Studies, but also in Religion and interfaith dialogue. Muslims who love to talk of emulating and doing good deeds, and dichotomously engage at times in anti-Semitic rhetoric should be particularly struck by the story of an Albanian National hero, Ismail Qemali Vlora, Ottoman governor of Tulcea, Romania at the end of the nineteenth century. When Romanian Jews were being horribly persecuted by Romanian Christian rulers, he did all that was in his power to assist the Jews, deeming them as “the race from which sprang the truth of all religions and all the intelligence possessed by humanity through revelation. . .” (p. 268).

One of the common drawbacks that I should mention against books of such depth is their prohibitive price, largely due to the fact that they are considered as “academic” publications. Fortunately for the reader, this book is classified as a “trade” publication, and costs an economical $30.00, while listing among its several attractive features, photographs and references. This book should be a part of every library, private or otherwise. Rabbis, priests, imams, professors and students of religion, conflict resolution, and Balkan studies should consider this book as essential reading.

Khaleel Mohammed


History as a subject is fraught with deficiencies, mainly because it has been written by people who were paid for by the rulers to write about their glories. Consequently, history has mainly remained concerned with men (that is why history is called his-story rather than her-story), and those too who became kings and about their conquests and wars. Recorded history has thus gone to ignore 99.9% of the humanity, who were ordinary mortals and had scant concern with their occupations that were “less than glorious.”

It is during the last few decades that historians have started looking at the life of all humankind, belonging to “us” and “them,” to men and women, to princes and serfs, and so on. The book under review is one such commendable attempt to discover the lives of the ordinary mortals of the Middle East: how
they lived, how they felt, what they ate and wore, and what was their impact on the course of history.

While emphasizing that the working people who constitute the majority of any society can and deserve to be subjects of history, the author does not fail to appreciate the difference in approach in writing such a type of history, by stating that “many aspects of their lives cannot be represented by the methods typically deployed to write histories of the political activities, and ideas of elites and lettered classes” (p. 1).

Until the 1970s, most histories of the Middle East took as their subjects either the religious, legal, philosophical, and literary texts of Islamic high culture or the political histories of the states. Concentrating on such topics virtually ensured that the urban working classes and rural peasants would remain peripheral to the main concerns of history. Their rare appearance in history, in the Middle East like anywhere else, was usually refracted through the visions of the elites who had a vested interest in the prevailing hierarchies and discourses of power.

The passing and collective mention of the common people would also occur in respect of strikes and political upheavals, but not in respect of the “weapons of the weak” like passive resistance, false compliance, foot dragging, arson and small acts of sabotage. Away from political concerns, the social life of the man on the street, his way of living, clothing and dining, common customs and social hierarchical relations, remained conspicuous by complete absence.

The major problem of defining the Middle East has been dealt with by the author in the introductory chapter. He has, for the purposes of the study, roughly defined the Middle East as the outer boundaries of the erstwhile Ottoman empire. While focusing mainly on the heart of Middle East — Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq — he has referred to the situation in as far as Morocco in Africa and Albania in Europe where it was found analytically useful or relevant.

The book studies in great detail the guild system in the Ottoman empire. The Ottoman guilds, the writer says, may have grown out of popular religious or social solidarity associations that became consolidated as craft associations between fifteenth to seventeenth centuries (p. 17). In the seventeenth century, there were 260,000 artisans in Istanbul organized into 1,019 guilds, while in Cairo, there were 119,000 artisan members of 262 guilds. He admits that there is considerable debate about what the guilds actually did and how they functioned. The basic assumption about the guild system was that every producer had the right to a certain share in the market. Guilds thus often acted to restrain unfair competition, regulate entry to professions, and establish
standards of quality. Despite their association with Islamic popular practices and the affiliation of some guilds with Sufi orders, the guilds were based on crafts and were composed alike of Muslim, Jewish and Christian artisans of a particular craft. Although the guilds were a form of organized civil society and in some of the cases they also collected taxes on behalf of the State, it can hardly be denied that many of the guilds enjoyed a high level of regulatory control over their crafts and their members.

The first chapter of the book discusses how the Ottoman empire tried to cope with the global trade competition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The condition of the peasants in the empire was comparable to and, in most cases, better than their counterparts in Europe. The taxes were reasonable and the eviction rate was minimal. Although the word tax was used, but for all purposes, the majority of peasants were tenants on state land, with almost a life time security of tenancy, as long as the land was properly cultivated. The major peasant revolts were against conscriptions, rather than tax-related grievances, like the ones in Egypt in 1827 and 1832 when Muhammad Ali Pasha (r. 1805–1849) tried to conscript peasants as part of his plans to enlarge and modernize his army.

The second chapter analyses the impact on the life of common people of the Ottoman sultanate’s Tanzimat reforms in the nineteenth century and that of the European interference in Ottoman affairs on the pretext of “defending Christian rights.” The 1839 Gulhane Edict of the Ottoman government, a major milestone in the Tanzimat reforms, promised all peoples of the empire, irrespective of religion and race, the security of their lives, their properties, and their honour. These pronouncements, the author pertinently points out, resonated with the dominant ideas of John Locke (d. 1704) and Thomas Jefferson (d. 1826) (p. 44). But the meddling of the European powers in the affairs of the empire with ulterior political motives, scuttled the peaceful coexistence between the various religious communities of the region. The writer decries the theory of the Muslims’ primordial antipathy to the non-Muslims by averring that most of the Muslim-Christian riots were rooted in the economic grievances of one community or the other (p. 49).

The third chapter of the book focuses on the first half of the twentieth century and defines how mass awareness emerged among the working class of the Middle East, how the politicians exploited the situation, and how mass politics grew in the region. Various nationalist movements tended to employ the workers for their political ends but would stop short of struggling for the genuine rights of the working classes. The Wafd Party in Egypt in particular wanted a controlled and guided direction of the workers’ movement, to the extent that they would become a pain in the neck for the British colonial
authorities, but ensuring that it never became strong enough to challenge the
authority of the rulers in post-colonial Egypt. The last two chapters then
elaborate the betrayal of the interests of the working classes by the post-
independence Middle Eastern elite. The authoritarian regimes in the Middle
East demonstrated zero tolerance for the workers’ movement and any
organized form of dissent was brutally and ruthlessly silenced.

The book is a laudable attempt at tracing the trajectory of progress of the
working classes towards achieving their rights and self-esteem. The painful
facts borne out by the study are that while a European worker has gained a lot
of rights in the past couple of centuries, his counterpart in the Middle East has
seen a sharp deterioration in his standards of living, income levels and freedom
of action. The present age of globalization and its attendant winds of change
may have some good news for the working classes of the Middle East as well.

Saad S. Khan

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