

How to Write Fake Global History

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A historian from Yale University, Alan Mikhail, has recently published a popular biography of the Ottoman Sultan Selim (r. 1512-20). Entitled *God's Shadow: Sultan Selim, His Ottoman Empire, and the Making of the Modern World* (Liveright, 2020), the book also modestly claims that it is an “innovative, even revolutionary” (p. 3) contribution to global history. It has rapidly been met with popular acclaim in the press, while other recent scholarly studies of Selim by young scholars have not been accorded any such attention. This is not entirely surprising given the fact that, as a “trade” book, *God's Shadow* (henceforth cited as *GS*) has been the object of an effective publicity campaign mounted by the author, his agent, and their diligent circle. Mikhail’s agents and admirers have ensured that he has been afforded ample opportunity to publicize summaries of his book and its arguments after it came out. For instance, on August 20, 2020, the *Washington Post* carried a prominent essay by Mikhail in its “Made by History” section, “The Ottoman sultan who changed America”, with the sensationalist claim in its subtitle that “America, Protestantism and coffee all have a Muslim history.” The few reviews by competent scholars have not exactly shared this enthusiasm. Rather, they have suggested that the book has a number of errors of fact and logic, as well as serious misinterpretations, and that Mikhail – until now an environmental historian, primarily of eighteenth-century Egypt – is in fact less than properly equipped to write on the early sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire, let alone its impact on the world.

They have also pointed out that the author depends for several crucial points on sources that cannot be easily identified, let alone verified. There are obviously “advantages” to avoiding the process of normal peer-review, which would have brought this out.

Mikhail declares in his newspaper essay that his intention was to persuade “Americans who don’t even know what the Ottoman Empire was,” that this empire was highly significant, and that its history remains worthy of study. We can hardly disagree. Nor have we any issue with his view that, rather than always seeing Islam as a “threatening other” to the West, it is worthwhile to consider the varied and complex interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims throughout history. However, we are disconcerted by the methods and arguments used by Mikhail in making his case, which do no credit at all to history as a serious professional practice. We will focus here on a handful of issues, although many other specific points can be made in relation to his book, which has so far received only limited critical analysis in print by competent scholars. Indeed, if one were to systematically refute every error and doubtful interpretation in his work, one might wind up with a text of several hundred pages.

Mikhail’s book is part of an unfortunate trend by which “global history” has become an excuse for authors to make outlandish claims, based on the belief that they will not be subject to the usual scholarly scrutiny. A flagrant example from France is the prize-winning book by political scientist Romain Bertrand, *L’histoire à parts égales* (Le Seuil, 2011), a pell-mell compilation of undigested materials lifted from the work of specialist scholars and wrapped in a package of politically correct Left Bank *tiers-mondisme*. Bertrand has set a trend in France, in which *histoire globale* has often come to stand either for indifferently conceived encyclopedias like *L’histoire mondiale de la France* (Le Seuil, 2017), or for works that borrow heavily and with scant acknowledgment from English-language scholarship. More recently, in the Anglophone world, we have a trade book by another Yale historian, Valerie Hansen, entitled *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World – and Globalisation Began* (Scribner, 2020). In this work Hansen produces the same generic descriptions of “exotic” eastern marketplaces as Mikhail, both of which seem to be taken from tourist brochures. (Selim’s Trabzon, according to Mikhail already had “flaming Indian red pepper,” long before these peppers arrived in India from America: *GS*, p. 67). But Hansen also claims that in the year 1000 CE, the circumnavigation of the globe was possible for the first time, because the Vikings (or Norsemen) had made contact with north-eastern America, and – in a dubious leap not supported by leading specialists – also allegedly with the Mayas. As the noted historian Noel Malcolm has written in a critical review of this book in *The Telegraph* (19 April 2020): “Hansen triumphantly declares that in 1000 these Norsemen had thus ‘closed the global loop,’

and that ‘for the first time an object could have travelled across the entire world.’ But one has to ask: even if archaeologists were to find a Viking-owned bronze Buddha in Newfoundland, would that really tell us anything about the start of a global process? This key part of the ‘process’ was not resumed until the voyages of Columbus; and even if the Vikings had stayed in place much longer, they would not have found any large-scale North-East American trading network to connect with. Globalisation surely means more than one pin-prick contact on the edge of a continent.” Authors like Mikhail and Hansen seem in turn to draw on earlier speculative and dubious global histories to build their houses of cards. In another skeptical review, the Columbus specialist Felipe Fernández-Armesto wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* (17 September 2011) of these earlier works – notably one by Carol Delaney on Columbus – that they demonstrated “incompetence in research, a lack of critical discrimination and a chutzpah reminiscent of Columbus’s own,” and further that the authors (Delaney included) “have embarked on their odysseys in leaky vessels, with sails full of hot air instead of a speeding wind.” Now the authors dealt with by Fernández-Armesto were not professional historians, with positions in the history departments of prestigious universities. Yet, Carol Delaney’s *Columbus and the Quest for Jerusalem* (Free Press, 2011), a book that the critic describes as “indifferent to coherent narrative or rational chronology,” is heavily drawn upon by Mikhail (and cited thirteen times) in the lengthy first section of his book which tries improbably to link Columbus to the Ottomans. What the specialist critics had said was obviously of no interest to him.

In the matter of such dubious global histories then, the critic is spoilt for choice. But our central focus here is on Alan Mikhail’s book, and its offshoots in the popular press. It is glaringly obvious from the outset that Mikhail still practices an outdated and crude form of “great man” history, in which only rulers and other outstanding heroic individuals “make history.” He thus compares his hero Sultan Selim favorably to Columbus, Martin Luther and Niccolò Machiavelli as the prime movers of the early sixteenth century, and as men whose actions literally “changed the world” (*GS*, p. 304). This is a view of history that has long been abandoned by historians who do not subscribe to personality cults. The expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the 1510s was not the act of a single man, but the product of the interaction of several complex political and military systems. It is furthermore absurd to compare a military conqueror to a political philosopher and thinker, as if they belonged to some sort of historical “Hit Parade.” Did Einstein “change the world” more than Mao Zedong? These are precisely the sorts of questions we teach even our beginner students to avoid as ways of thinking about history. But once he has gone down this path, Mikhail is locked into a view where a single man who is a “shrewd political strategist” (*GS*, p. 211) can shape everything, from the rise of Protestantism

to the Spanish conquest of America, and to the global expansion of coffee consumption. In order to do so, he has to stretch facts, distort the laws of time and space, and sometimes resort to outright falsehoods.

To provide the reader with some context, Mikhail considers it necessary moreover to resort to a kind of history-writing which we had believed long-forgotten, namely “primordialism.” Rather in the style of beginning a biography of Charles V with the original Indo-Aryans, Mikhail offers us a millennial perspective across Eurasia: “The people who would eventually become the Ottomans started marching westward from China as early as the sixth century, making their way across Central Asia to the Mediterranean. For nearly a millennium, they continued their steady trek” (*GS*, p. 5). This may be an “epic story,” but it is hardly a meaningful beginning for the historical process by which the Ottoman polity was formed. As for “marching westward from China” – a reference perhaps to the militaristic “essence” of the Turks – the author probably means something like “in the vicinity of China,” by which those who really care about Eurasian history should understand Outer Mongolia, where the earliest written evidence of the Turkish language is to be found.

What then are the key facts of the matter? Mikhail wishes to see his hero Sultan Selim as having an impact in every possible direction. Let us take the case of Asia and the Indian Ocean. The Ottomans did indeed control the Hijaz and the Red Sea from 1516–17, partly through indirect rule. But while they may have been a factor of disruption, it is entirely false to state that Selim “held the keys to global domination” through the “monopolization of trade routes between the Mediterranean and India and China” (*GS*, p. 305). Many different traders from various parts of Asia, including non-Muslims, continued to ply these routes not only in the 1510s but throughout the sixteenth century. The matter of Selim’s limited eastward ambitions in the Indian Ocean were carefully discussed in an essay by the brilliant French scholar Jean Aubin, which Mikhail has obviously not read since he falsely believes that Selim even possessed territories in western India, and that he sent a huge fleet of “thirty ships and thousands of sailors” into the Indian Ocean in February 1519 (this is based on a serious misreading of the Sanuto diaries, which say the exact opposite) (*GS*, p. 328). But his bizarre ideas do not stop there. Despite Mikhail’s claims, Selim did not possess “ports on all the major seas and oceans of the Old World” (*GS*, p. 305). Here are some significant exceptions: the entire eastern Atlantic seaboard, the Baltic Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Bay of Bengal, the whole of the western Indian Ocean (once outside the Red Sea), the South China Sea, the Sea of Japan, and so on. Selim only possessed ports on three seas: the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Red Sea. Mikhail’s claim here is nothing short of ludicrous nonsense, based on a haughty neglect of basic geography. But it is only one of many such

claims. One would expect a specialist of the Ottoman Empire to know that, even as late as 1530, Muslims were not a clear majority in the empire (they represented 1.6 million from a total of 3.45 million households in partial census data). One might equally expect a specialist of Islamic history to know that it is highly tendentious to claim that Selim “possessed unrivaled religious authority in the Muslim world [in 1517]” (*GS*, p. 305), since his authority was not only rejected in Iran and Iraq, but not acknowledged by Muslims in many other populous parts of the Islamic world, such as South Asia and Morocco. Mikhail invents letters from the Safavids to Selim in support of this absurd claim, which cannot be found in the source he cites (*GS*, p. 443). Later in the sixteenth century, even prominent Ottoman intellectuals like Mustafa Âli admitted the legitimacy of the “caliphal” as well as dynastic positions held by the Safavids and the Mughals. Since, as demonstrated by a critical passage in his book, Mikhail does not even seem to know the difference between the Mamluk Sultan and the ‘Abbasid Caliph, these fine points may have escaped his notice. In fact, the juridical ‘Abbasid caliphate that Mikhail so confidently describes as being transferred to Selim in 1517 (*GS*, p. 309), had largely been a dead letter since the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258. The caliphal status was asserted by a number of rulers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but had nothing to do with the ‘Abbasids, as abundantly illuminated by several recent and authoritative books on the subject, which Mikhail ignores.

Let us now consider Mikhail’s larger claims and speculations. One of these is that Selim was somehow responsible for the success of the Protestant Reformation, because of two reasons: first, Luther was apparently persuaded that the Catholic Church’s “moral depravity ... had enabled the Ottomans to spread Islam around the world” (*GS*, p. 371); second, because the fear of the Ottomans prevented Catholic powers from sending additional fighting forces to quell these early Protestant rebellions. The implication is that Selim should be given “credit” for all this by instilling the fear of Islam among Europeans and posing a threat to Europe, which we thought Mikhail was arguing against. More importantly, neither claim is borne out by the literature. Selim in his lifetime was far more of a threat to his fellow Muslims than to European Christendom. Selim’s Ottomans were not one of Luther’s great early preoccupations, as several major new studies of Luther attest. Serious students of the reign of Charles V will be surprised to learn from Mikhail’s newspaper essay that Europe in the late 1510s was “a continent of small principalities and bickering hereditary (*sic*) city-states,” or that Selim was the major reason why Protestantism managed to flourish. But Selim was apparently not content with having accomplished all this. Instead “his influence reached beyond even Europe and the Middle East, across the Atlantic to North America,” so that “from China to Mexico, the Ottoman

Empire shaped the known world at the turn of the sixteenth century” (*GS*, p. 2). How do we know this? Because at much the same time that Selim “marched his Ottoman troops to conquer Mamluk Cairo” (*GS*, p. 131) a Spanish fleet of Hernández de Córdoba (presumably having kept touch with this on the internet), had a sighting of Yucatán. These Spaniards were apparently haunted by Selim and “possessed by Ottoman ghosts” because they compared a Mayan urban center to Cairo, which – incidentally – they still thought of as the Mamluk capital-city. The only real connection of the conquest of Mexico to the Ottomans came far later, when Hernán Cortés participated in the failed Algiers expedition of 1541. By then Selim was long dead.

His chief legacy on confessional matters had to do not with Protestantism but with bitter memories of his bloody suppression of “heresy” among his own Muslim population, which is an unfortunate fact best neglected in this kind of “superman history” but worth remembering by us all when state violence is on everyone’s mind, thanks to Black Lives Matter. Selim may be Mikhail’s hero, but he is not exactly that to many in Turkey and the Middle East. Given the kind of history he has written, Mikhail’s efforts at the end of the book to say something snide – rather than truly critical – about neo-Ottomanism in today’s Turkey (a posture which has become de rigueur these days if one wants to keep liberal company), strikes the reader simply as strategic political posturing. This is the case in both the somewhat lame “coda” (*GS*, pp. 399–405) obviously appended to the book in haste just before publication, and even more so in the post-publication op-ed essay by Mikhail in *Time* magazine (3 September 2020). Contrary to his claims, the overwhelming majority of the Alevis in Turkey do not think of themselves as Shiites (see *GS*, p. 402) and do not want to be considered as such, whatever their links to the Safavids in the early modern era. This is no different than the American straitjacketing with the term “Hispanic” of millions of people who find it irrelevant or exclusionary, or both.

This brings us finally to coffee. Mikhail claims that it was Selim’s military that first discovered “a bush with a strange, bright-red berry” in Yemen, and then proceeded to brew and sell it (*GS*, p. 318). As we have now come to expect, this is a patently false claim. There is a sizeable literature that shows that coffee and its use were already well-known to Muslims during the fifteenth century, and to the Ethiopians possibly before that. Its legality as an intoxicant was discussed by intellectuals in Mecca, Medina and Cairo before the Ottoman conquest of those cities. Its spread was the result of a number of private initiatives, not an act of Ottoman policy. There is simply no basis for stating the spread of coffee was through “a ubiquitous locale that Selim bequeathed to humanity – the café” (*GS*, p. 318), and even less (as Mikhail does in his newspaper essay) that “an Ottoman sultan [Selim] was

the first to turn commerce into geopolitics, monopolizing the supply of one of the world's original mass consumer goods." Not a single piece of documentary evidence exists directly linking Selim to the spread of coffee. We do not even know whether he consumed it or was aware of it. This is simply the invention of a modern historian who does not know where to draw the line between fact and fantasy, between truth and "just a bit of exaggeration."

We cannot read our fellow historians' minds, let alone the mind of an early sixteenth century ruler. Why a historian in a respectable university has been possessed to concoct this tissue of falsehoods, half-truths and absurd speculations remains a mystery to us. Why a paper like the *Washington Post* would publish a set of such unsustainable claims and then block responses to it, is also a question that would bear examination. The newspaper's "Made by History" editor, a historian of Hollywood and American politics, first refused to publish a response by us to Mikhail's essay on the grounds that "we are part of a news section and not in the opinion section." The editor then generously added: "if there is a specific factual error in the piece and you want to send specific details about that so we can amend (*sic*) a correction, we are happy to review that as we want all our pieces to be factually accurate." We then supplied a list of seven major factual errors in the essay. After some days silence, the editor replied: "We have reviewed the piece in question and reached out to the author for specific documentation. He has provided it, and we believe that no corrections are warranted based on the evidence he has provided. I encourage you to read his new book for the specific documentation as well." Naturally, nobody wished to tell us what this "specific documentation" was or where it came from.

But let us also consider the larger politics of the matter in the world. Mikhail's book has quickly been acclaimed on the social media by some groups and individuals in Turkey as confirming their own view that Sultan Selim was a great, world-transforming individual who had hitherto been neglected. It is indeed worthy of historians to enable the reading public to understand the significance of the Ottoman Empire, of its profound impact on world history, and of a figure like Selim, but not as a hollow gesture of "revisionism," and not on the basis of pseudo-scholarship. As the eminent historian Caroline Finkel writes in the *Literary Review* (5 September 2020): "Mikhail also sets conspicuous store by a book that, at least in the Turkish original, has no footnotes and whose author is unknown to me and to colleagues I have consulted" (the work in question by Fatih Akçe is cited thirty-one times). Is it not irresponsible for a scholar based in the West to liberally use such "original" research while the plethora of relevant primary sources in Arabic, Persian and Turkish are not deemed worthy of

examination? This at the same time that Mikhail himself has been writing in the Western press warning of the dangers of the political use of the Ottoman past!

Whatever the case may be, it is clear that *God's Shadow* is an excellent example of how global history should not be written. Fortunately, there are also other works, whether published by scholarly presses or trade publishers, that give us hope for how global history can and should be written – in a variety of ways. It would be a pity if “global history skeptics,” of whom there are quite a few, should pounce on the worst examples to make their case.

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