

# Foreword

Almost six years ago, when I embarked upon this book project, the preliminary concept I had in mind was very different from the end result. My plan was to write a comprehensive micro-history of the international commission that was dispatched to Ottoman Syria after the violent summer of 1860. Along the way—and, I must confess, not soon after I began the project—a set of questions struck me, upended the book's structure, and resulted in an enormous review of my intentions: by what right, I wondered, did the so-called European Great Powers claim the responsibility to supply security in the Levant in the long nineteenth century even when the sovereign authority was opposed to their intervention? On what legal grounds? How did it all begin?

At first, I thought of explaining these in a long background chapter before I delved into the history of the commission. But this didn't quite work. The more I read the fascinating existing literature on the several episodes that formed the prehistory of 1860, the more questions I was left with about these events, about their connections with one another, their micro-global nuances, and the historical, political, legal, and economic continuities. The ambitious endeavour to address them almost organically led me to a massive restructuring of the manuscript half-way through the project.

What was supposed to be a book about the years 1860–62 thus turned into a study of nearly a century of European Great Power interventionism in the Levant, and the reception and implications of these acts, as well as persistent patterns, and cultures of security. My task then became writing a history that hinges together the existing literature, filling the gaps as far as I was able—a book that highlights the long-standing vectors, overt or covert, previously noticed or unnoticed, but without losing sight of the ideas, ideals, emotions, and observations of several historical figures whose lives and biographical experience have usually remained un- or under-explored in previous studies.

Yet, in doing so, my aim has hardly been to write another Saidian, anti-Orientalist or post-Orientalist book. Instead, I have endeavoured to uphold a third narrative that goes beyond both Orientalism and its (corrective) rejection, beyond the likes of both Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami and Edward Said. This narrative embraces the complexity of the historical reality through in-depth and multi-archival research to offer a more substantiated and less impressionistic analysis of interventionism and violence in the Levant.

The very same consideration led me to propose a new paradigm, and to use security as a driving force of political and social change, rather than producing

another history of westernization, modernization, or secularization of the (Ottoman) Middle Eastern societies after their ‘encounter with the West’. Since the spatial scope of the book is limited to the eastern Mediterranean coasts, and since I devote only very limited space to the events that simultaneously transpired in areas including Mesopotamia and the Arabian Peninsula, I have decided to use the term ‘the Levant’ as the geographical focus of the book, even though the region that became a theatre of interventions covered in the book has come to be known as ‘the Middle East’ as of the early twentieth century.

*Dangerous Gifts* came into being as part of a larger project funded by the European Research Council (ERC), ‘Securing Europe, Fighting Its Enemies’. Thanks to this, I have been able to cooperate with several brilliant scholars. One of them, the prime investigator of the project, Beatrice de Graaf, read the draft chapters of the book and made most useful comments. With her patience and encouragement, with the occasional lunch and dinner meetings she organized, she has been a source of immense moral support. Constantin Ardeleanu, Erik de Lange, Annelotte Jensen, Wouter Klem, Melle Lyklema, Trineke Palm, Joep Schenk, and Jossie Til-Duijsters as assiduously read my draft chapters and offered insightful comments. Susanne Keesman has been of great help in guiding me through the bureaucratic minutiae of the project as well as helping me to settle in the Netherlands. Myrthe van Groningen and Andrea Dörr kindly helped me to sort out copyright and other practical issues in the final stages of the project. Erik Goosman designed the appealing maps used in this book.

The ERC funding has also allowed me to enlist the support of a number of research assistants whose linguistic and/or logistical reach brought to my consideration primary and secondary sources in several languages and from numerous archives, which I would not otherwise have been able to make use of. Markus Wegewitz, Dominik Loibner, and Theresa Herzog supplied me with materials from archives and libraries in Berlin and Vienna, working with the challenging *Kurrentschrift*, taking notes, and translating their notes from German into English. Elena Linkova found and dispatched sources from the archives and libraries in Moscow and St Petersburg. Zienab al-Bakry and Tarek Sabra provided assistance with locating, taking notes, and translating Arabic primary (mostly archival) and secondary materials from Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. Filiz Yazıcıoğlu has been tremendously generous in offering her support. Not only did she hasten to the Ottoman archives and Islamic Research Institute in Istanbul and send me copies of an archival material or a book whenever I needed her urgent help. She also helped me ‘decipher’ some of the more intricate Ottoman texts. I am indebted to Pavlos Kardoulakis for taking copies of archival materials in Britain and France for my use.

The task of freeing the manuscript from my linguistic mistakes was skilfully taken up by Alastair Paynter.

Selim Deringil, Jonathan Conlin, and Jonathan Parry have read the draft manuscript and provided me with excellent feedback. I was lucky to find Selçuk Dursun (abi) within reach whenever I needed his support with the transliteration of subtle Ottoman sources.

My editors at Oxford University Press, especially Stephanie Ireland, believed in the project from the beginning. Together with Katie Bishop and Cathryn Steele, she displayed an impressive degree of professionalism in arranging for timely peer reviews and putting together the contract. Stephanie, Katie, and Cathryn have patiently responded to my endless questions and inquiries during the various stages of this publication journey. My copy-editor Sarah Barret was admirably diligent, while Saravanan Anandan has been a model professional during the production of the book.

Devoting nearly six years of my life to researching and writing a historical book has been a demanding endeavour, to say the least, which sometimes entailed a hermit-like-life style, spending weeks in archives, and sacrifices of sorts, especially on the part of those I love. My dearest family and friends have tirelessly supported me all along even when I disappeared from their lives for extended periods of time. They have shown an indefatigable faith in me and the project, which has been my main source of motivation and energy. Esther Meininghaus has also helped me with the transliteration of Arabic sources, while patiently listening to me for hours rambling about the contents of the book. Julia Kozak has assisted me with the transliteration of Russian sources, and uncomplainingly read all draft chapters, telling her honest opinion even when I wouldn't like it. I am grateful to all of them for their endless patience, support, and, above all, for their presence.

Grateful I am also to all the truly helpful archivists and librarians I met during research, and my numerous colleagues and students, whose names I unfortunately cannot list in the little space I have here. I can, however, say that I have been privileged to have the opportunity to discuss the very questions I asked myself while writing the book—not only with expert scholars but also with my students, hundreds of them, from all walks of life and literally from all over the world, during the teaching of several course modules. Nearer the completion of the project, I shared with my students the draft chapters of the manuscript, and fine-tuned its contents and tone following their suggestions. They even conducted research into the various subjects covered in the book as part of their assignments, which introduced me to new literature and primary sources that I had not been aware of.

'I like reading stories,' one of my students at Utrecht once told me, not soulless scientific analyses. Among the several challenges in writing a book on entangled histories, the most difficult one has been to develop out of a fiendishly complex story a narrative that is both intelligible and captivating for readers. They should be the judge of the extent to which I succeed in this.

In short, *Dangerous Gifts* has been the result of a tireless team effort. The fact that my name appears as its single author ought not to outshine the degree of collaborative labour which allowed it to materialize. Without my research team, without the support of my colleagues, without my family and friends, and without my students, this book could not have seen the light of the day. I dedicate it to these unseen co-creators.

*Utrecht*  
*November 2020*

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