

## Miners and the State in the Ottoman Empire

**International Studies in Social History**

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**MINERS AND THE STATE IN THE  
OTTOMAN EMPIRE**

*The Zonguldak Coalfield, 1822–1920*

Donald Quataert

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***Berghahn Books***  
NEW YORK • OXFORD

Published in 2006 by  
Berghahn Books  
www.berghahnbooks.com

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#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Quataert, Donald, 1941–

Miners and the state in the Ottoman Empire : the Zonguldak coalfield, 1822–1920 /  
Donald Quataert

p. cm. — (International studies in social history; v. 7)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-84545-133-2 (hardback) — ISBN 978-1-84545-134-9 (paperback)

1. Coal miners—Turkey—Zonguldak—History. 2. Coal mines and  
mining—Turkey—Zonguldak—History. 3. Coal mine accidents—Turkey—  
Zonguldak—History. 4. Turkey—History—Ottoman Empire, 1288–1918.

I. Title. II. Series.

HD8039.M62T96 2005

331.7'62233409563—dc22

2005048299

#### **British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

Printed on acid-free paper

ISBN: 978-1-84545-133-2 hardback

ISBN: 978-1-84545-134-9 paperback

*To Jean Helen,  
for everything*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A clear view of the everyday lives of Ottoman subjects has been an important and elusive goal for me. Over several decades, frustrations far outnumbered successes in ferreting out the few materials about Ottoman workers in the Istanbul-based Prime Ministry Archives, an otherwise marvelous repository of millions of documents. By the early 1990s, after publishing a book and several articles that touched on workers' lives, it seemed to me that I had run out of documents relating to workers, and so I began to consider abandoning labor history. At that juncture, in early 1996, I received a letter from Erol Kahveci, then a graduate student in sociology at Bristol University, who had just returned from substantial fieldwork on the coal miners of Zonguldak during the 1990s. He asked for my help in locating some sources because, in a chapter of a 1983 book, I had written all that I knew about the miners during the late Ottoman period. After some further correspondence, he mentioned that he had seen Ottoman- and French-language materials about Ottoman-era mining while carrying out his own research in Zonguldak. One thing led to another, and I made three research trips to Zonguldak in 1997, 1998, and 2004. This book is the result.

I am profoundly grateful to Erol Kahveci for his extraordinary courtesy and help, without which I literally could have neither begun nor completed this book. He not only told me about the existence of the research materials but also introduced me to a host of mining engineers, workers, and officials in the Zonguldak coalfield who opened the doors that made the research possible. Some have become dear friends; among these I count Nevzat Ünlü, Aydın Kasapoğlu, and Avni Özerkan. Hüseyin Toraman and Kemal Kutlu provided invaluable aid, as did Fevzi Engin and Emine Uzun. I offer my respects to Erol Çatma, a retired mine foreman who has learned Ottoman Turkish on his own initiative and is now writing on the history of the Ottoman Zonguldak miners.

Nearly all of the materials that I consulted are housed in two locations around or in the city of Zonguldak. Most are in a reading room at Karaelmas

University, under the watchful eye of Professor Mustafa Yüce; his vigilance in protecting these documents deserves our profound thanks and gratitude. I am indebted to Erol Şeref at the Education Bureau of the Mining Ministry in Baştarla, who offered essential cooperation and support for my research. Nadir Özbek, once my graduate student and now on the faculty at Boğaziçi University, accompanied me on all three visits, acting as my eyes, voice, and coordinator. On these trips we formed a lasting friendship for which I am grateful. I wish to single out the generosity of M. Arsen Yarman and Orlando Carlo Calumeno in providing me with scanned images of their incredible collections of Zonguldak postcards.

Thanks to Kevin Heard of the Binghamton University GIS Core Facility for the wonderful maps.

Nancy Micklewright, Mary Guillochon, Margarita Poutouridou, Christoph Neumann, Yavuz Karakışla, and Nalan Turna helped me in locating other important materials, and Mert Sunar, Selim Deringil, and Mike Hanagan provided additional invaluable assistance. Mel Dubofsky and Tom Dublin, experts in U.S. mining, provided helpful comparative contexts. Jean Quataert, as always, offered invaluable criticisms at every stage of the research and writing.

This project was a long time in the making and would not have been possible without sustained financial support from various sources. The Social Science Research Council funded my second research visit in 1998. In 1999–2000, I spent my entire tenure as a Senior Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities organizing and translating the vast body of materials that I had assembled. In 2003 and then in 2004–2005, a sabbatical leave from Binghamton University and a Guggenheim Fellowship allowed me the time to write, reorganize, and complete the manuscript.

There is a Web site, prepared with the assistance of Thomas M. Sliva, that contains a host of photographs, illustrations, maps, and documents relevant to this volume. Please visit the following site: <http://bingweb.binghamton.edu/~coal/index.htm>.

I am very pleased to have this book appear in a series under the editorial supervision of Marcel van der Linden. And finally, I wish to thank the two readers for Berghahn Books, who saved me from many errors, Jaime Taber, for the very careful copyediting, and Shawn Kendrick, for outstanding typesetting and proofreading. The remaining mistakes are my own.

## **INTRODUCTION AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY**

The narrative setting for this account centers on the coalfield of Zonguldak, a few hours' drive eastward along the Black Sea coast from modern Istanbul. Exploitation of the Zonguldak mines began in the early nineteenth century, as Ottoman leaders confronted the implications of the steam revolution and sought coal to power the war fleet and state factories. Steam and coal, after all, were accelerating the ongoing shift in the balance of wealth and power toward Western Europeans, a process underway since their conquest of the New World and domination of the human, mineral and other natural resources of the newly discovered continents. As the Ottoman economy increasingly entered the steam age, state planners looked for indigenous mines to maintain uninterrupted supplies, even in wartime. After several false starts that may date back to the 1820s, coal began to flow from the Zonguldak mines around 1850, promising a richly abundant supply independent of foreign control. Mine workers were recruited in large numbers to dig the coal; and on the eve of World War I, they totaled more than 10,000 persons, the largest concentrated labor force in the 600-year history of the Ottoman Empire. These workers are the focus of the present study.

For labor historians of the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia, coal miners are a familiar sight, the subject of a rich literature. From the perspective of the history of the world's workers, the appearance of a book on Ottoman coal miners requires no justification. As I will explain shortly, this history of Ottoman coal workers both draws upon and enriches the efforts of labor historians in general. But from the viewpoint of my colleagues in Ottoman history, some discussion of these miners and their place in our historiography is a good beginning point, before moving on to situate the subject in labor history writing. Coal miners at first appear to be an odd vehicle for exploring some of the major themes in Ottoman social, economic, and political history. After all,

aren't miners an exception in the Ottoman world? Aren't mine labor experiences idiosyncratic, with little general explanatory power? As the following pages make clear, the story of the miners of Zonguldak presents a particularly graphic local lens through which to examine questions that have been of major concern to historians—both within and outside of Ottoman history writing—most prominently, the nature of labor, the development of the state, the nature of capitalism, and the role of the working classes in these large processes.

The development of the state remains a predominant preoccupation among Ottoman historians who have generated a comparatively rich literature on this subject. Although many still disagree, it now seems clear that the formation of the modern Ottoman state can best be understood as part of a long, ongoing, and continuous evolutionary process from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. In this view, events such as the Tanzimat reforms of the 1830s and 1850s are regarded as part of a domestically inspired continuum of change, rather than radical westernizing breaks with the past imposed from outside. Nineteenth-century reforms derived from ongoing internal dynamics, not from programs suddenly imposed or inspired by the West.<sup>1</sup>

Yet many of the revisionists arguing for domestically driven continuity seem to agree with their opponents supporting westernization from without that the hegemonic power of the central Ottoman state is the force before which pale all other agents at work in Ottoman history. I certainly will not disagree with the notion of the Ottoman state as an important actor equipped with a host of tools to maintain control. For example, during the 1830s, in the general area of the coalfield, it sought to keep track of the daily movements of its subjects, recording their goings and comings in registers.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, at about the same time, it planted spies in Istanbul coffeehouses who wrote down conversations, passing these on to spymasters in the state apparatus.<sup>3</sup> Later in the century, the sultan subtly dispensed charity not merely as a humanitarian gesture but also to enhance his own power and bind to him the objects of his generosity.<sup>4</sup>

The study of the state and its elites certainly is appropriate since its decisions and actions powerfully affected the nature and evolution of not only the Ottoman body politic but society as well. It is, however, not appropriate for a field as rich and developed as Ottoman history to continue to neglect the history of workers and other non-elite groups. Ottoman historians' unwillingness or reluctance to move beyond elite groups and examine those populating the rest of the Ottoman past has had many causes. First, there are the long-established patterns of historical writing, dating back to the Ottoman era, which heavily emphasize the deeds of sultans and other state policy makers. The authors usually were members of the elite literati, often on royal appointment. When the empire vanished, these traditions continued into the era of the Ottoman successor states, of which the Turkish republic was one among many. The historical writing that had served the empire now propped up the nation-state. History writing in the successor states became distorted by nation-building projects in the post-Ottoman world. In their quests to form new identities and make new

states, writers vilified their own Ottoman pasts and sought to make them irrelevant. Thus, whatever the experiences of workers were in, for example, Syria or Iraq, they were seen as part of the history of the Syrian or Iraqi nation rather than Ottoman history as a whole.<sup>5</sup> More generally, history writing emphasized nation-state building. Non-elites' success depended on following the paths set down for them by the elites (as the Uzun Mehmed story later in this chapter illustrates). Thus, the histories of workers (or other non-elites) either were related within the nation-state master narrative or went untold.

The geopolitical position of the republic of Turkey has played a particular role in discouraging history from below. This aspect of Turkey's story is especially important considering that the main Ottoman archives are located in Istanbul and that, thanks to linguistic similarities between Ottoman and modern Turkish (among other reasons), most Ottomanists from the successor states are Turkish nationals.<sup>6</sup> During the first decades of the new republic, Turkish historians, like their nation-building colleagues in many other post-Ottoman states, emphasized state elites and ignored the non-elites. But within Turkish historical writing there was a twist, one tied to the later emergence of the Cold War. Turkey's role in its front lines meant that workers' histories often were linked to Communism and the Soviet Union, reinforcing already-negative attitudes concerning the field. Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the writing of workers' history continues to be seen as a subversive activity.

In addition, the nature of the historical records left by the Ottoman state stressed elites at the expense of the non-elites. Until quite recently, almost all of Ottoman history writing relied upon documents found in the central archival repository, the Prime Ministry Archives in Istanbul. For all their wonderful revelations, these millions of documents suffer from several deficiencies. First, because they are by definition materials that replicate official interests and concerns, workers appear only when they become interesting to the state—often at times of labor unrest in the form of guild petitions or strikes. Second, these archives usually record activities at a high societal level. Documents might record the outcome of a guild or village petition for tax relief, but omit the details that permit discussion of the guild members or villagers involved.<sup>7</sup>

This study devotes considerable attention to the state and, by demonstrating its powerful effect on coalfield residents, in many respects reinforces the prevailing sense of extensive state control. Thanks to a registration system they maintained from the 1860s, state officials knew precisely the street and house addresses and physical descriptions of individuals in remote villages of the Black Sea littoral, from whom the state demanded mine work (see chapter 2). This information enabled it to dragoon villagers into the mines against their will, sometimes using naked military force. State officials employed less direct methods as well. An extraordinary series of mine inspectors' reports describe, in increasing detail, the accidents that killed or wounded many hundreds of workers (chapters 7 and 8). Indeed, Zonguldak miners were hurt and killed in relative numbers far greater than their contemporaries in Western Europe

and the United States. These reports illustrate the growing intrusiveness of the state into the everyday lives of its subject/citizens. They also offer irreplaceable insights into laboring conditions. The details they present on the site and nature of the accidents as well as on the personal lives of accident victims and witnesses offer an otherwise unobtainable profile of the labor force. Relevant to the point at hand is the notion that the safety regulations and reports did not spring merely from government concern for workers. Rather, they were part of an effort to discipline the work force into a malleable body, one more amenable to state control. Like the sultan's spies and charity, safety rules formed part of the drive to create a disciplined and responsible citizenry.

If my study thus depicts the state as increasingly intruding into the lives of its citizens, it also helps to demystify the central Ottoman state that too often has been oversimplified as all-powerful. Indeed, this volume demonstrates the total and complete failure of the state to achieve its most basic goal in coal mining—the assurance of adequate coal supplies in wartime. Despite all efforts of the government and the policing infrastructure that it had created, the mines produced no more coal during World War I than they had four decades before in the 1870s.

The reasons are detailed in the following chapters: simply put, the state could not overcome the forces in Ottoman society that worked against official objectives. Workers refused to work, or they fled after being dragged to the mines. And the villages that were to send allotments of workers sometimes refused to cooperate with the central state in forcing residents into the mines. Indeed, an important finding concerns the central state's use of village authorities—the headmen and councils of elders—to discipline workers. On the one hand, this shows the power of the state's enforcement apparatus. But the persistent shortages of mine workers meant that the headmen, elected by the villagers and appointed by the state, were not fulfilling the tasks assigned to them by their superiors. So on the other hand, the headmen were part of the historic compromise the central state made with local elites over the course of the nineteenth century. Across the empire, and in the coalfield, local notables *were* part of the central state apparatus, serving it even as they guarded local interests from centralist encroachments. In this way, they resembled local elites elsewhere in the empire, for example, the council of elders in faraway Nablus during the 1830s. When Istanbul imposed new instruments of centralizing control on Nablus, the notables gained entrance to the council and there continued to defend local interests against central state encroachment.<sup>8</sup> In Zonguldak, village headmen served as central state functionaries, directing the recruitment of villagers for mine labor (and financially profiting from the task) but also mediating and guarding the village against levies that would damage its fabric—hence, the chronically inadequate supplies of mine labor. In the end, the villagers never constituted the reliable work force envisaged by state planners.

Thus, the story of the coal miners helps to present an alternative to the paradigm of an all-powerful nineteenth-century Ottoman state effortlessly

imposing its will. The central Ottoman state was an uneasy union between imperial and local interests in a relationship filled with tension, conflict, and compromise. And, to repeat, it utterly failed to achieve its fundamental objective in opening the coalfield in the first place—to gain assured coal supplies in wartime.

The story of the miners also reveals much about the nature of capital in this corner of the world. Indeed, in the coalfield, the workings of capital were constrained on the one side by the Ottoman state and on the other by the labor force. Worldwide, most coal mines came into being through the efforts of private entrepreneurs using their own and investors' capital to open and operate mines. For example, coal mining in three of the world's most prolific producers—Britain, France, and the United States—depended on private capital. Somewhat by contrast, the Zonguldak mines owed their opening and initial exploitation to state efforts, to the Ottoman regime's determination to have steam power for its fleet and industries. Early efforts at state management of the mines quickly failed, however, and by the late 1860s they had yielded to a hybrid system of exploitation. The coal belonged to the state, or more accurately to the sultan, who leased exploitation rights to private operators. Production stagnated at first because the state, reluctant to surrender control, imposed prohibitively onerous terms on would-be entrepreneurs. But over the period studied here it steadily surrendered control to private interests. In 1882, when it partially yielded to operators' demands for better terms, production began to climb.

The entrepreneurs who came to play an increasing role included both Ottoman subjects, some with connections to the court, and foreigners. Chief among the latter, as of the 1890s, was the French-financed Ereğli Company, which came to control three-quarters of total coal production. In this regard, the Ottoman coal-mining experience did not follow the British, French, or U.S. pattern, but rather resembled that of contemporary Czarist Russia. In both Russia and the Ottoman Empire, state sponsorship and a dependence on French capital combined to exploit coal resources. In the Ottoman case, the state continuously battled with the Ereğli Company. Fearful that French money would corrode its sovereignty, the Istanbul government often impeded the company's natural quest for profits, seeing this as a French plot for domination. More generally, however, local and international capital alike obtained poor rates of return from the Zonguldak mines. The Ereğli Company was a special case and could place the blame for its mediocre performance on tense relations with the state. But in fact, all operators (including those with royal connections) suffered from the nature of the mine labor force. In the end, increasingly capitalist relations did emerge, but their structure proved too fragile to withstand the pressures of war.

As I hope the above makes clear, this study of coal workers adds to our understanding of the state and of capital during the last Ottoman century. Yet this story of miners is most of all a history of workers, an effort to present

Ottoman “lives of labor.” For Ottoman specialists, therefore, the book offers a rare focus on the popular classes. It portrays their worlds of work and of home life. It hopes to encourage and point the way to other studies of Ottoman workers. For labor historians reading this book, it will become clear that while the fate of Zonguldak workers was much like that of miners elsewhere, there also is much that is unique in their story. Because of the inherent nature of mine work, the lives of coal miners everywhere have been brutish, nasty and brief. It is true that today, the life expectancy of miners in some countries is close to the national averages. But the high incidence of catastrophic accidents in China reminds us that coal mining remains among the most dangerous of all occupations. Now, as in the past, the specific conditions of recruitment and work imposed by states and entrepreneurs make a considerable difference, for better or worse. There is no doubt that because of the diversity of these imposed conditions, the fate of miners in different regions of the world at particular times has varied enormously.

During the period under study here, states and entrepreneurs worldwide employed a host of stratagems to recruit and retain mine labor. There were nearly as many methods of mine work recruitment and treatment of labor as there were mining work forces. Whether or not laborers were abundant or scarce was not necessarily the determining variable in how workers were treated. In some cases, labor scarcities provoked what appears to be relatively generous treatment. But, contrariwise, shortages of workers also prompted coercive and cruel measures. Sometimes states and employers have relied on cash bonuses, decent housing, and medical care to attract and retain their work force. In some areas they provided food, free of charge. At the other end of the spectrum, brutal coercion, whippings, and forced labor were frequent tactics under conditions amounting to slavery. In the nineteenth-century United States, many operators used cash wages to attract some of the then vast and continuing inflows of cheap immigrant labor into mine work. In the Donbass region of Russia during the later nineteenth century, mine operators found seasonal village labor unsuitable and sought to recruit full-time workers, offering them better wages and conditions attractive to their families.<sup>9</sup> Across the Atlantic, in Peru, mine labor slowly evolved, between 1906 and 1945, from temporary migrant labor into a permanent, stable, work force.<sup>10</sup> Here too, employers aimed to create a labor force that was married, believing it to be more stable and reliable. Somewhat similarly, the white colonial state in Rhodesia at first, during the late nineteenth century, tried to rely on a mix of permanent, married workers living at the mine sites and temporarily employed migrant workers. But when this hybrid failed, it implemented a truly brutal forced labor system on African workers in order to obtain a sufficient supply of low-cost labor. This mine force became proletarianized, in the sense that it was fully dependent on wage labor without access to other forms of subsistence.<sup>11</sup>

In this global variety of labor systems, the Ottoman miners share characteristics with workers in many regions, but—to my eyes, at least—they still

seem somewhat special. This Zonguldak mining work force derived from an extraordinary and changing mix of unfree and free labor that, toward the end of the period under study, drew upon at least six distinct sources of workers. There were three groups of unfree workers: villagers from the coalfield region who were forced to perform rotational labor (the majority of all workers); townsmen from the coalfield; and lastly, active-duty soldiers. Free laborers also fall into three groups: aboveground workers from various extra-coalfield Ottoman regions, recruited to fill technologically more difficult jobs; underground miners from Ottoman provinces in eastern Anatolia, who were recruited once the rotational work force proved problematic for the state and the mine operators; and very small numbers of foreigners, including foremen.

The complexion of the aggregate work force evolved over time. In the following chapters, the narrative traces the formation and hybrid nature of the labor force, especially the unfree local villagers. The Ottoman state's search for mine labor was mired in its own practices of compulsory labor recruitment, which dated back centuries. Thus, dating from 1867, it required all males in the coalfield to be available for mine work on a rotational basis—which divided the miner's month equally between the time of work in the mines and the "rest" time back in the village. In exchange, the workers received cash wages and exemption from active-duty military service. In this way the Ottoman state adopted an allegedly pre-capitalist form of labor to exploit coal, that most capitalist of commodities.

Four decades after initiating this rotational labor system, the state yielded to private mine operators' complaints about the quality and quantity of the rotational labor, allowing them to recruit free labor from metal mining regions in the Ottoman east. This experiment, however, failed. Labor agitation mounted and accident rates skyrocketed with the arrival of the new workers, who in the end did not provide the hoped-for reliable work force. The narrative also reveals how, from the outset, the state violated its own regulations—which divided local residents into those who mined and those who soldiered—to keep the mines working. Throughout the period, the mine superintendent's office employed active-duty soldiers, conscripted from the coalfield region, in a variety of mine tasks to supplement the rotational work force, paying them a tiny fraction of the already-low rotational worker wage. The final major component of the work force consisted of the free workers, recruited from outside the coalfield, who labored in aboveground jobs different from the tasks carried out by the rotational workers. Altogether it was predominantly a male work force, although women regularly were present in both above- and belowground work.

More than three hundred villages sent rotational workers, who labored in more than 100 different mines. Every twelve days, thousands of workers put down their tools and walked home to their villages to be replaced by the second shift of village workers. From a global perspective, this rotational system seems rather unusual in its formality and regularity. These village-mine connections,

moreover, reveal the power that village headmen and councils of elders wielded over fellow villagers. Indeed, the state's rotational system gave these authorities a chilling tool of control: they determined which young men's names were placed on the mine-worker rosters and which were inscribed in the registers of those eligible for military service. Thus, mine work transferred the existing system of power relations within the village to the new setting of the worksite (the mine), enhancing the position of the community authorities back in the village. Numerous additional illustrations of unbalanced power relations are provided later in this volume. Workers often were paid in promissory notes, not in specie. Unable to cash these, the workers sold them at a fraction of face value to village leaders and town merchants, who bought them as investment opportunities and then used their leverage to seek full payment. So for many workers, mine work did not inject cash into their homes but furthered subordination to local authorities and notables.

These relations between mines and villages forged the long-term identity of the rotational mine labor force as villager-worker, a concept fraught with powerful consequences for worker, mine operator, and state. This Ottoman example demonstrates how, in a modern state during the age of high capitalism, mine labor could be the province not of a landless, uprooted class but of workers with enduring ties to the land. Again, the Zonguldak case seems rather special in that its work force, despite five decades of involvement with mine work, had not been proletarianized. This is quite unlike many studies of French and English miners, whose ultimate proletarianization historians have dissected into stages. It also is unlike the cases of the Rhodesian and Peruvian miners noted above, for in the Ottoman instance, workers remained deeply connected to the village and indeed, to this day, identify as villager-miners rather than merely miners. Their adherence to village life while mining allowed villager-miners to remain uncommitted to mine labor. They stayed away from the mines because they feared accidents, because of religious holidays, because the crops needed tending, even at times because they didn't need or want the cash incomes provided by mine work.

Such behavior was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, since they did not identify with the workplace, the villager-miners remained more vulnerable to exploitation than contemporaries who formed militant working-class identities. For example, their wages remained fixed for decades while those of the free mine workers rose. The villager-miner syndrome badly hurt the state and capital as well. When the state fell short of coal in wartime because of these labor problems, it sustained grave injury. These same labor issues also caused mine operators to fail financially, over and over again. And to boot, exploitation of the coalfield did not trigger the accumulation of capital for investment elsewhere in the Ottoman economy, retarding the entire empire's further development.

## The Historiography of the Zonguldak Mines

### *Uzun Mehmed's Discovery of Coal*

The story of how Uzun Mehmed, a villager from the Ereğli area, first discovered coal in 1829 is a familiar one to citizens of today's Turkish republic. His name and story are embedded in Turkish national memory, long a part of the education of schoolchildren growing up in the republic. The construction and propagation of this Uzun Mehmed narrative helped to shape the Turkish nation-state; the structure of the story and its wide dissemination tell a great deal about the formation of republican ideals and of the state itself. This famous tale, however, derived from an Ottoman narrative that was selectively built upon during the Turkish republican era.

Intellectuals and officials in the coal basin prepared the most widely circulated account of the Uzun Mehmed story, which appeared in two somewhat different versions published in 1933 and 1934, as part of the tenth anniversary celebration of the Turkish republic. The first appeared as part of an extensive monograph published by the Zonguldak People's House (*halkevi*), established just months before on 24 June 1932. Ultimately, the ruling Republican People's Party founded some 500 of these People's Houses in Turkey; they were intended, in the words of one author, "to spread nationalist, positivist and secularist ideas."<sup>12</sup> Their main goal, according to another writer, "was to educate people in the Kemalist ideals and to create ideological unity between the educated elite running the party and the [Grand National] Assembly, and the masses."<sup>13</sup> The large monograph, entitled *Zonguldak and the Coalfield on the 10th Anniversary of the Republic*, traced the history of the coal region and its development and was perhaps the first fruit of the new local institution.

The Zonguldak People's House had charged a research team of three persons with the duty of determining the history and chronology of the coalfield's discovery.<sup>14</sup> These included the head editor of the *Zonguldak* newspaper, Tahir Kara Uğuz Bey, as well as Hüseyin Fehmi, a former superintendent of the mines (1910–1921) who, no longer a pasha of the empire but a bey of the Republic, was serving as president of the Zonguldak Chamber of Commerce. The third was Ahmet Naim, representative of the People's House publication committee.

In the subsequent year, 1934, Naim (1904–1967) published his own account of the Uzun Mehmed story, a condensed version of the collectively authored account that had just been published, as part of his book entitled *The Zonguldak Coalfield: From Uzun Mehmed to Today*. We must see the 1933 collective account as the more official story since it had the imprimatur of the state-organized People's House. The plot lines of the two versions are essentially identical, but there are some important differences in the details.

In brief, both the People's House and Naim's accounts relate how Uzun Mehmed returned from military service in the Istanbul naval yards, remembering how he and other discharged soldiers were shown coal samples and

promised rewards should they find coal in their home districts. Constantly searching for the stones that burned, he found them one day in the autumn of 1829, as he was killing time waiting near a mill to grind his grain. Keeping his discovery a secret, he went to Istanbul in the spring of 1830, and there received both a cash award and a lifetime salary. Richly rewarded and honored, the hero incurred the jealous wrath of a local notable, whose lackeys poisoned Uzun Mehmed on his return visit to the capital.

Both versions dismiss rival stories that attributed the discovery of coal to a wandering shepherd or local notable. Instead, they focused on the person of Uzun Mehmed, “a quick-witted man”; the discovery of coal “in Turkey” was no accident but derived from his actions, his taking advantage of an opportunity. Thus, the authors offered a vision of great deeds springing from individual peasant initiative and an eye to opportunity. Both versions drive home the message that the common man could score important achievements and gain wealth and fame, regardless of rural, peasant origins. Pointedly, in both versions the initiative for Uzun Mehmed’s actions comes from above, from the state that offers the common man the necessary direction and opportunity for success. The lesson seems clear enough: in republican Turkey the key to success was a resourceful peasantry following the lead of an informed state elite, pursuing opportunity. “Uzun Mehmed is a national hero.”

Their Uzun Mehmed story, which was disseminated nationally, also illustrated for its republican audience the callous disregard of the Ottoman state for the common man. After Uzun Mehmed was murdered, the state punished the killers<sup>15</sup> but took no action of any kind to help his widow and children. The “sultanate remained indifferent to the family of Uzun Mehmed which had lost its head.” Under the Ottomans they remained in poverty, uncared for and neglected. “But the sunshine of the Republic shed light on this event which no longer remained in darkness.” Thanks to the investigations of the People’s House committee, a holiday was established in the name of Uzun Mehmed, a monument was built, and his name was given to streets, avenues, and gardens. “The republican administration [also] ... took the family of Uzun Mehmed under its protection ... [and] “assistance was given to individuals of the poor family of Uzun Mehmed which exists today.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the republic succeeded in caring for the deserving, while the empire had utterly failed in this duty.

Turning now to the differences between these two versions, we see that Naim’s later 1934 story is a bit more dramatic and heroic, for example, in its description of Uzun Mehmed climbing by his fingernails up a mountain road to keep his secret. Meanwhile, the more official 1933 version credits anonymous officials of the (Ottoman) state for ordering the search for coal and for rewarding our hero, without any mention of the monarchy. After describing the murder, it strongly condemns the sultanate for ignoring the victim’s family. But in Naim’s story, it is the person of the sultan who plays the central role in the chain of events leading to the discovery: to avoid spending vast sums on imported coal, Sultan Mahmud II himself ordered explorations for coal in

every corner of the empire. Too, the sultan personally rewards, pensions, and honors Uzun Mehmed. Naim's story, after narrating Uzun Mehmed's murder, refrains from criticizing the sultan for failing to help the widow and children.

In a number of other differences, Naim deviates from the official version in ways that suggest he was bothered by inconsistencies in the People's House story and was trying to paper over the cracks. The People's House committee relates without comment how Uzun Mehmed was near a mill when he found the coal. But Naim notes that the mill was distant from Uzun Mehmed's village and spends some energy explaining, rather lamely, why he chose this particular mill and not the one next to his village. Also, the 1933 version simply states that Uzun Mehmed waited until spring before traveling to Istanbul. Naim, for his part, sounds puzzled when he comments that the information available to him indicates a spring departure and therefore a delay that is difficult to understand, considering the importance of the discovery. As an explanation for the delay, his speculations again seem contrived.

There are other differences between the account of Naim and that published by the full People's House committee. For example, Naim relates that the local notable, on ordering the killing, said to his two henchmen: "As soon as you find him, cut the throat of that Turk pig"<sup>17</sup>—a curious remark since almost surely the notable also was an ethnic Turk and certainly a Muslim. Here, I believe, Naim was arguing to his readers that the Ottoman Empire had a non- or even anti-Turkish nature and that its provincial elite, in this telling, was at liberty to murder Turks who were performing great deeds for the common good.

In 1932, just one year before the appearance of the People's House version, an alternate story of Uzun Mehmed had appeared in Turkish, written by Ahmed Cemal as part of a booklet on the provinces of Kastamonu and Zonguldak. He previously had published at least nine other provincial studies.<sup>18</sup> Given the timing of its appearance, the Zonguldak People's House committee and Naim likely completed and published their separate Uzun Mehmed tales with the text of this alternate version before them. They both chose to prepare versions that differ in important details from the 1932 study—which turns out to be based, sometimes verbatim, on a 1903 Ottoman account.

And so here I present the available Ottoman version, Cemal's digressions from it, and their differences from the People's House and Naim accounts. The Ottoman story appeared in a December 1903 issue of the *Sabah* newspaper, published in Istanbul. During those years, writers were giving considerable attention to the entrepreneurial ethos; it was a time, for example, when many self-help manuals appeared in print.<sup>19</sup> Noted for its efforts to curb European investors' domination of the Ottoman economy, the *Sabah* newspaper published an extensive account of the geology and production of the Zonguldak coalfield.<sup>20</sup> It impressively reproduced the best geological information on the deposits then available and gave a succinct summary of the major production locales. At the end of this long article, the author dates and describes the initial discovery of coal, in 1829. In both the structure and the sequence of the factual

presentation, this is the same story that appeared in 1933 and 1934. These versions contain many details that are tellingly different from the Ottoman newspaper account, but those that they share make clear that the republican authors had access to either the *Sabah* version or a report on which it was based (and not merely the 1932 Cemal account).

In the 1903 tale, Ottoman subscribers and listeners learn of the imperial factories' dependence on foreign sources and Sultan Mahmud's orders to look for coal in every corner of the empire. The promises of imperial rewards reach Ereğli, and it is only there and then that Uzun Mehmed is introduced, not as a returned veteran who once had served in Istanbul but as a "Kestanelik" village resident near Ereğli learning of the reward. Seeking to take advantage of "the things promised," he becomes very active in searching the area of his village. "The more he searched about, the more this person's peace of mind became spoiled." Wishing to mill flour, he goes to the Köşeazgı mill, which the newspaper story inaccurately locates near his village. Here the *Sabah* account offers a detail not present in the 1933–1934 accounts. Wandering the stream shores and becoming cold, he tries to warm himself at a village called Limancık. Inadvertently, he starts the fire on an exposed coal vein, which begins to burn.<sup>21</sup> As the black stones burn, Uzun Mehmed understands that he has discovered the coal sought by the sultan, exclaiming "I found it." He puts out the fire, retrieves his flour from the mill, goes home, and secretly returns the next day to fill a sack with coal.

At this juncture, the 1903 account again relates a detail that does not reappear in the People's House or Naim versions: that is, he leaves immediately for Istanbul, without waiting for spring. He presents his sack to officials at the imperial mint (*Darphane*) who examine the sample and pronounce it to be coal. The sultan then issues a decree, awarding Uzun Mehmed a decoration, a 5,000 kuruş (hereafter krs) reward, and a lifetime monthly salary of 600 krs. Here the story abruptly stops, without any mention of the Ereğli notable or the untimely death of Uzun Mehmed.<sup>22</sup>

This 1903 account is remarkable for the individuation of the discoverer.<sup>23</sup> The sultan certainly is credited, and the state in his person is the ultimate author of the discovery. But in the *Sabah* newspaper story, more agency than in the People's House or Naim version is given to the person of Uzun Mehmed, a "curious person" who acts tirelessly and decisively to take advantage of an available opportunity to enrich himself. In its recounting, *Sabah* implies that he left immediately for Istanbul. Moreover, he summons his determination to find coal not for the sake of the empire, nor even for the sultan but rather for his own profit. The *Sabah* story, in my view, is presenting Uzun Mehmed as a role model, an Ottoman entrepreneur diligently striving for gain who becomes wildly successful. Thus, the story ends as he gains his recognition, reward and pension.

The 1932 Cemal version follows the 1903 Ottoman account in a nearly verbatim fashion, also stopping at a successful, un-murdered Uzun Mehmed. Most but not all of the few variations from the 1903 story are populist or Turkish embellishments. In the 1932 account the sultan's order is to find coal in

Anatolia, not in every corner of the empire. To this end, the sultan is encouraging the masses (*halk*) to look for coal. Uzun Mehmed is described as “a very poor villager.” He does not cry out “I found it” (as he does in the *Sabah*, People’s House, and Naim versions). But otherwise, the structure and the details of the 1932 story are identical to those in the 1903 newspaper—including the burning earth, the Limancik locale, the immediate Istanbul departure via the same road, and the audience with the grateful sultan. The hero in 1932 is nearly the same as in 1903—an enterprising peasant who makes his fortune—but with a slight Turkish nationalist twist. It is quite likely that Cemal had direct access to the newspaper story.

With varying degrees of emphasis, all four versions—1903, 1932, 1933, and 1934—feature an energetic and creative Uzun Mehmed. Cemal, in his 1932 study, uncritically takes the 1903 Ottoman story, translates it into modern Turkish, and disseminates it to his Turkish audience essentially without modification. As stated, the only differences, beyond the missing “I found it” quote, concern his mild introduction of Turkish nationalist themes. Beginning just one year later, however, the intellectuals and officials in the coalfield would produce a radically different version with a considerably beefed-up Turkish nationalist component that went well beyond Cemal’s presentation. As part of this endeavor, they insert and bring into high relief a tale of Ottoman corruption and decadence. In the 1933 and 1934 accounts, agents of the corrupt and ungrateful Ottoman state strike down the hero at the very moment of his success. Thus, three decades after Uzun Mehmed appeared in the 1903 story as an entrepreneurial model for individual action in a capitalist world, that story is revised: now, cast in a republican aura, he has evolved into a model of a different sort, a patriotic common man being accorded his just recognition by a grateful nation.

Moreover, to repeat, the differences between the 1932 version by Cemal and those by the People’s House and Naim are truly striking, given that only a single year separates the appearance of the first and the latter two. Surely we are witnessing the impact of the emergence of the People’s House on the writing of the past. The publication of the story, in both its People’s House and Naim versions, aimed to disseminate a tale of an energetic national hero brutally murdered by local notables who sought only their own interests, unrestrained by a cold and indifferent Ottoman state. By contrast, the republic thanks, recognizes, honors, and rewards the obedient and productive sons of the fatherland. The Uzun Mehmed memorials, holidays, and parades similarly intended to promote a unified vision of this newly reconstructed past, shared by Kemalist elites and the masses alike. The Uzun Mehmed story thus illustrates the process of value formation and nation-building by the Turkish republican elite through the vehicle of the People’s Houses.<sup>24</sup>

Since 1934, nearly all of the studies (approximately a dozen in number) that discuss the Ottoman-era coalfield at any length follow the Uzun Mehmed story as related by the Zonguldak People’s House and Ahmet Naim. The vast majority of their authors had a direct personal connection with the coalfield: prominent

among them are Sina Çıladı, Zonguldak newspaper editor and son of Ahmet Naim, and several professional engineers, many of whom wrote after they had moved away from the coalfield. They include just one former miner, Erol Çatma, and two academics, Özeke and Kiray.<sup>25</sup> None of the authors focuses exclusively on the Ottoman era, which normally is presented as a cautionary preamble, a reminder of the bad old days before the Turkish Republic.

In a 1944 article, the former mine superintendent, Hüseyin Fehmi, repeats the finding of the People's House commission in which he participated (but does not offer Naim's later justification for Uzun Mehmed's traveling to a distant flour mill).<sup>26</sup> In his 1970 study, Sina Çıladı acknowledges the existence of a rival 1822 dating of coal's discovery (see below) but accepts as definitive the 1933–1934 findings of the People's House committee and of Naim.<sup>27</sup> In the substantial 1977 revision of his earlier book, Çıladı reiterates his position and introduces new material to explain the murder of Uzun Mehmed, basing his explanation on a 1964 study by M. Kiray. In her field research, Kiray found that the village near Uzun Mehmed's discovery had "belonged to" a notable family, the Karamahmudzadeler. Having based its fortunes on coal, this family emerged later in the nineteenth century as one of the most powerful in the region but, during the 1820s, it was rivaled by the Hacı İsmailoğluları. The head of this family, Hacı İsmailoğlu, was angered by the discovery that enhanced the wealth of his opponents, so he ordered Uzun Mehmed's murder.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, a chief mining engineer, Savaşkan, in a concise and useful 1990s history of the coalfield, summarizes the transmission of the Uzun Mehmed story and its rival discovery alternatives.<sup>29</sup> After evaluating the various stories, he comes down on the side of the 1829 Uzun Mehmed version.

A number of alternate accounts to the Uzun Mehmed story have remained in circulation since 1933–1934, but so far to little effect. Özeke offered the most complete presentation of the main rival version in 1944. He presents the discoverer of the coal as Hacı İsmail, a discharged marine from Kestaneci village near Ereğli who in 1822 responds to the appeals, finds coal, and is awarded 5,000 krs by the sultan. Yet the deposit lay undeveloped for years when Uzun Mehmed appears and enters the service of the Safranbolu head administrator, then in charge of Ereğli. He is none other than İsmail Agha, the son of the original discoverer. Following several years of searching, Uzun Mehmed discovers the coal, receives his reward in Istanbul and is then murdered by the jealous İsmail Agha.<sup>30</sup> A brief 1976 account supports the 1822 date.<sup>31</sup> Most recently, in 1998, the former miner Çatma accepts 1822 as the initial discovery date but says that the importance of coal did not become clear until later. Hence, the first real exploitation occurred only in 1848.<sup>32</sup>

The triumph of Uzun Mehmed over Hacı İsmail as the discoverer of coal surely is linked generally to the populist impulses of the Kemalist state and in particular to the labors of the People's House to forge links between the state and the peasants. Given the goals of the People's House and its efforts to create a common vision between state elites and the people, the victory of the version

crediting the poor peasant Uzun Mehmed over the story supporting Hacı İsmail, scion of an aristocratic family, seems inevitable. Uzun Mehmed served as a vehicle to disguise the real differences between republican peasants and elites, and all could enjoy his enshrinement as national hero. A victorious Hacı İsmail, for its part, symbolically would have meant the triumph of notable over peasant, an impossibility given the populist logic of early 1930s Turkey.<sup>33</sup>

### *Uzun Mehmed in Global Perspective and the Historiography of the Coalfield*

There is a false ring to the entire Uzun Mehmed (and Hacı İsmail) story, in both its Ottoman and Turkish versions. Namely, the premise that the local population was unaware of the existence of the coal until 1829 (or 1822) is implausible, given both the exposed nature of the rich seams, on the very surface, and the history of other coal discoveries across the globe. For many centuries elsewhere in the world, such as in England and China, populations of coal-bearing regions knew about and used the “stones that burned” for heating and cooking well before the industrial revolution. Similarly, Native Americans were very familiar with the coal seams of Pennsylvania and helped European settlers locate the deposits.<sup>34</sup> Discoveries of coal, other minerals, or valued commodities commonly were serendipitous, if not apocryphal. For example, I remember reading about the accidental discovery of coffee, by a shepherd in the Yemeni hills who noticed the strange behavior of goats feeding on certain bushes. Similarly, Sutter’s great discovery of California gold was purely by accident.

In most coal discovery tales though, its presence is well known and the crucial factor becomes the economic motive for its exploitation. In our story, we are supposed to believe, local villagers were unaware of these abundant, visible deposits until the state intervened to set in motion the chain of events leading to the coal’s discovery by a local. That is, the Ottoman-era and the 1932, 1933 and 1934 versions generally share a vision of the state as the *primum mobile*, the agent responsible for the subsequent chain of events. In the *Sabah* account, this quality is filtered through the economic liberalism of the editors. The statist version is most starkly evident in the People’s House account which, after all, was an officially sponsored writing project. In sum, the Uzun Mehmed (or Hacı İsmail) story illustrates the centrality of the state in the historiographical tradition of both the empire and its Turkish successor republic.

The shadow of the state is similarly present in the periodization of the mines’ history. This completely state-centered chronological ordering is organized to narrate the succession of government ministries’ supervision of the mines. The early studies by the Zonguldak People’s House and Naim not only established the Uzun Mehmed orthodoxy but also set the periodization of coal-mining history. This chronology emerges more clearly in Naim, who plainly organizes the history according to the government body administering the coalfield.

1848–1865	Privy Purse
1865–1909	Ministry of Marine
1909–1920	Ministry of Commerce
post-1920	Ministry of the Economy <sup>35</sup>

With minor adjustments to some of the dates, this periodization prevails up to the present, adopted by virtually all of those writing on the mines. Even authors who quarrel with the Uzun Mehmed story follow this ministerial timetable.<sup>36</sup> This chronology implies that state actions drove the tempo, timing, and course of events and were the crucial variable that explains the history of the Zonguldak mines.

But such a periodization is not terribly useful if we seek to explain unfolding developments in the coalfield, except for its 1848 starting date, when real exploitation apparently began. Whether it was the Ministry of Marine or the Ministry of Commerce that was in charge is irrelevant to the story, and the shift from one ministry to another was not a decisive turning point. Rather, we should look to new demands for coal that emerged thanks to vast increases in the number of steamships plying Black Sea and other Ottoman ports, in urban utilities, and in Ottoman steam-powered factories. There were turning points: for example, a decision taken in 1882 to permit free sales of coal. It was, to be sure, a result of state action, but one taken only after enormous pressure from entrepreneurs. Similarly, other key events in the history of the mines—such as ending the restrictions on labor recruitment in 1906 and the civilianization of the mining administration in 1910—resulted from private initiatives and lobbying. The claim that such state decisions were decisive interventions is true only in the very narrowest meaning of the phrase—if the state had not acted then labor supplies would have been worse and the administration would have remained a military one. Yet these state decisions were the effects of ongoing changes, not their cause. Therefore, the continuing primacy of a state-based chronology in coal-mining history is not actually a function of governmental importance; rather, it mainly derives from the ongoing dominance of a state-centered historiographical tradition in both Ottoman and republican Turkish historical writing.

Since nearly all the authors focus on the state and its actions or inactions, they view workers through state-ground lenses. These authors often are respectful of workers and their rights. Özeke, for his part, expresses great frustration over their lack of full-time proletarian status, which to his mind would assure a more regular labor supply. With an eye on the state, most of these histories are mainly concerned with coalfield operations, production, state policies, imperialism, and issues of non-Muslim mine ownership. In these areas of concern, they offer a great deal of valuable information. But rarely do the authors discuss working conditions or wages, even though elsewhere in the world, the miners usually are the center of attention in coal-mining narratives. Some writers, such as Naim and Çıladı, are deeply sympathetic to workers and accord them much space in their narratives. But in my view, theirs is always sympathy from

a distance or, more precisely, from above. These two discuss workers mainly as victims of Ottoman state neglect and beneficiaries of enlightened republican state policies. Indeed, this is the generally shared view of workers among our authors, when they discuss workers at all. Only Çatma, himself a former miner, maintains a focus on workers and their living conditions, making them the central subject of his narrative.

This state-focused approach distorts both the chronology and our understanding of the engines of change in the coalfield. In addition, it promotes a view of legislation as an actual description of conditions rather than a normative set of rules. Thus, there is nearly unanimous uncritical praise for the 1867 regulations, named for the first mine superintendent, Dilaver Pasha, who created the compulsory rotational labor system. Without much discussion, nearly all writers on the topic equate these regulations with actual working conditions after 1867 (which, as I will demonstrate, was clearly not the case). Yet, they go on to discuss the appalling working conditions of the later Ottoman era, not seeing the contradiction between their acceptance of the 1867 rules as reality and their critique of working conditions supposedly governed by those rules. They then discuss the new mine labor laws of the early republic that, they argue, ameliorated these deplorable conditions. Consistent with their statist bias, they do not consider such legislation from the workers' perspective or ask if, indeed, the legislation enacted actually ever was implemented. Their goal is to assert the beneficent intentions of state elites and the consequent identity of interests between state and worker.

The present study is a break, but only a partial one, with prevailing trends in Ottoman history writing. It diverges from the statist perspective of most Ottoman historians' narratives to present a history from below—so called not because of the underground worksites but because workers and villagers stand at the very center of the narrative. This study contributes to the modest but important body of scholarship narrating the lives of workers, peasants, and other non-elite groups in Ottoman society,<sup>37</sup> who together with their families constituted 90 percent of the total Ottoman population and generated most of the wealth that financed the ambitions of the elites.

It also differs from most Ottoman historical writing in the nature of the sources utilized. The majority of Ottoman historical narratives have their source in the massive archives of the central Ottoman state, located in Istanbul, with the disadvantages that I mentioned above. More recently, a second set of sources has emerged. The records of the Ottoman courts have offered a valuable local rather imperial perspective and present a better view of non-elite Ottoman life.<sup>38</sup> A different source base is used here and suggests the value of a third kind of data set for labor and other historians. Within the empire were thousands of large and small concentrations of labor, ranging from home manufacturing and small workshops to factories (as well as mining enterprises). There can be no doubt that the records of some of these concentrations, whether generated by the state or privately, have survived in scattered