

## **BOOK REVIEW**

Benjamin C. FORTNA, *Kuşçubaşı Eşref: Efsane Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa Subayının Hayatı* (İstanbul, Timaş Yayınları, 2017)

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# Kuşçubaşı Eşref: Efsane Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa Subayının Hayatı

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*Selçuk Uygur (Çev.), Timaş Yayınları, İstanbul, 2017, 447 sayfa, ISBN: 978-6050826654*

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The Special Organization (*Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*) was the intelligence agency of the Ottoman Empire, which conducted espionage and paramilitary operations especially during the World War I and constituted the basis for the modern National Intelligence Organization of Turkey. However, the structure, operations, members and staff of the organization were mostly vague because of the absence of records.<sup>1</sup>

This vagueness about the personnel of the Special Organization was more common, resulting in life stories interwoven with legends and myths thereby concealing the historical facts. Benjamin C. Fortna<sup>2</sup> has written a biography of Kuşçubaşı Eşref who was one of the legendary officers of the Special Organization, refining the true-life history from the made-up stories.

The main aim of Fortna was to understand the world of Eşref Kuşçubaşı by creating a portrait of an historical person through using the national archives, making interviews with prominent experts such as Philip H. Stoddard and most importantly studying the personal documents of Kuşçubaşı Eşref for the first time and interviewing with his family members. Due to the loss of Eşref's memoirs, these documents and interviews provided invaluable contribution to reveal the missing parts of Eşref's life and the history of the Special Organization.

Fortna described three main patterns in the life of Eşref and centered his narration on these. The first pattern was the Circassian origin of Eşref, through which Fortna explains the background of Eşref's life, his involvement in the military and brigandage. Another pattern was the paramilitary actions in which the Circassian immigrants of the Empire played a key role in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Eşref and many of his fellows were the members of the paramilitary groups of the Empire in

1 For further information, see Philip H. Stoddard, *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*, Tansel Demirel (Çev.), İstanbul, Arma Yayınları, 2003.

2 Benjamin C. Fortna is a professor at the University of London and specializes in the Modern Middle East, specifically interested in the late Ottoman Empire and the early Turkish Republic. His major works are *Imperial Classroom: Islam, Education and the State in the Late Ottoman Empire*, *The Modern Middle East: A Sourcebook for History*, co-edited with C. Amin and E. Frierson and *Learning to Read in the Late Ottoman Empire and the Early Turkish Republic*. He serves as series editor with Professor Ulrike Freitag (Berlin) of the SOAS/Routledge Studies on the Middle East and on several editorial boards, including the Turkish Historical Review and Middle Eastern Studies (<https://www.soas.ac.uk/staff/staff30949.php>).

many operations. The last pattern was the mobility of Eşref who travelled long distances for different duties by train, ships and cars; used telegraph lines to communicate and carry out operations. Fortna developed the biography of Kuşçubaşı Eşref based on these patterns and described the versatile actions of him.

The book has nine chapters and the first chapter introduces outlines of the study. Chapter 2 provides the background of the early years of Eşref's life and his school years. Furthermore, Eşref's first exile to Arabia after his dismissal from the Military School and his actions in the region are explained in this Chapter. Besides, this chapter tells his Unionist activities in İzmir subsequent to his return to Anatolia after the 1908 Revolution as well as Eşref's brigandage years in this region.

Chapter 3 is about the operations of Eşref in the Tripolitanian War (Turco-Italian War) where he smuggled Turkish officers to Tripoli through Egypt and formed local paramilitary groups from the Bedouins. Moreover, this chapter gave coverage to the Eşref's relations with Enver Bey and Mustafa Kemal Bey who were also in Tripoli. Mainly focusing on the Balkan Wars, Chapter 4 depicts the most renowned operations of Eşref who took a significant role in the recapture of Edirne, conducted paramilitary operations beyond the borders and even established a short-lived state.

Chapter 5 concentrated on World War I when Eşref left his family behind to participate in missions to support the Ottoman Military with fifth column activities for India and Central Asia as well as the missions to prevent that of the British in the Arabian Peninsula. The chapter also mentions Eşref's operations around the Suez Canal during the Canal Campaign. Chapter 6 continues the description of Eşref's works in the World War I by focusing on his mission to Yemen to submit golds to the Ottoman Army and his capture by the Arab rebels.

Chapter 7 mentions his time in Malta as a Prisoner of War and his return to İstanbul in 1920. Chapter 8 depicts the involvement of Eşref in the Nationalist Movement which was headed by Mustafa Kemal Pasha. After he had a position of regional command near Adapazarı, he drifted away from the Ankara Government and joined in the Greek side. The Chapter 9 tells the Eşref's ban from Turkey by the list of 'The 150 personae non gratae' who were exiled from the country in 1924 and his life after the declaration of the Republic. Eşref's life in Egypt and in Turkey after his return to Turkey was included in this chapter.

Furthermore, Benjamin Fortna links his findings from the archives, interviews and Eşref's personal documents with the major events and concepts of the late Ottoman and early modern Turkish history, which enables the reader to understand the Tripoli War, Balkan Wars, the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire and the first years of the Turkish War of Independence better. For instance, the paramilitary operations of Eşref enable the readers to realize their importance as a basis for the formation of the Turkish National Forces (*Kuvay-ı Milliye*) which fought against the occupiers of Asia Minor after the World War I. Hence, accompanied by Fortna's flowing style enriched with visuals, the book forms an appropriate atmosphere to have a look at these years from a different perspective and with a different interpretation. In addition, his further notes on the relevant personalities, events and organizations help readers to comprehend the actual context and comparative influence of not only the activities of Eşref but also their contribution to the historical processes which resulted in the radical changes in the Middle East.

In spite of the author's great success in including many relevant resources and archival documents, there are still left some points to be clarified. First of all, while studying the telegram correspondence of Eşref during his duty in İzmit, Fortna could not detect the receiver of the telegram because of the unknown name 'Nuh' and indicated this in a footnote (p. 361). This name given by *Karakol Cemiyeti* founded from ashes of dissolved *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa*, was actually the code name of Mustafa Kemal Pasha at the beginning of the Turkish War of Independence along with other code names such as 'Musa' for Ali Fuat Pasha, 'İsa' for Galatalı Şevket Bey and 'Cengiz' for Kara Vasıf Bey, the last two were also founders of *Karakol Cemiyeti*.<sup>3</sup> Another certainty exists in the date of the Eşref's Nejd Mission to meet the Arabian tribal leaders with a delegation including Mehmed Akif. *Sebülürreşâd* periodical whose editor in chief was Mehmet Akif, reports the visit of Mehmet Akif to Nejd from May 1915 to October 1915. When the close ties of Mehmet Akif with the magazine are considered, Ertuğrul Düzdağ's assessment in the book can be evaluated as more accurate (p. 263).<sup>4</sup> The other point was about a confusion regarding Rahmi Bey who was a famous Unionist and the Governor of İzmir from September 19, 1913 to October 24, 1918. Eşref was told to be in a dispute with Hıfzı Bey, a relative of Rahmi Bey. However, the footnote confusingly mentions Hıfzı Bey (p.79) as the governor even though Rahmi Bey was the governor during those times.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the extensive study of resources, some extra sources could also be beneficial for the excellence of this study. Memoirs of Fuat Balkan who was a member of Eşref's group in Thrace Campaign during Balkan Wars (*Komitacı: Fuat Balkan'ın Anıları*); *Kara Defter: Atatürk'ün Silah Arkadaşı İhsan Eryavuz Anlatıyor* which includes the memoirs of İhsan Eryavuz, former Unionist and officer of the Special Organization; *İttihat ve Terakki İçinde Dönenler* by Samih Nafiz Tansu, *Kurtuluş Savaşında İstanbul ve Yardımları* by Hüsnü Himmetoğlu; *Milli Mücadele Dönemi TBMM Hükümeti Tarafından İstanbul'da Kurulan Gizli Cemiyetler* by Mesut Aydın, *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa'nın Reisi Süleyman Askeri Bey* by Nurettin Şimşek and *Emir Şekib Aslan ve Şehid-i Muhterem Enver Paşa* by Erol Cihangir would also contribute to the completion of the Eşref Kuşçubaşı's life.

All in all, the scholarly biography of Eşref Kuşçubaşı by historian Benjamin C. Fortna provides a concrete and refined history of one of the leading figures in the late Ottoman history based on original documents with a flowing style. The book provides a detailed profile of the paramilitary groups of the Ottoman Army while studying the Eşref's life and constituting a basis to understand the major events of the late Ottoman period through the Eşref's links to these events and pioneers of these events.

3 Fethi Tevetoğlu, *Milli Mücadele Yıllarındaki Kuruluşlar*, Ankara, Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1988, p.14.

4 Ertuğrul Düzdağ, *Mehmed Akif Ersoy*, Ankara, Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1997, p.68.

5 Sinan Kunalalp, *Son Dönem Osmanlı Erkan ve Ricali (1839-1922)*, İstanbul, İsis Yayınları, 1999, p.26 and 110; Ahmet Mehmetefendioğlu, "Rahmi Bey'in İzmir Valiliği", *Çağdaş Türkiye Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Vol.1, No.3, 1993, p.347-370.