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Review of Digital Historical Research on Southeast Europe and the Ottoman Space, edited by Dino Mujadžević (post-print)

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Review of *Digital Historical Research on Southeast Europe and the Ottoman Space*, edited by Dino Mujadžević

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Digital Historical Research on Southeast Europe and the Ottoman Space is an edited volume born from the workshop, “Data-Driven Research in the History of Southeast Europe and Turkey” held at the Center for the Mediterranean Studies at the Ruhr University Bochum, Germany, in 2015. Its aim is to bring together scholars of the digital humanities who study areas of the world that were once a part of the Ottoman Empire. The case studies range from the metaphorical heart of the empire—the thousands of administrative documents produced over its long tenure—to its distant geographical frontiers in modern-day Ukraine. With the exception of one chapter, most of the case studies deal with historical texts from the mid-15th century through to 2014. Clearly the book is not strictly about the Ottoman era but rather, as the title indicates, the Ottoman “space.”

The book opens with an introduction by the editor, Dino Mujadžević, who offers a birds-eye-view of the evolution of the digital humanities since the mid-20th century and an up-to-date and useful review of the current digital scholarship on Southeast Europe, helpfully highlighting initiatives that originated from within the region, others from outside the region that would be helpful to scholars of the area, and those that deal specifically with Ottoman materials. The nine chapters that follow are divided into sections that speak to the core digital approach shared by the papers within them: Historical GIS (Chapters 1, 2, and 3), Textual Analysis (Chapters 4 and 5), Computer-Assisted Quantitative Approaches (Chapters 6 and 7), and Other Approaches (Chapters 8 and 9). In reality, the chapter groupings are somewhat arbitrary; a majority of the chapters make use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) in some way or another, and most also deal with some

form of textual analysis through either text mining or computer-vision approaches. If anything, this volume demonstrates the extent to which these methods overlap in the realm of digital humanities scholarship, and it illustrates how scholars are often willing to experiment with many different techniques.

According to the book's cover and preface, the thread connecting all the chapters is that each contributor uses digital tools as a core part of their research, either by contributing directly to the development of tools to search for and analyze information or by using the tools to assess information in new ways. In my view, however, the more important context for understanding how this volume contributes to the wider scholarship is the papers' chronological and geographical focus. There are two points to keep in mind. First is the fact that scholarly work about this era and region has traditionally suffered from national, linguistic, and disciplinary divisions. There is plenty of rigorous historical research about the Early Modern period in each of the countries that make up Southeast Europe, but accessing it often requires linguistic abilities that not all researchers have. As just one example, transnational syntheses of Ottoman historiography are exceptionally rare; much more typical are articles, manuscripts, and even whole conferences that focus on individual modern-day countries and the Ottoman remains and/or archival documents that happen to apply to them, inadvertently casting present-day borders back onto the past and affecting the way we, today, view regional histories. The second point to remember is that scholars of Ottoman history began experimenting with digital approaches very late in the game—by the editor's estimation, around the year 2010 (p. 18). The concept of 'digital humanities' had already been around for decades by that point, and technologies like GIS and text mining had been widely adopted by scholars in related fields like Classics, Archaeology, and History more broadly. But for this particular subfield, the 2010s were the heyday of technological experimentation and growth. This volume—essentially a conference proceedings that captures the contributors' research as of the year 2015—offers us a glimpse into the early adoption of digital techniques to fields that did not yet have much experience with them.

Given this context, I believe the volume's main contribution is that it unites scholars from multiple fields and multiple countries who otherwise would have been unlikely to publish their research together in an anthology. Making this research available in English is a major step toward promoting interdisciplinary—and intercontinental—awareness about the work that is being done in their respective fields. Although some of the chapters are stronger than others, all of them provide a starting point for scholars outside Southeast Europe (or from different countries within the region) to explore further. Three chapters, in particular, would make for excellent graduate-level reading: the introduction (for a broad state-of-the-field review relevant to historians of Southeast Europe), Chapter 4 (for an example of applying corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis to a body of modern texts), and Chapter 7 (for an example of using cluster and multiple correspondence analyses to analyze demographic data from Ottoman tax registers). In addition, while Chapter 5 has some structural weaknesses, its methodology and the interactive web map that resulted from it are interesting enough to include as a case study for a seminar on digital history. These chapters show off the potential for digital approaches both to shine new light onto traditional research questions and to help elucidate new questions that have yet to be asked.

A secondary (albeit, unintentional) contribution of the volume is to underscore the challenge that all digital humanities initiatives face when it comes to long-term preservation. Most of the content in the book appears not to have been updated since the 2015 workshop, and as a result some of the projects that are referenced are themselves no longer active (e.g. "A Literary Atlas of Europe," referenced in Chapter 5), or the weblinks no longer work (examples abound). Most of the chapters also err on the side of providing no digital content whatsoever, while one (Chapter 5) takes the opposite approach of linking to a single web map with no screenshots or other graphics to accompany the text. A middle way between these two extremes is probably the best way forward: digital humanities scholars must give careful thought to how to preserve certain aspects of their work (e.g. archiving code and datasets in institutional repositories, creating snapshots of websites) while

embracing the reality that the core product of their initiative will necessarily have an expiration date.

Rather than review every individual chapter, I will focus on the two strongest contributions in the collection. Chapter 4, “Representations of Turkey in Bosnian Mainstream Printed Media (2003–2014): A Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Analysis” (by Dino Mujadžević) is a fascinating application of a digital approach from the fields of linguistic and social theory to a potentially fraught topic: to what extent media discourse influenced public opinion about Turkish foreign policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. The research method demonstrated here—corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis (CDA)—is grounded in the theory of discourse as a tool by which powerful groups exact control over social structures. It combines two approaches: (1) corpus analysis, a quantitative approach that can assess the co-occurrence and context of words within large numbers of texts, and (2) critical discourse analysis, a qualitative approach that is limited to smaller datasets but is highly detailed. The author applies the method to a body of over 20,000 articles from mainstream Bosnian media to assess the frequency and context of discourse that either favored Turkish foreign policy or was critical of it. Mujadžević finds that pro-Turkish discourse played a greater role in influencing the reporting on both the diplomatic and economic relations between Turkey and Bosnia. This study stands out in the collection as being especially well written and thoughtfully organized. The section on the study’s “Research Procedure” offers an excellent introductory-level overview of the specific analyses, which gives enough context to non-specialist readers that they can understand how the approach is being used in this case study. The results and discussion are presented together in the second half of the chapter, and there are numerous data tables and an appendix to support the author’s interpretations. Some of the web links in the footnotes are broken (an issue that recurs throughout the volume)—an inevitability in the internet age that could have been averted by archiving the links on a site like Internet Archive. But overall, this is a great case study that would have most relevance to scholars of more recent history, when digital texts abound.

Chapter 7, “Reading and Mapping Mid-Nineteenth Century Ottoman Tax Registers: An Early Attempt toward Building a Digital Research Infrastructure for Ottoman Economic and Social History” (by Murat Güvenç and M. Erdem Kabadayı) offers a complimentary case study for historical texts, which present many more challenges for computational analysis than their born-digital or digitized counterparts. In this study, the chosen method is a combination of cluster analysis and multiple correspondence analysis (MCA), which are used to understand the broad social structures present in a given population (as defined by income, occupation, and ethno-religious affiliations) and to locate individual people within those structures. The method is applied to a set of 148 *temuttuat* tax registers from the city of Bursa in northwestern Turkey, dated to the year 1844/45. Güvenç and Kabadayı provide a concise overview of the Ottoman tax registration system and the reforms that led to the collection of the *tumuttuat*, with plenty of footnotes pointing readers to more detailed discussions within this heavily researched field. A non-specialist reader might not know about the tendency within Ottoman historiography to translate and publish individual tax registers (which are necessarily restricted to specific geographical areas)¹—this is helpful context for understanding why comprehensive, multi-regional analyses based on Ottoman documents are so rare, and for situating this study of a discrete collection of registers within the broader discipline. The conclusion is one of the longest in the entire volume, and the authors use the space to relate their findings to the untested claim that “non-Muslim communities were the agents and beneficiaries of economic and social modernization in the late Ottoman Empire” (p. 199). Although they rightfully acknowledge that their results are both preliminary and also specific to 19th-century Bursa, they do successfully demonstrate the power of MCA to elucidate complex socioeconomic structures in an urban population. Specifically, they show that religious affiliation was associated with particular occupations (and Jewish affiliation also with a specific neighborhood of residence), but not necessarily with income level. Ethnicity likewise mattered

¹ For example, archaeologists of ancient Greece may be familiar with the publication of a 1716 tax register of Messenia (TT880) in association with the Pylos Regional Archaeological Project; Fariba Zarinebaf, John Bennet, and Jack L. Davis, eds., *A Historical and Economic Geography of Ottoman Greece: The Southwestern Morea in the 18th Century* (Princeton: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 2005).

mainly for the Roma, who the analyses associated with a group the authors termed “the lowest of the low.” While this chapter stands out for its clarity of writing, thorough citations, useful commentary on relevant sources, and data presentation, where it really shines is in the use of color maps to illustrate the power of GIS for visualizing spatial patterns that are embedded within textual sources. Although several of the chapters in this volume use GIS as either a primary or secondary method, these are easily the best maps in the book: clearly titled, with a readable legend and standardized color scheme to make visual comparison easy. Their only flaw is the illegibility of smaller labels—this, too, is an issue that affects the entire (digital version of the) book and could have been rectified by providing access to higher-resolution versions online.

Despite the strengths of these two chapters, the volume as a whole suffers from a number of shortcomings that make it hard to imagine, for example, assigning the other chapters as seminar readings or referencing them as examples of up-to-date digital humanities projects. Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, and 9 all have the potential to be interesting case studies, but they lack discussion sections that provide interpretations of the methods or data and/or situate the case studies within their wider disciplines. Judging by the citations, it is clear that the contributions were not updated since the workshop in 2015, yet the authors at least should have expanded the papers into full-length book chapters. Chapter 8 is the most lacking in content, presenting only a methodological concept without an application to a concrete case study or a discussion of how the concept might be useful to other digital humanities scholars. Chapter 6 is essentially a rehashing of the author’s 2016 publication, with direct (unattributed) quotations appearing frequently throughout the text. In my opinion, these latter two chapters should have been excluded from the book.

There are a number of editorial weaknesses that make the volume difficult to navigate. The overall feeling one gets from reading the book is that there was little effort made to synthesize the chapters into a coherent whole; the introduction provides sufficient context for the chapters that are to follow, but none of the contributors reference the other papers, and there is no overarching theme to

which they aspired to align themselves. References are provided in footnotes, but do not adhere to a consistent style guide—a single bibliography or chapter-by-chapter references section would have been helpful. Labels, maps, and tables are inconsistently labeled, and headings are inconsistently applied—some chapters use Roman numerals while others use an outline style, and there is no formatting difference between different heading levels. Overall, the copyediting and layout work could have been done more carefully (e.g. the mixed use of thousands separators to represent the number 5,662 on p. 172 and the bulleting layout on pp. 173–174). But the worst offense in my opinion is the missed opportunity to harness the power of digital technology to engage the reader and display the digital techniques the chapters are presenting. The authors could have created better static visualizations and maps (many chapters are lacking them, while others have images that are illegible or inaccessible), hosted high-resolution versions of images online to circumvent the degradation that comes with digital publications (none took advantage of this), hosted interactive maps to allow readers to play around with the data and see how it changes over time (a main feature of several chapters, but adopted by only one), and published accompanying datasets and scripts so that readers could reference them and contribute back to their research.

Despite these limitations, *Digital Historical Research on Southeast Europe and the Ottoman Space* is nevertheless an important contribution to the many disciplines and subfields that deal with the Ottoman world, past and present. In their chapter, Güvenç and Kabadayı remind us that “Whether explicitly acknowledged or not, results derived from such exploratory studies may decipher a pattern invisible to the naked eye and in so doing contribute significantly to the formulation of original research questions” (p. 174). The nine chapters in this volume are nothing if not exploratory, and the hope can only ever be that such work inspires us to ask new questions and experiment with new techniques. There is no area of study more ready to be explored with digital humanities approaches than that of the Ottoman space.

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