



Association of Former Intelligence Officers

Representing U.S. Intelligence Community
Service, Education, Interest, and Support



Weekly Intelligence Notes Exclusive Book Review (September 2024)

Spies for the Sultan: Ottoman Intelligence in the Great Rivalry with Spain

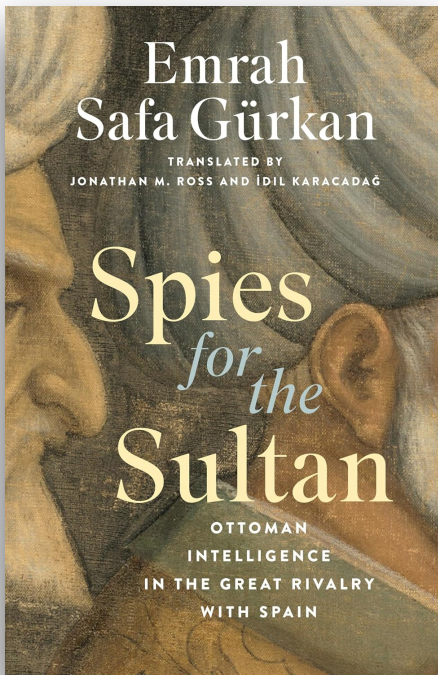
by Emrah Safa Gürkan
Translated by Jonathan M. Ross
and Idil Karacadag
Georgetown University Press
01 May 2024

Review by award-winning Intelligence
and Military Historian **Rose Mary
Sheldon***

Intelligence activities span the entire recorded history of man; therefore, no one person can be an expert in it all. It takes specialists trained in the history, culture, and language of a geographical location and historical period to do the deep dive into the ancient sources and tell us what was going on. The context is always the same. No matter where or when, someone

is collecting political, military, and economic information because it was essential for any state or empire to stay ahead of its rivals. Spies are an essential part of this historical pattern, and the Ottomans were no exception.

The topic covered by this book is the sixteenth-century rivalry between the Ottoman Empire and the Spanish Hapsburgs. States in the sixteenth century had not yet institutionalized intelligence services, so each side had to use every possible resource – merchants, corsairs, soldiers, travelers, etc. to gather intelligence on their rivals. Plus, there were new sources of information that could be monitored and tapped. New trade routes were opening up, and the invention of the printing press brought about postal services and the spread of news bulletins. Information stopped being the preserve of the state and became the property of an emerging public sphere. The need to keep some of this information secret led to the development of cryptography, cryptanalysis, and steganography.



[Order Book Here](#)

The imperial rivalry between the Ottomans and the Hapsburgs, the two great empires of their time, raised intelligence collection and espionage activities to an unprecedented level. One of the strengths of this book is that Gürkan avoids the clichéd binary opposition between Islam and Christianity as two warring camps, but treats the Mediterranean as a zone of transition between religions and cultures. His goal is not to tell interesting spy stories but to highlight the interwoven nature of the Mediterranean region and to uncover the intricate network of relationships that prevailed in the border lands. Studying the movement of spies across borders and between cultures illustrates the rich historical experience beneath the old stereotypes.

Since the Ottomans were a major empire that lasted six centuries, concluding that they used spies is not a groundbreaking discovering. Nor are their government's techniques new: espionage, bribery, counterintelligence, and sabotage were all used to subvert the enemy. We can trace these activities in the sixteenth century because this period was a turning point in the evolution of the Ottoman archives. It saw the adoption of more systematic methods of storing the considerable quantity of documents that were produced both on the Ottoman side and in the expansion of chanceries of the western powers. Gürkan delves into both sets of archives to mine this treasure trove of information.

Chapter one describes the imperial rivalry between the two great empires (not easy to do in one chapter). Chapter two gives the background of the Ottoman spies and presents the stories of ten different spies, each illustrating a separate activity like covert operations, assassination, bribery, agitation. Chapter three concentrates on intelligence gathering and the many sources that the Ottomans mined: civilian, military, and diplomatic. Chapter four examines the institutional structure of Ottoman intelligence during an age when central bureaucracies were in their infancy. Chapter five centers on counterintelligence as the Ottomans struggle against rival intelligence organizations.

Ottoman historians, like too many other historians, have paid little attention to intelligence history which they see as "marginal." Gürkan, however, draws on authentic domestic and foreign documents, as well as secondary literature, in order to see how espionage and counterintelligence were used during the apex of the Ottoman imperial age. His findings are extremely convincing. He identifies the members of the Ottoman imperial intelligence service, and his approach to the material is very systematic. He avoids generalizations and comparisons to western states that are, too often, held up as having superior intelligence services. Gürkan masterfully demonstrates why a different approach is needed.

Gürkan, a professor in the Department of Political science and International Relations at 29 Mayıs University in Istanbul and who holds a doctorate in history from Georgetown University, writes in an engaging style that will appeal to both experts and general educated readers who are curious about the subject. The bibliography will give readers a handle on how much research has been done on the topic including Gürkan's many articles. This is a fine addition to any intelligence collector's bookshelf.

* **Professor Rose Mary Sheldon** received her Ph.D. in ancient history from the University of Michigan. Her dissertation, on intelligence gathering in ancient Rome, won a National Intelligence Book Award in 1987. She is a Professor Emerita of History at The Virginia Military Institute, where she held the Burgwyn Chair in Military History. She was made a Fellow of the American Academy in Rome in 1980. Dr. Sheldon has been on the Editorial boards of the International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence, The Journal of Military History, and Small Wars and Insurgencies. She has written seven books and more than three dozen articles on intelligence in the ancient world. Her books include: *Espionage in the Ancient World: An Annotated Bibliography* (McFarland, 2003); *Intelligence Activities in Ancient Rome: Trust in the Gods, but Verify* (London: Frank Cass, 2005); *Rome's Wars in Parthia: Blood in the Sand* (Vallentine Mitchell, 2010); *Operation Messiah: St. Paul and Roman Intelligence* (with Thijs Voskuilen, Vallentine Mitchell, 2008); *Spies of the Bible* (Greenhill Books, 2007); *Ambush! Surprise Attack in Ancient Greek Warfare* (Frontline Books, 2012); and *Kill Caesar! Assassination in the Early Roman Empire* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).