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100002



MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES  
2019, VOL. 55, NO. 4, 481–498  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2019.1566124>

MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN  
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01 Kasım 2019

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## The Young Turk revolution: comparisons and connections

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The constitutional revolution that took place in the Ottoman Empire in July 1908, often called the 'Young Turk' revolution, was one of a series of revolutions that rocked old-established empires in the decade before the outbreak of the First World War: the Russian revolution of 1905, the Persian revolution of 1906, the Ottoman one in 1908, the Portuguese revolution of 1910 and the Chinese revolution of 1911. The close chronological proximity of these revolutions invites comparison to see whether common factors can be discerned in the underlying causes and/or in the actual execution.<sup>1</sup>

A decade ago, Nader Sohrabi looked at three of these revolutions (the Russian, the Persian and the Ottoman) in a seminal article.<sup>2</sup> His comparison was at the same time one of similarity and one of difference. The similarity, which established the a priori case for a comparative approach, was that the three revolutions were all unleashed in the name of constitutionalism. Sohrabi convincingly shows the degree to which the constitutional ideal dominated the ideas of those aiming for political change throughout the long nineteenth century. As a result, the call for the (re)introduction of a constitution basically circumscribed the political imagination of most revolutionaries of the pre-war decade in the Near East and in Russia.

The difference lies in the degree to which the revolutionary movements were successful in establishing a new political order. Sohrabi sees the Ottoman Young Turks as most successful, and the Russian constitutionalists as least successful, with the Persian in between. In his analysis, the deciding factor here was the degree to which the constitutionalists could depend on extra-parliamentarian and extra-constitutional forces to defend them, once the reactionaries regrouped and attacked the new constitutional regime. Here, the Young Turks' control over the army gave them a decided edge.

This article aims to revisit the Young Turk revolution of 1908 from a comparative perspective, but it goes beyond Sohrabi's approach in four different aspects. In the first place, and in line with contemporary developments in comparative history, it also looks into possible connections between the different cases and at the influence of possible common factors (something that Sohrabi also does, of course, but only for the shared ideology of the movements, not for their revolutionary methods). In the second place, it broadens the comparison to also include the Portuguese and Chinese revolutions. In the third place, it explores the influences that shaped the Young Turk revolution, both in terms of ideology and in those of methodology, and, finally, it aims to say something about the legacy of the Young Turk revolution.

In using a comparative approach, this article also follows in the footsteps of Charles Kurzman in his *Democracy Denied* but it differs in its conclusions.<sup>3</sup> As the reader will see, I argue that Kurzman in the Ottoman case overestimates the role of intellectuals in bringing about and shaping the revolution as well as the degree to which the Young Turk revolutionaries were genuinely committed to democracy. This latter aspect fundamentally undermines a key part of Kurzman's narrative, where he sees a democratic revolution being 'hijacked' by the military under the

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