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Pascal Firges, *French Revolutionaries in the Ottoman Empire: Diplomacy, Political Culture, and the Limiting of Universal Revolution, 1792-1798*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xix + 304 pp. Figures, maps, tables, glossary, notes, bibliography, and index. \$100.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN: 978-0-19-875996-6.

Review by Julia Landweber, Montclair State University.

Out of several well-trodden subjects--the French Revolution, diplomatic history, and the beginnings of decline in the Ottoman Empire--Pascal Firges has produced something exciting and fresh. His goal is to examine how the politics and culture of the French Revolution affected both Franco-Ottoman diplomatic relations and the expatriate world of French diplomats and civilians residing in the Ottoman Empire during the 1790s. (For most of the preceding two hundred years, France had maintained a robust diplomatic and commercial residential presence in all the principal Ottoman port cities.) Stationed far from France, these French subjects-turned-citizens wanted to participate in the new political culture developing back home. Firges argues that they could not have found a safer, more congenial space for such behavior than the Ottoman Empire. Surprisingly, the Ottoman sultan and his government, far from being the oriental despots of myth, turned out to be more tolerant of radical new democratic ideas than the other absolutist states of the day. When France shut off diplomatic relations with all other foreign powers (save the United States and Switzerland), the Sublime Porte permitted the new French Republic to maintain a diplomatic presence in Istanbul. In return, the French government and its expat communities were unexpectedly circumspect in how they deployed their new revolutionary ideologies within the Ottoman realm. Ultimately, Firges argues that amidst the many shocking changes instituted by successive French governments in the 1790s, when it came to diplomatic relations with the Ottomans, the revolutionary leadership permitted and even defended the value of maintaining an essentially old regime attitude and approach.

Firges calls his monograph a "microstudy" (p. 1). Insofar as it covers only the six-year period 1792-1798, and seldom strays beyond those chronological confines, the history examined here is indeed brief. But the enormous numbers of characters and personalities who put in appearances, not to mention the bureaucratic and epistolary complexities of his materials, and the vast geographic scope of his inquiry, make this seem a much larger history. It is based on painstaking archival research, derived in large part from the diplomatic correspondence preserved in the Archives du Ministre des Affaires étrangères in Paris, as well as from three other diplomatic archives: the archive of the French legation in Istanbul, now housed in the Centre des Archives diplomatiques at Nantes; the British National Archives; and the Haus- Hof- und Staatsarchiv in Vienna (p. 8). Firges delves equally deeply into the historiographical literature on the three fields

under investigation. His focus on French revolutionary diplomatic relations with the Ottomans leads to some important revisionist discoveries. For example, scholars have long claimed that Robespierriest foreign policy hewed to five “provisional bases of diplomacy” decreed by the Committee of Public Safety on 24 September 1793 (p. 99). These “basic principles” were as follows: first, “during the war and until the implementation of the Constitution, the Republic would have neither ambassadors nor ministers plenipotentiary”; second, all diplomatic employees would be investigated for their loyalty to the French state, and be either reformed or recalled; third, future diplomatic agents would no longer receive written instructions for their missions but only secret verbal briefings; fourth, contradicting the first basic principle, the Americans and the Swiss, as exceptional “free peoples,” would receive ambassadors; and fifth, the French Republic would no longer negotiate with foreign powers who did not recognize it (pp. 99-100). Many historians have assumed these principles were binding policy; Firges amply demonstrates that the Ottoman case proves otherwise. Through the Terror and beyond, Istanbul retained a French diplomatic representative in possession of lengthy written instructions, who worked hard and publicly to negotiate an alliance with the Ottoman Empire, despite the Ottomans’ extended refusal to officially recognize the new government.

The book is organized thematically and divided into three parts. Part one uncovers in minute detail the history of diplomatic relations between France and the Ottoman empire as seen from the geographical perspective of Istanbul, starting in 1792 (the year Count Choiseul-Gouffier, the final ambassador loyal to Louis XVI, was recalled to France) and ending with the 1798 rupture occasioned by Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt, which at that time was an Ottoman territory. Part two shifts geographically to Paris to analyze the revolutionary republic’s foreign policies and practices in these same years. Part three returns the reader to the eastern Mediterranean to explore what regime change meant to permanent French residents in the Ottoman Empire.

These changes in location and perspective are a key part of Firges’ methodology, which he identifies as “the ‘translocality’ approach [or] the approach of an *histoire croisée*” (p. 7). As he defines it, “translocality” is short-hand for “the linking of different scales and frames of observation and analysis” (p. 7). By moving the analytical focus back and forth from the perspectives and experiences of French agents in Istanbul, to that of Ottoman bureaucrats, and to members of the revolutionary governments in Paris, this study sheds new light on the perennially fascinating subject of how French revolutionary political culture was created. A prime example is Firges’s examination of the one time during the Terror that a public debate was held about Franco-Ottoman relations. In October 1793, the Jacobin Club of Paris received an unexpected request from Istanbul: a group of republican sympathizers there had formed a political club and wanted the Paris Jacobins to recognize them. The resulting debate, which stretched over three sessions and six days, raised three crucial issues facing French revolutionary foreign policy: “what relations should the Republic have with neutral states that were considered to be despotic; should the Republic support the propagation of revolutionary ideology in such states; and what role should political clubs play with regard to foreign relations?” (p. 110)

Various members made arguments which led the Jacobin Club to first grant the request (October 5), then to repeal it (October 9), and finally to confirm the repeal and end the debate (October 11). The initial argument proposed that a branch Jacobin club in Istanbul would help solidify already friendly relations between the two powers and speed the establishment of a Franco-Ottoman alliance (long a foreign-policy goal of the revolutionary government). But on October 9 another member warned that such a club could threaten the political stability of the Ottoman

Empire, which would then make an alliance with the Ottomans impossible. After more back-and-forth about whether affiliating with this club was a good idea, a bad idea, or even a treasonous forgery aimed at provoking war between France and the Ottomans, they concluded it was simply too risky to jeopardize relations with a neutral power which at that point was shielding France from starvation via massive grain imports. The real underlying issue, however, involved balancing the demands of ideology against pragmatic needs. Despotism had long been understood as a fundamental threat facing France, dating back to the mid-century publication of Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. Moreover, the Ottoman political system (as the French conceived it) was the ultimate model of a despotic state. How could French revolutionaries, who were waging a desperate all-out war against despotism, ally with the Ottoman Empire? The answer, as Robespierrists in the club argued forcefully, was that French interests outweighed universal liberation. Firges concludes that "even during the heyday of revolutionary vehemence, conventional views on foreign policy prevailed" (p. 114). Ottoman sultans had been traditional allies of the French monarchy dating back hundreds of years and transferring that connection to the French nation seemed more worthwhile than extending revolutionary values to the Turkish people.

French Revolutionaries in the Ottoman Empire offers a valuable contribution to the fields of both Ottoman and French history. The old attitude among Europeanist historians of viewing the Christian West and the Islamic world as somehow separated by a hard barrier no longer holds water. As Firges declares in the opening pages, one of his goals "is to point to the connectedness of French and Ottoman history in the Age of Revolutions" (p. 4). More and more excellent studies are demonstrating in myriad ways the many and complex ways European and Ottoman history has always been intertwined.[1] This book contributes admirably to that larger goal.

NOTES

[1] A representative but far from complete sampling of significant studies produced in the past two decades includes Molly Greene, *A Shared World: Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Ian Coller, *Arab France: Islam and the Making of Modern Europe, 1798-1831* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011); Eric R. Dursteler, *Renegade Women: Gender, Identity, and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Christine Isom-Verhaaren, *Allies with the Infidel: The Ottoman and French Alliance in the Sixteenth Century* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011); Junko Takeda, *Between Crown and Commerce: Marseille and the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Gillian Weiss, *Captives and Corsairs: France and Slavery in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Daniel O'Quinn, *Engaging the Ottoman Empire: Vexed Mediations, 1690-1815* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019); and Elisabeth A. Fraser, ed., *The Mobility of People and Things in the Early Modern Mediterranean: The Art of Travel* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019).

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