Young Ottomans

The Young Ottomans were a late 19th-century Ottoman political group comprised of young intellectuals educated in the empire's newly established Western-style institutions and sent to Europe either as students or as commissioned officials. Its membership was characterized by its dissatisfaction with the far-reaching Western-style changes undertaken as part of the empire's sweeping Tanzimat reform effort just prior to this period. The Young Ottomans were also unhappy with the policies of the Tanzimat bureaucrats. After 1860, when debates over the Tanzimat reforms intensified with the rising power of newspapers and other media, public dissatisfaction focused on the delay in implementing the social and economic policies that were to have started right after the Islahat Ferman of 1856 (Imperial Rescript of Reform). Other factors also contributed to this widespread dissatisfaction, especially among the Ottoman intellectual class. Among these factors were the independence of the Romanian principalities (Wallachia and Moldavia) and the empire's severe financial crisis, especially in light of the corruption and extravagant lifestyle among the governing elite. Spearheading the reaction against these elites were the Yeni Osmanlılar, or Young Ottomans, the most serious and effective intellectual protest movement in the empire at the time.

The Young Ottomans were formed in 1867 by exiled Ottoman intellectuals who gathered in Paris, brought together by Prince Mustafa Fazil, a brother of the Egyptian Khedive Ismail and a grandson of Mehmed Ali of Egypt. The group initially called themselves Türkistanı Erbabi-ı Şebabı (Turkistan Youth) and Ittifaq-ı Hamiyeti (Society of Zealots), later changing their name to The Young Ottomans. The prominent founders were Ali Suavi, Namık Kemal, and Ziya Pasha; Reşat Bey, Mehmed Bey, and Nuri Bey later joined the group. Mustafa Fazil kept in contact with exiled Ottoman intellectuals in various European cities and invited those whose newspapers were under the ban of censorship by the Ottoman administration to publish their papers in Europe.

The Young Ottomans founded, and disseminated their thoughts through, various newspapers funded by Mustafa Fazıl Pasha. The first of these, Muhbir (Herald), was established in London by Ali Suavi on August 18, 1867. Roughly one year later, on June 29, 1868, Namik Kemal and Ziya Pasha founded another newspaper, Hürriyet (Freedom), which consisted of a summary of Young Ottoman thought and published various articles related to the issues of government reform. Other Young Ottoman newspapers included Ulum (Science), launched by Ali Suavi in Paris, and the Geneva-based İnklab (Revolution). Upon their return from exile, the voice of the Young Ottomans was most clearly expressed in the newspaper İbret (Lesson).

During their exile in Europe, the Young Ottomans were organized around Mustafa Fazıl Pasha. Although the Young Ottomans saw his return to Istanbul to accept a ministerial post under Sultan Abdülaziz (r. 1861–76) as a success for their cause, this return actually began the breakup of the group, which never shared an established ideological consensus.

Namik Kemal was the first member to abandon the group and return to Istanbul in 1870. Ziya Pasha, who strongly disagreed with Namik Kemal, continued his publishing activities and moved to Geneva. Mehmed Bey and Hüseyin Vasfi Pasha, seen as extremist members of the group, founded another newspaper, while Ali Suavi and Rıfat Bey resigned from the group. The next year, following the death of their opponent Grand Vizier Mehmed Emin Âlî Pasha in 1871, the other members of the group started to return. Most of them returned from exile during the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz. Ali Suavi, the last exile, returned to Istanbul during the reign of Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909).

The Young Ottomans developed highly effective political, financial, and administrative critiques. On the one hand, they presented theoretical discussions on the subjects of constitutional monarchy, equality, and the rule of law; on the other hand, they criticized political and economic applications conducted by Tanzimat bureaucrats. The main target of their critiques was the Tanzimat and its bureaucrats. Another important target was foreign intervention. They also wrote and published articles criticizing Ottoman financial policies, foreign debt, and extravagance.

The Young Ottomans played a significant role in Turkish thought, both as role models for a new intellectual tradition and as pioneers of political dissent. The ways in which newspapers could be mobilized as a tool for political criticism, the emergence of the press as a political power, and its use as a political weapon against rivals owes much to the energy and invention of the Young Ottomans.


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