

Visualizing Modernity: Ottoman Railway Construction and the Photographic Record, 1880-1914

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When we think of Ottoman history, one seldom thinks of railways. Yet the late Ottoman period produced a substantial body of printed visual material that offers new ways of historically interrogating how the empire represented itself. This project questions how railway photography, and especially the widely circulated images of the Hejaz Railway and Anatolian Railway during the late Ottoman period, constructs a visual language of modernization, imperial integration, and pan-Islamic legitimacy. The historiography of Ottoman modernization has not considered railroad photography in its own right, using it instead as description to punctuate textual analysis. Instead, this project argues that Ottoman railway photography articulated a hybrid visual modernity by blending European industrial and infrastructural motifs, such as locomotives, telegraph lines and bridges, with Ottoman imperial symbols, Turkish and Arab geography, and culturally specific markers

The Ottoman Empire, from the early 19th century, sought to rethink and restructure the state politically, socially, militarily, and economically. In the face of European territorial challenges, this was not an arbitrary choice but one of imminent necessity. Reorienting the empire meant importing European technology and methods while maintaining Ottoman uniqueness, culture, and history, of which Ottomans were immensely proud. Situated in this context, this CUROP internship teases out the tension embedded in Ottoman railway photography to reveal how the middle classes and elites alike conceived of themselves as subjects in a modern empire with centuries-old tradition.

Throughout the project, a methodological approach was developed that reads photographs through their recurring visual motifs while simultaneously examining the conditions behind their production and circulation. This includes consideration for the photographers and technologies involved, the archives and publications through which images circulated, and the audiences who encountered them. It sought to read ‘behind the scenes’ of photographs. Particular attention is given to themes associated with Ottoman modernism, including education, fiscal independence, imperial authority, and the symbolic presence of the Sultan. Close attention to composition informs an analysis that considers images in dialogue with each other, stringing together repeating motifs to tell a coherent narrative of Ottoman representation during its final decades. Understanding the images as being circulated as part of a contemporary narrative construction was key.

The main primary sources considered were organized into three categories. Firstly, the photographic archives of Sultan Abdulhamid II. Historians have described these albums as imperial self-representations, containing carefully selected and organized photos. Sent as a gift to the American and British governments, their stated purpose was to render visible the drastic material changes brought on by late Ottoman reform. The illustrated journals *Şehbal* (meaning “Wing Feather” or “Wings”) and *Servet-i Fünun* (meaning “The Wealth of Sciences”) represent the best examples of photographic publications. Selling thousands of copies per issue, these altered consumers’ (both international and domestic) understanding of the Ottoman nation. Finally, the Thomas E. Lawrence (of Arabia) photographic collection, holding the best-quality images produced by Ottoman photographers in the Hejaz, contains photos that began life in Ottoman publications before ultimately arriving in European archives through the First World War.

Ultimately, this project situates railway photography at the intersection of Ottoman adaptability, imperial identity, and modernity. By considering photographs alongside the existing textual historiography, the analysis reveals how the tensions inherent in Ottoman modernization appear in railway photographs. By placing the images back into their context, this study returns meaning to photographs that appear, retrospectively, as merely documentary. The railway system is thus not simply an interesting footnote at the end of the Ottoman story, but rather a visual theme where Ottoman subjects and the government alike communicated their place in a rapidly changing world.