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Fighting the Minor Evils: Slavery and the Diverse Lives of Abolitionism in the Ottoman Empire

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Abstract

Historians have long argued that abolitionism, as a distinct political project, never fully took root in the Ottoman Empire. While anti-slavery measures emerged from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, they are often seen as state-imposed responses to diplomatic pressure. From a state-focused perspective, abolition indeed appears to be the result of actions by the Ottoman state and international community, inevitably so, given its entanglement with the emergence and development of the Congress system in the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna. Yet a focus on individuals, organizations, and institutions also suggests a subversive, practical abolitionism concerned with everyday injustices rather than lofty ideals. This paper examines such efforts, reframing abolitionism as a political issue rather than a moral one detached from broader transformations. By situating abolitionist thought within the late Ottoman Empire's increasingly radical politics, it challenges the conventional state-centered narrative, highlighting the diverse actors who shaped anti-slavery discourse and action.

Keywords: abolition; Ottoman Empire; slave trade; slavery; subversion

In early 1873, a young enslaved boy of unspecified age, referred to simply as *sagir*—the term for “minor” or “the young one” in legal discourse—fled from his owner's house and vanished.¹ The owner, Hacı İshak, a recent immigrant from the Caucasus, lived in the close company of fellow immigrants in a village in the Edirne province, where he also served as the village imam.² That the enslaved child could disappear without a trace was perplexing for him, given how close-knit his community (and how well-connected he himself) was. He

¹ Ottoman State Archives (hereafter, BOA), ŞD (Şûrâ-yı Devlet, Council of State) 2403/34, 1290.S.15 (14 April 1873).

² Although not addressed in detail here, the backdrop of this story involves the forced displacement of native populations from the Caucasus and their subsequent transplantation to the Ottoman Empire, with the peak occurring between 1859 and 1864. For an in-depth examination of this episode, which saw the displacement of over one million people with catastrophic results, see Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, *Empire of Refugees: North Caucasian Muslims and the Late Ottoman State* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024); and Ella Frantuo, *Governing Migration in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2024). For specific discussions on slavery-related legal ambiguities and problems, see Ceyda Karamursel, “Transplanted Slavery, Contested Freedom, and Vernacularization of Rights in the Reform Era Ottoman Empire,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59, no. 3 (2017): 690–714.

knew that it would be impossible for the child, who was unable to pay for food or shelter, to go unnoticed and survive for so long all by himself.³ He was sure that the boy had received help; he just did not know who the culprit was, until one day a villager noticed and identified the boy at the household of Selami Bey, a high-ranking military officer who had recently arrived in the region on a temporary appointment.⁴ This eventual discovery of the runaway child—who now bore a new name, hairstyle, and outfit—after months of active searching caused genuine bewilderment for Hacı İshak. It also triggered a chain of events that inspired many other enslaved individuals to flee, despite the measures implemented by the slave-owning elite in the region. Moreover, it initiated a legal process through which Hacı İshak attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to reclaim ownership of the runaway child.

Historians of Ottoman and Middle Eastern slavery and abolition have long argued that abolitionism as a distinct political movement never truly established itself, and that there was an “abolitionist void” in the Ottoman Empire.⁵ They argued that although antislavery measures were adopted and implemented by the Ottoman state beginning with the dissolution of the public slave market in Istanbul in 1846 and the empire-wide ban on the African slave trade in 1857, these efforts were driven solely by intergovernmental relations shaped by Britain’s growing political and economic influence over the Ottoman Empire, rather than by any profound ideological commitment to antislavery principles within the empire.⁶ Unlike European and American cases, historian Ehud Toledano has noted, there was no “marketplace of ideas,” and the ban of trade in enslaved Africans was imposed upon the Ottoman government “as a result of sustained pressure through diplomatic channels.”⁷ Abolitionism was an “alien idea [that] came from Britain, was little understood, and won few or no converts.”⁸ To be sure there was an active abolitionist community, epitomized by such organizations as the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which had keen interest in slavery and abolition in the Ottoman Empire, but these “operated outside the empire and rarely engaged Ottoman interlocutors and supporters.”⁹

³ For a general overview of the vulnerability of Ottoman children, see Gülay Yılmaz and Fruma Zachs, eds., *Children and Childhood in the Ottoman Empire: From the 15th to the 20th Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021). Specifically, for those without kin support, as is the case here, see Nazan Maksudyar, *Orphans and Destitute Children in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014). As both studies highlight, children were far from being devoid of agency. They made decisions, secured their own safety, and devised strategies for survival. However, none of these actions alleviated their extreme vulnerability in a society that systematically coerced them into slavery or other highly exploitative labor arrangements.

⁴ In the government-produced yearbook for the province (*Edirne Salnamesi*, 1289, 1872/73), the corresponding position seems vacant that year. Presumably, Selami Bey was sent to the province during this time, to fill the position until a permanent appointment could be made.

⁵ Y. Hakan Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), xviii–xix; Madeline Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 97–98; Ehud R. Toledano, “Abolition and Anti-Slavery in the Ottoman Empire: A Case to Answer?” in *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William Mulligan and Maurice Bic (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 117–36; Michael Ferguson, “Abolitionism and the African Slave Trade in the Ottoman Empire (1857–1922),” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Bondage and Human Rights in Africa and Asia*, ed. Gwyn Campbell and Alessandro Stanziani (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 215.

⁶ Toledano, “Abolition,” 118; Ferguson, “Abolitionism.” For a contrasting overview of abolition from the viewpoint of Islamic jurisprudence, see William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁷ Toledano, “Abolition,” 118.

⁸ Ehud R. Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression: 1840–1890* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 91.

⁹ Toledano, “Abolition,” 119.

Indeed, various edicts and proclamations that sought to abolish the slave trade within the Ottoman Empire were all born out of international treaties and agreements. For one, the seminal empire-wide trade ban of 1857 came as a condition to the Ottoman Empire's entry into the Concert of Europe, the body overseeing the emerging public international law, following its signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1856. Similarly, the final abolition of slavery as an institution by the republican government in 1933 was an extension of the 1926 Convention to Suppress the Slave Trade and Slavery, which itself made explicit reference to earlier, 19th-century treaties—such as the Brussels Conference Act and the Treaty of Berlin—and to which the Turkish state became signatory upon its accession to the League of Nations the previous year.¹⁰ When viewed strictly from a state-focused perspective, the abolition of slavery in the Ottoman Empire indeed appears primarily to be the result of the actions of the Ottoman state and the international community, which is inevitable, given that the history of the concept is very much interlinked with the emergence and development of the congress system in the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna.¹¹ However, such a narrow focus and rigid definition of abolitionism fails to do justice to, and inadvertently flattens, antislavery thought and action, as well as the complexity of the immediate political context in which these operated in the late Ottoman Empire.

I argue that abolitionism was more than merely a collection of state policies; it was not solely a product of the “marketplace of ideas,” either, even though there were several fairly vibrant fora for debating the issue in the late Ottoman Empire.¹² The rich, diverse, and contentious history of antislavery thought and action in the Atlantic world and beyond, shaped primarily by resistance and subversion, defied any uniform (Western or otherwise) conceptualization.¹³ In the Ottoman Empire, too, there were incidents, such as the one that opens this article, that hint at the practical, subversive, and concealed side of abolitionism, focused on addressing everyday injustices rather than lofty ideals or noble causes, going beyond the realm of the reformers, intellectuals, and other usual dispensers of ideas. Buried under a thick layer of policy-related documentary evidence and not readily discernible, these cases suggest that abolitionism may have been more widely embraced at the practical level in the Ottoman Empire than historians have previously assumed.

This paper takes the aforementioned case of a runaway enslaved child—and a government official who afforded him protection—as its entry point to explore practical manifestations of antislavery action in the reform-era Ottoman Empire. To be clear, the intention is not to suggest that a robust, all-round abolitionist movement existed within the empire, nor to equate the scale and impact of these practices with those observed in the Atlantic world. Instead, the paper argues for a broader definition and understanding of abolitionism, highlighting instances that the existing literature may have overlooked. By doing so, it seeks to position abolitionist and antislavery thought and actions—broadly conceived—within

¹⁰ William Mulligan and Maurice Bric, eds., *A Global History of Anti-Slavery Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 14. For the corresponding bill and the commission mandates in early republican Turkey, see “Esaretin meni hakkındaki mukavelenin tasdikına dair 1/467 numaralı kanun lâiyhası ve Hariciye ve Dahiliye encümenleri mazbataları,” *Sıra* 260, 26 December 1932.

¹¹ Brian Vick, “Power, Humanitarianism and the Global Liberal Order: Abolition and the Barbary Corsairs in the Vienna Congress System,” *International History Review* 40, no. 4 (2018): 939–60.

¹² For an excellent treatment of these fora in which proslavery and antislavery ideas were debated and defended in their complexity, see Amal N. Ghazal, “Debating Slavery and Abolition in the Arab Middle East,” in *Slavery, Islam and Diaspora*, ed. Behnaz A. Mirzai, Ismael Musah Montana, and Paul E. Lovejoy (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2009), 141.

¹³ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

the increasingly radical political context of the late Ottoman Empire, to reinterpret abolitionism as a political issue, rather than merely a moral one isolated from broader social and political changes, while challenging the conventional focus on the state's central role in its development.

Ottoman Abolitionism in the Abstract

Viewed retrospectively, abolitionism appears as a movement founded on a coherent set of ideas and ethical concerns. Framed as a distinctly northwestern European articulation of the “freedom principle,” it is frequently portrayed as a noble effort to universalize this principle as a moral imperative.¹⁴ In the Ottoman context, abolitionism has been depicted, almost without exception, as a forceful imposition of this imperative, at times wielded by Western powers with strategic intent, functioning less as a purely moral or ideological endeavor and more as a tool to reinforce imperial hierarchies, most notably by consolidating and expanding British influence over the Ottoman Empire.¹⁵

Although abolitionism as a deeply rooted moral project or a 19th-century imperial endeavor holds some truth, in reality it was far more diverse and eclectic, encompassing a broad spectrum of actors, ideas, and action. Far from being confined to righteous jurists, devout religious groups, romantic reformers preoccupied solely with the moral evils of slavery, or ambitious colonial officers intent on consolidating British power, abolitionists and antislavery activists were critical thinkers who challenged emerging political structures and practices—particularly in the 19th century—while simultaneously asserting claims to state belonging and citizenship rights.¹⁶ This intensive process of claims-making and advocating for equality and justice—and by extension, citizenship—was not confined to the Atlantic world, either; it reverberated globally during what is often referred to as the “golden age of freedom.”

Although less organized and on a smaller scale than in the Atlantic world, there was a notable interest in the concept of freedom (*hürriyet*, from Arabic *hurriyya*) within the Ottoman Empire, particularly among intellectuals, from the mid-19th century onward. Although this interest may not have directly aligned with abolitionism, it nonetheless signified a broader global engagement with ideas of freedom. These intellectuals' understanding of the concept of freedom was, at least initially, not simply a translation or an uncritical adoption of the Western liberal principle of *liberté*. In fact, the term *liberté* was translated into Ottoman Turkish as *serbestiyet*, signifying a different conceptual framework altogether.¹⁷ Instead, their notion of freedom was deeply rooted in Islamic jurisprudence, in which it signified being freeborn and legally free, directly opposing the condition of slavery.¹⁸ However, this concept of freedom also was shaped by the new intellectual currents

¹⁴ Seymour Drescher, *Abolition: A History of Slavery and Antislavery* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ Toledano, “Abolition”; Ferguson, “Abolitionism.”

¹⁶ For a comprehensive analysis of abolitionism as the conglomeration of a diverse set of ideas and practices, see Sinha, *Slave's Cause*.

¹⁷ Ehud Toledano, “Late Ottoman Concepts of Slavery (1830s–1880s),” *Poetics Today* 14, no. 3 (1993): 492; Hüseyin Yılmaz, “From Serbestiyet to Hürriyet: Ottoman Statesmen and the Question of Freedom during the Late Enlightenment,” *Studia Islamica*, 111 (2016): 204.

¹⁸ Yılmaz, “From Serbestiyet,” 203–4, 222–30. The earlier generation of historians of the Ottoman reform era, such as Bernard Lewis and Niyazi Berkes, argued against this, inevitably flattening, as Yılmaz aptly notes, Ottoman political thought and traditions. Similarly, a flattening effect is inevitable when historians insist that abolitionism could not have grown out of, or simply adapted to, the Ottoman political and intellectual milieu.

and political forms that emerged during the global age of revolutions, particularly from the late 18th century onward, with the revolutions of 1848 marking the final significant wave.¹⁹

The Ottoman Empire was not a major site of revolutionary activity in 1848, with the notable exception of the Wallachian Revolution, which, as historian Christine Philliou has noted, followed closely on the heels of the Paris and Vienna revolutions.²⁰ It also became a refuge for numerous revolutionaries, particularly from Poland and Hungary, after their respective uprisings were suppressed. More importantly, however, the Ottomans had been intimately involved, although for most part on the back foot, in one of the most significant revolutionary episodes of the early 19th century: the Greek Revolution (1821–29). During this conflict, the revolutionary fervor of the Greeks was frequently contrasted with what was depicted as the “backward” ways of the Ottomans.²¹ Slavery, which had been condemned as “repugnant to the principles of humanity and universal morality” in the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna, and its abolition written into international law, played a particularly prominent role in these depictions.

Freedom’s occasional appearances in earlier political debates notwithstanding, the concept gained significant prominence especially in the second half of the 19th century, when reform-minded statesmen and intellectuals began to discuss it extensively, not as a seditious idea, but as what historian Hüseyin Yılmaz described as “the principal idiom” through which they engaged with European discourses on civilization.²² Among those who adopted, redefined, and weaponized the notion of freedom as a “foundation of an ideology of dissent,” the group of intellectuals known as the Young Ottomans stands out.²³ Prominent figures such as Ziya Pasha and Namık Kemal not only employed the concept of freedom extensively in their push for constitutionalism against absolutist monarchy but also chose it as the title of their leading oppositional newspaper.²⁴ As the 19th century progressed and political opposition in the Ottoman Empire grew more robust and vocal, discussions of freedom expanded to encompass related concepts, most notably equality (*müsâvât*). These debates also found expression in other venues, particularly literary works, where abstract ideas like freedom and equality began to take on more concrete forms. It was during this period that the issue of slavery also entered these discussions.²⁵

Despite their rigorous efforts to define and expand the notions of freedom and equality as tools for their “ideology of dissent,” Ottoman intellectuals also exhibited a notable degree of perplexity and ambivalence when it came to personal freedoms—particularly the freedom of enslaved individuals, which stood in contrast to the freedom to own and dispose of property—as well as the issue of abolition.²⁶ This ambivalence was partly due to their own

¹⁹ For a general overview of early discussions on *liberté* and its discontents, see Şerif Mardin, “Freedom in an Ottoman Perspective,” in *State, Democracy and the Military Turkey in the 1980s*, ed. Metin Heper and Ahmet Evin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988), 23–35; Yılmaz, “From Serbestiyet,” 203–4, 222–30; and Yusuf Ziya Karabıçak, “‘Why Would We Be Liberte?’ *Liberté* in the Ottoman Empire, 1792–1798,” *Turcica* 51 (2020): 219–53. For the age of revolutions and 1848 as its final episode, see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962).

²⁰ Christine M. Philliou, *Biography of an Empire: Governing Ottomans in an Age of Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 153.

²¹ Markos Karasarinis, “Mesolonghi,” in *The Greek Revolution: A Critical Dictionary*, ed. Paschalis M. Kitromilides and Constantinos Tsoukalas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 256–57.

²² Yılmaz, “From Serbestiyet”; İsmail Parlatır, *Tanzimat Edebiyatında Kölelik* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1987), 24.

²³ Yılmaz, “From Serbestiyet,” 230; Erdem Sönmez, “From Kanun-ı Kadim (ancient law) to Umumun Kuvveti (force of people): Historical Context of the Ottoman Constitutionalism,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 52, no. 1 (2016): 116–34; Karabıçak, “‘Why Would We Be Liberte?’” 221–22.

²⁴ Toledano, “Late Ottoman Concepts,” 490.

²⁵ Parlatır, *Tanzimat Edebiyatında Kölelik*, 26.

²⁶ Toledano, “Late Ottoman Concepts,” 492.

intimate connections with the institution of slavery; many of these intellectuals famously grew up in households with enslaved servants, and some, such as the renowned authors Ahmet Midhat (1844–1912), Abdülhak Hamid (1852–1937), and Samipaşazade Sezai (1859–1936), had mothers who were brought into the Ottoman Empire as slaves from the Caucasus.²⁷ Given these personal ties, slavery was not an easy or straightforward matter for Ottoman intellectuals to address. They often found themselves on the defensive, approaching the issue cautiously, as if, in Ehud Toledano’s words, “treading on very thin ice.”²⁸ Their personal experiences, which were common among the Ottoman elite of the time, led them to seemingly defend the Ottoman practice of slavery, emphasizing its purportedly “benign” or even “humane” nature—especially in comparison to the brutal chattel slavery in the American South.

However, this was not the sole cause of their ambivalence and perplexity regarding slavery. At times, their hesitation to address the slavery question in the Ottoman Empire arose not from a need to justify the institution but as a criticism or an expression of concern about the hasty and clumsy categorizations of slavery by their foreign, particularly Western, contemporaries. For example, the prolific author and self-proclaimed public educator Ahmed Midhat critiqued these misrepresentations in an imaginary conversation between a Russian princess and a fictional Ottoman intellectual named Suphi. When the Russian princess incorrectly referred to concubines as “odalasak,” Suphi sharply rebuked her, saying, “You see how those writers, not having even the name correctly, call it odalacak. If the misunderstanding starts with the name, imagine how far it would reach.”²⁹ Similarly, Fatma Aliye (1862–1936), the leading female author of the late 19th-century Ottoman Empire, criticized European travel writers for their superficial observations. Fatma Aliye argued that these “amateurish writers of fabricated accounts” would often check into hotels in the European quarters of Istanbul and rarely ventured into other neighborhoods. This limited exposure, she contended, led to incomplete and often incorrect information about local practices, including slavery.³⁰

It is true that reform-era Ottoman intellectuals occasionally, at times fervently, defended slavery, but their criticism was often directed at the arbitrary and superficial manner in which knowledge about the Ottoman Empire—and specifically its practice of slavery—was produced by outsiders. For Ahmed Midhat and his contemporaries, it was this inept and conceited approach that demanded a response before anything else. In this context, Ehud Toledano’s portrayal seems somewhat unfair to the intellectual capabilities of Ottoman writers, when he suggests that “one party [Europeans] barged in, fully armed with moral, economic, social, and political arguments and imbued with a strong sense of justice, while the other timidly turned its back, refusing to engage in a dialogue

²⁷ Ibid. For an overview of slaves brought from the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire, see Toledano, *Ottoman Slave Trade*; Erdem, *Slavery*. For the intensification of the slave trade and its relation to the Caucasus War (1817–64), see İbrahim Köremezi, “The Place of the Ottoman Empire in the Russo-Circassian War (1830–1864)” (Master’s thesis, Bilkent University, 2004); and Ceyda Karamursel, “In the Age of Freedom, in the Name of Justice: Slaves, Slaveholders, and the State in the Late Ottoman Empire and Early Turkish Republic, 1857–1933” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2015), ch. 1. For a specific overview of the Caucasus modes and practices of slavery, see Liubov Kurtynova-D’Herlugnan, *The Tsar’s Abolitionists: The Slave Trade in the Caucasus and Its Suppression* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

²⁸ Toledano, “Late Ottoman Concepts,” 492.

²⁹ Ahmed Midhat, *Acaib-i Alem* (Istanbul, 1882), also quoted in Parlatır, *Tanzimat Edebiyatında Kölelik*, 43. “Odalacak” is the incorrect form of “odalisque” in French and English. The correct Turkish word for this term is *odalık*, which literally meant chambermaid, although in actuality it denoted concubinage.

³⁰ Fatma Aliye Hanım, *Nisvan-ı İslam: Bazı adet-ı İslamiye hakkında üç muhavereyi havidir* (Istanbul: Tercüman-ı Hakikat Matbaası, 1309/1891–92), 43–44.

and claiming that there was basically no common ground, no common language, no frame of reference through which a true discussion could take place.”³¹ Ottoman statesmen and intellectuals were informed about, and later became participants in, the debates and decisions concerning the abolition of the slave trade and slavery from early on, indicating that they understood these concepts rather well.³² To be clear, this did not mean that Ottoman statesmen and intellectuals were not complicit in the perpetuation of slavery, as the trade reportedly continued to be conducted by high-ranking officials, including even the Grand Vizier `Ali Pasha.³³ The same Fatma Aliye who criticized European travel writers for their shallow observations, to give another example, continued purchasing slaves for her household—sometimes illegally—well into the early 20th century.³⁴ However, their critiques of how slavery was categorized and discussed by outsiders were not without merit. Furthermore, they were often more forceful than they have been given credit for when it came to criticizing the practice of slavery itself. Although it is difficult to measure the impact of their efforts, examining the writings produced by Ottoman intellectuals and literary figures in the final decades of the 19th century—writings that can loosely be classified as abolitionist literature—offers important insights into their stance.³⁵

The issue of slavery was taken up for the first time in Ottoman literature in Ahmed Midhat’s “Esaret” (Slavery or Captivity).³⁶ Published in 1870 as part of his *Letaif-i Rivayat* (Delightful Tales) series, “Esaret” is a lengthy story in which slavery is not merely a background detail but the central theme. The story is narrated by its protagonist, Zeynel Bey, a thirty-five-year-old army officer who is initially portrayed as being, at least outwardly, opposed to slavery. However, after the death of his mother and sister leaves him utterly desolate, he decides to purchase a young Circassian girl with the intention of grooming her for marriage. Persuaded by a slave dealer, Zeynel Bey instead buys two young children—a boy and a girl—whom he eventually adopts. As the adopted daughter grows up, the narrative shifts into a tragic love story that culminates in the children’s untimely demise.

Ahmed Midhat is anything but vague in his condemnation of slavery in this story. By the end, Zeynel Bey repents for having bought slaves and vows never to do so again.³⁷ More importantly, slavery is portrayed as fundamentally flawed, inevitably leading to tragic outcomes. For Ahmed Midhat, the so-called humane aspects of Ottoman slavery—such as benevolent masters and frequent manumissions—are insufficient to redeem an inherently evil practice. Even if Ottoman slavery had a humane side, which itself is highly doubtful, Ahmed Midhat makes it clear that it still results in the heart-wrenching separation of “these lambskins from their mothers and fathers.”³⁸ Therefore, the “human sensitivity” often

³¹ Toledano, “Late Ottoman Concepts,” 488.

³² See BOA, HAT 1283/49739, 1232.M.24 (14 December 1816) for a brief partial report on the abolition of trade in African slaves as part of the Vienna settlement. For the Ottoman Empire’s full, albeit deliberately unofficial, engagement with the Congress of Vienna, see Ozan Ozavci, “A Priceless Grace? The Congress of Vienna of 1815, the Ottoman Empire and Historicising the Eastern Question,” *English Historical Review* 136, no. 583 (2021): 1450–76.

³³ British National Archives, FO 195/946, Slave Trade #5, from Colonel Stanton to the Earl of Clarendon, 14 October 1869.

³⁴ For one bill of a legally dubious sale that involved Fatma Aliye, see Taksim Atatürk Kitaplığı, Fatma Aliye Hanım Papers, FA_Evr_000012-016, 7 Mart 1302 (19 March 1886).

³⁵ I use the term “abolitionist literature” rather broadly here, to comprise any piece of written work that has slavery as its central theme, with a clear objective of condemning it.

³⁶ Ahmet Midhat, “Esaret,” in *Letaif-i Rivayat*, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Kirk Anbar Matbaası, 1315/1899–1900).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

attributed to Ottoman society was not, as historians of Ottoman slavery argued, “taken for granted and appealed to in order to mitigate the circumstances that surround and the traffic that feeds it,” but was instead used, as in “Esaret,” to highlight the tragic ironies of the slaves’ plight.³⁹

Even more forceful than Ahmed Midhat’s “Esaret” is Samipaşazade Sezai’s short novel, *Sergüzeşt* (Adventure). Originally published in 1887, *Sergüzeşt* was the first literary work in Ottoman literature to feature an enslaved person as its protagonist.⁴⁰ Like “Esaret,” it is a tragic story that tells the life of a young Circassian girl, Dilber, who was smuggled into the empire from Batumi at the age of nine. Lacking the beauty required to become an *odalık*, she was initially employed as a domestic servant under harsh conditions. As Dilber grows up, she becomes a beautiful woman, but for the enslaved, beauty is as much a curse as a blessing—far from a guarantee of safety or security. In Dilber’s case, as likely in many others in real life, her beauty does not protect her from the dreaded fate of being resold. After being sold and resold to various households, Dilber eventually finds herself in Egypt, where she continues to live a grief-stricken life until she ultimately commits suicide by throwing herself into the blue waters of the Nile—or, as the author poignantly describes it, to her “freedom” (*hürriyet*).⁴¹ This is a choice word by the author that allegedly led to a government investigation and surveillance of him that lasted many years.⁴² In short, neither Ahmed Midhat nor Samipaşazade Sezai, among others, minced their words when it came to highlighting the intrinsic evil of the slave trade and slavery. For Sezai, trading in a “creature with consciousness” stemmed from avarice and nothing else.⁴³ Similarly, Ahmed Midhat saw slavery as an incorrigible wrong that was best abolished altogether.

It is important to note, however, that the sharp critique and sympathy shown by these and other authors who wrote about slavery seem to be largely limited to Caucasian slaves and rarely, if ever, extend to enslaved Africans. In “Esaret,” for instance, Ahmed Midhat briefly mentions an African cook whose enslaved status does not present any apparent moral dilemma for Zeynel Bey. Even more striking is Samipaşazade Sezai’s *Sergüzeşt*, in which the African servant Taravet is demonized as the “merciless Sudanese,” portrayed as someone who not only mistreats Dilber but takes pleasure in doing so.⁴⁴ However, if we read between the lines, Sezai hints that Taravet, too, was driven by fear—fear of becoming a target of the slave owner’s violence, of being resold, or of being thrown out onto the street.⁴⁵ Despite the apparent animosity or, at best, indifference toward enslaved Africans in both literary and other types of writing—an attitude that can be attributed largely to anti-Black sentiment in the late Ottoman Empire—Africans are not entirely excluded from the moral considerations of these authors who saw themselves as abolitionists. We do not know how Selami Bey, one of the two main protagonists of our story, perceived these racial differences or how he treated enslaved Africans in practice. The only documented account involving him concerns the rescue of a young Caucasian boy. However, the actions he took to ensure the boy’s escape suggest that he also may have assisted others, potentially including enslaved Africans, in escaping. Now, let us turn to his story, as much as the sparse records from the Council of State (*Şura-yı Devlet*) file allow us to reconstruct it.

³⁹ Toledano, “Late Ottoman Concepts,” 492.

⁴⁰ Samipaşazade Sezai, *Sergüzeşt* (Istanbul: Kitaphane-i Sudi, 1340/1924).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 3–7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

Ottoman Abolition in Practice

“Is there not too much of abolition ‘in the abstract?’” abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison asked with studied candidness in a *Liberator* article in 1835.⁴⁶ For Garrison, it was one thing—an “easy matter”—to “argue the question of liberty” and completely another to act on it.⁴⁷ In a similar vein, the New York Committee of Vigilance recognized that bringing about “a mighty revolution, such as the general abolition of slavery,” demanded “agents, and funds, and time, and influence, proportioned to the magnitude of the work.” Although they upheld the pursuit of this grand “noble cause” as essential, they also underscored the importance of confronting the “minor evils, which tend in the aggregate to make up that monstrous system of iniquity,” fervently urging that “in every case of oppression and wrong, inflicted on our brethren, [we should] prove our sincerity by alleviating their sufferings, affording them protection, giving them counsel, and thus in our individual spheres of action, prove ourselves *practical abolitionists*.”⁴⁸ These statements underscored a critical point: the fight against slavery, like any other revolutionary endeavor, has always been as much about the small, often concealed and overlooked acts of resistance as it has been about sweeping political movements. If this was true even in the Atlantic world, where abolitionism was arguably the strongest, one can reasonably surmise that “practical abolitionism”—a piecemeal approach to combating the institution of slavery by addressing the “minor evils” and everyday injustices—also found echoes in the Ottoman Empire, where antislavery action was less organized and conspicuous, and where, despite the absence of a formal abolitionist movement, similar acts of subversion and resistance quietly unfolded on a daily basis, carried out by myriad actors like Selami Bey.

Selami Bey exists, at least for now, only through the mentions in the detailed yet still incomplete Council of State folder, along with the various reports and petitions that accompany it. Like the runaway child he helped protect, we have no biographical information about him, nor do we know his opinions on the abolition of the slave trade or slavery—whether globally or within the Ottoman Empire. His views on broader concepts like justice, equality, and freedom, the elusive foundations of the emerging political order he closely witnessed, also remain unknown. Was he aware of the new worldview—one that skillfully blended Ottoman and Islamic political and legal traditions with European liberal innovations—as proposed and fervently discussed by figures like Namık Kemal and Ziya Pasha? Very likely. Was he a reader of the small abolitionist literature led by Ahmed Midhat? Possibly. After all, the Young Ottomans, particularly Namık Kemal, were far from obscure figures. Ahmed Midhat, too, was already a significant literary presence, even early in his career during the 1870s, having penned several hundred books in his lifetime. It is quite plausible that Selami Bey encountered and read some of the early stories from the inaugural volume of the *Letaif-i Rivayat* series, one of which was “Esaret,” published just three years

⁴⁶ William Lloyd Garrison, “Practical Anti-Slavery,” *The Liberator*, 25 July 1835; “Practical Abolitionism,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 15 June 1855.

⁴⁷ John G. Whittier, “Letter to the Editor,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, December 1840. For a later and considerably sharper critique of abolitionism as “a mere mock philanthropy, without soul, espoused for partisan purposes ... simply to elevate white demagogues to office,” see “Practical Abolitionism,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 15 June 1855.

⁴⁸ *First Annual Report of the New York Committee of Vigilance for the Year 1837: Together with Important Facts Relative to Their Proceedings* (New York: Piercy and Reed, 1837), 13, emphasis mine. For a detailed analysis of “practical abolitionism” as manifested through the radical politics of David Ruggles and the New York Committee of Vigilance, see Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City*, John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Although the social and political contexts of 1830s New York and the 1870s Ottoman Empire differ markedly, I borrow and employ the term “practical abolitionism” to highlight the piecemeal and often concealed nature of abolitionist actions during this period.

earlier. Even if Selami Bey was not familiar with the writings of Namık Kemal or Ahmed Midhat, or if he did not have clearly articulated ideas about abolitionism—not necessarily as a political project but as a moral stance—it is evident that he was aware of and concerned about the issue. This is demonstrated not only by his decision to aid the child’s escape but also by his continued efforts to shield him from the potentially justified legal claims made by the boy’s owner, Hacı İshak. In this sense, Selami Bey was not merely sympathetic to the plight of one enslaved child; he took concrete action against slavery, possibly on more than one occasion, in the years leading up to the case at hand.

As briefly summarized in the vignette that opens this article, the incident began with the flight and disappearance of the child, who, after months of searching in and around the village, was eventually found in the household of Selami Bey, a colonel (*miralay*) who had recently been appointed to a temporary post in the region. The file does not indicate how a high-ranking military officer like Selami Bey crossed paths with the boy, whose name, as we learn from a later-dated report, was Mehmed.⁴⁹ Their encounter might have been by chance—in the village square, at a government office, or in another public place. But the enslaved often acted with an understanding that they needed outside help to secure their freedom and had a clear hierarchy in mind of whom to approach. At the top of this hierarchy were those known by word of mouth to be willing to help or harbor fugitive slaves, and at the bottom, those who were most likely to hunt them down and turn them over to the authorities.⁵⁰ Therefore, it is more likely that Mehmed had heard of Selami Bey’s reputation and approached him with the specific purpose of seeking assistance. Either way, it is certain that they not only met but also exchanged words. During this conversation, Mehmed likely shared his story with Selami Bey, perhaps even seeking his advice. It is plausible that Selami Bey, in turn, encouraged him to flee.

As will be discussed in more detail shortly, Hacı İshak’s petition repeatedly emphasized that Mehmed’s enslaved status was indisputable, as he came from a lineage of slaves (*ced beced köle cinsinden*) in the Caucasus, where customary law (*adat*)—typically recognized and upheld by the Ottoman state and its legal institutions—established his enslavability.⁵¹ The implication was that any claim by Mehmed to freedom would have been seen as without merit, leaving him with almost no chance of being freed by the appropriate legal body and with no option other than to flee.⁵² However, as the final Council of State report reveals, Mehmed’s real story—perhaps the one he recounted to Selami Bey, too—was not exactly as his owner claimed. According to the report, Mehmed was actually freeborn.⁵³ He had emigrated to the Ottoman Empire with his mother, who died shortly after their arrival. Once orphaned, Mehmed became, as mentioned earlier, utterly vulnerable to the predatory slave traders whose numbers had surged during and after the mass expulsion and transplantation of Caucasians to the Ottoman Empire between 1859 and 1864. The chaotic nature of refugee resettlement turned even ordinary people into opportunistic slave dealers, who exploited existing trade networks to prey upon those who were weakened both physically and financially by their arduous journey.⁵⁴ Many freeborn children, like Mehmed, were coerced into slavery through deceit or force. For example, slave traders might have lured children with promises of food or shelter, only to sell them into servitude once trust was

⁴⁹ BOA, ŞD 2403/ 34, 1290.S.15 (14 April 1873), 5-1.

⁵⁰ Ehud R. Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 71.

⁵¹ For a detailed discussion on the legal conversion of categories of slavery and servitude in the aftermath of the Circassian expulsion, see Karamursel, “Transplanted Slavery,” 696–97.

⁵² Toledano, *As If Silent*, 95–96.

⁵³ BOA, ŞD 2403/ 34, 1290.S.15 (14 April 1873), 5-1.

⁵⁴ For a detailed overview of this episode of extended crisis, see Karamursel, “Age of Freedom,” ch. 3.

gained. In fact, as numerous petitions show, even adults were not immune to being forcibly absorbed into the Ottoman slavery system.⁵⁵ For instance, a brief note sent to the provincial council of Edirne a few years earlier than Mehmed's case mentions 26 people from a single village who were forced into slavery after a group of community leaders simply declared them their property.⁵⁶

Mehmed had been forced into slavery in a similar manner when, one day, a certain Osman Ağa from Berkofça (Berkovitsa, in today's Bulgaria) claimed him as his slave.⁵⁷ Osman Ağa then took Mehmed to Edirne, where he sold him to Hacı İshak, who readily accepted the bill of sale's assertion that Mehmed was from a lineage of slaves. Hacı İshak, in turn, planned to sell Mehmed for profit, but his plans were thwarted when the child successfully escaped and disappeared. Did Mehmed become aware of Hacı İshak's intentions and specifically seek help, or had he been planning his escape since his enslavement, only realizing it after his encounter with Selami Bey? It is difficult to say, but in either case, it seems Selami Bey took it upon himself to assist the child in his escape.

According to various petitions and reports in the same archival folder, Selami Bey began helping Mehmed by first altering his name, hairstyle, and clothing, making it harder for the townspeople—acting as Hacı İshak's scouts—to identify him as they continued their search for the runaway child.⁵⁸ To further protect Mehmed, Selami Bey took him in, at least temporarily, knowing it would be easier to conceal him within his household. Distrustful of the local government and its legal institutions, Selami Bey refused to produce the boy at the council proceedings when Mehmed was eventually discovered and his case brought before the local council. He also declined to take Mehmed to court, convinced that any verdict would favor the owner rather than the child. Finally, when it came time for Selami Bey to return to Istanbul, he entrusted Mehmed to the Austrian consulate in Edirne, placing him completely beyond the reach of both his claimant owner and the Ottoman authorities, local or otherwise—a point we will return to shortly.

Deprived not only of the profit he expected to make from Mehmed's sale but also of the 6,000 piasters—not an insignificant sum—he had already paid to Osman Ağa, Hacı İshak was expectedly furious.⁵⁹ In his petition, he employed every possible narrative strategy to establish the legitimacy of his claim as the rightful owner of the runaway slave, beginning by providing a detailed overview and justification of the institution of slavery as it had long existed and been practiced in his homeland, the Caucasus. Before emigrating to the Ottoman Empire, Hacı İshak explained, Caucasians—particularly the elite, although this is not explicitly stated in the petition—owned slaves in numbers that varied according to the owner's status and power. Some employed their slaves in agricultural work, while others used them for domestic tasks, depending on their needs. The institution of slavery, he argued, had not been particularly problematic for the Russian state before their emigration and was even less so for the Ottoman state, which, as Hacı İshak fervently insisted (using highly ornate language), had pledged to recognize and uphold all prior arrangements made

⁵⁵ Karamursel, "Transplanted Slavery," 702. For another striking example, especially involving unlawful (re)enslavement after manumission, see Toledano, *As If Silent*, 116.

⁵⁶ BOA, MVL 529/110, 1283.Z.29 (4 May 1867).

⁵⁷ BOA, ŞD 2403/ 34, 1290.S.15 (14 April 1873), 5-1.

⁵⁸ Although they await further, in-depth research and analysis in the case of Ottoman Empire, clothing items and bodily features played a very important role in the abolitionist movement, including grassroots efforts in the United States, both to avoid recapture of runaway slaves, but also for recording and reporting unlawfully kidnapped people. For an illustrative example, see Hodges, *David Ruggles*, 92. For a brief discussion on the representation of the slave's body in the Ottoman society, see Ehud R. Toledano, "Representing the Slave's Body in Ottoman Society," *Slavery & Abolition* 23, no. 2 (2002): 63–64.

⁵⁹ For his own petition, see BOA, ŞD 2403/ 34, 1290.S.15 (14 April 1873), 4.

under Caucasian customary law, often referred to simply as ancient customs (*adat-ı kadime*).⁶⁰

This was one of the most common narrative strategies employed by slave owners in the Ottoman Empire: asserting that their right to own slaves—which included the right to the sale, purchase, labor (*istihdam*), and sexual services (*istifraş*) of enslaved individuals—was sanctioned both by the “venerated” ancient laws of the Caucasus and by the sacred tenets of Islamic jurisprudence (or, at times, by both).⁶¹ According to this argument, this right was not only ancestral but also reinforced by numerous Qur’anic verses and prophetic traditions, making it impervious to any secular political or legal intervention.⁶² This powerful narrative was often bolstered by other tactics, such as the dissemination of false or manipulated information or the threat of communal violence. In his petition, Hacı İshak similarly employed these methods, providing misleading information about the case’s development and Selami Bey’s involvement, even going so far as to accuse Selami Bey of inciting unrest among the enslaved population and provoking potential violence between slave owners and their slaves in the region.

For Hacı İshak, figures like Selami Bey, who allegedly abused their power by seizing slaves through force, were directly responsible for undermining the laws that established the right to slave ownership in particular and property ownership in general. In his petition, Hacı İshak framed Mehmed’s flight as a case of deception and coercion. To him, and later to other slave owners and their legal representatives, any encouragement given to slaves could only be viewed as a deliberate act of deceit and any support offered by Selami Bey as motivated solely by self-interest—to keep Mehmed in his service “as though he were his own property” and potentially to sell him for a significant profit. Indeed, Hacı İshak even claimed that Selami Bey had offered to sell the child back to him for an unspecified sum, which he refused.⁶³ In Hacı İshak’s view, this was the true reason why Selami Bey consistently refused to comply with the laws and decrees ordering him to deliver the boy either to his rightful owner or to the local authorities, such as the provincial council or the court involved in the case.

As slave owners frequently did, Hacı İshak also blamed Selami Bey for setting a dangerous precedent for other slaves to follow, thereby causing social and economic upheaval, disrupting agricultural production and inciting widespread communal violence between slave owners and their slaves. Indeed, especially after delivering Mehmed to the Austrian consulate—thereby placing him beyond the reach of both his owner and the Ottoman state—Selami Bey inadvertently inspired other slaves in the region, despite the collective efforts (and considerable expenses, according to Hacı İshak’s petition) of slave owners to prevent such outcomes. Encouraged by Mehmed’s successful escape, many other enslaved men and women, Hacı İshak claimed, resolved to flee, leaving their owners “high and dry,” not only with unfinished agricultural work but, in some cases, also taking with them tools and even working animals.⁶⁴ What Hacı İshak did not disclose, however, is that some of these tools and animals—distributed by the Ottoman government upon the immigrants’ settlement—had often been unlawfully appropriated by the slave-owning elite in the first place. In this context, the slaves’ alleged theft could be seen as part of their broader claims to freedom, reclaiming what was rightfully theirs but had been wrongfully taken.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Karamursel, “Transplanted Slavery,” 709.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 702; Karamursel, “The Uncertainties of Freedom: The Second Constitutional Era and the End of Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire,” *Journal of Women’s History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 149.

⁶² Karamursel, “Uncertainties of Freedom,” 149.

⁶³ BOA, ŞD 2403/ 34, 1290.S.15 (14 April 1873), 4.

⁶⁴ “[K]imisi ziraat edevat ve öküzlerimizi fûruht eyleyerek ve kimisi felahat ve hizmetini meydanda bırakarak,” *ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁵ Karamursel, “Transplanted Slavery,” 706.

For Hacı İshak and a growing number of similarly disgruntled slave owners, Selami Bey was directly responsible for the unrest, as they believed he had instigated these actions—an implicit acknowledgment of the abolitionist nature of his efforts. Accordingly, in various petitions sent to the central government—most notably to the office of the grand vizier—they demanded not only that Selami Bey be appropriately punished but also that they receive full compensation for their losses of slaves, tools, and animals and additional expenses. Most crucially, however, they emphasized the urgent need for Mehmed to be retrieved from the Austrian consulate. As long as Mehmed remained there, they argued, he continued to serve as a glaring example of successful resistance, inspiring more slaves to either seek out the likes of Selami Bey or to find refuge in one of the consulates in the province. Therefore they demanded that the boy be retrieved and returned to his owner at once.⁶⁶

In this matter, the Ottoman government was powerless. The Austrian consulate was considered Austrian soil, where no one could be or remain enslaved, and its right to refuse to surrender the child was firmly established by both Austrian and international law.⁶⁷ This was precisely why Selami Bey took the child to a consular office in the first place—to ensure that Mehmed would be beyond retrieval or even reach.⁶⁸ What is less clear is why Selami Bey chose the Austrian consulate over another, such as the British one. Was this suggested by the runaway child himself, or did Selami Bey make the decision based on his understanding of the safest or most reliable protection? Or was it, as Ehud Toledano has suggested, because British consular offices had become inundated with such cases and were increasingly reluctant to take them on, making the Austrian consulate the only viable option?⁶⁹ The archival folder does not include a petition or plea from Selami Bey explaining or defending his actions, leaving the exact reasoning behind his decision open to speculation. However, his approach suggests that he may have previously assisted others, potentially including enslaved Africans, especially because international laws and regulations initially applied most directly to the latter.⁷⁰

Selami Bey was evidently well-versed in the different jurisdictions governing slavery and the slave trade, and he understood what each jurisdiction could mean for enslaved individuals. For instance, he knew that the Ottoman state and its legal institutions would likely side with the slave owners, as they had in many similar cases at the time.⁷¹ He knew that the Ottoman government's role was not to dispense universal justice, but rather “to codify” the actions of slaveholders and slaves, and to place them “within the grid of law” that it was constructing.⁷² Accordingly, Selami Bey understood that recent bans on the slave trade did not automatically extend to the practice of slavery, and that the burden of proving Mehmed's freeborn status would fall on the child himself. Perhaps more surprisingly, he identified the Austrian consulate as a strategic option, knowing that “neither slavery nor the exercise of power pertaining to it is permitted in the Austrian Empire,” and that Mehmed

⁶⁶ BOA, ŞD 2403/ 34, 1290.S.15 (14 April 1873), 2, 4.

⁶⁷ Alison Frank, “The Children of the Desert and the Laws of the Sea: Austria, Great Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and the Mediterranean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 2 (2012): 410; Alison Frank, “The Strange, Sad Case of the ‘Bosnian Christian Girl’: Slavery, Conversion, and Jurisdiction on the Habsburg-Ottoman Border,” *Austrian History Yearbook* 51 (2020): 39–59.

⁶⁸ Frank, “Children of the Desert,” 410.

⁶⁹ Toledano, *As If Silent*, 62–63.

⁷⁰ Despite some diplomatic pressure and temporary measures, Caucasian slavery remained largely outside the jurisdiction of international antislavery and anti-slave trade regulations. For a detailed account of this process and the implications of this exclusion, see Erdem, *Slavery*, 102–24.

⁷¹ Karamursel, “Transplanted Slavery,” 704–14.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 701.

would become free “the moment he set foot” there.⁷³ Above all, he recognized that by doing so, he would transform Mehmed’s freedom into a matter of international law, a status that could at best be contested through diplomatic channels but could not be reversed or enforced by the Ottoman government.

Selami Bey did not write about slavery, nor did he, as far as we know, advocate for its abolition. Yet, he understood how to combat it on a practical level, and in this, he was far from alone. The final decades of the 19th and early 20th centuries saw other “practical abolitionists,” many of whom remain unknown but were undoubtedly active in various capacities—legal, administrative, and beyond. Their contributions, although piecemeal and often concealed, quietly advanced the cause of abolitionism, challenging the boundaries of citizenship rights and state belonging set by the Ottoman state. One such “practical abolitionist” was Cemal Bey, the district governor of Kayseri, who, like Selami Bey before him, drew the ire of slave owners by protecting fugitive slaves in the region—an act that earned him the reputation of being the “guardian angel” of the enslaved.⁷⁴ During his tenure in Kayseri, a region bordering one of the largest Caucasian immigrant settlements and home to one of the highest concentrations of enslaved individuals in the country, Cemal Bey repeatedly received and protected groups of runaway slaves. One such group, consisting of enslaved young men from the neighboring province of Sivas—along with the two horses and thirty sheep they had taken—sought refuge with Cemal Bey, who, recognizing the strategic importance of their request, helped them gain acceptance into the army as a means to claim full citizenship.⁷⁵ Slave owners reacted to Cemal Bey much as Hacı İshak and his allies had responded to Selami Bey—with anger and accusations, blaming him not only for their financial losses but also for his corruptive behavior, as well as any potential violence that might arise from his actions.

It is crucial to recognize that Cemal Bey’s actions were far more than mere gestures of benevolence or mercy. Known for his unwavering support of Armenians during periods of widespread communal violence, Cemal Bey famously set an administrative barrier between his district and the neighboring province of Adana, where a massacre was unfolding, effectively preventing the spread of mass violence to Kayseri.⁷⁶ The accusations leveled against him by slave owners did not ignore this broader political context; they repeatedly painted him as a figure with dubious and seditious motives, insinuating connections with the Armenian revolutionary groups active in the area.⁷⁷ Much like the accusations Hacı İshak directed at Selami Bey several decades earlier, any aid provided to these enslaved men—who also were branded as thieves—was seen, in their eyes, as stemming from Cemal Bey’s intent to corrupt the state and society. In another instance, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Tashnaktsutyun) was directly accused of inciting otherwise obedient slaves to escape, allegedly with the sole objective of harming the “Muslim folk.”⁷⁸ Although we do not know whether the Armenian Revolutionary Federation or similar groups actively sought out and assisted slaves, it is clear that several Armenian deputies—some with ties to the Armenian revolutionary groups, such as Hamparsum Muradyan—raised the issue of slavery in parliament, underscoring its impact on all vulnerable people, both Muslim and Christian. Far from seeking to harm the “Muslim folk,” their critiques and actions were aimed squarely

⁷³ Article 95 of the Austrian penal code, cited in Frank, “Children of the Desert,” 410.

⁷⁴ BOA, ŞD 2786/29, 1327.N.14 (29 September 1909). See specifically pages 4, 8, 12, 24, and 27 for reference to the said governor.

⁷⁵ Karamursel, “Uncertainties of Freedom,” 145; Karamursel, “Transplanted Slavery,” 712.

⁷⁶ For a comprehensive overview of the broader political context within which Cemal Bey operated, see Önder Uçar, “The Massacres of 1909: Violence in Revolutionary Context in Adana and Its Hinterland” (PhD diss., Atatürk Institute for Modern Turkish History, Boğaziçi University, 2021).

⁷⁷ BOA, ŞD 2786/29, 1327.N.14 (29 September 1909), 13.

⁷⁸ BOA, BEO 3565/267343, 1327.Ca.14 (3 June 1909).

at the power-holding elite, who perpetuated the institution of slavery.⁷⁹ In other words, as the political atmosphere at the turn of the 20th century grew increasingly tense and radical, so too did the political significance and urgency of the issues of slavery and abolition, now seen as inextricably linked to the broader struggle for rights and liberties in the Ottoman Empire.

It would be misguided to attribute these antislavery efforts solely to government officials such as Selami Bey or Cemal Bey, nor would it be entirely accurate to specify such known figures like Arifi Pasha and Pertev Efendi, the district governors of Jidda and Massawa, who exercised their official authority to suppress slave trafficking in their respective regions, as champions of the abolitionary cause.⁸⁰ It equally would be a mistake to regard them as the only actors well-versed in international law, as it was often the enslaved themselves who actively sought out and generated such relevant—usable—knowledge.⁸¹ Moreover, the enslaved exhibited overt signs of political motive and engagement, underpinned by moral convictions, when claiming their freedom, which should be considered an integral part of the abolitionist movement in the Ottoman Empire, as it was elsewhere.⁸²

As in the Atlantic world, the most determined and ardent “practical abolitionists” in the Ottoman Empire were the enslaved people themselves, who, having the greatest stake in fighting for and claiming their freedom, did so with remarkable acuity and sophistication. Such was the case with a group of enslaved Caucasian men—Haydar, Osman, and Zoş—who, in 1872, imaginatively pushed the boundaries of their belonging and raised highly pertinent questions about what it meant to be a citizen. Their petition, supported by a sixteen-point fact list, tackled concrete issues rather than relying on abstract appeals to humanity or civilization. At the heart of their compelling argument were their obligations as citizens, particularly taxation and conscription, both of which were compromised by their enslaved status—a condition that, in turn, weakened the sovereign authority of the Ottoman state.⁸³

Although less conspicuous and more difficult to decipher, a similar resolve was demonstrated by an enslaved Caucasian woman aboard one of the Austrian Lloyd steamers traveling from Istanbul to Samsun, who refused to disembark, asserting, whether rightly or wrongly, that “slavery [was] abolished and that she meant to remain free.”⁸⁴ Later, in the 20th century, the young enslaved woman Fatma Leman fled her owner’s house in 1908, not merely to escape but to claim the freedom she believed the new constitutional order granted to everyone, herself included.⁸⁵ The political nature of her actions is starkly evident in her decision to seek refuge in the premises of the Ministry of Justice, and when the ministry failed her by sending her off to the police, in her insistence on waiting for the parliament to reconvene. Although ultimately unsuccessful, Fatma Leman’s astuteness in navigating institutional channels for support underscores the inherently political nature of her actions, deeply tied to the liberal order and its

⁷⁹ Meclisi Mebusan Zabıt Ceridesi (Minutes of Parliamentary Proceedings), 27 Mayıs 1325 (9 June 1909), 222–24.

⁸⁰ For a brief overview of Arifi Pasha’s position, see Toledano, *Ottoman Slave Trade*, 239–40; for Pertev Efendi, see, 206–7.

⁸¹ Toledano, *As If Silent*, 63–67, 129–34.

⁸² Manisha Sinha has rightly cautioned historians of slavery and abolition against the whitewashed understanding of abolitionism, urging them to include the numerous slave rebellions and the less conspicuous acts of resistance against various forms of oppression for an understanding of abolitionism as an integrated process. For a detailed discussion, see Sinha, *Slave’s Cause*, 1–5.

⁸³ Karamursel, “Transplanted Slavery,” 710–12.

⁸⁴ “Abolitionism in the East,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, 10 May 1856.

⁸⁵ BOA, DH.EUM. THR 32/34, 1328.R.26 (7 April 1910).

professed principles of freedom and equality before the law, even when these actions might seem like isolated, personal gestures.⁸⁶

Whether successful or not, these efforts collectively recast and contribute to the redefinition of questions surrounding citizenship, state belonging, and broader concepts of equality and justice. Expanding the definition and scope of abolition in the Ottoman Empire—without diminishing its more radical and less conspicuous elements—enables us to fully appreciate both the sophistication of these claims and the complexity of the political context within which they were made.

Conclusion

Shifting away from the conventional framing of abolitionism as the product of a “marketplace of ideas” or a “neatly packaged set of ideals,” this article highlights its practical, subversive, and often concealed dimensions, reframing it as a fragmented and fundamentally incomplete process. By examining cases in which a range of actors—whether government officials or enslaved individuals—navigated everyday injustices within a complex and shifting political landscape, I have argued that abolitionist practices in the Ottoman Empire may have been more widespread than traditionally assumed. The aim here is not to suggest the existence of a cohesive or robust abolitionist movement. Were government officials and parliamentarians like Selami Bey, Cemal Bey, and Hamparsum Muradyan, or enslaved individuals like Zoş, Fatma Leman, Mehmed, and unnamed others, truly indicative of a broader abolitionist effort in the Ottoman Empire? Did organizations such as the Armenian Revolutionary Federation or the Circassian Unity and Mutual Aid Society (*Çerkes İttihad ve Teavün Cemiyeti*), which actively supported the legal and political claims of enslaved individuals, reflect the prevailing attitudes of the time?⁸⁷ Or, to what extent did state institutions like the Ministry of Justice—or its various components, such as the office of the public prosecutor—which positioned themselves in opposition to Islamic jurisprudence on the issue of slavery, shape the trajectory of slavery and abolition in the country?⁸⁸

Given that the sale and purchase of human beings continued in the Ottoman Empire well into the 1910s, if not beyond, one might be inclined to answer these questions in the negative. Indeed, the proslavery camp—comprising petty merchants, influential tradesmen, government officials, and ordinary citizens—was undeniably formidable. Yet, as this article illustrates, the existence of such cases and figures as those described suggests the presence of agents who, much like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, perceived the continued practice of slavery as a threat to the emerging political, social, and economic order. They wielded their personal or organizational power to challenge the state’s prescriptions—not merely out of benevolence or mercy (which would presuppose a position of power) but driven by deep political convictions and concerns. In other words, abolitionism in the Ottoman context may have taken more concealed and less conspicuous forms, and it may have ultimately fallen short of achieving full-scale abolition, but the actions of these diverse actors reveal that there was, in fact, a critical mass linking the issue of slavery and the quest for freedom to larger political questions and distinct challenges. When we expand

⁸⁶ It is within this context—defined by the absence of a larger political framework—that earlier incidents of slave escapes or claims to freedom differ from those of later periods. Nevertheless, the frequency of such incidents in earlier centuries suggests a deep-seated culture of subversion among the enslaved and their allies against enslavement. For an excellent overview of such cases, see Hayri Gökşin Özkoray, “Un ‘culture de la résistance’?: Stratégies et moyens d’émancipation des esclaves dans l’Empire ottoman au XVII^e siècle,” in *Mediterranean Slavery Revisited (500–1800)*, ed. Stefan Rank and Juliane Schiel (Zurich: Chronos Verlag, 2014).

⁸⁷ Karamursel, “Uncertainties of Freedom,” 151–54.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 145–50.

the definition of abolitionism beyond the notion of a neatly packaged set of ideals “unmistakably imported from the West” to encompass a set of political inquiries critiquing the flaws of the newly forming political, social, and economic order, and when we closely examine cases like those of Selami Bey and Cemal Bey and situate them within the political contexts in which they operated, we begin to see a clearer picture—not only of slavery and abolition but of the Ottoman Empire as a whole.

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