

Activities - Prof. Edhem Eldem recounts the tradition of Ottoman orders and decorations...

It is undeniable that the major inspiration for the process of transformation undertaken by the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century came from the West. In this westernization process, the practice of honoring individuals by bestowing on them orders and medals occupies a particularly fascinating place.

The saga of Ottoman orders and decorations starts with the awarding of a very special *çelenk* (aigrette or 'plume of triumph') to English admiral Lord Nelson following his victory against Napoleon Bonaparte in Ottoman Egypt. The practice, at first largely considered an "English invention", gradually gained impetus in the 1830s in conjunction with the rise in diplomatic relations with Europe and the attempts at reform within the Empire. After the 1840s, the close link between decoration and rank disappeared and the first real decorations as we know them today were created. The Crimean War signaled the opening of a new phase in the process and the Ottoman State began to use medals for distinctly political and diplomatic purposes, exactly as was being done in all major European countries. Abdülmecid's Mecîdî (1852) and Abdülaziz's Osmânî (1861) orders illustrate the passage to a "modern" format.

The process reached a climax in the Hamidian period. While previous decorations remained in use, certain new medals were issued for the first time: the Sevkat (Charity) Order created specially for women, the Medal for Education awarded to top-ranking students, and the İmtiyaz (Privilege) and Liyakat (Merit) medals presented for loyalty, bravery and services rendered to the State. Abdülhamid II's deliberate and manipulative use of medals and orders as ideological and political instruments sometimes led to an arbitrary, unmerited and almost ludicrous bestowal of honors. Opponents to his regime even began to imply, in their prose or verse, that decorations no longer held any real value.

With the 1908 Young Turk Revolution and the ensuing ambiance of war, orders and decorations became the instruments of political affiliation, patriotism, nationalism, and political and military propaganda, thus reaching a much wider public. A large number of unofficial medals, pins and commemorative badges flooded the market spreading war propaganda and reflecting the new ideological and political discourse. The fact that the Republic would later adopt a tradition almost entirely free of orders and medals can probably be considered a reaction to some of the excesses witnessed in Ottoman times.