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Notes on a Scandal: Transregional Networks of Violence, Gossip, and Imperial Sovereignty in the Late Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire

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On 21 September 1797, the Ottoman governor of Rumeli, El-Hac Mustafa Paşa, reported to Sultan Selim III (r. 1789–1807) that he, his imperial forces, and the local community were together in a precarious position that had the potential to escalate into a large-scale conflict in the city of Filibe (now Plovdiv in Bulgaria).[1] In the first of a series of letters, the official claimed to have successfully co-opted the notorious mountain bandit leader Kara Feyzî, his companions, and their respective bands into his own retinue. By finally settling them in southern Rumeli (i.e., the Ottoman Balkans), he insisted, he was on the cusp of ending their five-year, transregional pillaging spree that had devastated large parts of the province. He complained, however, that everything went awry when his counterpart, the governor of Anatolia Seyyid ʻAlî Paşa, marched his troops into the outskirts of Filibe and attacked their divisions, completely disregarding pledges of amnesty Mustafa Paşa had given to these bandit leaders and their men. Adding insult to injury, while attacking Kara Feyzî's men ʻAlî Paşa's forces had also visited great cruelty upon the local community by indiscriminately plundering properties and slaughtering bystanders. Mustafa Paşa added that locals were now saying it was his own failure to uphold his word to the "former" bandits that had led to their suffering. As a consequence, the *paşa* reported, the pardoned bandits, imperial troops in Rumeli, and the inhabitants were rumored to be on the verge of joining forces against him.

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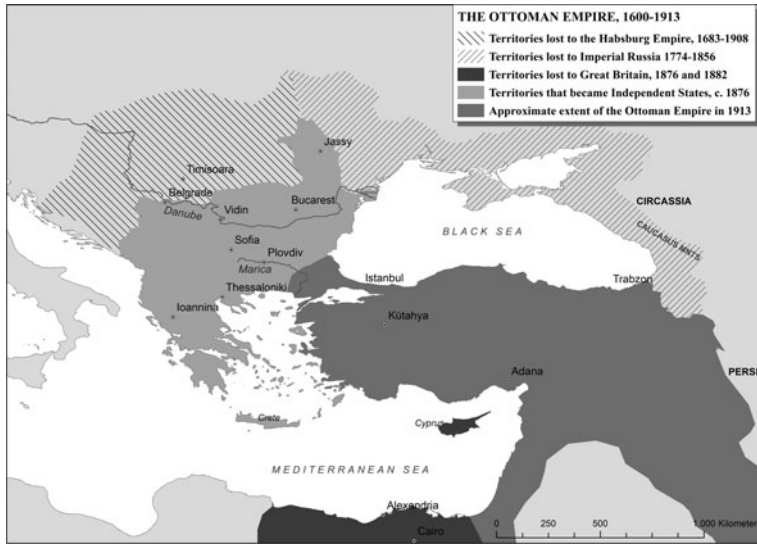
[1] Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Hatt-ı Hümâyûn (hereafter HH) 2521İ.



Two days later Seyyid ʻAlî Paşa, in his own letter to the sultan, accused Mustafa Paşa of spreading false rumors about what had transpired in Filibe. This initiated a heated exchange of conflicting narratives between the provinces and Istanbul that drew in a wide range of people from across the social spectrum and the empire. Anatolia's governor went so far as to charge not only that Mustafa Paşa was too soft on cunning Rumeli bandits, personally bargaining with men whose deception and wrath he could neither fully comprehend nor control, but that according to the local buzz his administration was also in cahoots with these very criminals. In this and a series of subsequent letters in response to those of his rival, ʻAlî Paşa conveyed that only a powerful and trustworthy outsider like himself could clean up this intricate web of complicity between bandits and officials in Rumeli.[2]

The flurry of scribal activity and intrigue based on these officials' rival allegations did not last long. Nonetheless, by analyzing how imperial officials deployed rumor and gossip about "bandits" (*eşkıyâ*) in their correspondence with the sultan we can gain important insights into how material and symbolic resources (such as reputation, honor, and prestige), legal categories, and authority were negotiated between different nodes of power in Ottoman society.[3] These insights illuminate the mechanics of the empire in an era usually studied almost

[2] Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Cevdet Dahiliye 9678.

[3] For more on the material and symbolic economy that revolved around Ottoman imperial officials' dealings with irregular soldier-*cum*-bandit networks, see Tolga U. Esmer, "Economies of

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exclusively through the prism of a series of well-known intra- and inter-imperial crises. Historiography of this period has understandably been preoccupied with the failure of the massive Ottoman imperial siege against the rebellious *paşa* Pasban-zâde (known as Pasvanoğlu) 'Osmân at his Danubian fortress in Vidin that would commence just a couple of months later in 1798, and with Napoleon's by no means coincidental invasion of Ottoman Egypt later that summer that interrupted the siege and prompted much of this fighting force to race across the empire to defend Egypt, and with aftershocks of these events such as the Serbian national uprising of 1804–1815.[4]

Against this historical backdrop, the present essay employs a micro-analytical approach and methodological tools of cultural and linguistic anthropology and legal studies to analyze the significance of the correspondence generated by this row. My focus is on the role of gossip and rumor, especially about and by "bandits," in negotiating the application and limits of legitimate imperial violence and sovereignty. I also explore other forms of intelligence in administrative correspondence from Ottoman archives related to these actors and their networks in order to recover the crucial role played by gossip and rumor—or labeling something as gossip and rumor—in cementing moral sensibilities and power relations in imperial politics and intrigue. I also employ a macro-analysis to position these contentious linguistic exchanges in local and transregional power struggles within a vast empire and larger historical processes, such as chronic inter-imperial warfare and its impact on Ottoman politics in an age when the empire was besieged on all fronts.

GOSSIP, VIOLENCE, AND IMPERIAL SOVEREIGNTY IN THE LATE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Ongoing anthropological debates point to the difficulty of reaching a consensus on a cross-culturally valid definition of what constitutes gossip. The category is subject to context-dependent interpretations and contestations within any given society, which raises the issue of how gossip can be justified as a subject of analysis.[5] The difficulty of definition goes together with the ambiguity and

Violence, Banditry, and Governance in the Ottoman Empire around 1800," *Past & Present* 224 (Aug. 2014): 163–99.

[4] The 1798 siege of Vidin was the second of three unsuccessful imperial sieges launched against Pasban-zâde 'Osmân Paşa. In the winter–spring of 1798, close to one hundred thousand local and imperial troops lay siege to Vidin for over five months. Napoleon invaded Egypt with only twenty thousand men.

[5] Since Max Gluckman's seminal 1963 essay on the topic, "Gossip and Scandal," anthropologists have debated the role of gossip in society. Gluckman highlighted the inherently conflictual yet integrative function of gossip, arguing that its principal role is to contribute to social cohesion and to distinguish one group from another (*Current Anthropology* 4 [1963]: 307–16). His critics argued that gossip is more a tool people use to foster their own agendas and undermine those of others. Gossip is a form of "information management" and a valuable commodity to be

even absence in various societies of terms that denote a meaning equivalent to "gossip" in modern English.[6] Terms or frames which indicate something like gossip or rumor derive their meaning from contextual use and thus their meaning is semantically unstable. In addition, claiming something is gossip or rumor is not just an accusation about information being spread; it is also a denunciation of the people or groups considered to prattle or truck in too much unreliable information. This is why such claims can be central to political contests. In Ottoman sources, connotations of "gossip" and "rumor" are roughly captured in phrases cited below such as "*mesmû'oldu*" (it has been heard); "*sohbeti şüyû bulmuş*" (there is talk to the effect that); "*havâdis-i mezkûre*" (the aforementioned talk, rumors); "*…diyü vâfir güft ü gû vâki' olub*" (there is plentiful talk along the lines); "*…diyü iş'âr ider*" (he imparts that; he is spreading rumors along the lines that); and "*rivâyet-i âhireye göre*" (according to the latest rumor). Grammatical devices such as the inferential (or "hearsay") past, or evidential morpheme, denoted in Turkish by the suffix *-miş* ("I, he, or she, etc. have/has supposedly said or done"; or "it is said that I, he, she, etc., have/has said or done"), could also be added to the end of verbs or as an auxiliary (3sg *-imiş*) to indicate that writers are reporting information that has been "heard." By using these features, the author in turn indicates his own distance from, surprise at, and/or suspicion of the information's content. In this fashion, an author or speaker can make subtle accusations against others with a mere suffix.[7]

Aware of the terminological nuances in meaning, and building on the general working definition of gossip in recent anthropological literature, this essay approaches gossip as a "negatively evaluative and morally laden verbal exchange concerning the conduct of absent third parties, involving a

accumulated and guarded, which may create or exacerbate conflict as easily as it contributes to group harmony. For a critical analysis of the debate, see Niko Besnier, *Gossip and the Everyday Production of Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 2009).

[6] On this point, see John Haviland, *Gossip, Reputation, and Knowledge in Zinacantan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 45–46. Addressing the modern "gendering" of the term, Ivan Illich noted that "gossip" derives from the earlier English concept of *god sip*, which referred to a relationship close enough to make a person a godparent for a family's children. It referred to an adoption through ritual kinship by the house's men or its women. In Elizabethan times, the "gossip" lost his family ties and became a warm and close friend, sometimes as a drinking, boon companion. Only in the nineteenth century did the word become an abstract noun standing for idle talk, morphing into today's direct, negative association with women. See Illich, *Gender* (Los Angeles: Pantheon Books, 1982), 113–14.

[7] Terms I have come across in other contexts are *vesvese/vesâvis* (diabolic mutterings) and *kîl ü kâl* or *kîylükâl* (gossip; title-tattle). For more on the Turkish inferential past tense, see Geoffrey Lewis, *Turkish Grammar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 122–26. For a discussion of how such frames are a rhetoric of evidentiality, see Alejandro Paz, "The Circulation of *Chisme* and *Rumor*: Gossip, Evidentiality, and Authority in the Perspective of Latino Labor Migrants in Israel," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 19, 1 (2009): 117–43.

bounded group of persons in a private setting."[8] I locate this setting, however, in top-priority correspondence written by governors of the Ottoman Empire's most important provinces to the sultan and Imperial Council (*dîvân-i hümâyûn*), the ultimate legal authorities of the land. In doing so, I acknowledge that the correspondents intended their gossip to become public and influence politics at the highest level in Topkapı palace in Istanbul, and this in turn highlights the ideological and contextual nature of the terms "public" and "private."[9] At the same time, I focus on how these correspondents labeled their rivals' claims as gossip and rumor in order to establish their own voice as authoritative.[10] I approach rumor and hearsay as the unconstrained circulation of information about an event deemed important.[11] Gossip that becomes public knowledge can become a scandal. Scandal can lead to accusation, a term suggesting the speech act of turning ordinary gossip into something on which action—possibly legal—can be taken.[12] My analysis of gossip and other forms of informal speech takes into account the dynamic and shifting nature of these categories and, more importantly, their relationship to other forms of discourse and social action.[13]

Historians have devoted less attention to gossip and rumor than have anthropologists, having marginalized them as social practices associated with women and the poor. Since the 1990s, however, historians have followed larger trends in cultural studies to categorize gossip and rumor as "subversive tactics" that lower classes use against the powerful in their everyday struggles for status, dignity, and resources.[14] Ottomanists, conversely, have focused more on the imperial preoccupation with monitoring and controlling subversive talk in emerging public spheres,[15] especially in popular venues like coffeehouses

[8] Besnier, *Gossip*, 13.

[9] As Susan Gal argues from the perspective of feminist theory, the private/public distinction is an ideological one. "Public and private are co-constitutive cultural categories … but they are also indexical signs that are always relative: dependent for part of their referential meaning on the interactional context in which they are used." See "A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction," *Differences* 13, 1 (2002): 77–95, 80. Building on Gal, Alejandro Paz elaborates, "The establishing of a relatively public forum for communication in a group, often using broadcast modes of communication, stands in relation to more private forms, often using interpersonal modes. Yet the dichotomy works so that a more comprehensive public forum can be constituted that will recast seemingly public genres as relatively private in comparison; likewise, there are potentially more private or intimate contexts that can be generated as well." See Paz, "Circulation," 118.

[10] Ibid., 119.

[11] Besnier, *Gossip*, 13.

[12] On distinctions between rumor, gossip, and scandal in journalism and mass communication, see Luise White, "Between Gluckman and Foucault: Historicizing Rumour and Gossip," *Social Dynamics* 20, 1 (1994): 75–76.

[13] Besnier, *Gossip*, 14–15.

[14] See Chris Wickham, "Gossip and Resistance among the Medieval Peasantry," *Past & Present* 160, 1 (1998): 3–24; and Arlette Farge, *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France*, Rosemary Morris, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[15] Uğur Kömeçoğlu, "Homo Ludens ve Homo Sapiens Arasında Kamusallık ve Toplumsallık: Osmanlı Kavehaneleri," in Ahmet Yaşar, ed., *Osmanlı Kahvehaneleri: Mekan, Sosyalleşme,*

and public pleasure gardens.[16] Gossip and rumor have generally been studied in terms of reified oppositions between classes, or society and the state, rather than in terms of their role in mediating imperial politics and decision-making. And yet, as Niko Besnier argues, "It is precisely the contrast between its social evaluation as trivial talk and the seriousness of its potential repercussions that endows gossip with potency as a political tool" and forces us to revisit problems of power, resistance, and agency because it is not always clear whom gossip benefits or harms, whether materially or symbolically.[17]

This article shifts focus from resistance theory, in which gossip and rumor have been approached in terms of agency for the poor or the "weapons of the weak," to their deployment by imperial officials.[18] In their correspondence with the sultan regarding bandit insurgency, officials gossiped and fashioned rumor as "public opinion" that threatened imperial sovereignty, in order to bolster their own status in Ottoman politics. These men's strategic use of gossip and rumor to mediate their own positions as well as material resources deserves the same careful attention to the rhetoric and "fictive" textures that historians have lavished upon millers and peasants.[19] This essay therefore transposes methodologies and approaches to *mentalité* and "fiction in the archives" conceived by earlier generations of cultural historians onto elite letters. I do so

İktidar (Istanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2009), n.p.; Dana Sajdi, ed., *Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee: Leisure and Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008); and Shirin Hamadeh, *The City's Pleasures: Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007). For the modern period, see Cengiz Kırlı, *Sultan ve Kamuoyu: Osmanlı Modernleşme Sürecinde "Havadis Jurnalleri" (1840–1844)* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası, 2009); and *idem*, "Coffeehouses: Public Opinion in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire," in Armando Salvatore and Dale F. Eickelman, eds., *Public Islam and the Common Good* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2004), 75–94. For a recent critical approach to the boundaries between public and private spheres assumed in this literature, see Tülay Artan, "Forms and Forums of Expression: Istanbul and Beyond, 1600–1800," in Christine Woodhead, ed., *The Ottoman World* (London: Routledge, 2011), 378–405.

[16] For a different approach that makes preliminary remarks about the connections between rumor and governance through imperial chronicle-writing and compares the Ottomans with other early modern European polities, see Murat Dağlı, "Bir Haber Şâyi'Olduki: Rumor and Regicide," *Osmanlı Araştırmaları—The Journal of Ottoman Studies* 35 (2010): 137–80.

[17] Besnier, *Gossip*, 17. See also Sally Engle Merry, "Rethinking Gossip and Scandal," in Donald Black, ed., *Toward a General Theory of Social Control*, vol. I (New York: Academic Press, 1984), 271–302.

[18] James C. Scott's monographs together have been particularly influential in historians' conceptualizing how the poor and weak use gossip, rumor, and other "hidden transcripts" in their struggles with powerful individuals and the state: *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

[19] See Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); and Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Paulo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1987).

in order to ask new questions about information brokerage, the negotiation of power among different agents of imperial violence, and the contested nature of imperial intelligence gathering and sovereignty.

As Ann Laura Stoler lucidly puts it, reading "upper-class" sources "upside down" instead of from the "bottom up" moves us away from doing history as an extractive exercise to an "ethnographic one in and of the archives that attends to the processes of production" and "relations of power in which archives are created, sequestered, and rearranged." In this essay, I wrestle with the reading and rhetorical strategies of archival sources while approaching archives not as "repositories of state power but as unique movements in the field of force." In doing so, I analyze overlooked features of politics like gossip, rumor, emotions, and sentiments expressed as social interpretations and indices of relations and tracers of power.[20]

Language itself was a commodity exchangeable for other material and symbolic commodities that derived their value and meaning from a preexisting market defined by local, domestic, and inter-imperial tensions.[21] The linguistic marketplace discussed here mediated a much larger Ottoman political culture predicated upon an extensive, imperial military marketplace. This marketplace included itinerate, highly mobile military laborers—often called "irregulars" (*sekbân, levend, sarıca*, etc.)—who came to constitute transregional networks that implemented specific forms of sanctioned imperial violence, ranging from defending the empire's territories to policing and disciplining domestic society in times of war and peace. However, as seen in the case of Kara Feyzî's and other irregular *cum* bandits' careers, the imperial strategy of arming and organizing these ambiguous agents of imperial violence often backfired. This was the case particularly during periods of inter-imperial peace when they refused to demobilize and began to prey on the empire's subjects. In such circumstances, in the language of imperial sources "irregulars" came to be relabeled as "bandits" (*eşkıyâ*), much like privateers *cum* pirates in other contemporary settings.[22] The repelling of bandit networks in Ottoman society and the flows of men, cash, weapons, provisions, and prestige that came with it became an important part of Ottoman "peace-time" economy and governance. In what follows I will discuss the overlooked mechanics through which fighting

[20] Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 32–33, 47.

[21] Susan Gal, "Language and Political Economy," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1989): 349–50; and William Hanks, "Pierre Bourdieu and the Practices of Language," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005): 67–83.

[22] The Ottoman military marketplace was comprised in large part of mercenary-style irregular soldiery who were key commodities bought by the highest bidder, but these individual military laborers were keenly aware of this status and manipulated it to their benefit against their elite interlocutors. See Tolga U. Esmer, "The Confessions of an Ottoman Irregular: Self-Representation and Ottoman Interpretative Communities in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Ottoman Studies* 44 (2014): 313–40.

bandit terror became a highly coveted task among high-ranking imperial officials because it insured that they could build their large military retinues and administrations or keep them intact between wars with imperial rivals.

This Ottoman experience, which has been portrayed as a *sui generis* Ottoman decline and decentralization at worst or social transformation at best, ought to be studied comparatively in terms of how sprawling empires with limited resources and manpower were forced to rely on great networks of violent men, whom they could rarely control fully, for implementing governance and defending imperial territories and interests.[23] In her comparison of European mercantile empires, Lauren Benton attributes disorder and imperial violence during the era of early modern imperial expansion and consolidation mostly to overlapping legal cultures, imperfect and intertwined corridors of contested imperial control and legality, and imperial imaginations informed by specific geographic features—oceans, rivers, islands, and mountains—far from European metropoles. I argue here that many of these same problems marked the imperial sovereignty of land-based, contiguous empires like the Ottoman but also Hapsburg, Romanov, Safavid, or Mughal polities at different stages *throughout* their existence. Reliance on irregular soldiery allowed imperial governments recourse to different nodes of the affordable coercive force necessary to defend, police, and extract the resources of empire, while conveniently allowing them to distance themselves from the contentious practices of these ambiguous agents of imperial violence.[24]

That said, these imperial practices were not without controversy, and various social actors, including those subjects of the empire who became the collateral damage of these policies, had plenty to say both officially and behind the sultan's back. The gossip and rumor about the bandit leaders' interactions with imperial officials and local communities, as well as the bandits' own words describing their actions and intentions, became vital commodities informing how notions of legality, power, and imperial sovereignty were articulated and negotiated. Legal and surveillance regimes overlapped with broader social communication to comprise the imperial production of knowledge that informed sultanic decision-making.[25] My intent here is to give voice to the "oral and aural authority"[26] upon which both Ottoman imperial rule and the reputation of its ambiguous emissaries rested, but which was volubly

[23] Lauren Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty: Law and Geography in European Empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[24] Ibid., 258.

[25] See Christopher Bayly. *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Upendra Baxi, "'The State's Emissary': The Place of Law in Subaltern Studies," in Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, eds., *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 247–64.

[26] Marc Aymes, "The Voice-Over of Administration: Reading Ottoman Archives at the Risk of Ill-literacy," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 6 (2007), http://ejts.revues.org/133.

debated by different groups in inclusive legal forums that stretched across the empire.

Given the transregional nature and activities of the networks of high-profile criminals and imperial officials involved in this scandal, local courts had no jurisdiction over them, and so gossip and rumor about bandits served as evidence in the empire's ultimate court of law consisting of the Imperial Council and the sultan himself. One therefore must look beyond the sources privileged in the study of Ottoman legal culture, such as local court records (*sicill*s), the rulings of the jurisprudents (*fetvâ*s), and imperial statutes (*kânûn*). What is required is a more flexible, pluralistic approach to legality and to the voluminous repositories of oral accounts featured in other kinds of staple Ottoman sources such as the imperial rescripts (*hatt-ı hümâyûn*s) and related sources that I draw on here. These sources were vital pieces of intelligence addressed to the attention of the Imperial Council and the sultan, but they were made up of conflicting accounts in which reports of informal talk and formal writing of numerous actors converged and influenced legal decision-making at the highest levels. There is now a corpus of literature about banditry and state formation, but it mostly neglects the extent to which even the highest-ranking imperial agents who managed crises like bandit insurgency interacted with groups that the imperial palace labeled as bandits, and did so in ways that represented the best interests of neither the crown nor its subjects.[27] In their competition to manage lucrative wars on bandits, officials often utilized mystifying rhetoric to conceal certain relationships from the palace's gaze. These relationships were nevertheless crucial mediators of power, resources, and prestige in the world of Ottoman politics as it transitioned from an early modern to a modern state.[28]

A BANDIT CO-OPTATION GONE AWRY AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS IN INTRA-IMPERIAL POLITICS

Although the bandit leader Kara Feyzî is central to this scandal, the invectives the two governors wrote against one another and their narrative strategies had much less to do with him than they let on in their dispatches. Kara Feyzî (i.e., "dark" or "tough" Feyzî) achieved notoriety for leading a transregional pillaging enterprise that recruited many irregular soldiers discharged after the Hapsburg-Ottoman-Russian War of 1788–1792. This started in Belgrade and over the following decades spread throughout the Ottoman Balkans into

[27] On banditry and its role in state formation, see Karen Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[28] For a study that demonstrates how thieving groups in India continue to play important roles in systems of watch and ward, intelligence supply, and conflict management on political levels ranging from disagreements between farmers to princely disputes, see Anastasia Piliavsky, "A Secret in the Oxford Sense: Thieves and the Rhetoric of Mystification in Western India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, 2 (2011): 296–302.

what is today Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Macedonia, Greece, and Turkey. Until recently, scholars of the Ottoman Empire, the Middle East, and the Balkans attributed much of the violence and disorder of the era to the allegedly uniform practices of a social category vaguely defined as local notables (*a'yân*). They represented these *a'yân* as the patrons of irregular/bandit networks in Rumeli, which they used to undermine Selim III's broad military and fiscal reforms (the *nizâm-i cedîd*, or New Order) that threatened their interests. However, this statist perspective on the notables and bandits alike stems largely from the palace chroniclers who have shaped modern historiography of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[29]

Though Kara Feyzî is ubiquitous in period sources found in Ottoman archives throughout the Balkans and Istanbul, imperial chroniclers gave him little notice because he held no official title or fixed seat of power like the *a'yân* did. Instead, he forged mobile networks that operated throughout the Balkans and far beyond. Furthermore, Kara Feyzî's embarrassing success, formidable power, and connections with imperial officials defied the chroniclers' elite perceptions of class and proper station, and they all but erased him from palace chronicles. And yet, as I have shown elsewhere, Kara Feyzî's story demonstrates that there were important players between the provinces and Istanbul besides the *a'yân* and renegade imperial officials showcased in mainstream Ottomanist historiography. This was so because the Ottoman government relied heavily upon much larger, highly mobile, and inclusive transregional networks of violence. The leaders of these networks fulfilled important functions in Ottoman politics and governance, even if the palace intermittently labeled them irregulars or bandits.[30]

The larger context of this scandal in Filibe also exposes how the government in Istanbul misread the nature of power relations within these transregional networks of violence that came to dominate Rumeli. The government and the very dignitaries that were central to this scandal were preparing to mobilize, and vying to lead, an enormous imperial siege against Pasban-zâde 'Osmân Paşa in his Danubian fortress city of Vidin. This is why co-opting or

[29] Treated in corporatist terms, the *a'yân* are said to have gained too much power in their rapacious accumulation of land as a result of the central government's replacing the ancient land-distribution and administrative system based on merit (i.e., the *timâr* system) with a more brutal tax-farming system, thereby becoming foes of the countryside and palace alike. For this classic take on the *a'yân*, see Bruce McGowan, "The Age of the *Ayans*, 1699–1812," in Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert, eds., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1916*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 637–724; and Robert Zens, "Provincial Powers: The Rise of Ottoman Local Notables (Ayan)," *History Studies: International Journal of History* 3, 3 (2011): 433–47. For recent criticisms of this approach, see James Gelvin, "'The Politics of Notables' Forty Years After," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 40, 1 (2006): 19–29; and Alan Mikhail and Christine M. Philliou, "The Ottoman Empire and the Imperial Turn," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, 4 (2012): 721–45.

[30] Esmer, "Economies."

destroying Kara Feyzî's bands in southern Rumeli became imperative for Istanbul in order to ensure that supply and communication routes between Vidin and Istanbul remained unmolested. It was believed that the renegade Pasban-zâde was the "patron" of these transregional networks of violence, whereas in fact they were much larger and more geographically spread out than his operation in Vidin. Kara Feyzî did occasionally work with well-known players like Pasban-zâde, the Belgrade Janissaries in the Danubian borderlands, and a handful of *a'yân* throughout the province. But he most often operated independently and wielded considerable influence on large groups throughout the Balkans, especially in Filibe and nearby towns like Hasköy and Kırca'ali (Haskovo and Kărdzhali in modern Bulgaria), the latter from whence he hailed.

Partly as a result of this scandal, Kara Feyzî and his companions became intimate with many imperial grandees from different parts of the empire, which gave an enormous boost to the legitimacy and success of their enterprise in the years to follow.[31] But while Kara Feyzî's career prompts us to rethink historiography of this period, more important for this essay is the methodological insight we gain by pondering him as a trope, or prop, in elite power struggles that drew on gossip, rumor, and different versions of public opinion presented to Istanbul. If we compare dispatches about him and his network written by officials like Mustafa Paşa and Seyyid 'Alî Paşa across the period of his insurgency, which lasted well-beyond 1808, it becomes clear that imperial elites exploited the threat he posed to secure their own footing in struggles with one another.

According to Mustafa Paşa's initial testimony regarding the incident in Filibe, sent to Selim III on 21 September 1797, the whole affair started when the *paşa*'s servants brought Kara Feyzî and his companions to him to negotiate a settlement. As the imperial war machine was preparing to mobilize against Pasban-zâde's fortress city of Vidin, it was imperative to prevent Kara Feyzî's network from harassing imperial troops in the Rhodope and Balkan Mountain passes as they headed north along imperial roadways. Mustafa Paşa informed Istanbul that Kara Feyzî and his colleagues Emincik and Cenkçioğlu Kara Mustafa were brought into his presence under an assurance of security (*te'mîn ve ma'iyyetine istishâben*). They abandoned their wicked deeds and repented, he said, and vowed not to repeat them (*ef'âl-i şenâyi'den rücû' ve tâ'ib-i müstağfir olup*) and pledged to conduct themselves henceforth with honor and dignity (*kendü 'ırz u edebleriyle*).[32] Building his case against Seyyid 'Alî Paşa, Mustafa Paşa distinguished himself to the sultan as the official who finally had the smarts to bring the cunning Kara Feyzî and companions to their knees and make them repent, settling them down in his own retinue under his full control. He went so far as to use the bandits' plight to cast

[31] Ibid.
[32] HH 2521İ.

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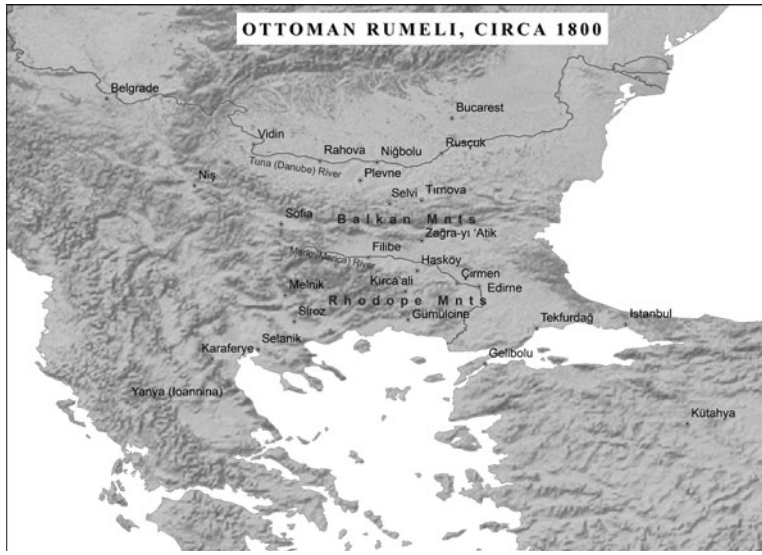

aspersions on the judgement and character of the Anatolian governor by insisting that when the Anatolians attacked Kara Feyzî and allies they had already been the sultan's *bendeler*, a term used broadly for loyal servants or subjects who enjoyed sultanic favor and trust.[33]

Mustafa Paşa clearly stated that he consulted with 'Alî Paşa and he consented to (*inzimâm-ı re'y ü ma'rifet-i müşîraneleriyle*) the strategy of co-opting these bandit retinues into his military entourage.[34] He even portrayed his opponent's unauthorized use of force as premeditated because 'Alî Paşa had quarreled with imperial and local authorities in Filibe, who had previously denied him and his troops accommodation and provisions in the city because they were already hosting another high-profile guest, the governor of Selânik (Thessaloniki in Greece).[35] According to Mustafa Paşa, Alî Paşa had retaliated by ordering all of his cavalry and foot-soldiers to descend upon the Yeni Mahalle district of Filibe under the guise of destroying Kara Feyzî's followers. In actuality, he asserted, they had only terrorized the population (*ahâlîlerine mûcib-i vahşet olmağla*).[36] When this is read alongside other types of sources that addressed 'Alî Paşa's temperament, it is clear that Mustafa Paşa was building on his Anatolian peer's already controversial reputation by portraying him as a vain man who responded to perceived slights with

[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

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disproportionate violence. He implied that this character trait was hardly becoming of an imperial minister.[37] He added that he was forced to rush his troops from across the surrounding region simply to protect the population, not from Kara Feyzî's bandits but rather from 'Alî Paşa's unruly Anatolian troops.[38] In another document he sent to the Porte a few days later, he said the governor of Anatolia had tried to incite riot and disorder among the troops in his retinue and thereby tarnish his reputation by making him appear as a weak and ineffective commander.[39]

Mustafa Paşa's suggestion that Rumeli and Anatolian troops were on the brink of fighting it out in Filibe must have deeply alarmed Selim III and his advisors. At a time when the state was competing with men like Pasban-zâde and Kara Feyzî for the loyalty of Rumeli's residents, any hint of an intra-imperial battle in Filibe drawn along "continental" lines would bode disaster for the Porte's imminent invasion of Vidin. But Mustafa Paşa further raised the stakes in his scribal attack on his counterpart's character, and in doing so brought to light common narrative strategies of the period within the discourse of banditry, albeit in an unlikely context. Namely, the governor described the behaviors of Seyyid 'Alî Paşa's forces in a manner similar to the way he and other officials had previously described Kara Feyzî's actions, as those of common bandits. Mustafa Paşa told the sultan that while the bandit leaders were negotiating with him and his staff in Filibe Seyyid 'Alî's men had already attacked the homes of the bandit leaders' men with the intention of killing them all. Though the latter managed to flee, Mustafa Paşa strategically inserted that 'Alî Paşa's men nevertheless looted (*yağma ve gâret*) much property in the area. In addition to stealing whatever they could from both Kara Feyzî's followers and the locals, he said, the imperial troops had torched *all* of the homes in the neighborhood. They had even slaughtered wounded residents who were weak and unable to defend themselves (*kudret-yâb olmayan mecrûhları katl u i'dâm itdiklerinden*).[40]

Throughout the Kara Feyzî saga, officials similarly reported on his violence in vague but consistent terms, usually repeating this same formula: Kara Feyzî's network pillaged property, burned homes, and then in a cowardly manner slaughtered defenseless but inevitably unspecified bystanders. This use of accusatory formulas was key from a legal standpoint. Recent research has

[37] For instance, the late nineteenth-century Ottoman chronicler Ahmet Cevdet Paşa noted that upon first setting foot on the continent at the beginning of his commission to seek out and destroy Kara Feyzî, the unruly, violent behavior of Seyyid 'Alî Paşa's Anatolian troops in Istanbul's different districts drew the palace's attention. Though Ahmet Cevdet Paşa mentioned struggles between El-Hac Mustafa and 'Alî Paşa, he unsurprisingly omits Kara Feyzî's central role in this larger dispute. See *Tarih-i Cevdet*, vol. 3 (Istanbul: Matba'a-yı Osmaniye 1891–1892 [1309]), 292.

[38] HH 2521İ.

[39] "…*ma'iyyetimizde olan 'asâkirin beynlerine ihtilâl ve teşvîş ilkâ eylemek mülâhazasıyla*…"; HH 2521O.

[40] HH 2521İ.

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revealed how, on a much smaller scale, common subjects (*re'âyâ*) in eighteenth-century Anatolian towns would in their petitions (*'arzuhâl*), recorded in imperial council registers (*ahkâm defterleri*), use similar formulaic expressions to describe the abuses of different local powerholders. They did so in order to portray specific strongmen as habitually inflicting certain types of violence on communities. Ottoman subjects deployed these strategic phrases and emphasized the transgressors' reputations as repeat offenders. They employed buzzwords such as "bandit" (*eşkıyâ*), "tyrant," "usurper" (*mütegallib*), and "oppression" (*zülm*) in order to trigger strong legal responses from the central government, knowing that a reputation for committing crimes was a precondition for conviction. This type of petitioning was part of a collaborative process in which Ottoman subjects and the state acted together to combat common threats to their welfare and security.[41]

Although Mustafa Paşa did not explicitly label Seyyid 'Alî Paşa a bandit, his descriptions of his behavior were clearly intended to besmirch him in the eyes of the sultanate, just as Anatolian peasants did in their complaints, and to thereby elicit specific legal responses from Istanbul.[42] Leslie Peirce has shown just how important reputations of common subjects were in local court cases: while a blot on someone's reputation (*töhmet*; lit. suspicion) might not result in their immediate prosecution, if he or she were later accused of a similar crime the community could cite a previous case to imply that their morals were suspect and successfully prosecute them.[43] Peirce argues that this was particularly important for communal self-surveillance on local levels, but Mustafa Paşa's invective against his peer suggests that "*töhmet*-ing" through gossip was also a strategy of imperial grandees seeking arbitration at the empire's highest legal body, and in conversation with different groups across the realm. We will see to what extent a *töhmet* could inflect enduring harm to a *vezîr*'s record in Istanbul.

SEYYID 'ALÎ PAŞA'S REBUTTAL AND COMPETING VISIONS OF THE LEGITIMATE USE OF FORCE

Turning to 'Alî Paşa's responses to the Rumeli governor's damning letters and his attempt to defend his reputation in Istanbul, one sees that the debate centered on competing understandings of the purpose of imperial violence and particularly how much force the government should apply in battling bandit

[41] See Başak Tuğ, "Gendered Subjects in Ottoman Constitutional Agreements, ca. 1740–1860," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 18 (Aug. 2014): 18–25, http://ejts.revues.org/4860.

[42] In contrast, the court historian Cevdet Paşa (*Tarih-i Cevdet*, 292) noted that various reports regarding the excesses of Seyyid 'Alî Paşa's men in Istanbul and other parts of Rumeli at this time described these Anatolians as men no better than the mountain bandits (*dağlı eşkıyâsı*) they were commissioned to fight.

[43] Leslie Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 133–34, 179.

networks. In promoting their own vision and discrediting their rival's, both *vezîrs* used gossip and rumor to construct their competing versions of public opinion about the state's war on banditry. This apparently carried considerable weight with the sultan and the Imperial Council.

On 23 September 1797, just two days after Mustafa Paşa had written to the sultan leveling his charges against him, 'Alî Paşa sent the sultan the first of a series of impassioned letters expressing his disappointment and shame (*hicâb ve havâ ederim*) at having received a *fermân* (imperial order) from Istanbul ordering his immediate return to Anatolia with his entire entourage because of Mustafa Paşa's specious allegations, prematurely ending his commission to hunt down Kara Feyzî.[44] Seyyid 'Alî Paşa, known to imperial chroniclers by his Kurdish nickname "Alo" Paşa," began his defense with his own version of the events in Filibe and expressions of frustration that Mustafa Paşa, and even the sultan's administration, had been inconsistent in dealing with bandits.[45] He complained that while the sultan had initially instructed him not to pardon some of Kara Feyzî's companions in the north who had sought his mercy, Rumeli's governor had nevertheless done so in Filibe. The *paşa* also denied that his Rumeli counterpart had reported to him either his so-called strategy of co-optation or the outcome of his negotiations with the bandit leaders ahead of time. Thus, he had not been prompted to use restraint in dealing with Kara Feyzî, whose men, contra Mustafa Paşa's claims, were still roaming freely and harassing Filibe's inhabitants.[46]

The common theme throughout 'Alî Paşa's correspondence here is that he could not understand why Mustafa Paşa not only interfered with his commission to destroy Kara Feyzî but also gambled on the remote possibility that the bandits would not revert to their old ways if Rumeli's governor showed them kindness and made overtures to be their patron. His letters stress Mustafa Paşa's reckless naïveté in taking Kara Feyzî at his word and for misleading the sultan into thinking him subdued.[47] In another pair of letters sent on 27 September, 'Alî Paşa uses a rumor to support his criticisms: there was talk on the ground, he said, that Kara Feyzî and his companions had the audacity to transgress the commitments they made to the governor of Rumeli via his retainer.[48] Instead, they had continued with business as usual, visiting cruelty

[44] Cevdet Dahiliye 9678. A number of dispatches are bundled together under this call number: one dated 23 September 1797 and two 27 September 1797. For more on Seyyid 'Alî Paşa's commission with ten thousand Anatolian troops to destroy Kara Feyzî's network, see Vera Mutafchieva, *Kărdzhaliisko vreme*, 2d ed. (Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 1993), 146–49. See also, İsmail H. Uzunçarşılıoğlu, "Vezir Hakkı Mehmed Paşa, 1747–1811," *Türkiyat mecuası* 6 (1939): 177–286.

[45] Cevdet Dahiliye 9678.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] *Rumeli vâlîsi vezîr-i müşârunileyhin silâhdârına tenbîh ve merkûm silâhdâr dahi olvechle ta'ahhüd itmiş olduğundan ta'ahhüdlerinin mugâyiri ... te'addîyâta cesâret.*

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and oppression onto the poor and the weak (*fukarâ ve zu'afâya cevr ü ezâ itmeleriyle*).[49] In another dispatch, the governor similarly scolded El-Hac Mustafa Paşa for falling for Kara Feyzî's insincere promises and well-known tricks (*hîle*), and even establishing a suspicious rapport with him, actions unbefitting a high-ranking *vezîr*.[50]

We learn from 'Alî Paşa's correspondence that part of Mustafa Paşa's strategy to convince Istanbul to decommission the governor was to persuade the sultan to dump Kara Feyzî and his network onto 'Alî Paşa's retinue. Alî Paşa could then take a principal part of the bandit insurgency back to Kütahya, the seat of his governorship in Anatolia.[51] Though Selim III spared him the dishonor of demotion from his position as *vezîr* and governor, 'Alî Paşa lamented that Mustafa Paşa could persuade the sultan to decommission him on the basis of grossly distorted information.[52] He carefully noted the flaws of Mustafa Paşa's strategies in dealing with Kara Feyzî and foretold immediate consequences of his leaving Rumeli. He observed that Mustafa Paşa's strategy was obviously flawed since Kara Feyzî and his people would have a choice in the matter and might well choose not to leave for Anatolia, where they had no connections and were less familiar with the terrain, resources, and inhabitants. 'Alî Paşa advocated instead a much harsher stance: bandits and anyone associated with them should be brutally punished to discourage other mountain groups from joining them. Anything less, he argued, would send the wrong messages to the wrong men and embolden them to operate more brazenly.[53]

To undermine Mustafa Paşa's attacks 'Alî Paşa also deployed features of Turkish grammar such as the evidential morpheme (*–miş*) to convey both the reckless rumors his peer was spreading about him and his surprise that he would stoop so low. He expressed disdain that Mustafa Paşa was gossiping (*sohbet şüyû bulmuş*) and spreading misinformation to the effect that 'Ali Paşa had disregarded the sultan's orders and returned to Filibe with his men. In fact he had followed the sultan's instructions precisely and was near Gelibolu on route to Anatolia.[54] He treated Mustafa Paşa's information as questionable while distancing himself from and expressing contempt and surprise at the speech, and he reported it all in a convenient suffix. In this way, 'Alî Paşa

[49] Cevdet Dahiliye 9678.
[50] Ibid. Prior to the Filibe scandal, Kara Feyzî and his companions repeatedly feigned their willingness to disband and mend their ways in talks with lower-ranking officials. But they used these negotiations to increase their coercive power to extract more resources and manpower from communities throughout Rumeli. See Esmer, "Economies," 179–82.
[51] Cevdet Dahiliye 9678.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.

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implicitly accused Mustafa Paşa of sending untrustworthy information to the sultan and his ministers.

At the heart of the polemics these two *paşas* directed against one another was a disagreement regarding the use of force against bandits. ʻAlî Paşa told Selim III that his rival was boasting falsely that he had single-handedly alleviated southern Rumeli's mountain bandit problem (*dağlı gâ'ilesini ber-taraf oldu diyü iş'âr ider*). Mustafa Paşa had also spread the word that ʻAlî Paşa and his men had been ordered back to Anatolia, without realizing this would only bring calamity upon himself (*kendüye vehâmet idüğünü derk idemeyüp*).[55] ʻAlî Paşa complained that Mustafa Paşa was claiming that ʻAlî Paşa intended to counter the bandits through excessive force. He countered, "As things having transgressed so badly, I ventured to write this because I have put on my cloak of zeal, tucked up the sleeves on my powerful arms, and am ready to use *all my full force* against bandits to make them succumb to our beneficent lord's noble request that they henceforth not compromise the repose of security and comfort in his lands. I resort to force because I am a true supporter of the faith and state."[56] Despite his already tainted reputation regarding his treatment of Ottoman subjects, ʻAlî Paşa defends his actions by asserting that the well-being of the faith and state—and by extension the sultan's subjects—required the use of resolute force against the bandits, and he dismisses Mustafa Paşa as a man who could never wield such power.

By invoking the security of the sultan's subjects in defaming each other, both *vezîrs* may appear to appeal to a pillar of Ottoman state ideology—the so-called "circle of justice" (*dâ'ire-yi 'adliye*). The concept envisioned the ruler as the guarantor of justice for all his subjects, and in return the welfare of the subjects (*re'âyâ*) guaranteed the sovereign and state's stability.[57] Yet in their exchange these ideals were obviously mere tropes in their intrigue and their battle over reputations and the resources entailed in the state's war against banditry. Their discursive strategies reflect larger ambiguities in the legal and moral frameworks for combating widespread banditry, insurgency, and rebellion within the Ottoman-Islamic legal tradition. Neither *shari'a* (Islamic law) nor *kânûn* (sultanic law) were conceived to combat large-scale, organized crime, especially when officials at the highest levels of government were implicated.[58]

[55] Ibid.

[56] *"Fe'emmâ hasbe'l-hâl işler bu dereceye gelüp tâ'ife-i eşkıyâ külliyyen nizâm ve bilâd ve 'ibâdın fi-mâ-ba'd âsâyîş-i emn ü râhatlarıyla evliyâ-yı na'imâ efendilerimize da'avât-ı hayr aldırmağa dâmen der-miyân gayret ve teşmîr-i bâzû-yı kudret ve hayr-hâh-i dîn ü devlet olduğum mülâbesesiyle bu vechle tahrîre cesâret kılınmıştır.*" Ibid., my italics.

[57] Gottfied Hagen, "Legitimacy and World Order," in Hakan Karateke and Maurus Reinkowski, eds., *Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 55–83.

[58] Scholars studying forms of social disobedience in the Ottoman Empire acknowledge that there is still very little consensus on what constituted "mutiny" (*'isyân*), "disorder" or "sedition" (*fitne, fesâd*), "rebellion" (*tuğyân*), and "banditry" (*eşkıyâlık*) and what the "typical" imperial

Recent scholarship has more closely engaged legal pluralism and new kinds of sources to study para-judicial praxis and procedure in empires. This provides us a more fruitful framework within which to analyze the legal dimension of the discourses these two governors used to attack one another, and the decisions the sultan and Imperial Council subsequently reached.[59] So much does the overly mediated nature of legal documents filter the experiences of Ottoman officials and subjects that it is fruitful to focus more on the rhetorical and ideological tools and the discursive strategies in legal documents than on the actions and agency of actors who compose them and appear in them.[60] We must consider as legal sources not only court records or complaint petitions but also reports like those we are examining here in order to identify and understand the linguistic practice and narrative strategies embedded in them.[61] For "crimes" of this scale, involving networks of bandits and *vezîrs* alike, Topkapı was the empire's final legal arbiter since local *kadıs* (judges) were powerless against transregional bandit enterprises, especially if powerful officials were in cahoots with them.[62]

Embracing a more pluralistic approach to law similarly allows one to better grasp not only the rhetorical but also the oral dimension of Ottoman legal culture. In this correspondence 'Alî Paşa defends himself by presenting his own, alternative assessment of the talk on the ground. He undermines every charge Mustafa Paşa makes against him as unfounded rumor and works to establish his own voice as authoritative. In addition to charging that Rumeli's governor was powerless against bandits, he adds that rumor has it (*mesmû' olduğu*) that bandits were intermixed (*mahlût*) with officials in Mustafa Paşa's administration.[63] The implication is that his peer is misleading the sultan to cover up a larger "Rumeli conspiracy" marked by covert relationships between imperial officials with men like Kara Feyzî. After all, El-Hac Mustafa Paşa himself was from Filibe, as was Kara Feyzî's intimate companion

responses to them were. See Jane Hathaway, ed., *Mutiny and Rebellion in the Ottoman Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

[59] See Tuğ, "Gendered Subject"; and Ido Shahar, "Legal Pluralism and the Study of Shari'a Courts," *Islamic Law and Society* 15 (2008): 112–41.

[60] Milen Petrov. "Everyday Forms of Compliance: Subaltern Commentaries on Ottoman Reform, 1864–1868," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, 4 (2004): 730–59.

[61] The failure to be attentive to the linguistic practices, or terminology and specific methods by which Muslim jurists discoursed on Islamic law is largely responsible for the view that Islamic law has remained unchanged since the tenth century. Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5–6.

[62] The Imperial Council (*dîvân-i hümâyûn*) bypassed local courts as a first adjudication center for most serious crimes like organized banditry well before the late eighteenth century, largely because local officials colluded with criminal networks on the ground or were unable to police them. See Başak Tuğ, "Politics of Honor: The Institutional and Social Frontiers of 'Illicit' Sex in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Anatolia," PhD diss., New York University (2009), 100, 137.

[63] Cevdet Dahiliye 9678.

Kara Mustafa, who also took part in the negotiations with the governor.[64] Kara Feyzî and Emincik, another of his companions at Filibe, were from nearby Kırca'âlî and Hasköy, respectively.

There was another facet of this crucial link between, on one hand, the multiparty performance of gossip, rumor, and their constitution of public opinion, and on the other Ottoman governance, legal culture, and real politik. 'Alî Paşa wrote to Selim III that if he sent spies (*câsûs*) to Rumeli to assess talk there and inquire as to which official—himself or Mustafa Paşa—possessed the power and moral rectitude needed to destroy men like Kara Feyzî, the sultan would learn that he was the proper choice because only a powerful outsider could stamp out the messy insurgency.[65] But by claiming the popular mandate, what 'Alî Paşa was really after was Mustafa Paşa's position as the governor of Rumeli, since the assignment to combat the bandit problem would guarantee years of resources, promotion, and opportunities to distinguish himself.[66] Period sources confirm that the opportunity to battle networks like Kara Feyzî's made Rumeli a coveted venue for *vezîrs* hailing from other regions of the empire. These were difficult times of peace, between the Habsburg-Russian-Ottoman War of 1788–1792, Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, and the Russo-Ottoman War of 1806–1812. The cash and provisions to build large divisions flowed less freely from imperial coffers than in times of inter-imperial war. More importantly, high-ranking *vezîrs* from across the empire were, like 'Alî Paşa, keenly aware that the seeming imminent demise of Pasban-zâde with the upcoming siege of Vidin would create a huge power vacuum along the Danubian frontier and great opportunities for wealth and social distinction.

Benton also points out just how important rumor and gossip were in mediating disputes in far off geographies because European crowns lived in constant fear of betrayal by colonial governors or the indigenous guides upon whom they depended.[67] Even in Filibe, only some 400 kilometers west of Istanbul, persistent rumors, gossip, and miscommunication reigned, and they affected imperial sovereignty in ways that have been overlooked. This royal fear of betrayal was constant in any imperial setting whether it reached across an ocean or through core provinces of large empires. This was especially true when imperial military markets depended upon diverse groups of bellicose men to defend territorial integrity and police society to the extent that the Ottoman one did by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This royal fear of betrayal and sedition became an important commodity in the linguistic markets that mediated

[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] See Aymes, "The Voice-Over of Administration," for how local tittle-tattle reported to Istanbul could constitute the grounds for dismissal of governors of late nineteenth-century Cyprus.
[67] Benton, *Search for Sovereignty*, 53.

Ottoman military markets, especially when transregional networks of violence employed in far-off theaters of war came to roost close to the capital.[68]

HOW INCLUSIVE GOSSIP NETWORKS POLICE DIFFERENT NODES OF IMPERIAL VIOLENCE

Seyyid ʻAlî Paşa used alleged local talk—in lieu of print cultures in the west that fashioned public opinion on the ground, like provincial newspapers—to boast about his exclusive strength and ability to guarantee the security and welfare of Ottoman subjects. His and Mustafa Paşa's actions together generated a variety of other rumor and spy reports linked to this and related incidents. In his struggle to build an effective military force and protect his constituents from powerful bandits and "foreign" *paşas* alike, Mustafa Paşa resorted to proclaiming the suffering and anguish of local subjects to sully ʻAlî Paşa's character. The prominence of other people's voices in the correspondence of both *paşas* underscores the importance the governors and their interlocutors in Istanbul placed in what people were talking about. For instance, in the initial account of the incident the governor sent to Istanbul he described not only the plight of the bandits but also the alleged complaints Kara Feyzî and his companions had made to him. He did so to portray ʻAlî Paşa's actions as cowardly and a flouting of assurances he, Mustafa Paşa, had given the bandit leaders, and by extension to the entire community. He ventriloquized the bandits:

> For all this time we have roamed and marauded (*serserî geşt ü güzâr idiyoruz*) in lands far from our homes, yet no one has extended a hostile hand into our poor homes to steal our property and belongings. Though we have repented (*tâ'ib ve müstağfir*) for our previous crimes and humbly beseeched the refuge and patronage (*ilticâ*) of no less than a *vezîr*, and assurances of our safety and security were, in turn, extended to us all by him, all of our belongings have been plundered, and our homes have been burned to ashes! How could something like this happen?[69]

Mustafa Paşa's inclusion of the bandit leaders' admission to their previous crimes betrays tacit agreements and complicity between bandits, imperial officials, and inhabitants of the governor's own hometown, who had kept the outlaws' properties and kin safe while they were off plundering other communities. Ultimately, his betrayal of these indiscretions mattered little to Istanbul, which exposes how conventionalized these contentious alliances had become. Mustafa Paşa could tell of his relationship with bandit leaders despite ʻAli Paşa's charges. Much like the colonial governors Benton describes, he explained this intimacy in terms of maintaining imperial interests and even risking his own reputation in order to stem the damage caused by his rival's tempestuousness. He states that he had to appease Kara Feyzî and his

[68] After 1803, Kara Feyzî and his network were pillaging areas alarmingly close to Istanbul. For example, see Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi HH 2637 (31 Oct. 1803).
[69] HH 2521İ.

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companions to avoid their retaliation, and therefore lied to them on behalf of ʻAlî Paşa. He wrote that he had repeatedly (*bi'd-defâʻat*) explained to Kara Feyzî and his colleagues that the governor of Anatolia did not know about the negotiations taking place and that the destruction of their properties occurred without his consent. The governor complained to the sultan that he even found himself in the humiliating position of having to beg Kara Feyzî not to retaliate and promising him that he alone would serve as the guarantor for all of their property lost in the ordeal. In doing so, he laments that he took on an enormous financial burden.[70]

Other sources, however, show that Mustafa Paşa's claims were challenged. Only two months later, during the siege of Vidin in the winter of 1798, one of the sultan's couriers, a certain Tatar Seyyid, presented to the Porte his own assessment of the latest rumors in Filibe.[71] What is fascinating about this source is that the courier reported talk he heard from other couriers delivering imperial correspondence and spying on those sending and receiving correspondence in the region. For instance, Tatar Seyyid said that a courier who had come back from Filibe told him that the governor of Rumeli could no longer control Kara Feyzî, who was now pillaging the greater Filibe region along the Meriç River Plain. In fact, rumor had it that Mustafa Paşa had run out of money and could no longer pay his troops. His situation in Filibe was said to be so dire that he needed two hundred soldiers just to protect himself as he slept due to the unruly men that roamed and looted the city at night.[72]

Contra Mustafa Paşa's portrayal of Kara Feyzî as his "rehabilitated" servant, Tatar Seyyid painted a very different picture, informing the Porte that he had heard that Kara Feyzî and three hundred of his men could come and go from Filibe as they pleased and even pillage nearby towns like Hasköy, whence Kara Feyzî is said to have stolen with impunity over forty purses (*kîse*) of money in addition to booty from inhabitants.[73] Tatar Seyyid added in his report that the bandits had the audacity to seek out and kill a new strongman who had usurped power, proclaiming that he was the *aʻyân* of Hasköy (*aʻyân iddiʻâsıyla*) and threatened Kara Feyzî's interests there.[74] Tatar Seyyid had also heard that Kara Feyzî visited nearby Zağra-yı ʻatîk (Stara Zagora in Bulgaria) and from there summoned Mustafa Paşa's courier to ask the *vezîr* to promote one of his companions named Rodoslu (i.e., from Rhodes) Ahmet Ağa to the rank of *kapıcıbaşı* (imperial gatekeeper) and *aʻyân* of that town, presumably so that he could pursue Kara Feyzî's interests there.[75]

[70] Ibid.
[71] HH 2677. While this source is undated, it is clear from its content that it was written during the imperial siege of Vidin several months later.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] HH 2677.
[75] Ibid.

Tatar Seyyid's report reveals that not only were Kara Feyzî and his companions reneging on the promises they made to Mustafa Paşa and conducting "business as usual," but people were talking about how Kara Feyzî used their relationship to broker the appointments of local officials amenable to his enterprise in different parts of Rumeli. The courier-spy crafted his report to Istanbul so as to convey the plausible manner in which people were talking about the bandit leader's relationship with the governor and how it allowed him to usurp imperial sovereignty by appointing or even killing officials who promoted or threatened his interests. This even though these officials were supposed to be selected by councils made up of community leaders. Reading Tatar Seyyid's intelligence report alongside the governors' correspondence captures heteroglossic performances embodied within Ottoman archival documents that mainstream historiography has overlooked. The oscillation between gossip, news, espionage, and legal evidence demonstrates how instrumental seemingly less authoritative knowledge claims were in mediating power and status in Ottoman political culture.[76]

It was not just Kara Feyzî and his companions who complained about the savagery of the Anatolians and how the two *vezîrs* had handled the situation in Filibe. El-Hac Mustafa Paşa wrote to Selim III that when the townsmen on Filibe's outskirts witnessed (*müşâhade itdikde*) the hostility of Seyyid 'Alî Paşa's men toward them, they sent a messenger to Mustafa Paşa to inform him that they had just opted to join forces with the bandits because they were the only ones powerful enough to protect them from 'Alî Paşa's savage troops.[77] Mustafa Paşa peppered his correspondence with emotive registers by informing the sultan of the great shame (*haclet-i 'azîm*) he felt because he appeared incapable of fulfilling his vow to protect the people from 'Alî Paşa's reckless behavior.[78]

Mustafa Paşa added that when news of these untoward events reached the imperial troops in his retinue, convincing them that their own security and welfare were threatened, they became consumed with lacerating fear (*mecmû' tahdîş idüp*), thus undermining the governor's reputation even among his own men. The governor presented the alleged complaints of his troops by summarizing what was being talked about behind his back ad nauseam (*diyü vâfir güft ü gû vâki' olub*): "All of the *vezîrs* are supposed to be one. Here we take refuge in the patronage of a *vezîr* (*bir vezîrin himâyesine ilticâ ve i'timâd itdik*), yet meanwhile he kills us off one by one. Does such behavior befit the prestige of an exalted *vezîr*?"[79] This statement, considered

[76] For a similar point in the context of late Mughal India, see Michael H. Fisher, "The Office of Akhbār Nawīs: The Transition from Mughal to British Forms," *Modern Asian Studies* 27, 1 (1993): 45–82.
[77] HH 2521O.
[78] HH 2521İ.
[79] HH 2521O.

along with Mustafa Paşa's aforementioned charge that his Anatolian rival was inciting rebellion among his Rumeli troops so as to make the *vezîr* look weak and incompetent, points to the perilous position in which the governor found himself. While intrigue among governors and their retinues was not a new phenomenon in Ottoman politics, talk of sedition in the governor's army alarmed Istanbul since the government was preparing for its invasion of Pasban-zâde's Vidin, which was probably the largest imperial siege against a rebellious *paşa* in Ottoman history.[80]

Though it is difficult to discern their actual voice in Mustafa Paşa's diatribes, what he says does hint that imperial soldiers, like the population, understood that they were unjustly subject to the cold calculations of governors, their shifting alliances, and imperial decrees. His meticulous citations of and commentary on all of these groups' complaints betrays how the moral values expressed in gossip networks, tied to military marketplaces and communities they became embroiled in, obliged Ottoman elites to act in certain ways. *Publica fama*, public reputation, was after all predicated upon how people talked about an issue, person, or group.[81]

Mustafa Paşa's inclusion of talk on the ground was an ideal weapon against an opponent who threatened his reputation in his own circle. It also echoed the alarm felt over people's lack of faith in the imperial government's ability to protect its subjects and servants during the age of constant inter-imperial war and domestic insurgency that ensued. This was something the sultan and his ministers were especially concerned about at this moment. As Benton points out regarding trans-oceanic colonial settings, when ruptures occurred then leadership changed hands abruptly, groups splintered, factions formed, and mutinies simmered. These were times for invoking royal, religious, and personal authority to muster rhetorical resources and stand firm for procedure, or judiciously abandon it. Officials, pirates, and bandits alike rehearsed legal stories, plotted actions, and recorded statements in the service of narratives intended for legal proceedings, whether in parliamentary courts with semblances of judicial procedure in London or more informal, but nevertheless inclusive transregional legal forums like those ultimately bound to the sultan and the Imperial Council in Istanbul.[82] With this context in mind, we can appreciate the power and policing force of gossip. It was most effective when it contained degrees of truth, but even when it did not it evoked plausible attitudes of groups that had suffered a long-lasting bandit insurgency.

[80] For more on the corruption and abuses of *vezîrs* and provincial governors in Ottoman history, see Baki Tezcan, *The Second Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
[81] Wickham, "Gossip and Resistance," 5–12.
[82] Benton, *Search for Sovereignty*, 101–2.

What emerges from this episode is that the "official truth" about the state of affairs in Rumeli was reconstructed in the sultan's court by sifting through the gossip and rumors from all of these groups. The ways in which Mustafa Paşa presented these voices with emotional references to his shame felt and disrepute acquired due to his peer's excesses validates Stoler's plea for students of empire to think about gossip and rumor along with the writerly forms in which they were presented by imperial officials trying to move their royal audiences. To Stoler, reading "along the archival grain" entails treating the imperial archive not as a source but rather a site of knowledge production and concept formation, a repository of and generator not of facts or proofs but of social relationships.[83]

GOSSIP AND IMPERIAL DECISION MAKING

On 27 September 1797, Seyyid 'Alî Paşa sent to Istanbul what may have been his last letter regarding this scandal. The remorseful official now seemed to accept the sultan's decision that he immediately return to Anatolia, a decision Istanbul had based largely on El-Hac Mustafa Paşa's damning gossip.[84] The governor wrote that he had gathered all of his troops in their current position in Hasköy and they would immediately embark on their long journey back to Kütahya.

Given that the governor of Rumeli's use of gossip played a key role in 'Alî Paşa's decommission from this lucrative war on banditry, the question arises: how did the sultan and the imperial government that received these conflicting, heteroglossic reports distinguish truth from fiction and react to them? Prompted by Natalie Zemon Davis' pioneering work, distinguishing fact from fiction has given way to efforts to track the production and consumption of information as the contingent of coordinates of particular times, temperaments, places, and purposes.[85] Here, I am analyzing how narratives were formulated by the inclusion of different voices in order to determine how the highest-ranking imperial officials, and legal bodies to which they appealed, processed conflicting information to make decisions on state security and imperial sovereignty. We must acknowledge the dialogic nature of the production of imperial intelligence, which clearly shows how the highest legal authorities and ministers depended upon the moral, emotional, and social sensibilities of other groups in order to mediate status, resources, and governance.[86]

While the sultanic "rulings" based on these communications did not amount to a consistent policy, they cannot be dismissed as a symptom of weak government, decentralization, or anarchy, as was often the case in

[83] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.
[84] Cevdet Dahiliye 9678.
[85] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, 30.
[86] Bayly, *Empire and Information.*

traditional historiography on the period. Like other sprawling empires that had imperfect, patchy control over their vast realms, the Ottomans were bound to an array of domestic and global factors that often forced them to change policies abruptly in seemingly contradictory ways. What was perceived (and perhaps punished) as imperial agents' use of excessive force at one moment might in another context be seen as desirable behavior that promoted royal interests. Like gossip, rumor, and other forms of speech and emotions that informed it, imperial sovereignty itself was indeterminate and constantly shifting. Benton has pointed out how indeterminacy could even figure as a core principle of imperial law based on divisible sovereignty in far-away colonial settings like early ninetieth-century British India. Not specifying specific legal arrangements in treaties or other agreements with native states in India allowed imperial governments there recourse to different types of coercive force that were at times imperative for defending, policing, and extracting resources.[87] In the nineteenth century the Ottomans were even more pressed to rely on different agents of imperial violence for fighting incessant wars and combating subsequent uprisings on the home front. The existence of ambiguous proxies of imperial force, for better or worse, left open the possibility of rehabilitating rogue ministers and co-opting bandits as agents of empire during both before and after the Napoleonic period.

Thus while El-Hac Mustafa Paşa succeeded in tainting his competitor's reputation in Istanbul in the short term, the imperial siege of Vidin that began two months later, in the winter and early spring of 1798, shifted the Ottoman government's priorities and its approach to war on banditry. Only a few months after the row between Mustafa and 'Alî Paşa in Filibe, but well before Napoleon's epic invasion of Egypt on 24 January 1798, El-Hac Mustafa Paşa sent another dispatch to Istanbul, this time complaining that during the massive siege of Vidin Rumeli's general population seemed to be flocking to Pasban-zâde's side against imperial forces. He estimated that around fifty thousand supporters of Pasban-zâde were outside of the walls of Vidin, with people flocking from throughout Rumeli to support the rebel *paşa*.[88] But this time, Selim III—who often wrote instructions to the grand *vezîr* and Imperial Council in the margins of dispatches he had received—wrote atop this communiqué: "My grand *vezîr*, this governor of Rumeli is writing *tall tales* (*masâllar yaziyor*; my emphasis), since it is said that he has been invited to (*da'vet ederlerimiş*) districts along the borderlands (i.e., in the siege of Vidin) on a number of occasions. Why does he not go there himself? He just sits in Filibe—his writing such things is therefore meaningless (*ma'nâsı yoktur*). His status must be investigated thoroughly (*mülâhaza lâzımdır*)."[89]

The sultan's comments here speak to how Rumeli's governor began to lose his own footing in Istanbul politics soon after the scandal in Filibe due

[87] Benton, *Search for Sovereignty*, 258.
[88] HH 2777.
[89] Ibid.

to his inability to muster a powerful army and prove himself in Vidin. In Istanbul politics, the defamation of a powerful Ottoman grandee's character was sometimes short-lived. Events on the ground could change at any given moment, and a tainted imperial official with the wherewithal to lead a large and powerful military force could be rehabilitated. Apropos the need for power, 'Alî Paşa probably did not make the full journey back to Anatolia. Just before the sultan inscribed his distrustful marginalia, another source dated 15 January 1798 reveals that Selim III and Grand Admiral Kapudan Hüseyin Paşa had honored Seyyid 'Alî Paşa by making him a principal commander in the siege against Pasban-zâde on the Danube. He would soon distinguish himself as one of the most effective generals in the early campaign.[90] In fact, on 4 August 1798 he was appointed to the governorship of Rumeli, while a much chagrined El-Hac Mustafa Paşa was demoted and "exiled" to govern the Maarız Körfezi region (today the Saros Gulf in the Aegean).[91]

But just as in Filibe, officials were soon complaining of Seyyid 'Alî Paşa's heavy-handed ways. They accused him and the commander of the siege, Kapudan Hüseyin Paşa, of claiming the early successes for themselves and not sharing important tasks and resources (i.e., cannon, weapons, grain, and other supplies) with other *paşas* who participated in the campaign.[92] 'Alî Paşa's peers also charged him with bombarding the city of Vidin to the point that they feared the state would soon lose the hearts and loyalties of the population trapped within Pasban-zâde's city walls. Here again we find ongoing debate on the nature of state violence to deal with the bandit problem.[93]

By the fall of 1798 Seyyid 'Alî Paşa's good fortune had come to an end. The Vidin campaign turned for the worse after Napoleon invaded Egypt and many of the imperial forces engaged in the siege were hastily redeployed there. On 20 November 1798, a dispatch from Rumeli arrived in the Porte informing the sultan that 'Alî Paşa was summoned to his headquarters in Rahova (Ryahova in Bulgaria). There he suffered a humiliating end—stabbed, shot, and then beheaded, probably because he was an ideal scapegoat for the imperial failure to subjugate Pasban-zâde in Vidin. Five days later his head was duly sent to the sultan to be displayed outside of the gates of Topkapı, as had been the heads of many a common bandit in Kara Feyzî's retinue throughout his long insurgency.[94] El-Hac Mustafa Paşa, on the other hand, ultimately

[90] HH 12367.
[91] HH 2110.
[92] See HH 2667, 2253, and 2719C.
[93] HH 2238. By 2 June 1798, reports arrived in Istanbul that Seyyid 'Alî Paşa had the "traitor" Pasban-zâde 'Osmân Paşa completely surrounded and his punishment was imminent; see HH 5970. At the same time, 'Alî Paşa's peers complained he was unwilling to share heavy armaments and ammunition; see HH 2719B.
[94] Y. Özkaya, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu Dağlı İsyanları (1791–1808)* (Ankara: Ankara University Press, 1983), 57.

saved face and made his way back to Belgrade, where he was reappointed to his former position as the city's protector (*belgrad muhâfızı*). Soon after, though, in December 1801, Mustafa Paşa, too, suffered a humiliating end when Kara Feyzî's companions took Belgrade and inscribed their revenge upon the *vezîr*'s body.[95]

As for Kara Feyzî, he would never share the fates of the imperial and local officials entangled in his web of organized crime and power brokering. His role in the scandal in Filibe was not recorded in imperial chronicles nor did it represent his most daring endeavor. Yet the imperial chatter he generated may well have been one of the most definitive moments in his long insurgency, which outlasted Selim III himself, who was deposed and assassinated in 1807–1808.[96] Kara Feyzî's central role in mediating El-Hac Mustafa Paşa and Seyyid 'Alî Paşa's disputes catapulted him onto the imperial stage as a veritable power broker and contributed to the lasting success of his plundering enterprise in the region.[97] Whereas 'Alî Paşa merely accused El-Hac Mustafa Paşa and his administration of concealing ties to organized crime, immediately after the Filibe scandal a number of other *vezîrs* from across the empire calculated that *overtly* plundering alongside Kara Feyzî suited their immediate goals. It enabled them to negotiate for promotions or protest demotions from a position of greater strength.[98]

Napoleon's Mediterranean adventure only augmented these trends since it required that most of the imperial army leave Rumeli, which gave networks of violence like Kara Feyzî's a free hand to continue their plundering and racketeering operations. This, in turn, contributed to a culture of violent politics that led to the First Serbian Uprising (1804–1813) followed by the related Russo-Ottoman War (1806–1812), the events surrounding the 1808 regicide of Selim III, and even the outbreak of the Greek Revolution (1821–1828). Kara Feyzî was ultimately co-opted as a respected, borderland skirmisher charged with fighting first Serbian and then Greek rebels, and with terrorizing their respective kinfolk along what would later become the national boundaries between the Ottoman Empire and the Serbian and Greek states. Once again, the imperial government sanctioned his old, violent ways against new types of social groups that the Ottoman palace labeled rebels and bandits.[99]

CONCLUSION

Great divides between literate and illiterate, written and oral, or elite and commoner persist in mainstream historiography. Yet the nexus of oral and written

[95] S. Aslantaş, *Osmanlıda Sırp İsyanları* (Istanbul: Kitabevi, 2007).

[96] Some of Kara Feyzî's plundering adventures in 1803 brought him as close as the outskirts of Istanbul.

[97] After this scandal, from 1797 onward, the Filibe/Meriç River valley became the center of Kara Feyzî's plundering confederacy. See V. Mutafchieva, *Kărdzhaliisko vreme*.

[98] Esmer, "Economies."

[99] Ibid.

reports that defines this scandal displays the "leveling effect" gossip and rumor could have on the brokering of relations between the state, imperial administrators, irregulars *cum* bandits, and subject populations.[100] By focusing on relationships between social status and speech we can rethink dated ideas about the public sphere and public opinion. The latter was formed through the expressions of a variety of voices from diverse social backgrounds.[101]

Vezîrs and other grand emissaries of empire, like those in other imperial polities, needed the words of peasants, soldiers, and rogues alike. They competed to harness or fashion their narratives as accurate public opinion to bolster their own standing in imperial politics and transregional power struggles. In the process, Ottoman administrators produced polyphonic texts that included "another's speech in another's language," but these texts nevertheless betray that Ottoman elites still had to earn their reputations locally. In their postings they were subject to the tongue-wagging of their common interlocutors as they sought to establish a good name in Istanbul based on different sets of constantly changing criteria.[102] This essay has introduced the politics of legal forums that worked outside of *kadı* courts of law traditionally evoked when discussing formal law in the Ottoman Empire. I have showed that these forums were constitutive of a multi-vocal world in which speech in writing was a scene of struggle.[103] Late-Ottoman administration was as dependent on the ability of grandees to muster informal sources of information as on their ability to marshal large armies. However, in crafting plausible stories from which they thought they would benefit, grandees filled their letters to the sultan with gossip and rumor that left them open to being "challenged, unraveled, or stained by the rogue words of their common interlocutors."[104]

The exchange of less formal scripts as part of imperial decision-making indicates how crucial information conveyed as gossip and rumor could be in mediating power, status, and resources in this and other imperial settings. This was especially so where governments relied on diverse and ambiguous groups to implement royal prerogatives in distant areas. Recent scholarship has explored the transition between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish

[100] To move beyond these divides and their ideological underpinnings, see Brian V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and Nelli Hanna, "Literacy and the 'Great Divide' in the Islamic World, 1300–1800," *Journal of Global History* 2 (2007): 175–93.

[101] Elizabeth Horodowich, "Introduction: Speech and Oral Culture in Early Modern Europe and Beyond," *Journal of Early Modern History* 16 (2012): 301–13, 312.

[102] For recent scholarship that shows how political elite culture departs from convention by using the verbal forms and expressions originating from popular slang, in many of the same ways that lower social strata were thought to appropriate, mock, or parody dominant ideology, see Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers, "'A Bad Chicken Was Brooding': Subversive Speech in Late Medieval Flanders," *Past & Present* 214 (Feb. 2012): 45–86, 50.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Aymes, "Voice-Over," 1–4.

Republic in terms of how the imperial government and its successor often used unruly bandits and paramilitary networks for diverse security tasks, from fighting national rebellions to ethnically cleansing minority groups.[105] This work, too, has challenged Weberian precepts claiming that a universal goal of all states has been to achieve a monopoly of legitimate violence.[106] Like other imperial polities, the Ottomans always wavered between wooing and fighting different coercive forces within their society, and tried to use them to attain their goals. One can argue that Ottoman successor states today stretching from Serbia to Syria still struggle to manage multiple nodes of coercive power that exist parallel to standing armies and police forces. Given their more compact polities and boundaries, we might conclude that they have been even less successful in this than were the Ottomans.

That said, in this essay I have not dwelled on taken-for-granted twentieth-century abstractions about universal goals of statecraft or on formulating all-encompassing explanations of Ottoman imperial legacies lurking behind today's instability across the empire's former lands. I have instead focused on what different people at the end of the eighteenth century actually said about the use of extreme force, and more important, how that talk brokered it. I have highlighted the speech of those who wielded force in dialogue with those who suffered as its collateral damage in order to analyze the overlooked, more subtle means by which coercive force was brokered among disparate agents of imperial violence, communities, and the imperial center behind the scenes.[107]

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[105] Recent Ottomanist scholarship treats the overlap between the criminality of paramilitarism and state-craft as more of a modern phenomenon, which informed the transition from empire to nation-state. See Ryan Gingeras, "Last Rites for a 'Pure Bandit': Clandestine Service, Historiography and the Origins of the Turkish 'Deep State,'" *Past & Present* 206, 1 (2010): 151–74; and Uğur Ümit Üngör, "Rethinking the Violence of Pacification: State Formation and Bandits in Turkey, 1914–1937," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, 4 (2012): 746–69. In contrast, scholars of the emergence of the empire have long talked about the Ottoman venture as a "plundering confederacy" comprised of unwieldy armies that the center found difficult to control. See Heath Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); and Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

[106] See Esmer, "Economies"; and for other contexts, Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski, eds., *States of Violence* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press and Comparative Studies in Society and History, 2005).

[107] My approach that theorizes the relations between gossip and informal talk on one hand and the mediation of imperial violence on the other has been influenced by the work of Leila Abu-Lughod. In her efforts to curb recent scholarship's enthusiasm for finding subaltern resistance anywhere and everywhere she heeded Foucault's warning that power has the propensity to lurk in covert places, just as power and resistance are always intertwined in complicated ways. See "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17 (1990): 41–55; and Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972–1977*, Colin Gordon, trans. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

Abstract: This essay reconstructs a scandal in the fall of 1797 involving Ottoman governors, leaders of a notorious network of irregular soldiers *cum* bandits, and residents of the city of Filibe (Plovdiv in Bulgaria). It erupted over whether or not state officials should pacify successful bandit enterprises by co-opting their leaders. The scandal escalated into a crisis in which the large armies of the governors of Anatolia and Rumeli (the Ottoman Balkans) verged on clashing because each wanted to lead the state's lucrative war against Rumeli bandit networks. Imperial administrators issued dispatches regarding this scandal that were based on gossip and rumor circulating within the general population as well as among bandits. I draw on understandings of gossip as a social and cultural resource from linguistic anthropology to make sense of Ottoman political culture. I analyze these dispatches to uncover how the performance of these informal scripts featured prominently in correspondence with the Imperial Council and related surveillance reports, and thereby mediated resources, power, and authority among different agents of imperial violence. I show that gossip, rumor, and related forms of seemingly informal "talk" played a fundamental role in sovereign decision making. I also transpose methodologies and approaches of "history from below," conceived by earlier generations of cultural anthropologists and historians, onto elite letters to ask new questions about information brokerage, the negotiation of power among different agents of imperial violence and their interlocutors, and the contested nature of imperial intelligence gathering and sovereignty.