سلا حله بیلدیرمه به  
 و مظلوم ملک استقامی آما یه ایجه قرار ووردی . نرضه ایسه الهه ایجه بیک ایلک فرصته مین  
 مجاهده به آتله جقدر ! .. بولده ؛ عثمانلی بوره کما شیائل ؛ اومارنکه (اختلال) سوز نلغ  
 مناسبتن معالرجی قارما یه رقی بزاجیلر ایجه قاریشیر ؛ حقه و خلقه اولان بورج لری بران اوله  
 اودرسکر ! .. اول باقر شورا سی ده بیلدیرمک ایسترنکه ؛ حقیرده کیم قاسوز سولرسه ؛ یا به  
 بیه جکی برایشی تکلف ایتدیکه خاله یا ما زسه ؛ بخصوص - اوکوجک بویوک مغالطجا سولسر  
 بر طرف - ضابطه کوهی و عسکر کما فی بولور کیمه به فالقیشرسه آرمز ایشق اولور امله  
 جقدر ! .. اورت ؛ اوله جکر ؛ اولدیره جکر ؛ کسه جکر ؛ بیجه جکر ؛ یا قه جفر ؛ بیقه جفر !  
 هیم کیمسه دن برولمزوق ! .. کوکلر ؛ وجد انلر بویوکا چوقدن عاشق قدر ؛ هله قانولر ؛ قوللر  
 بولور یز به باشا جیق ؛ یک دوغرو کوستریون ! .. باشقه چاره یوق ! .. دکالاکر ؛ بیا بیک  
 منافعی بنه له ملک ایچون لازمکن قوللر ؛ اوستوا ز طبعی طر شاهک (میلین) بی سو  
 ندره جکر ؛ و کولوی سلا بزره ؛ و غرو صا و وره جق اولان (دینا مین) لریله آلدنه بئله حاضرده  
 خلقک سلامتی هر جا تکی نقطه ی کوستر رسه اولایه آتله جقدر !

اعظام الدن قوروللر ایچون چاره لر آریان ؛ فقط قان و کولوسنی ایستیه مین  
 ولما ایشلمز ؛ کلکن ؛ بارغلا یه و هر قصیه ده ک حکومت قوناقا بنه طولیک ؛ ایجا بیلدیرسه صوما  
 بری ؛ بیجا قاری ؛ بیککن ؛ قورضا بیکن ! .. زیرا ؛ بویکده و قوروق ایسته به ایضا نلک جا ز الیزه در !  
 اورت ؛ آیا قانلر ؛ اهنوز باش قالدیر ما بش اولان لاهلیر ؛ بو قدر جق بیجا نلغ غریب باری کوستریکر  
 که ؛ (شیدیکه عثمانلارده اسکیم عثمانلک قان بوقدر) کیم غیر سوز لر نلندن قورولر سکر ! .. اوستی و شد  
 اضارنک فداکار لقلندن اولسون بیز الیکر ؛ کئده به یا بیلان خطاری اورتک ایچون ایلیکری ؛ اولره  
 اوزا نیکر ؛ ارفه لر نلک کئک اغیر کایورسه اولکینه دوشیکر ! .. بونه آچی بمرده کسه نلر بیز برلکده  
 دینا مین شو بویوق فردا ایشتمز له بیه یوز یوزه کله جک حاکم لقلدی !

تیمو کیم ؛ عثمانلار ! هیم اولما زسه الله قوروق سوله تیزه بیکرکه قلمکده و عه حق برتدیر سله  
 سنه شو ا ساریت بویوک آرقه کزدن دوشسون ! .. یا قیشماز ؛ عثمانلیغه ؛ مسلمانلغه بویوک نلر ق  
 بالله لکده در ! .. ایشیدیکر ؛ شو قدا ز حکومتک ظلمنه قران اولان آنا ؛ ببالر ؛ قرانلر ؛ اولدیرن  
 کیکدن (استقام استقام) و به باغور ! .. کور کیم ؛ عثمانلار ؛ یا ن باشکده کیم بویوک اختیار لر او  
 راق کیم بیلر ؛ اوریک ایچون ؛ یا خور بولتمه جه ایدیلن و غرو با کلن بر شهه اوزرینه اولدورمک لک  
 جکر لری بار اولان قیاد و قفاته قولا ق اصله به رف یافته پاچه کالدیر یلوب کور و یورکن برلر کیزه  
 میخلی کیم دور جکده بویجه لرک امدادینه قوشیکر ؛ باشلینه مسلط اولمش چلار لری ده بار اولیکه  
 اورتق سوله جه لر بیکله چارچاق قیز لیسین ؛ زندانلده ؛ سوکوز لریه ؛ عیبتانک ؛ نا طولور  
 روملر لیک ؛ برککی لر نده بیه اچقلندن ؛ اکلن ؛ نزلجمله عثمانلیلو ؛ رحمت بونوق کورمک نصیب اولسون ؛  
 وآلا ؛ یا حق ؛ یا اولور ؛ دیرک (پاس بویوان) قاجدیر ق و شو ظلم کوی کون کدن سوکولمق اولدنه بز  
 ایشته سلمه السلام باشلا یه جفر ؛ بیلدیر یوز ؛ کما نه کندی !

5  
153/72  
Y.MTV

Figure 1. Ottoman Revolutionary Party's declaration printed in red ink. Source: Ottoman Archives of the Prime Minister's Office (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi; BOA). Reference BOA, Y. MTV. 153-72, leaf 5. See note 37 for a snippet from the transcription of the Ottoman original.

Muslims, where he began to teach French and general history.<sup>41</sup> Even though he felt rather isolated in Vidin and noted that he lacked any comrades to take part in the assassination plot (Temo 1987, 75), he maintained contact with Kaymakam Şefik (alias Berki) about how to proceed.<sup>42</sup> As Şefik noted, however, the major setback to the operation was the fact that Armenian revolutionaries decided not to provide explosives to the Young Turks for reasons that remain unclear. Furthermore, Mustafa Ragıp seems to have presented too many possible scenarios, which frustrated the operatives based in Geneva. Şefik still sent both to Temo and Ragıp the necessary instructions to make explosives, while İshak Sukuti preferred the use of good old revolvers (Temo 1987, 79, 90). While these negotiations were underway, Mustafa Ragıp's cover was blown after he began to request seditious newspapers and documents to the literary coffeehouse that opened just two days previously.<sup>43</sup> After having had to leave Vidin, Mustafa Ragıp came to Geneva in early fall of 1897, where he stayed for a short time (Kuran 2010, 225), but he continued to be in close contact with İbrahim Temo, whom he called *hocam* (my master). Another assassination plot was already underway by then, involving once again Mustafa Ragıp, when, in the words of Temo, "Turkish blood, which was drained, again became hot" (quoted in Hanioglu 1995, 109). The plot, just like the prior one, was a botched operation, as the organization seemed to have failed in mobilizing the necessary resources.

As for Mustafa Ragıp's teaching post in Vidin, it had been filled by Mithat Şükrü (Bleda). Upon hearing the news of replacement, the Ottoman commercial agent in Vidin quickly contacted the local committee for Muslim education which was composed of Tahtacı Şükrü and his business partner Hasan, Ömer, a Muslim notable, and Hüseyin, owner of a tobacco factory. Noting that the new teacher was also a seditious fugitive, the Ottoman agent politely asked for his removal from the post. The committee members, however, did not budge and instead told İstanbul that they "did not attach much importance to private behaviors and actions of their teachers, but only desired the children of the nation be educated and trained according to the new methods."<sup>44</sup> The latter emphasis on *usul-ü cedid* (the new methods) is indicative of how widely the educational reformist positions of İsmail Gaspıralı had circulated since the late 1890s via his Crimea-based *Tercüman* (The Interpreter) newspaper, popularly read and consumed by the Muslims inhabiting the Danube hinterland (Turan and Evered 2005, 488–490). The Young Turks indeed thrived in this borderland environment which was porous to the flows of revolutionaries and reformist ideas: they took up locally funded positions as teachers and entrenched themselves in the local networks of trust by capitalizing on the already existing Jadidi reformism that had clearly penetrated well beyond state borders (Khalid 1998).

Commenting on *Osmanlı* published in Geneva from late 1897 onwards, Şerif Mardin (1994, 143–147) noted how this new outlet found its readership primarily among the middle-class Balkan Muslims, even though the newspaper defended the Balkan

<sup>41</sup> BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 74 and 75, 24 Temmuz 1313 (5 August 1897).

<sup>42</sup> It is tricky to identify Berki's real identity, but I believe it is Kaymakam Şefik who is credited in Ragıp's letter as the individual insisting that he receive the deliveries of explosives.

<sup>43</sup> BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 69, 13 Mayıs 1313 (30 May 1897).

<sup>44</sup> BOA, HR. SFR (04). 750-122, lef 82, 13 Eylül 1313 (25 September 1897). Emphasis added.



revolutionary model and embraced an openly propagandist attitude directly targeting Abdülhamid II. These Balkan Muslims who read and supported the Geneva-based *Osmanlı*, I suggest, were also the ones who welcomed the Young Turks in their midst and at times did so, as we have seen, despite the dictates of the Ottoman center and its local representatives. Upon arrival, the Young Turk exiles found the cities from Rusçuk to Şumnu and Varna with a Muslim majority who enjoyed access to a vibrant associational activity, a print media and the three fourths of Turkish schools that existed in all of Bulgaria (Şimşir 1986, 35–49). This local Muslim public sphere populated by the local Muslim intelligentsia and bourgeoisie alike was not only passively receptive to their revolutionary messages, but also helped actively to co-produce them across the fin-de-siècle Danubian cities. This was why, when the radical Young Turk newspaper *Osmanlı* ceased operations in 1903 after rounds of the Hamidian cooptation of its editors, Ethem Ruhi, its last editor-in-chief, chose to settle in Bulgaria – a country that he deemed to be a more opportune setting for the realization of his radical agenda.

## Conclusion

*Anything I subsequently experienced had already happened in Ruschuk.*

Elias Canetti (1979, 4)

After the restoration of the Ottoman constitution on July 23, 1908, Mustafa Ragıp and some others asked İbrahim Temo to organize a local celebratory meeting in Constanta, after which they departed for İstanbul. Just like many other revolutionaries who spent many years in exile, İbrahim Temo wanted to see his hometown, Struga, but on the way he also stopped in Salonica. Together with Mustafa Ragıp, he visited the headquarters of the CUP. When they entered, they found Cemal, Mithat Şükrü, and many others in the building. After congratulating them for their contributions to the revolution, Temo started discussing the successes of the Young Turks. Cemal interrupted him, however, asking which organization Temo was talking about and then noted that “our committee is not the committee you worked for outside the homeland; ours is a product of Manastır (Bitola) and Selanik (Salonica).” These comments, Temo recalled, made Mithat Şükrü rather blush, since he had spent many years working next to Temo in the Dobruja region, but as Temo (1987, 179–185) remembered bitterly, Mithat Şükrü could not even open his mouth in objection. Mithat Şükrü’s memoirs are firmly silent, too, on all the years he had spent in the Balkans (Bleda 2010, 16–22). Perhaps aware of how he was dropped out of historical narratives, Temo himself noted that he would publish one day a memoir solely dedicated to the revolutionary movement in Bulgaria and along the Danube (Temo 1987, 95), but he never did. The role his Balkan branch played found partial discussion only in the memoirs of other sidelined Young Turks such as Ethem Ruhi.

The existing scholarship has similarly failed to decenter the broader outlines of the historical narrative provided by the revolutionary mainstream on the making of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908. As Şerif Mardin (1994, 142) noted, many scholars working on the Young Turks have mainly focused on the period after 1902, and in

doing so skipped the activities of individuals such as İbrahim Temo.<sup>45</sup> This article is a small step to address this void by piecing together some episodes that Temo's memoirs had identified in passing, with the help of Ottoman intelligence reports that shed partial light on a key set of events that unfolded along the Danube. On top of their empirical value, these curious episodes are historiographically significant as well. Nader Sohrabi (2002) argued that it was only after the Russian constitutional revolution of 1905 that the Young Turks began to embrace more bottom-up revolutionary tactics, slowly warming to the idea of mobilizing masses to the revolutionary front. The Young Turk Revolution of 1908, in his assessment, "turned out to be from above and below simultaneously; it was organized by military officers, but joined and assisted by the public, especially Turkish villagers in Macedonia" (Sohrabi 2002, 67). While *fin-de-siècle* Rusçuk certainly tells us the story of a revolution that did not happen, it nevertheless provides us with a template that anticipated the type of revolution that was to unfold in Ottoman Macedonia by 1908.

Finally, in studying a city, where there had been multiple rounds of abortive assassination attempts, I hope to go against the broader tendency in global history "to dwell on integration and concord, rather than disintegration and discord," whereby prizing global connections often came at the expense of emphasizing disconnections, disruptions, and failures (Adelman 2017). The Danubian cities, such as Rusçuk, were certainly privileged settings that experienced the first wave of globalization, with its characteristic markers of growing connections, faster pace of life, and incessant inflows of laborers, refugees, goods, travelers, and capital – borne as much out of interstate rivalries as due to the integration of world economy. Revolution and revolutionaries thrived in this *fin-de-siècle* world, particularly in its port-cities, such as Rusçuk, where they could come and go, as they pleased, with ready opportunities to plug themselves into illicit circuits providing arms, explosives, and revolutionary literature (Öztan 2017). Yet, this was neither given, nor easy, but rather contingent. It was very much up to the historical agency of revolutionary actors to exploit this abundance of means, networks, and experts, in addition to navigating the vicissitudes of fate from diseases to dungeons, counter-revolutionary forces to like-minded revolutionaries-turned-fierce competitors. This was indeed a global world where radicalism was made, but also certainly one characterized by very real limits that should feature more often in our globally oriented accounts of connected revolutions.

**Acknowledgments.** I thank Alp Yenen, Alex Balistreri, Murat Kaya, and Nadir Özbek as well as the editors of this special issue for their very helpful comments and suggestions. Special thanks are also in order for Sefer Soydar for all his help with Ottoman sources.

**Conflicts of interest.** None.

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<sup>45</sup> The exception here is Hanioglu who provided valuable discussions of the Young Turk branches in the Balkans (Hanioglu 1995, 89–90, 109, 122–124, 140–144). The rest of the studies that explored the Young Turk activities in Bulgaria chose to focus on later periods, mostly centering around Ethem Ruhi (Sincer 2020; Kamali 2021).

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**Cite this article:** Öztan, Ramazan Hakkı (2024). The Bulgarian connection: the Young Turks in exile and the making of radicalism in Ottoman Europe, 1895–1897. *New Perspectives on Turkey* 70: 12–31. <https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2023.22>