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book review of

Germany and the Ottoman Railways: Art, Empire, and Infrastructure by Peter H. Christensen

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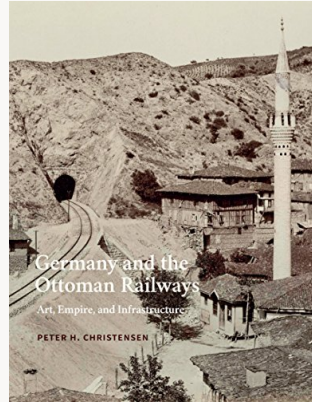
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Peter H. Christensen,
Germany and the Ottoman Railways: Art, Empire, and Infrastructure.
New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017.
204 pp.; 77 color and 66 b&w illus.; bibliography, index.
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Germany and the Ottoman Railways: Art, Empire, and Infrastructure is a multifaceted and rich exploration of the complexities of a transnational partnership examined through the lens of the object, specifically the material and visual culture that constituted the Ottoman railway. The Ottoman railway, in essence, was the manifestation of a constellation of geopolitical, sociocultural, aesthetic, practical, and at times, religious motivations of two polities engaged in an ambiguous yet coaxial partnership. Peter H. Christensen employs and expands the concept of ambiguity—or rather, the *process* of ambiguity—as a means of articulating the Ottoman–German relationship as it was realized in the construction of a vast railway network. In addition to using biological or organic metaphors, as well as imperial, colonial, and Orientalist theories, Christensen employs “ambiguity as a unifying concept” (155). Christensen defines and expands on the concept of ambiguity when describing the nature of the German–Ottoman relationship as “an artistic and morphological duality where two sides are locked in a partnership in which the level of reciprocity of their relationship is continually in flux” (8). This ambiguity manifests in various ways—from compromise to liminality, adaptability, or strategic vagueness—that can serve both or either party.

Grounded in extensive archival research, *Germany and the Ottoman Railways* foregrounds the objects that comprise, celebrate, commemorate, propagate, and also criticize the Ottoman railway and German involvement with it. The diverse corpus of primary source material explored in the book includes “train stations, paintings, urban byways, maps, bridges, monuments, photographs, and archaeological artifact[s],” as well as newspaper articles, satirical cartoons, travel literature, architectural decoration, and more (2).

The book is organized in two parts of four chapters each, with the first part dedicated broadly to the “construction of knowledge” and the second to the “construction of form” (2). At the outset, Christensen clearly articulates the structure of the book and the interwoven thematic threads that bind it. Each chapter has a well-defined subject and a sub-corpus of

primary sources as well as a cast of characters involved in the railway's conception and construction. These sources vary in scale, from portable and even ephemeral objects (e.g., newspapers), to monumental structures (e.g., bridges constructed in ashlar masonry). The organization of the book is likewise scalar, oscillating between broad overviews of assorted comparanda and detailed analyses of important structures, such as the Sirkeci and Haydarpaşa train stations. These shifting dimensions and levels of focus create a rhythmic cadence over the course of the book.

Christensen begins Part One with a chapter outlining the political landscape in which the railway was conceived and constructed. He also introduces many of the major players involved in the project, on both sides of the partnership. The chapter broadly charts the railway's progress against the backdrop of major events that variously altered the state of affairs in which the railway came to be—from the Tanizmat reforms to the Young Turk Revolution, and through World War I and its aftermath. The overview of historic events in conjunction with the timeline of the railway's construction demonstrates the ways in which the project needed to adapt to not only the physical geography and topography of the region (discussed in subsequent chapters), but also the mutable political landscape. This initial broad scope allows the reader to get a glimpse of the big picture of the Ottoman–German relationship as well as the underlying goals and motivations of both parties, including the Ottoman drive for security and modernization and Germany's “ambiguously colonial” ambitions (2).

The next two chapters situate the Ottoman railway project in its geographic and topographic contexts. They address the physical and logistical situation on the ground as well as the variously conceptualized visual and textual descriptions of the railway and the land it traversed and transformed. In so doing, a number of ambiguities are revealed. For instance, Christensen notes that the geographic continuity between Germany and the Ottoman Empire rendered their borders “malleable, penetrable, and frontier-like” (26). Without clear geographic demarcation between territories, the colonial motivations underlying Germany's involvement in the Ottoman railway remained ambiguous: they were articulated through concepts of settlement and development rather than colonization outright. As such, Germany's penetration into Ottoman lands took on many guises. For example, expeditions ostensibly intended to chart the topography in which the railway was to be built also gathered information about ethnic demographics, potential for political unrest, sources of petroleum, and more.

These myriad data sets manifested themselves differently in the visual record. Through close examination of his material evidence, Christensen demonstrates the ambiguity of the information and knowledge produced by such expeditions. For example, albums of images could tell differing tales about the Ottoman railway and its construction. The well-known albums of photography commissioned by Sultan Abdülhamid II emphasized the progress made toward the modernization of the empire, whereas the albums of watercolors executed by German artist Theodor Rocholl focused on romantic and picturesque landscapes. Other visual and textual descriptions of the region's geography and topography were colored by different biases that, for example, viewed Ottoman hinterlands as an untamed outback or presented an image of a timeless Orient. Even the railway itself and its marks on the environment could be interpreted in various ways. The railway blurred the line between art

and infrastructure, and the iron rails carved through the landscape could be viewed aesthetically in gestural, even calligraphic terms.

The production and codification of knowledge of Ottoman territories also were closely linked to the burgeoning field of archaeology, which is the theme of the closing chapter of Part One. Several important discoveries of ancient sites—including Gordium and Tell Halaf—occurred in tandem with or as a direct result of the movement of earth for the construction of the Ottoman railway. Like the railway, the excavations and extractions of antiquities were, at least in part, the result of a partnership with German interests and investment. Consequently, the ancient artifacts uncovered in Ottoman territories were sent to either Istanbul or Berlin, even as the Ottoman state was attempting to control this movement with new laws governing patrimony.

Christensen demonstrates the importance of Ottoman archaeology in nineteenth-century transnational geopolitics. On the one hand, the discovery of these ancient sites in Ottoman territory reinforced the state's imperial claim and served as a means of "national self-fashioning" (80). By the same token, however, the history of the region recovered through archaeological digs piqued Germany's interest, particularly in relation to the so-called Orient-or-Rome debate regarding the origins of western civilization. Here again Christensen foregrounds strategic ambiguities, as both Germany and the Ottoman Empire laid claim to the newly discovered artifacts, but for different, if not conflicting reasons.

Part Two moves from the exploratory expeditions, mapping and surveying of land, and unearthing of antiquities to the active construction of the Ottoman railway and related structures. Not only do chapters 5 and 6 present deep archival research while foregrounding the visual through art historical analysis, they also shed light on the German and Ottoman conceptualizations of the built environment in relation to the earth. Christensen focuses the first two chapters of Part Two on construction and the German concept of *hochbau*, or the "field of construction and planning related to any entity above the ground" (96). Through the concept of *hochbau*, Christensen demonstrates the strategic ambiguation of infrastructure and architecture. This ambiguity allowed various structures, regardless of type, to serve a multiplicity of purposes and embody mutable meanings. For example, while bridges and tunnels were necessary features of railway construction, they also served as potent symbols of empire through their monumentality and materiality. In another case, Christensen's analysis of train stations along the Ottoman railway shows that within a serialized system, both uniformity and variation can produce meaning. Such fluid systems therefore were able to adapt to variable factors including changes in labor force, technological advances, alterations in administrative structures, and disruptions in the form of disease, natural disasters, and political unrest. Finally, Christensen turns to the "least enfranchised parties" responsible for the construction of the railway (123). Through examination of their roles in construction, he attempts to illuminate the agency of the disadvantaged parties involved in the railway endeavor, which is explored further in subsequent chapters.

The last two chapters of Part Two move beyond the structures necessitated by the railway and focus on various types of commemorative monuments and the railway's effect on urban space and populations. Like the movement of earth and incisions in the landscape, the

railway also altered the matrix of cities it connected, and in so doing assigned them relative importance. Railways brought cities economic growth, but they also disrupted the urban fabric, forcing city dwellers to adjust, for better and worse. Christensen's analysis of the monuments related to the Ottoman railway and its construction develops directly out of a wealth of material and visual evidence. For example, his detailed analysis of the German Fountain situated in the Hippodrome in Istanbul and gifted to Abdülhamid II by Wilhelm II relies upon myriad sources, including but not limited to the initial plans for the monument, satirical cartoons criticizing it, and the structure itself. Other monuments outside the capital, such as those built in Haifa, Damascus, and Konya, demonstrate the variability of commemorative monuments that can reflect local character and meaning as well as imperial objectives.

In addition to the monuments that expressed the ambitions of the individuals responsible for the railway—chief among them the sultan and the kaiser—Christensen discusses cases wherein monuments reflected the “humble expressions from some of the railway’s least enfranchised parties” (123). While bringing these often historiographically invisible people to light is an admirable goal, the means by which they actuated their agency is not always apparent. Indeed, a clear understanding of the artistic agency of the often-voiceless laborers and lower classes can be difficult to ascertain without the kinds of written documentation that are often abundant for elucidating the ambitions of the upper classes and central authorities. Thus, Christensen again turns to the concept of ambiguity in the closing lines of the book: “I leave it to the readers of this book to determine whether ambiguity is a concept that is operable when facts and forms preclude an absolute notion of authorship. It is both my hope and my inclination to believe that it is” (156).

Overall, *Germany and the Ottoman Railways* is an important contribution to multiple fields, including the histories of art and architecture, colonialism, geopolitics, economic and infrastructural histories, and of course, nineteenth-century studies. Christensen offers new research on understudied aspects of the railway as well as fresh perspectives on familiar subjects through multivalent methodologies. The thematic organization and rhythmic pacing make for informative and stimulating reading. Christensen's use of the concept of ambiguation is provocative and effective, and as such, is transferrable to other studies that explore the complexities of transregional, intercultural, or multidisciplinary relationships. In *Germany and the Ottoman Railways* the ambiguities are indeed many and often self-apparent, though there is still room to grow and nuance the different modes of ambiguation. The strategic use of spatial liminality, practical flexibility, as well as artistic agility are all examples of the ways in which ambiguation occurred. However, it can be difficult at times to grasp the intention or agency behind the ambiguation. Further development of the concept would further increase its utility beyond the case of Germany and the Ottoman railways.

Ambiguity and ambiguation serve Christensen well as unifying concepts in his exploration of the relationship between Germany and the Ottoman Empire in the endeavor of constructing the Ottoman railway. Throughout he privileges material objects and architecture as primary sources to great effect and brings to the fore the role of objects in the making and modernizing of empire. Through close analysis of these primary sources as well as many kinds of documentary evidence, he nuances the geopolitics underlying the construction of the Ottoman railway, including the blurred imperial, colonial, and modernizing ambitions

of the two parties over the course of the nineteenth century through World War I. Significantly, the study also serves to correct the historiographical imbalance of scholarship that obfuscates or even ignores Ottoman agency in the broader geopolitical landscape of the nineteenth century, particularly in relation to Europe in this period. By foregrounding the ambiguities of the German-Ottoman partnership, which was constantly in flux, Christensen aptly avoids false binaries and biases. *Germany and the Ottoman Railways* presents a critically nuanced and compelling case study of the intersections—or ambiguations—of art and infrastructure, which, as Christensen affirms, is what makes empires.

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