

POWER AND LOYALTIES IN LATE OTTOMAN SOCIETY:

The Case of Multi-Confessional Herzegovina

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review of: Grandits, Hannes:
Herrschaft und Loyalität in der
spätosmanischen Gesellschaft.
Das Beispiel der multimultikonfessionellen
Herzegovina. Wien, Köln,
Weimar: Böhlau 2008 (Zur Kunde
Südosteuropas II/37), 789 pp.

1 Grandits calls this a *Patronagekultur*.

The subject of Grandits's book – the title of which roughly translates as *Power and Loyalties in late Ottoman Society: The Case of Multi-Confessional Herzegovina* – is change. His foremost object is to portray the end of an era; the »waning« of an established social and political order as experienced in a somewhat peripheral Ottoman region in the »late« period of that empire's existence. While writing about the last two centuries of Ottoman rule, the author's emphasis is on the years previous to and following the belated introduction of the Ottoman reform package (*tanzimat*) to the province following the sultan's intervention in 1850/51. It was at this time that the orders of old times corroded; the *timar*-system and the Janissary corps, which both had proven crucial in the Ottoman Empire's dynamic period of expansion and consolidation, had been abolished. The power of the guilds in the regulation of urban life was fading, and so was the degree of reliance of the centre on the provincial notables for the administration of local affairs. Their power was now curbed in favour of the new »reformed« cadre of bureaucrats sent from the centre to govern the provinces. Another innovation was that now, at least in principle, Muslims and non-Muslims were to be equal in front of the state; a principle that was, as Grandits shows, indeed implemented down to the lowest levels during the last decades of Ottoman rule prior to the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878. In the early 1850s, however, this principle must still have sounded quite theoretical to the locals; at least until one day Ömer Pasha Latas forced both the Muslims and non-Muslims of Sarajevo, the notables and the paupers, to contribute to the building of roads. This was, as Grandits reasons, perhaps really more a symbolic act than one guided by necessity.

It was this also a period in which loyalties, interests, and networks bridged confessional, »ethnic«, and social boundaries.¹ In the context of a historiographical tradition that has been (and often still is) treating factors like ethnicity or confession as monolithic categories throughout different eras, projecting backwards current sensibilities into the past, it is Grandits's mission to remind us of exactly that. Yet, the author leaves the reader somewhat uncertain about his goals (other than the obvious) until the very last, and even in his condemnation of the said tradition he appears a bit hesitant. Rather than aggressive, Grandits's work is careful and diligent, his critique at times more implicit than explicit. Where it really excels is in terms of methodology. Inter alia, this is shown in the indiscriminate approach to the sources: Grandits does not limit himself to one genre or specified body of documents. Instead, he taps all the sources available to him – the older Yugoslav literature, narrative and ethnographic accounts from a century or more ago (he in fact uses an impressive, for some perhaps even unanticipated, amount of first-hand accounts by contemporaries), archival materials, consular reports, travelogues, some Ottoman sources in translation, and even oral histories – in order to find answers to the kind of questions he poses. He is conscious of these being different to those posed in the existing literature, declaring the task ahead of him manageable only if an interdisciplinary approach is pursued. At first glance, Grandits's work could be mistaken for a mere addition to the numerous existing accounts of the history (and demise) of »multiculturalism« in the Balkans, but that it is not. Rather than a mere addition, Grandits makes an actual contribution.

Next to his treatment of the sources, the author's diligent methodological approach is exemplified in his solutions for the tackling of some of the problems. For instance, the chapter dealing with administrative within the three confessional communities is exemplary. Here, as in general, the author luckily refrains from trying to provide an all too general synthesis or overview. Instead, he argues along three tangible and adequately documented cases of functionaries from all three confessional communities, and studies their lives and careers, the problems they had and the choices they made. This turns out to be far more illuminating than any generalization about religion and state could ever be. It is most clearly in these partial biographies that the multiple levels of local »coping with the state« and its institutions are revealed. In part, these images stand in stark contrast to the histories to which we have become accustomed. They also encapsulate the essence of what I regard as the author's key argument and principle contribution.

2 Cf. also his first monograph: *Familie und sozialer Wandel im ländlichen Kroatien (18.-20. Jahrhundert)*. Wien, Köln, Weimar: Böhlau 2002.

3 Cf., e.g. Özdemir, Bülent: *Ottoman Reforms and Social Life: Reflections from Salonica, 1830-50*. Istanbul: ISIS, 2003 or the well-known Anastassiadou, Meropi: *Salonique, 1830-1912: Une ville ottomane à l'âge des réformes*. Leiden: Brill, 1997)

4 I also had the impression that, e.g. on pp. 80-81 and p. 232, we find what appear to be alternative versions of the same series of sentences/arguments, repetitive parts of which forgotten to be deleted.

5 For most other »foreign« terms he presents two or three versions; one Germanized (e.g. »die Vergija«; usually the Bosnian term equipped with a capital letter), the Bosnian form, and the Turkish one, here distinguished by the use of italics.

Grandits's interdisciplinary approach also allows for the final chapter, dedicated to uprisings (and especially the »great insurrection« of 1875), to be written more in the style of a *histoire événementielle*. At the same time it is in this chapter that one of the book's strongest statements is made: He interprets the turbulence of 1875 as the continuation of an ongoing struggle for power between the Muslim notables of East Herzegovina and the increasingly autonomous mountaineers of adjacent Montenegro, which the re-centralized Ottoman government had merely inherited after 1850. It is only here that Grandits returns to his introductory remarks on loyalty and violence (which until just before the final pages of the book might have appeared as mere lip-service to theory). He speaks of a strategic application of violence in order to transform group solidarities and meet political goals, even when cruelty and bloodshed found little initial support among the populace. The coerced construction of group solidarity he holds to have been of central importance to the insurrection, and insists that, while inter-confessional hatreds were indeed a result of the violent confrontations, they were *not* its cause. Grandits thus defies traditional interpretations which had often held the development of national consciousness responsible for these conflicts. Grandits explicitly calls this thesis »a myth«, and finally expresses hope that his conclusions will contribute to focus future studies on *other* principles of social integration than nationality.

With the oeuvre counting no less than 789 pages, the question of where the book »really« starts is not an easy one to answer. Some may feel it »really« starts only on p. 334 with Chapter III, which is perhaps that chapter most central to theme announced in the title. Though perhaps less consequential if the book is read backwards from the conclusion, Chapter II is really one of the highlights of the book, however, at least for this reviewer. Its title, roughly translated as *Rural Lifescapes and Loyalties: the Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim Contexts*, Grandits presents three studies of village communities from the perspective of a *longue durée* narrative (not necessarily focused on the »late« Ottoman period). It is remarkable that the author is ready to devote more than 200 pages of his book to the sensibilities of villagers.² Yet, as villagers accounted indeed for some 80% of the population of Herzegovina during the period in question, this is wholly justified. Indeed, it fills a gap in the existing literature; but what is most remarkable here is that Grandits demonstrates that a micro-history of this sort can actually be written. At times one may think this extensive chapter should have been published as a book of its own. Had this been the case, however, the reader would have been deprived of several details woven into these case studies that are indeed essential for the broader picture (e.g. the insightful section on trans-confessional sponsorship/*kumstvo* in chapter 2.C.)

Nevertheless, a quite central question arising from the very title of the book remains neglected: Is Herzegovina really a representative case for the study of »late Ottoman society«, or is it perhaps quite the contrary? While Grandits otherwise leaves few sources available to him untapped, a comparison with the impact of the reforms on other Ottoman cities or regions is lacking. The relatively well-studied Thessaloniki during the Tanzimat, for instance, may have provided the author with a fine case for comparison.³ Similarly, the situation Grandits describes (e.g. the burden of taxation, corruption, political representation, the role of local intermediaries, etc.) would have gained authority from a contextualization with the situation in other parts of Europe (although this is, admittedly, the stuff for a separate book-length study, and a general *desideratum* in our field). In addition, there would have been room for improvement in questions pertaining to format. Especially the first half of the book reveals editing that leaves something to be desired, with a good number of misspellings,⁴ but given the sheer volume of the work this perhaps was impossible to evade. Where Grandits provides secondary translations (e.g. in the case of Yriarte's travelogue, a section of which he translates into German from a Bosnian translation of the French original), this should have been identified as such. Versions of names are given in the forms used in the Slavic historiographies (e.g. Sultan »Abdulmedžid« rather than Abdülmecid).⁵ More confusing, however, is perhaps the form of the footnotes: with all titles italicized and abridged, it is not deducible (enough) whether the cited work in question is a book or an article, nor where and when it was published. In order to identify the references, one has to browse through the comprehensive bibliography of more than 70 pages. The generous layout, with small-sized pages and plainly oversized footnote text similarly provides for a rather »nervous« reading experience (i.e. with a lot of interruptions). Yet, this has little to do with Grandits's

6 Aspects of Grandits's work on Herzegovina will also be published in English: Violent Social Disintegration: a Nation-building Strategy in Late Ottoman Herzegovina. In: *Conflicting Loyalties: Social (Dis-) Integration in the Balkans, 1839-1914*. London: IB Tauris forthcoming 2009; *Social Stratification and Change in Herzegovinian Urban Life in the Tanzimat Era*. In: *Ottoman Urban Studies*. Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag; forthcoming, 2009

overall achievement. The excellent choice of visual material drawn mostly from period newspapers should be mentioned as well. In sum, *Herrschaft und Loyalität* is probably not the »definite« work on late Ottoman Herzegovina, but neither is this the author's claim. It will also not be the primary choice of readers in search of insight on »late Ottoman society«, for it represents only one *tessera* in the mosaic (if also one that evidently deserves, even requires, more attention). What we do find is a meticulously researched local history of a region in its various facets, and in this endeavour, the author certainly succeeds.⁶

