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The forging of solidarity on the basis of territorial proximity, family bonds or, most often, common interest happens at all times and everywhere. For this study, originally a PhD dissertation (Harvard University), Charles Wilkins sees the need to prove that the local population of Aleppo in the seventeenth century was able "to act collectively and carve out their own spheres of action vis-a-vis state authority" (p. 9).

Wilkins intends to trace the development of civil society in Aleppo, its degree of solidarity and the state-society relations. Point of departure is the shift in historiography, considering the 17th century not as the beginning of a long decline of the Ottoman Empire but rather as a successful reorganization of the relations between central state power and society. The second process Wilkins investigates is the "diffusion of soldiers in provincial society," that means their economic and social integration into local society. This was accompanied by a tendency of civilians to buy military titles to enhance their status and privileges. He concludes somewhat surprisingly "[t]hus one can speak of two simultaneous processes, the 'militarization' of the civilian society and the 'civilianization' of the military population. In this study the first term will be used to refer to both processes" (p. 9). I shall return to this point later.

In three parts he investigates then city quarters and the negotiation of taxes, the insertion of the military into civilian society and, finally, the guilds. The limits of space permit only brief comments on these three issues. For the first part the institution of the avariz tax (from Arabic ‘awârid) is central for the analysis. Originally part of ‘extraordinary taxes”, it soon became part of budget planning and constituted for the province of Aleppo in 1667 22% of all budget income (p. 23). Originally, the Ottoman state calculated the tax by geographical units, each of which yielded iden-
tical amounts of tax. Later state surveys apportioned specific fractions of the rate to each house in Aleppo and the avariz was collected by city quarters. The distribution of that sum among the houses in the quarter was very much a matter of the people of the quarter themselves (pp. 23–25). Charles Wilkins sees here a great deal of social solidarity (through the "internal impulse of generosity and the external pressures of social customs“, p. 110) and personal initiative (taxpayers recognizing the benefits of helping insolvent homeowners, p. 110) at work through "acts of charity", "collective action", "mutual assistance" to "alleviate the hardships of poorer homeowners” (p. 110), "illustrating the active loyalties that quarters could engender” (p. 112).

It is not clear how loyalty and charity can be measured, but every house owner knows that empty, not to speak of dilapidated, houses in his neighborhood lower the value of his own property. Voluntary acts in Aleppo to rehab abandoned houses of neighbors and to rent them out, are not necessarily a sign of charity but rather of calculated investment to maintain values. Wilkins admits that "officials“ of the quarter exerted pressure on wealthier inhabitants to pick up some of the tax burden of the poorer homeowners. He also observes briefly that "waqfs [pious foundations] endowing neighborhood religious and charitable institutions also must have provided the wherewithal to minister to residents in financial straits” (p. 110) but does not elaborate the point further.

In Aleppo of the 17th century taxation was a highly complex matter. Wilkins mentions several examples, where the annual avariz apportionment on a house is one fifth and even one half of the value of the house (pp. 33, 68, 102.). For the reader it remains incomprehensible how the value of the house can be paid every five years over again. This needs fiscal or economic explanations. What are we to think of a large house abandoned by its heirs (p. 103) or a rate of 75% of dilapidated houses in the Zawiya Quarters (p. 91)? Something larger then taxes is happening here. A general statistic of population estimates for Aleppo could have at least indicated demographic trends. Likewise no description of the trade volume, the most important aspect

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Aleppo’s economy, is provided. Also the absence of a map, indicating all the quarters of Aleppo, is symptomatic for the lack of context.

In the second part, analyzing the “militarization” of society, a discussion of which individuals belong to the military and what activities would make them part of the civilian society rather than representatives of the central government, would have been helpful. Wilkins himself mentions the „beče“, Janissaries who live in private homes in the city and not in the citadel and who „have no officially recognized affiliations with the military“ (p. 81). They seem to be completely integrated into the civilian society. The process was one of „demilitarization“ in various shapes and degrees and is not counteracted by the fact that ambitious and rich civilians bought military titles in order to gain status and privileges. Such titles did not „militarize“ them as Wilkins claims (p. 197), but made them more powerful merchants, moneylenders or dignitaries, who were climbing successfully the social ladder but were not interested to acquire military skills and attitudes.

It can be argued that the „demilitarization“ reflected the weakness of the Ottoman government, in spite of its reform activities. As long as it is not established, in how far „military“ still represented the will and interests of the state, and no difference is made between local authorities and their interests and those of the central state, pointing out a certain degree of military esprit de corps or civilian solidarity does not lead very far. The analysis of fiscal politics and economic behavior, for which the case studies provide abundant material, should have been the main line of the argument, providing clear motives for cooperative behavior and solidarity of certain groups as well as individual competition.

In the last part there is a special section on inter-guild relationships. Wilkins discovers here the „formation of asymmetric power relations between ‘major’ and ‘assistant’ guilds, which we shall call yamak [i.e. assistance] relationship“ [emphasis T. P.], describing a guild’s „specific kind of subordinate relationship to another guild“ (p. 271): „It appears that the yamak guild acknowledged its subordination to the major guild by contributing funds to the major guild for the payment of taxes to the state“ (p. 273). He quotes one scholar, guessing that this might have been an administrative device to collect taxes more efficiently, and another as proposing that the subordinate guild provided services to a „major“ guild by either selling the latter’s product or providing it with the raw material for its product. Wilkins himself is inclined to see here an attempt of „major“ guilds to enhance their tax base. I would suggest that, here too, a strictly economic approach to the issue would quickly have led to the concept of downstream and/or upstream integration of business, often being considered as economically desirable. The guilds of the raw material suppliers, of the producers as well as the marketing salesmen have an interest of stable relationships with each other and exclusivity of supplies and markets. This would eliminate the unclear concept of „subordination“ and explain the willingness of the raw material supplier to share some of the tax burden of the producer in return for an exclusive supply relationship. It also might explain why the same guild could also resist too high a contribution to the producer guild, because the latter was as dependent on a steady supply of the needed materials. This has nothing to do either with „assistance“ or with solidarity, but is a business cooperation, which lasts as long as both partners perceive it as economically advantageous for themselves.

The study often tries to elaborate the point of a social solidarity, accompanied usually by a connotation of egalitarianism, good deeds and human concerns. Wilkins’ own analysis, however, regularly shows that commercial, financial or other material interests lead to collective action. Surely, such abilities can be found in Aleppo also before and after Ottoman rule. The study, therefore, does not show convincingly the uniqueness of economic behavior or of solidarity during the period of Ottoman reforms or the latter’s relations to them. Nevertheless, the book remains of interest for scholars and students of Aleppo’s history and serves as an example for the wealth of information that can be found in its archives.

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