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Diplomat's Endeavour to De-Foreignize the Ottoman Empire**

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PASCAL FIRGES

## ORIENTAL DESPOTISM OR CONSTITUTIONAL STATE?

### A French Revolutionary Diplomat's Endeavour to De-Foreignize the Ottoman Empire

One of the great alterations in the international system of power politics which the French Revolution brought about was the reversal of the Diplomatic Revolution of 1756. In 1756, at the beginning of the Seven Years' War, France had concluded an alliance with its traditional rival, Habsburg Austria. This led to a far-reaching reorganization of the European system of alliances<sup>1</sup>. One result of this development was that the French monarchy distanced itself from its traditional strategic partner, the Ottoman Empire, with which it had formed an informal alliance since the sixteenth century<sup>2</sup>. In the following years, the new alliance with Austria became immensely unpopular in France and played a significant role in the breaking down of the authority of the *ancien régime*. By 1792, revolutionary France declared war against Austria. Now, in their endeavour to return to a system of alliances similar to that which had existed before 1756, French revolutionary politicians sought to revive the old alliance with the Ottoman Empire<sup>3</sup>.

However, how natural an ally could the Ottoman sultan be for a revolutionary republic? After all, it is certainly no overstatement that the Ottoman social and political system had a massive image problem in Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century and well before that<sup>4</sup>.

In this article I examine one example of how a French revolutionary diplomat, Marie Descorches, the first French republican envoy to the Ottoman Sublime Porte, tried to justify the expediency of a Franco-Ottoman alliance and how for this purpose he reinterpreted the existing stereotypes about the Ottoman state and society. I will first briefly analyse the semantic contexts in which of the Ottoman Empire was often presented in French and European dis-

- 1 On the historical background of 1756, see e.g. Sven EXTERNBRINK (ed.), *Der Siebenjährige Krieg (1756–1763). Ein europäischer Weltkrieg im Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, Berlin 2011.
- 2 See e.g. Christine ISOM-VERHAAREN, *Allies with the Infidel. The Ottoman and French Alliance in the Sixteenth Century*, London 2011.
- 3 On French foreign policy before and at the beginning of the French Revolution see: Timothy C. W. BLANNING, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*, New York 1986; Jeremy J. WHITEMAN, *Reform, Revolution and French Global Policy. 1787–1791*, Aldershot 2003; Thomas E. KAISER, *The Diplomatic Origins of the French Revolution*, in: David ANDRESS (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution*, Oxford 2015, p. 109–127; Thomas E. KAISER, *La fin du renversement des alliances. La France, l'Autriche et la déclaration de guerre du 20 avril 1792*, in: *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 351 (2008), p. 77–98; Thomas E. KAISER, *The Austrian Alliance, the Seven Years' War and the Emergence of a French »National« Foreign Policy. 1756–1790*, in: Julian SWANN, Joël FÉLIX (ed.), *The Crisis of the Absolute Monarchy. France from Old Regime to Revolution*, Oxford 2013, p. 167–179.
- 4 See e.g. Pascal FIRGES, *Writing on »The New Order«. Ottoman Approaches to Late Eighteenth-Century Reforms*, in: Thomas MAISSEN, Susan RICHTER, Manuela ALBERTONE (ed.), *Languages of Reform in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, Abingdon [in press]. This is not to say that the Ottomans as allies were unpopular in France. Quite on the contrary, in public opinion they were certainly much preferred over the Habsburgs, all through the eighteenth century.

course in the eighteenth century. And in a second step, I will analyse Descorches's report about the Ottoman Empire and the way he moulded his arguments to fit them into the context of French revolutionary political discourse.

### The Ottoman Empire as the epitome of »Oriental Despotism«

Throughout the early modern period, representations of the political regime of the Ottoman Empire were deeply linked with notions of absolute and often arbitrary rule of the sultans. As Peter Burke has put it: »Five keywords in different languages recur to describe this regime: tyranny, despotism, absolutism, slavery and lordship«<sup>5</sup>. Although the term *despotisme*, in its substantive form, did not enter French dictionaries before the eighteenth century, the Ottoman Empire served as prime example for the illustration of absolute and arbitrary rule in political theory from the sixteenth century onwards<sup>6</sup>. In the French context, according to Richard Koebner, the adjective *despotique* first appeared in political pamphlets of the Fronde, in the middle of the seventeenth century. Here, and also in political rhetoric later on, the terms of *tyrannique* and *despotique* were often used interchangeably<sup>7</sup>. The accusation of despotic rule became a common motive in anti-absolutist writing since the reign of Louis XIV. This motive became ever more widespread throughout the eighteenth century<sup>8</sup>.

For the second half of the eighteenth century, the notion of despotism is inextricably linked to the writings of the political philosopher Montesquieu (1689–1755), and his specific political theory<sup>9</sup>. His conceptualization of despotism became so paramount that, according to his critic Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805), it had »in a way fixed the ideas on the nature of despotism«<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, argued Anquetil-Duperron, it would suffice to cite only him when criticizing the concept of despotism, because he had only been copied since, but no author was ever able to achieve a profounder analytical depth than him. Montesquieu described despotism as the form of government »in which a single person, without law and without rule, directs everything by his own will and caprice«<sup>11</sup>. For Montesquieu it was the climate which forms the character of a people. From this he inferred that despotism was »naturalized« in Asia<sup>12</sup>. Thus, Montesquieu con-

5 Peter BURKE, *Translating Knowledge, Translating Cultures*, in: Michael NORTH (ed.), *Kultureller Austausch. Bilanz und Perspektiven*, Köln 2009, p. 69–77, here p. 74.

6 Alain GROS-RICHARD, *Structure du sérail. La fiction du despotisme asiatique dans l'Occident classique*, Paris 1979, p. 8, 25. On the representation of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the early modern era, see Robert SCHWOEBEL, *The Shadow of the Crescent. The Renaissance Image of the Turk (1453–1571)*, Nieuwkoop 1967; Almut HÖFERT, *Den Feind beschreiben. »Türkengefahr« und europäisches Wissen über das Osmanische Reich 1450–1600*, Frankfurt a. M. 2003.

7 Richard KOEBNER, *Despot and Despotism. Vicissitudes of a Political Term*, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 15 (1951), p. 275–302, here p. 292–302.

8 Hella MANDT, *Tyrannis, Despotie*, in: Otto BRUNNER, Werner CONZE, Reinhart KOSELLECK (ed.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols., vol. 6, Stuttgart 1972–1997, p. 651–706, here p. 674–675; Franco VENTURI, *Oriental Despotism*, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24 (1963), p. 133–142, here p. 134; Thomas E. KAISER, *The Evil Empire? The Debate on Turkish Despotism in Eighteenth-Century French Political Culture*, in: *The Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000), p. 6–34, here p. 6, 14.

9 Bertrand BINOCHÉ, *Art. »Despotisme«*, in: *Dictionnaire Montesquieu en ligne*, <http://dictionnaire-montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/fr/article/1367168359/fr> (last accessed on: 31/12/2018).

10 Abraham Hyacinthe ANQUETIL-DUPERRON, *Legislation orientale*, Amsterdam 1778, p. 9 (my translation, as are all that follow).

11 Charles Louis de Secondat de MONTESQUIEU, *De l'Esprit des lois*, 2 vols., vol. 1, Paris 1961, 12 (II, 2).

12 *Ibid.*, 68 (V, 14).

firmed the implicit linking of despotism and »Asia« or the »Orient«, which had existed already long before. His conception of despotism »suggested a static and slavish society, a backward and corrupt polity, with arbitrary and ferocious rulers governing servile and timid subjects«<sup>13</sup>.

In the time before the Revolution, French political discourse was deeply marked by the fear that the monarchy could transform itself into a despotic state, or, as Thomas Kaiser put it: »If the recent historiography of pre-Revolutionary France has had any one common project, it has been to show how the French came to imagine that ›despotism‹ threatened, in the words of Jean-Louis Carra, ›to enslave this beautiful nation [of France] under the ruins of her *moeurs*, her fortune, and her liberty«<sup>14</sup>. During the French Revolution, the struggle for liberty and against despotism and tyranny then became the key justification for revolutionary action<sup>15</sup>.

The Ottoman Empire, which had always been represented as the key example of a despotic state, must therefore have appeared as a very unnatural ally for revolutionary France. Apart from the very few dissenting voices, such as Anquetil-Duperron, the consensus in French (and European) political discourse was that the Ottoman Empire was the epitome of »Oriental Despotism«<sup>16</sup>. In political speeches of the revolutionary period, one therefore often finds references to the Ottoman Empire, when the speakers were actually referring to despotism: On 14 December 1791 at the Jacobin Club, for example, Danton denounced his enemies as »this faction that wants to give us the English constitution, with the subsequent hope soon to give us that of Constantinople«<sup>17</sup>; and on 23 August 1794, Pierre-François Réal spoke out against press censorship with the following argument: »if [press freedom] does not exist to its full extent, I would rather like to be in Constantinople than in France with the revolutionary government«<sup>18</sup>.

- 13 Aslı ÇIRAKMAN, From Tyranny to Despotism. The Enlightenment's Unenlightened Image of the Turks, in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33 (2001), p. 49–68, here p. 56.
- 14 KAISER, *The Evil Empire?* (as in n. 8), p. 6. On the role of the concept of Oriental Despotism in French political discourse of the eighteenth century, see also Henry LAURENS, *Impérialisme européen et transformations du monde musulman*, in: Henry LAURENS, John TOLAN, Gilles VEINSTEIN (ed.), *L'Europe et l'Islam. Quinze siècles d'histoire*, Paris 2009 (Histoire), p. 271–426, here p. 278–279.
- 15 John M. BURNEY, History, Despotism, Public Opinion and the Continuity of the Radical Attack on Monarchy in the French Revolution. 1787–1792, in: *History of European Ideas* 17 (1993), p. 245–263, here p. 247: »The fear of the despotism of the executive, government, prince, ministers, or administration [...], is so prevalent in pre-revolutionary and revolutionary rhetoric that although historians frequently mention it, they often assign it little importance compared to more significant motivations.«
- 16 On this topic see also: ÇIRAKMAN, *From Tyranny to Despotism* (as in n. 13); Adanir FIKRET, Klaus SCHNEIDERHEINZE, *Das Osmanische Reich als orientalische Despotie in der Wahrnehmung des Westens im 18.–19. Jahrhundert*, in: Elçin KÜRŞAT-AHLERS (ed.), *Türkei und Europa. Facetten einer Beziehung in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, Frankfurt a.M. 2001, p. 83–122; Maximilian GROTHAUS, *Vorbildlicher Monarch, Tyrann oder Despot? Europäische Vorstellungen vom Osmanischen Reich zwischen Renaissance und Aufklärung*, in: *Frühneuzeit-Info* 6 (1995), p. 181–203; KAISER, *The Evil Empire?* (as in n. 8); Sven STELLING-MICHAUD, *Le mythe du despotisme oriental*, in: *Schweizer Beiträge zur allgemeinen Geschichte* 18 (1960), p. 333–336; Ann THOMSON, *L'Empire ottoman, symbole du despotisme oriental?*, in: Isabelle GADOIN, Marie-Élise PALMIER-CHATELAIN (ed.), *Rêver d'Orient, connaître l'Orient. Visions de l'Orient dans l'art et la littérature britanniques*, Lyon 2008, p. 177–196; VENTURI, *Oriental Despotism* (as in n. 8).
- 17 François-Alphonse AULARD (ed.), *La société des Jacobins. Recueil de documents pour l'histoire du Club des Jacobins de Paris*, 6 vols., vol. 3, Paris 1892, p. 288: *cette faction qui veut nous donner la constitution anglaise, avec l'espérance ultérieure de nous donner bientôt celle de Constantinople*.
- 18 *Ibid.*, vol. 6, Paris 1897, p. 369: *si [la liberté de la presse] n'existe pas dans toute son étendue, j'aimerais mieux être à Constantinople qu'en France avec le gouvernement révolutionnaire*.

Nevertheless, since the first year of its existence (1792), the French Republic considered itself as being engaged in a life-and-death struggle against (internal and external) despotism, French revolutionary governments were at the same time consistently seeking to conclude an alliance with the Ottoman Empire, until shortly before the French Invasion of Ottoman Egypt (1798)<sup>19</sup>. In this context, realpolitik clearly outweighed ideological considerations. Not only was revolutionary France willing to become the ally of the Ottoman sultan, it was also engaged in strengthening the power basis of the Ottoman regime by sending military instructors and specialists to modernize the Ottoman arms industry<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, French revolutionary governments were anxious not to propagate seditious revolutionary ideology among the populations of the Ottoman Empire<sup>21</sup>. The French Republic's first envoy to the Sublime Porte, Marie Descorches, was for example instructed to declare that his government had no interest in working towards a change of the Ottoman Empire's current political regime:

»The envoy of the French Republic shall take great care to reassure the divan<sup>22</sup>, with regard to fears that might exist, that the system of liberty which the French nation has adopted will not propagate in the territories of the Grand Seigneur. The distance of these territories, the difference of language, character, the manners and the customs of the Muslims, and finally the little contact they have with the Europeans, will always be insurmountable obstacles to such propagation<sup>23</sup>.«

Interestingly, it was not only the government which prioritized strategic goal of the Franco-Ottoman alliance over the propagation of revolutionary principles. In October 1793, the Jacobin Club in Paris repealed its affiliation with a political club in Istanbul, founded by French citizens, out of fear that this might have a negative impact on Franco-Ottoman relations<sup>24</sup>.

However, in the second half of the 1790s, during the regime of the Directory, when France gained superiority over its enemies on Europe's battlefields, the necessity of an alliance with the Ottoman Empire became less urgent. Moreover, in French geostrategic discussions since at least the 1770s, there had also been support for a dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the French conquest of one or several Ottoman provinces<sup>25</sup>. Historians studying French for-

19 On the Franco-Ottoman alliance negotiations between 1792 and 1797, see Pascal FIRGES, *French Revolutionaries in the Ottoman Empire. Political Culture, Diplomacy, and the Limiting of Universal Revolution, 1792–1798*, Oxford 2017, p. 25–92.

20 See IDEM, *Gunners for the Sultan. French Revolutionary Efforts to Modernize the Ottoman Military*, in: Pascal FIRGES et al. (ed.), *Well-Connected Domains. Towards an Entangled Ottoman History*, Leiden 2014, p. 171–187.

21 See FIRGES, *French Revolutionaries* (as in n. 19), p. 133–153.

22 I. e. the Ottoman government.

23 *Mémoire pour servir d'instructions à Marie Descorches allant à Constantinople en qualité d'envoyé extraordinaire de la République française, près la Porte ottomane, Nantes, Centre des Archives diplomatiques, Constantinople, Ambassade, Série B3, unfoliated: L'envoyé de la république s'appliquera surtout à rassurer que le système de liberté, que la nation française vient d'adopter, ne se propageât [pas] dans les états du Grand Seigneur. L'éloignement de ces mêmes états, la différence des langues, le caractère, les mœurs et les habitudes des musulmans, enfin le peu de relations qu'ils ont avec les européens, seront toujours des obstacles insurmontables à cette propagation.*

24 Pascal FIRGES, *French Revolutionary Transformations of Diplomatic Practice. The Case of Franco-Ottoman Relations, 1792–1797*, in: *The International History Review* 41 [in press].

25 For an overview of the many different proposals of French intervention, see François CHARLES-ROUX, *Les origines de l'Expédition d'Égypte*, Paris 1910; Henry LAURENS, *Les origines intellectuelles de l'Expédition d'Égypte. L'orientalisme islamisant en France (1698–1798)*, Istanbul 1987.

eign policy discourse have argued that there existed »two opposing schools of thought«<sup>26</sup> regarding this matter. One group, the so-called »clan interventionniste«<sup>27</sup> was in favour of conquering parts of the Ottoman Empire for France. In the context of this article it is important to note that the supporters of a partition of the Ottoman Empire often argued that it would be better for mankind if the Ottoman state, as a cruel and despotic empire, was replaced by a more moderate and rational government<sup>28</sup>. One exponent of this view was the philosopher and orientalist Constantin-François Volney (1757–1820). Although he had an ambivalent stance towards European colonialism, Volney's works are considered to have had a strong influence on Napoleon's ideas on the Middle East<sup>29</sup>. In 1788, Volney wrote a lengthy comment on the prospect of a Russian conquest of the Ottoman Empire, in which he praised this development with the following words: »what nobler ambition than that of liberating many peoples from the yoke of fanaticism and tyranny«<sup>30</sup>!

The other group, which called for the conservation of the territorial integrity of the Ottoman state, has often been associated with Louis XVI's foreign minister Vergennes (in office 1774–1787). Proponents of this group argued that a dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire was not in the interest of the French state, since other powers might benefit from such an event much more than France. This group endorsed a policy that would stabilize the Ottoman state, as this would be the best way to protect the French trade in the Eastern Mediterranean from British and Russian expansionism<sup>31</sup>.

### Reinterpreting the Ottoman Empire

The first French republican envoy to the Sublime Porte clearly belonged to the second group of French foreign policy makers, arguing in favour of the conservation of the Ottoman state's territorial integrity. Marie Louis Descorches (1749–1830), a former nobleman from Lower Normandy had become a diplomat under the patronage of foreign minister Vergennes in the early 1780s<sup>32</sup>.

26 KAISER, *The Evil Empire?* (as in n. 8), p. 26.

27 Catherine BOPPE-VIGNE, *Émigrés français de Constantinople en Russie pendant la Révolution*, in: Jean-Pierre POUSSOU, Anne MÉZIN, Yves PERRET-GENTIL (ed.), *L'influence française en Russie au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 2004, p. 411–427, here p. 273; Virginia AKSAN, *Breaking the Spell of the Baron de Tott. Reframing the Question of Military Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1760–1830*, in: *The International History Review* 24 (2002), p. 253–277, here p. 258.

28 Pascal FIRGES, *Großbritannien und das Osmanische Reich Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts. Europäische Gleichgewichtspolitik und geopolitische Strategien*, Annweiler 2009, p. 137–139.

29 AKSAN, *Breaking the Spell* (as in n. 27), p. 255; Christian WINDLER, *Interkulturelle Diplomatie in der Sattelzeit. Vom inklusiven Eurozentrismus zur »zivilisierenden« Ausgrenzung*, in: Hillard von THIESSEN, Christian WINDLER (ed.), *Akteure der Außenbeziehungen. Netzwerke und Interkulturalität im historischen Wandel*, Cologne 2010, p. 445–470, here p. 462. On Volney's stance towards European colonial projects, see Antoine LILTI, »Et la civilisation deviendra générale«. *L'Europe de Volney ou l'orientalisme à l'épreuve de la Révolution*, in: *La Révolution française 4: Dire et faire l'Europe à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (2011), available online: <https://journals.openedition.org/lrf/290> (last accessed: 25/03/2019).

30 Constantin-François VOLNEY, *Considérations sur la guerre actuelle des turcs*, London 1788, p. 44: *quelle plus noble ambition que celle d'affranchir des peuples nombreux du joug du fanatisme et de la tyrannie!*

31 Frédéric HITZEL, *La France et la modernisation de l'Empire ottoman à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in: Patrice BRET (ed.), *L'Expédition d'Égypte. Une entreprise des lumières 1798–1801*, Paris 1999, p. 9–19, here p. 10; cf. Marcel AHANO, *L'image de la Révolution française lors de la modernisation de l'Iran et de la Turquie contemporains*, in: *CEMOTI* 12 (1991), p. 5–20, here p. 9.

32 Pierre DOYON, *Marie-Louis d'Escorches, marquis de Sainte-Croix. Sa mission diplomatique à Liège (1782–1791)*, in: *Revue d'histoire diplomatique* 37 (1923), p. 89–113, 208–235, here p. 91.

Already in 1780 he had authored a report for the French foreign ministry, in which he warned of the possibility that Austria might be interested in conquering Ottoman Egypt<sup>33</sup>. His first posting was in the principality of Liège (1782–1791), after which he served as French envoy in Poland (1791–1792) and to the Ottoman government (1793–1795). Unlike many of his colleagues, he was an upright supporter of the Revolution. In 1792, a French newspaper named him as one of few trustworthy supporters of the new regime in the diplomatic corps, for he was a member of the Jacobin Club<sup>34</sup>. During his mission in Istanbul, Descorches had tried to negotiate a treaty of alliance with the Ottoman Porte. But he was recalled before he could succeed in this endeavour<sup>35</sup>.

Back in Paris, he continued to promote the project of a Franco-Ottoman alliance. His extensive embassy report, which he wrote in 1796 for foreign minister Charles-François Delacroix (in office 1795–1797), is in essence a pamphlet in favour of this alliance. What is most interesting about this report is that Descorches sought not only to put forward strategic arguments for the alliance. He also addressed the »image problem« of the Ottoman Empire by strictly contradicting the notion that the Ottoman Empire was a despotic state. In his endeavour to present the Ottoman state as a suitable ally for revolutionary France, Descorches reinterpreted many of the classical *topoi* of the contemporary orientalist discourse and presented the political and social conditions of the Ottoman Empire as those of a state which had every potential to become the »oriental« *alter ego* of the French Republic. By reinterpreting the empire's institutions with regard to western political theory, he tried to show that some aspects of Ottoman state and society were indeed similar to those of the French Republic.

### The Ottoman Empire as a constitutional state

In his report, Descorches claimed that the Ottoman state and society were generally being misunderstood by those writing about it. Europeans, he argued, were still very ignorant about the Ottoman Empire. Many aspects which were criticized about Ottoman society or politics had their good sides or had been expedient at the time they were introduced. One of the first commonplace political notions about the Ottoman Empire which Descorches discussed was the notion of the Ottoman government being a despotic regime:

»To our views on the Turkish government we ordinarily attach all those ideas of a hideous, a savage, a cruel despotism. These ideas, however, are not accurate; they suffer from uncertain and vague notions with which we usually judge the Turks [...]. The noise of haunting executions and horrible tortures has pierced from time to time the night which covers this people from our eyes. The groans of innocent victims and the passions of powerful men are all too often intermingled there. How to hear without trembling and becoming indignant about the fatal cord, through which so many heads have disappeared at the slightest order of the prince! In their troubledness, the sensitive souls have cried out: what a monster! what a despot! and the crowds repeated it<sup>36</sup>.«

33 CHARLES-ROUX, *Les origines de l'Expédition* (as in n. 25), p. 102–103.

34 *Diplomatie*, in: *Moniteur universel*, 4 April 1792, here p. 4.

35 FIRGES, *French Revolutionaries* (as in n. 19), p. 44–80; Édouard de MARCÈRE, *Une ambassade à Constantinople. La politique orientale de la Révolution française*, 2 vols., Paris 1927.

36 Marie DESCORCHES, *Mémoire. Remis, sur sa demande, au ministre des Relations extérieures*, Paris, Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères, MD Turquie 15, fol. 190: *À l'idée du gouvernement turc s'attachent ordinairement toutes celles d'un hideux, d'un farouche, d'un cruel despotisme. Ces idées ne sont pourtant pas exactes, elles se ressentent des notions incertaines et vagues avec lesquelles on juge ordinairement les turcs [...]. Le bruit d'exécutions éclatantes, de supplices horribles a de temps à autre, percé la nuit qui enveloppe ce peuple à nos yeux. Des gémissements d'innocentes victimes des passions d'hommes puissants s'y sont trop souvent mêlés.*

Although Descorches does not deny the reports of Ottoman cruelties, he argues that they have been taken out of context and that draconian measures were not applied towards civilians, but towards state officials. Although he and his family had considerably suffered during the Terror in France<sup>37</sup>, Descorches did not criticize the use of terror as an instrument of rule, as long as it was sanctioned by the law:

»The facts are true, but the consequences are not equally true. The ideas produced by our impressions are, I believe, easily to rectify, when, by examining the composition of this empire, we shall see that terror is and must be a principal means of its government; and when we know that the sultan and his first pashas, who exercise the right of life and death, only exercise it towards those who are their subordinates in the public service<sup>38</sup>.«

The former French envoy thus put the reports of Ottoman cruelties into the context of French policies during the Terror and therefore indirectly excused them as necessary in a situation of emergency. It is interesting however, that he put forward this reasoning even after 9 Thermidor. He must have reckoned that his readers would still accept it as a valid argument.

The key rationale, however, with which the author tried to demonstrate that the Ottoman Empire was not a despotic regime, was the argument that the rule of law existed in this state. Such an argumentation was not completely new. It can also be found in the writings of authors who criticized Montesquieu's »De l'Esprit des lois«. Anquetil-Duperron, for example, observed that »[...] despotism, as it is presented [by Montesquieu], is a form of government which exists nowhere<sup>39</sup>.« And Voltaire used a wonderful *bon mot* to illustrate his scepticism: »There is no such country where the nation would address someone and say: ›Sire, we give to your gracious majesty the power to take our women, our children, our goods and our lives, and to have us impaled according to your good pleasure and your adorable caprice<sup>40</sup>.« Accordingly, both Voltaire and Anquetil-Duperron agreed that even the sultan could not stand above the law<sup>41</sup>.

*Comment entendre sans frémir et s'indigner, parler de ce cordon fatal, sous lequel tant de têtes ont disparu au moindre ordre du prince! dans leur émotion les âmes sensibles se sont écriées: au monstre! au despote! et la foule les a répétées.*

- 37 During the Terror, Descorches constantly had to face allegations of treason, which easily could have brought him into prison or worse. As an ex-noble, he was only able to exercise his office because he was requisitioned by the government and was therefore not removed from the civil service like many other ex-nobles. In 1793, the tenants living on his family estates in Normandy took possession of his lands, burned his family archives, and, threatening the estate administrator's life, demanded a payback for all rents collected by Descorches and his ancestors. See FIRGES, *French Revolutionaries* (as in n. 19), p. 71–72; Descorches's wife to Committee of Public Safety, 25 August 1795, Paris, Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères, CP Turquie 191, fol. 323.
- 38 DESCORCHES, *Mémoire* (as in n. 36), fol. 190: *Les faits sont vrais; mais les conséquences ne le sont pas autant. Les idées produites par les impressions se rectifieront aisément, je pense lorsque, en examinant la composition de cet empire, on verra que la terreur est et doit être un des principaux moyens de son gouvernement; lorsqu'on saura que le Grand Seigneur et les pachas de la première classe, qui exercent le droit de vie et de mort, ne l'ont qu'envers ceux qui leur sont subordonné dans le service public.*
- 39 ANQUETIL-DUPERRON, *Legislation orientale* (as in n. 10), p. 4: *Le despotisme, tel que le présente ce savant, est un gouvernement qui n'existe nulle part.*
- 40 VOLTAIRE, *Pensées sur le gouvernement* (1752), in: Louis MOLAND (ed.), *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 52 vols., vol. 23, Paris 1877–1885, p. 523–534, here p. 530: *Il n'y a point de pays où une nation ait dit à un homme: ›Sire, nous donnons à votre gracieuse majesté le pouvoir de prendre nos femmes, nos enfants, nos biens et nos vies, et de nous empaler selon votre bon plaisir et votre adorable caprice.‹*
- 41 *Ibid.*; ANQUETIL-DUPERRON, *Legislation orientale* (as in n. 10), p. 44.



But Descorches added another aspect to this rule-of-law argumentation. He pointed out that the law was sanctioned not only by the authority of the sultan, but also by the general endorsement of the people. This enabled him to argue that the law was legitimate, even by democratic standards: it was the popular consent that legitimated it.

»the Turkish nation has a law: A law which carries all the characteristics that render it respectable; a law that found approval and which the enthusiasm of the public still endorses every day. This law is the Qur'an, which at once contains the precepts of religion, of the political, and civil regulations<sup>42</sup>.«

Descorches then presented the corps of Islamic religious scholars (*ulema*) as an institution which fulfils similar tasks as the independent judiciary in Western political theory: they act as judges and ensure through their *fetvas* that the holy law is not misinterpreted. Therefore, they are protected by a kind of judicial immunity. Descorches even implied that the *ulema* function as something similar to a supreme court, executing the right of judicial preview of both legislative and executive decisions of the sultan:

»It is according to [the Qur'an] that all is made, that everyone is acting in this empire; some are ordering, others are obeying. The ordinances of the sultan are nothing but paraphrases or emanations [of this law]. A large body of so-called men of the law, the *ulema*, inviolable by the authority of the prince in their persons and properties, is responsible for [the law's] preservation and its application in all civil matters. In the major affairs of the state, the sultan is obliged to add to his resolutions a preface from the heads of this body, stating that the resolution is not contrary to the law<sup>43</sup>.«

Although it is true that edicts of the sultan were sometimes accompanied by an affirming *fetva* of the *şeyh-ül islam* (the highest religious authority in the Ottoman Empire), this was not necessarily always the case. Nevertheless, the former French envoy did not stop short here. He strikingly completed his argument against the despotic nature of the Ottoman state by suggesting that the Ottoman Empire could much rather be categorized as a constitutional state, since the Qur'an is containing both political (constitutional), and civil regulations: »One could therefore say with more foundation that the Turks have a constitution, than to imagine them bent in the abasement of a despotic regime«<sup>44</sup>. Although he did not assert that the Ottoman Empire is a constitutional state – Descorches argues it is *rather* constitutional than despotic – he makes a unique proposition which goes beyond the rule-of-law argumentation of Anquetil-Duperron and other authors.

42 DESCORCHES, Mémoire (as in n. 36), fol. 190: *la nation turque a une loi: Loi portant tous les caractères qui la rende respectable pour elle: loi consentie, et que l'enthousiasme de ses spectateurs sanctionne encore tous les jours. Cette loi, c'est l'Alcoran, qui contient tout à la fois les préceptes du culte, les règlements politiques et les règlements civils.*

43 Ibid., fol. 190–191: *C'est d'après elle [la loi] que tout se fait, tout agit dans l'empire; les uns en commandant, les autres en obéissant. Les ordonnances du sultan n'en font que des paraphrases ou des émanations. Un corps nombreux dit des gens de loi, l'Ohlema, inviolable par l'autorité du prince dans leurs personnes et leurs propriétés, est chargé de sa conservation et de son application pour tous les effets civils – dans les circonstances majeures des affaires de l'état, le sultan est obligé de faire précéder ses résolutions d'une déclaration des chefs de ce corps que la résolution n'a rien de contraire à la loi.*

44 Ibid., fol. 191: *On pourrait donc dire que les Turcs ont une constitution avec plus de fondement qu'on ne peut se les figurer courbés dans l'avilissement d'un régime despotique.*

### The benefits of secluding women

In his effort to present the Ottoman Empire in a positive light and as a suitable partner for the French Republic, Descorches did not only try to rectify his readers' notions about the political constitution of the Ottoman state, but also about the customs of its society. The role of women and their alleged complete seclusion from the public sphere were a central element of the European discourse about the Ottoman Empire. As Voltaire noted in his »Essai sur les mœurs«: »The greatest difference between us and the Orientals is the way we treat women«<sup>45</sup>. European authors often claimed that European women should not complain about their disadvantaged position in society, since women in the »Orient« were much worse off<sup>46</sup>.

Also Descorches wrote extensively about the separation of men and women and the banishment of the latter from the public<sup>47</sup>. He stressed that the seclusion of women was not the result of male jealousy, but of religiously inspired prejudices<sup>48</sup>. However, he did not consider the banishment of women from the public to be harmful to Ottoman society. Quite on the contrary, for Descorches, such an arrangement had a positive effect on the character of men:

»I should pity those who know so little about the mutual attraction of both sexes, the power and the abuse all too common of the charms of the one on the sensitivity too often blind or weak of the other, for not having already perceived the influence that the [Ottoman] habits must have on the character of men who were formed there. They must have remained more male, their thoughts stronger, calmer their habits, perhaps their judgment healthier, for it is less altered or upset by their sensations. Dissipation is not a need for them«<sup>49</sup>.

Such a description stands in stark contrast to Montesquieu's theories, according to which calm and reasonable men could only originate from northern climates, while the men of the south would tend to surrender themselves to a life of pleasures (from Montesquieu's perspective, the Ottomans lived in southern climates)<sup>50</sup>. Descorches's statement is a good example for the prob-

45 VOLTAIRE, *Essai sur les mœurs*, in: Louis MOLAND (ed.), *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 52 vols., vol. 13, Paris 1877–1885, here p. 179: *La plus grande différence entre nous et les Orientaux est la manière dont nous traitons les femmes.*

46 See, e. g. Claudia OPITZ-BELAKHAL, *Der aufgeklärte Harem. Kulturvergleich und Geschlechterbeziehungen in Montesquieus »Perserbriefen«*, in: *Aufklärung der Geschlechter, Revolution der Geschlechterordnung. Studien zur Politik- und Kulturgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Münster 2002, p. 74–91, here p. 90–91.

47 DESCORCHES, *Mémoire* (as in n. 36), fol. 197: »Everyone knows about the strict separation which the law of Mohammed has established between men and women. The latter focus on the internal affairs of the household, they stay among their kind, visit each other, come together, but never mix with the other [sex], they are inaccessible, and only visible to their husband or the head of the household.« *Tout le monde sait la séparation rigoureuse que la loi de Mahomet a établie entre les hommes et les femmes. Celles-ci concentrées dans les soins intérieures du ménage, se voient entre elles, se visitent, se rassemblent; mais ne se mêlent jamais avec les autres, ne sont accessibles, visibles qu'à leur mari ou au chef de la maison.*

48 *Ibid.*, fol. 197.

49 *Ibid.*, fol. 197: *Je plaindrais celui qui connaîtrait assez mal l'attrait réciproque des deux sexes, la puissance et l'abus trop commun des charmes de l'un sur la sensibilité trop souvent aveugle ou faible de l'autre, pour n'avoir pas aperçu déjà l'influence que ces mœurs doivent avoir sur le caractère des hommes qui y sont formés. Ils ont dû se conserver plus mâles, leurs pensées plus fortes, leurs habitudes plus calmes, peut-être leur jugement plus sain; car il est moins altéré ou troublé par leurs sensations. La dissipation n'est pas un besoin pour eux.*

50 MONTESQUIEU, *De l'Esprit des lois* (as in n. 11), p. 239–242 (XIV, 2).

lematic attitude of many male French revolutionaries towards the equality of women. Although women played a central role in the Revolution from its very beginning and although it seemed at times that also women could gain full civil rights, female political activism was in the end suppressed, an important event in this development being the outlawing of political clubs for women, in October 1793<sup>51</sup>. In his report, the former French envoy to the Ottoman Empire did neither criticize the exclusion of women from political participation nor even their general seclusion from the public and from mixed-gender sociability. He only disapproved that the reason for the separation of both sexes was religious prejudice<sup>52</sup>. In its effects, he judged this separation not only to be unproblematic, but even beneficial to society, arguing that women would disturb the otherwise rational behaviour of men; and it was the men that counted for him.

It is interesting to see that someone like Descorches, who had benefited greatly from the public activities of his wife, who was very active in defending him against accusations at the Jacobin Club of Paris and in lobbying for him at the Committee of Public Safety, considered this seclusion-argument as useful to gain French sympathies for the Ottoman cause<sup>53</sup>. We should not forget that the main goal of this report was to present the Ottoman Empire as not only an acceptable, but as a preferable ally of the French Republic. Descorches must have thought his argumentation helpful in convincing his superiors that Ottoman society was not as barbaric as it had often been presented by his contemporaries, which also offers an insight into the opinions of many men of the French Revolution towards the political participation and the social role of women. In this context, the eighteenth-century criticism of French court culture could also have played a role in Descorches's judgement, since a typical argument of this critique was the allegedly too strong and very harmful influence of court ladies and mistresses on the politics of the monarchy<sup>54</sup>.

In any case, the former French envoy did not dwell on the consequences which the banishment of women from public life had for women. What he wanted to reveal were the positive effects Ottoman customs had on male Ottomans. He depicted Ottoman Turks in a strikingly Rousseauesque fashion as a people which is closer to the state of nature than the Europeans and therefore less corrupted by civilization. He explained that a Turk suffers when he has to live in an enclosed environment without access to open spaces:

»If his eyes, by contrast, can wonder around on a beautiful site, with greenery, trees, water; then he will appear happy; he will remain there, forgetting about himself; he will remain a long time alone, without needing anything. The sight and scent of flowers, the gaiety and chirping of the birds will be his delight. In a word, if these people are suffering the disadvantages of being far behind the Europeans in the sciences, they also have all the advantages of having stayed closer to nature<sup>55</sup>.«

51 See Lynn Avery HUNT, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1984, p. 104; Olwen H. HUFTON, *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution*, Toronto 1992.

52 DESCORCHES, *Mémoire* (as in n. 36), fol. 197.

53 MARCÈRE, *Une ambassade à Constantinople* (as in n. 35), vol. 1, p. 204, 340–341, 358–363.

54 See, e. g. Mita CHOUDHURY, *Women, Gender and the Image of the Eighteenth-Century Aristocracy*, in: Jay M. SMITH (ed.), *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century. Reassessments and New Approaches*, University Park 2004, p. 167–188, here p. 167–171; Sarah MAZA, *Private Lives and Public Affairs. The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France*, Berkeley 1993, p. 208–210.

55 DESCORCHES, *Mémoire* (as in n. 36), fol. 198: *Que ses regards, au contraire, puissent se promener sur un beau site, de la verdure, des arbres, de l'eau: Il paraîtra content, il y restera, s'oubliera, restera long-temps seul. Sans avoir besoin de rien. La vue et le parfum des fleurs, la gaieté et le gazouillement des oiseaux le charment. En un mot, si ce peuple éprouve les inconvénients d'être loin*

It is especially the aspect of joyful solitude and frugal serenity in nature, which certainly reminded every educated contemporary French reader of Rousseau's description of man's life before the downfall of civilization occurred.

### A French revolutionary's assessment of an Islamic society

Descorches was a man of the European Enlightenment and a supporter of the French revolutionary »Cult of the Supreme Being«<sup>56</sup>. He did not consider the Qur'an as a god-inspired holy book, but as the sole creation of Muhammad, who had written it to rule over his people. As a result, the former French envoy did not refer to Muhammad as a prophet, but he disdainfully called him an »Arabian camel driver«. Nevertheless, he then proceeded to praise Muhammad as an exceptionally gifted leader and legislator, emphasizing the positive effects of the Qur'an on the morals of the »Turks«:

»The law of Muhammed attests to the profound genius of this Arabian camel driver. It honours the sensitivity of his soul, which made him discover the true source of human happiness in the practice of virtue. It managed to spread its seeds widely in the Qur'an, where they did not remain without fruit for the Turks, who are generally moral and good<sup>57</sup>.«

One of Islam's positive effects on society, according to Descorches, was the equality among Muslims. Equality, like virtue, a key concept of French revolutionary ideology, was another feature that the French Republic and the Ottoman Empire were to have in common, notwithstanding the big differences of their political systems and societies. And in both states, argued Descorches, the only domains in which hierarchy (and thus inequality) were considered acceptable, were in the army and in the administration:

»The Muslims are the chosen people of god, in preference to all other men. Hence they have a high opinion of their individual dignity. Given the immensity, omnipotence, and grandeur of the Supreme Being [...], what distinctions between men could strike them? They know those [distinctions] in functions necessary for the public service and they are faithful followers of the subordination they require. But the sense of equality exists strongly among them and is found everywhere in their manners<sup>58</sup>.«

Descorches's description of Muslim religious practices can be analysed in the context of French enlightenment critique of religion in general, but more specifically of the Catholic religious practices. According to this view, Islam, like all other historic religions, has been founded by a

*en arrière des européens dans la carrière des sciences, il a aussi tous les avantages de s'être maintenu plus près de la nature.*

56 FIRGES, French Revolutionaries (as in n. 19), p. 242–247.

57 DESCORCHES, Mémoire (as in n. 36), fol. 191: *La loi de Mahomet atteste le génie profond de ce chameilier arabe. Elle honore la sensibilité de son âme, qui lui a fait découvrir la vraie source du bonheur des hommes dans la pratique des vertus. Elle se porta à en répandre abondamment tous les germes dans l'Alcoran, où ils ne sont pas restés sans fruit pour les turcs, généralement moraux et bons.*

58 Ibid., fol. 191: *Les mahométans sont les élus de dieu, de préférence à tous les autres hommes. De là une haute opinion de leur dignité individuelle. Devant l'immensité, la toute puissance et la grandeur de l'Être suprême [...], quelle distinction entre les hommes pourrait les frapper? Ils connaissent celles des fonctions nécessaires au service public, et ils sont fidèles observateurs de la subordination qu'elles exigent; mais le sentiment de l'égalité existe fortement en eux et se retrouve partout dans leurs mœurs.*

cunning and charismatic leader. But for Descorches, Muhammed seemed to have had also the wellbeing of his believers in mind and thus created religious rules that were intended to have beneficial effects on the life of the Muslim community.

»Muhammed, like all great ambitious persons, did not fail to seek in the heavens the means to strongly consolidate his and his descendants' worldly rule by sanctifying it. But it seems to me that he showed in this endeavour either more love to, or a better opinion of men than most of his kind. One can see that he wanted to elevate men towards god and not that he lowered god towards men. He presented [men] with a Supreme Being which could improve them through the idea of greatness, and he was careful never to ascribe to it their passions, their smallness, their figure; [and he] certainly [avoided] to constitute on earth for [god] ministers, tribunals, judges, a custodian of the keys to paradise, thereby encouraging the vices in some, through privileges and impunity; and withering the souls of the others, subordinating them, down to their most secret thoughts, into the most humiliating dependence on beings of their very own nature<sup>59</sup>.«

For Descorches, Islam is certainly closer to some kind of Enlightenment deism or to the Cult of the Supreme Being than Christianity. In his view, the notion of god having sent his son to earth degraded the idea of god. The allegedly degraded Christian concept of god is considered disadvantageous, because Descorches, in accordance with French revolutionary ideology (and in particular also with Robespierre's views on the Supreme Being), ascribed to the idea of god as the perfect being per se a positive effect on the morals of those worshipping god<sup>60</sup>. Descorches also criticized the establishment of the church as detrimental to society, because it created a privileged caste of corrupt priests who were in control of the spiritual wellbeing of the community. This very negative picture of Christian religion in general, and more particularly of Catholicism<sup>61</sup>, is contrasted by the rational character which Descorches ascribed to Muslim worship:

»Nothing could be simpler than the worship of the Muslim: multiplied, but short prayers, nothing but prayers accompanied by readings of the holy book and discourses on morality. No intermediaries required. Everyone can pray wherever he wants, in the open field, in his house; [he can] go, or not go to the mosque. There, the priest is nothing but a reader, his ministry is just a profession with no distinct character, requiring no special consecration. Finally, the worship of the Muslim puts his soul in direct relation

59 Ibid., fol. 198. *Mahomet, comme tous les grands ambitieux, n'a pas manqué d'aller chercher dans le ciel les moyens d'enraciner profondément, en la consacrant, sa domination et celle de ses descendants sur la terre. Mais il a porté à ce qu'il me semble, à ses combinaisons vers ce but, ou plus d'amour, ou une meilleure opinion des hommes, que la plupart de ses semblables. On voit que ce sont les hommes qu'il a voulu élever vers dieu; et non dieu qu'il a abaissé vers les hommes. Il leur a présenté un Être suprême qui pût les améliorer par l'idée de la grandeur, et il s'est bien gardé de lui prêter jamais leurs passions, leur petitesse, leur figure; surtout de lui constituer sur la terre des ministres, des tribunaux, des juges, un dépositaire des clefs du paradis; d'encourager ainsi les vices dans les uns, par les privilèges et l'impunité; et de flétrir l'âme des autres, en subordonnant, dans la dépendance la plus humiliante, jusqu'à leurs plus secrètes pensées à des êtres de la même nature qu'eux.*

60 See, e.g. Jonathan SMYTH, *Robespierre and the Festival of the Supreme Being. The Search for a Republican Morality*, Manchester 2018, p. 10–30.

61 One reference to Catholicism is his mentioning of the pope (»custodian of the keys to paradise«), the other, less obvious reference seems to be an allusion to the obligation to confess one's sins (»subordinating them, down to their most secret thoughts«).

with God [...]. Men raised in these habits can only be silent, meditative, leaving little influence to what could distract them, lead them astray, or corrupt their natural dispositions<sup>62</sup>.«

Thus Descorches considered Islamic worship to be better than most other religious practices. His main criterion for this assessment was the assumed effect on society. Nevertheless the former French envoy did not regard Islam as the ideal religion, because, he argued, it tends to create a fatalist mindset<sup>63</sup> and numerous prejudices which are detrimental to the advancement of the Muslim community. According to Descorches, these prejudices generated contempt for everything non-Muslim, which resulted in a backlog in the development of sciences due to the fact that non-Muslim learning was not appreciated. The Ottomans have

»until now remained focused only on themselves in relation to the Europeans, to which they still refer to with the derogatory name of infidels; and [they remain] behind a dividing line [which is] very marked through the influence of their manners, the prejudices of their religious fanaticism, [and] the difference and the difficulty of their languages«<sup>64</sup>.

Another aspect which Descorches considered disadvantageous for the Ottoman state and society was the fact that the Qur'an cannot be altered. For him, the Qur'an provided the perfect means to organize an army, but not to rationally govern a vast empire<sup>65</sup>. This idea, that the Ottoman government was basically a military regime, was a commonplace opinion, famously put forward by the seventeenth-century author Paul Rycault<sup>66</sup>. Its past military successes now placed a heavy burden on the Ottoman state:

»The subjugated peoples, who remained with the victorious people, blended in heterogeneous elements into the composition of this new state. This fact alone would have required that the arrangements of government be adjusted. But to touch the Qur'an, [or] even to doubt whether if there may be some improvement to its regulations, would have been sacrilege. [...] The Qur'an continued and still continues to be the only law, and the military regime of Muhammed still is in effect. The defeated were treated as prisoners, [and were] divided as subjects (*reâyâs*) among the victors; the lands were also divided as fiefs [...] like in our old feudal system, which Turkey has the misfortune to possess still today in all its pernicious activity; with the exception, however, of one essential vice that the Turks have been careful to avoid: inheritance<sup>67</sup>.«

62 DESCORCHES, *Mémoire* (as in n. 36), fol. 198: *Rien de plus simple que le culte du Musulman: prières multipliées, mais courtes; rien que des prières accompagnées de lectures du livre saint et des discours de morale. Point d'intermédiaires nécessaires. Chacun peut prier où il veut, en plein champ comme dans sa maison; aller, ne pas aller à la mosquée. Là le prêtre n'est guère qu'un lecteur, son ministère qu'un office, ne présentant aucun caractère distinct, ne demandant aucune consécration particulière. Enfin le culte du musulman met son âme en rapport direct avec dieu [...]. Des hommes élevés dans ces habitudes ne peuvent être que silencieux, méditatifs et laissant peu de prise à ce qui détourne, égare ou corrompt les dispositions naturelles.*

63 *Ibid.*, fol. 198.

64 *Ibid.*, fol. 190: *les turcs, restés jusqu'à présent concentrés en eux-mêmes par rapport aux européens, qu'ils ne désignent encore que par le nom méprisant d'infidèles, et derrière une ligne de séparation très marquée par l'effet de leurs mœurs, de leurs préjugés de leur fanatisme religieux, de la différence et de la difficulté de leurs langues.*

65 *Ibid.*, fol. 191.

66 PAUL RYCAULT, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, London 1668, e.g. p. 321–322.

67 DESCORCHES, *Mémoire* (as in n. 36), fol. 192: *Les peuples subjugués, restés avec le peuple vain-*

## Overcoming the Ottoman *ancien régime*

These were then, according to Descorches, the main problems of the Ottoman state: its difficulties to modernize and its feudal system. Both had been also French problems, which the Revolution had sought to overcome. Both were familiar problems which thus had the potential to evoke the French revolutionary readers' sympathies for the Ottoman cause. In order to develop these analogies, Descorches had to create a distorted image of Ottoman realities with regard to the status of *reâyâs*, the description of the »feudal« Ottoman *timar*-system, and the alleged Ottoman inability to generate positive legislation<sup>68</sup>.

Nevertheless, Descorches's intention was to show that the »backwardness« of the Ottoman Empire was not a fateful necessity, not a result of natural Ottoman intellectual inferiority, but only a temporary state of affairs. He thus implied that the Ottoman Empire, just like France, would be able to overcome its *ancien régime* and to modernize. Descorches emphasized that, especially since the beginning of the reign of sultan Selim III, the attitude of the Ottomans towards westernizing reforms had dramatically changed<sup>69</sup>:

»I said that their successive misfortunes and the presence of impending danger have produced a strong impression so that the generality of minds have felt the need to acquire the European arts. The prejudices have lost all their force [...]. The men of the law, very influential on the public opinion, shuddered [...] at the idea of a possible invasion of Constantinople by the enemy [...] and they hope to find in the restoration [...] of the empire the guarantee for their [...] security. The Qur'an has become more indulgent, and the barriers between the good believers and the infidels much less impenetrable. Therefore, ideas of improvement have become practicable<sup>70</sup>.«

*queur, apportaient, en outre, des éléments hétérogènes à la composition de ce nouvel état. Cette seule circonstance aurait demandé les combinaisons d'un gouvernement qui fût approprié. Mais touché à l'Alcoran, douter même alors qu'il y fût fait quelque amélioration à ce qu'il avait réglé, eût été sacrilège. [...] L'Alcoran continua et toujours continue d'être la loi unique, et le régime militaire de Mahomet d'avoir son effet. Les vaincus, furent traités en prisonniers, partagés comme sujets (rayas) entre les vainqueurs; ainsi que les terres qui furent divisées en bénéfiques [...], comme dans notre ancien régime féodal, que la Turquie a le malheur de posséder encore aujourd'hui dans toute sa funeste activité; à l'exception cependant d'un vice essentiel que les Turcs ont eu soin d'éviter: l'hérédité.*

68 See the respective articles on *Ra'yya*, *Timâr*, and *Kânûn*, in the Encyclopaedia of Islam: Clifford Edmund BOSWORTH, Suraiya FAROQHI, *Ra'yya*, in: The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Leiden 1960–2005, vol. 8, p. 403–406. Halil İNALCIK, *Timâr*, in: The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Leiden 1960–2005, vol. 10, p. 502–507; Yvon LINANT DE BELLEFONDS, Claude CAHEN, Halil İNALCIK, *Kânûn*, in: The Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Leiden 1960–2005, vol. 4, p. 556–562.

69 On the Ottoman reform efforts under Sultan Selim III, see e.g. Virginia AKSAN, *Ottoman Wars 1700–1870. An Empire Besieged*, Harlow 2007, p. 180–206; FIRGES, *Gunners for the Sultan* (as in n. 20); FIRGES, *Writing on »The New Order«* (as in n. 4); Stanford J. SHAW, *Between Old and New. The Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim III. 1789–1807*, Cambridge, MA 1971; Ali YAYCIOĞLU, *Partners of the Empire. The Crisis of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions*, Stanford 2016, p. 19–63.

70 DESCORCHES, *Mémoire* (as in n. 36), fol. 198: *J'ai dit que leurs malheurs successifs et la présence d'un danger imminent avait produit une assez forte impression, pour que la généralité des esprits ait senti la nécessité d'acquiescer les arts européens. Les préjugés ont donc perdu dès lors toute la force [...]. Le corps des gens de loi, puissants sur l'opinion publique, a frémi [...] à l'idée d'une invasion possible de l'ennemi jusqu'à Constantinople, et a désiré de retrouver dans la restauration [...] de l'empire la garantie dont sa sécurité alarmée lui faisait sentir le besoin. L'Alcoran est de-*

Descorches then went on to present a number of economic and strategic reasons in favour of a Franco-Ottoman alliance and French support for the Ottoman modernization effort. However, although these points are an integral part of the former French envoy's line of reasoning, they are of less interest in this context. It therefore suffices to sum up Descorches's argument in favour of a Franco-Ottoman alliance with his own words:

»That the Turks have pronounced their attachment to the Republic from early on; that this sentiment has never wavered in the greatest crises of the Revolution; that they want an alliance; that we can only attribute to their very difficult position and to the weakness of their means that they have not done more so far; that they had begun to advance towards us [...]; that, however, their moral condition makes them capable to recover from the decline into which a succession of defeats, betrayals and losses had thrown them; that our major interests, the prosperity and the security of the Republic require us to be as vigilant as possible in their preservation [and] the most honest assistance for their restoration<sup>71</sup>.«

### Conclusion

The French envoy's report on the political and social state of the Ottoman Empire shows how flexible and multi-faceted the discourse on »the Orient« was during the French Revolution. While many French and European authors followed narrative of »Oriental Despotism« when writing about the Ottoman Empire, other viewpoints did nevertheless exist and could gain momentum when they were politically opportune. The discourse on »Oriental Despotism« in eighteenth-century France was often more inspired by internal political debates than by the actual political situation of Asian and Middle Eastern states. It was used as an argumentative device for criticizing the own absolutist government by creating an Oriental »other«, to whose nature despotism belonged, whereas the »absolutist despotism« in France was criticized as unnatural and alien and therefore had to be replaced by a form of government which would better befit the character of the French nation.

The purpose of Descorches's report about the Ottoman Empire was a very different one: He did not want to show that the political and social conditions of the Ottoman Empire and France were incompatible, but indeed, that they were much more similar than one would suppose. His intention was therefore to »de-foreignize« the Ottoman Empire in order to present it as a suitable partner for the revolutionary French Republic. He did so, by addressing commonplace notions about the political constitution, about the seclusion of women, and about religion: He reinterpreted the Ottoman state as a polity governed by a law that had received the consent of the people. Although he did not do so, following his line of argument, and based on the propositions that the sultan was bound by the law and that the law had the approval of the people, Descorches could even have made a case for popular sovereignty being respected in the Ottoman state. Nevertheless, the former French envoy was content with arguing that the Ottoman

*venu plus indulgent, et les barrières entre les bons croyants et les infidèles beaucoup moins impénétrables. Dès-lors, les idées d'amélioration sont devenues praticables.*

71 Ibid., fol. 202–203: *Que les turcs ont prononcé de bonne heure leur attachement à la République; que ce sentiment ne s'est jamais démenti dans les plus grandes crises de la Révolution; qu'ils désirent une alliance; que nous ne devons attribuer qu'à leur position très difficile et à la faiblesse de leurs moyens tout ce qu'ils n'ont pas fait de plus jusqu'à présent; qu'ils avaient commencée à s'avancer vers nous [...]; que cependant leur état moral les rend susceptibles de se relever de l'affaissement où une succession de défaites, et pertes et de trahisons les avait jeté; que nos intérêts les plus majeurs, la prospérité et la sûreté de la République nous commandent la plus attentive vigilance à leur conservation, la plus franche assistance pour leur restauration.*



Empire was a constitutional rather than a despotic state. As for the often cited and criticized seclusion of women in the Ottoman Empire, Descorches discussed this aspect much less as a problem for women, but as a chance for men to develop a better character, free from female influence. In his discussion of Islam, he praised this religion almost as a kind of predecessor of the French Cult of the Supreme Being. For the French revolutionary Descorches, the main criterion with which he assessed the value of a religious cult was its ability to encourage the people to behave morally. And this requirement, Descorches judged, was clearly fulfilled in the case of Islam. The moral condition of the Ottomans, who benefited from the advantages of having kept themselves closer to nature and of following a humane and uplifting religion, was of central importance for the former French envoy's case in favour of a Franco-Ottoman alliance. In Descorches's opinion, it was this moral condition which enabled the Ottomans to overcome the defeats of the recent past and to restore themselves to new power.

The arguments of Descorches's report did not have a great impact on the general discourse on »the Orient«. His »Mémoire« was never printed and thus never became known to a wider public. His argumentation gained political value with the declaration of the French Republic, in 1792, and lost its argumentative power in the aftermath of the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 which finally destroyed the chances of a lasting Franco-Ottoman alliance. Nevertheless, this document is a remarkable example of the pro-Ottoman discourse of the French Revolution before 1798.