

REVIEW

Constantin Ardeleanu, *Un drum de fier prin „Estul Sălbatic”: Dobrogea otomană în zorii capitalismului*, Humanitas, București, 2025, 404 p.

The author of this book once again lives up to his reputation. In his most recent work, *Un drum de fier prin „Estul Sălbatic”: Dobrogea otomană în zorii capitalismului*, he succeeds in linking a subject that, until recently, had been treated rather as a local phenomenon, disconnected from broader processes and debates to international historiography. Moreover, the author once again proves to be an excellent "guide" for the reader. Following his earlier journeys along the Danube, he now proposes an equally captivating "shortcut": the Constanța–Cernavodă railway.

The book traces the history of the railway between Cernavodă and Constanța, which the author examines not merely as a technical achievement, but as a phenomenon with economic, political, and social implications. Building on the idea of the "shortcut," the volume shows how this infrastructure contributed to the integration of Ottoman Dobruja into international trade and into the wider transformations of the nineteenth century. In this respect, the railway is presented as part of broader processes of modernisation, as well as of economic and political competition among different actors.

The structure of the volume reflects this integrative approach, being organised into nine chapters that coherently follow the development of the railway project. The opening chapters explore the genesis of the initiative and the international context in which it was conceived, including debates over alternative infrastructure solutions (a canal or a railway) and the diplomatic negotiations conducted in Istanbul to secure the concession. The central section of the book focuses on the actual construction and operation of the line, emphasising both technical and financial challenges, as well as the relationships between British investors, the Ottoman administration, and local actors. The final chapters broaden the analysis to encompass the socio-economic and ecological impact of the infrastructure on Dobruja, addressing the urban transformation of Constanța, the dynamics of local communities, and the role of the railway in redefining the region's position after its incorporation into the Romanian state.

A key concept that can structure the reading of the volume is that of "connectivity." The book may be read as an analysis of multiple levels of connection. First, at the level of the subject itself, the author examines the construction of the railway between Constanța and Cernavodă. However, this infrastructure does not simply connect two geographical points but integrates Ottoman Dobruja into broader networks of circulation of goods, capital, and ideas. In the author's interpretation, the railway appears as a "shortcut" that

compresses space and time and facilitates the region's insertion into the global economy of the nineteenth century.

Secondly, the volume highlights how the initiatives of British capitalists generated multiple transformations: economic, technological, social, and even environmental. Particularly suggestive is the characterisation of the project as a veritable "polytechnic institute," in which local populations were introduced to new technologies and specialised labour practices. This interpretation aligns with the perspective explicitly formulated in the book, which conceives infrastructure as a "complex and hybrid assemblage" that transcends its purely technical dimension.

Thirdly, the book emphasises the importance of personal connections and transnational networks in implementing a large-scale infrastructure project. The central figure, John Trevor Barkley, emerges as a key actor not only through his engineering expertise but especially through his ability to articulate relationships across different spheres: British private capital, the Ottoman administration, and various regional political and diplomatic actors. His experience within the Ottoman Empire, knowledge of the Turkish language, and familiarity with local bureaucratic mechanisms enabled him to function as an effective intermediary between distinct institutional and cultural environments, thereby reducing the frictions inherent in such collaborations.

At the same time, Barkley's case illustrates that infrastructure is not merely the result of capital investment and technological progress, but also the product of networks of trust, influence, and negotiation. The success of the project depended on the actors' ability to mobilise financial resources, secure favourable concessions, and navigate tensions among the different centres of power, from London and Istanbul to the local level. In this sense, the volume offers a relevant case study of how concessionary capitalism functioned in the nineteenth century, relying as much on personal relationships as on formal institutional mechanisms.

Moreover, the management of an extremely heterogeneous workforce, in which, as the author notes, "32 languages and dialects were spoken", highlights the global dimension of this type of initiative. This linguistic and cultural diversity represented not only a logistical challenge, but also a social and political one, requiring specific forms of organisation, discipline, and conflict mediation. In this respect, the railway construction site emerges as a microcosm of early globalisation, in which labour mobility, technology transfer, and intercultural interactions become defining elements of the building process.

Through sustained attention to actors and networks, Constantin Ardeleanu successfully complements the structural analysis of infrastructure with an essential relational dimension, demonstrating that modernisation cannot be fully understood without interactions among individuals, institutions, and diverse cultural environments.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the volume connects the historiography of Dobruja, particularly that concerning the period prior to 1878,

with broader directions in international scholarship. The author distances himself from earlier traditions of Romanian historiography, which tended to marginalise the Ottoman period and to privilege a narrative of the region's "civilising" transformation following its incorporation into the Romanian state. Instead, Dobruja is analysed as a dynamic periphery of the Ottoman Empire, actively involved in administrative, economic, and infrastructural experiments.

From this perspective, the work makes an important contribution to studies devoted to the "peripheries" of the Ottoman Empire, understood as vilayets, kazas, or other spaces situated at the geographical and administrative margins of imperial authority. This relatively recent line of research has developed especially over the past two decades, in close connection with a growing interest in regional dynamics and in centre–periphery relations within imperial contexts. Nevertheless, the attention of both Turkish and Western historians has focused primarily on other regions, such as Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Crete, or Cyprus. At the same time, Dobruja has remained comparatively marginal in these discussions.

Although Ottoman Dobruja has received some attention in the scholarly literature, this has focused mainly on earlier periods, especially the medieval era. For the nineteenth century, however, contributions remain relatively few and fragmentary. Notable exceptions include the works of Kemal H. Karpat, who examines demographic developments in the region and addresses topics such as the founding of Medgidia and the history of Babadag. Dobruja has also been discussed within the broader context of the reforms of Midhat Pasha, governor of the Danube Vilayet between 1864 and 1868, whose policies transformed the region into a veritable laboratory of administrative reform and served as a model for other provinces of the empire. In this regard, one may also mention the studies of Bekir Koç on Midhat Pasha, as well as the monographs on the Danube Vilayet authored by Mehmet Çelik and Yalçın Murgul.

At the same time, it should be noted that Bulgarian historiography, in certain respects, makes more substantial contributions to the study of Ottoman Dobruja in the nineteenth century than Romanian scholarship. A relevant example is the work of Slavka Draganova (*Tuna Vilayetinin Köy Nüfusu*, 2006), which analyses the rural demographic structure of the Danube Vilayet and provides a useful framework for understanding regional developments.

In this context, Constantin Ardeleanu's volume fills an important gap in the scholarship by offering a coherent and well-documented analysis of Ottoman Dobruja in the nineteenth century.

Another relevant aspect of the book is its departure from orientalist clichés. The Ottoman Empire is not portrayed as a passive or "indolent" actor, but rather as an active participant in the negotiation and implementation of infrastructure projects. The rivalries between different initiatives—whether canal or railway, or alternative transport routes—are interpreted as forms of

competition for influence over Ottoman political decision-making. At the same time, the imperial administration appears capable of defending its own interests in its interactions with foreign investors.

From a methodological perspective, the volume stands out for its integration of diverse theoretical approaches, ranging from infrastructure studies and science and technology studies to political economy and environmental history. This interdisciplinary framework enables a nuanced analysis of the relationship between technology, power, and society, highlighting both the transformative potential of infrastructure and its inherent vulnerabilities and limitations.

At the same time, the author's writing style represents one of the volume's major strengths. Ardeleanu successfully combines precise technical details—costs, measurements, engineering aspects—with narrative episodes that illustrate the region's social complexity, including labour conflicts, acts of violence, and the sometimes unconventional behaviour of travellers. This combination enhances the work's accessibility without diminishing its scholarly rigour.

The author also devotes significant attention to the internal dynamics of Dobrujan society. The volume convincingly captures the impact of infrastructure on local communities, highlighting transformations generated by increased mobility, population movements, and the reconfiguration of the regional economy. The analysis of the development of urban centres such as Constanța and Medgidia, as well as the references to the region's ethnic and confessional diversity, demonstrate that the author consistently integrates the local perspective within the broader framework of global processes. Equally important are his observations on how the railway reshaped occupational structures, labour practices, and social relations in the region, as well as its impact on the environment and spatial organisation. In this respect, the book goes beyond an analysis of capital and technology flows, offering instead a nuanced account of how these processes were experienced, negotiated, and adapted at the local level. In doing so, the volume maintains a solid balance between these two levels of analysis, providing a complex picture of the interaction between infrastructure and society.

In conclusion, Constantin Ardeleanu's volume represents a major contribution to the study of the history of Dobruja, the Ottoman Empire, and, more broadly, modernity in Southeastern Europe. Through its integrative perspective, the author convincingly demonstrates that an infrastructure project can serve as a privileged lens for analysing the intersection of capital, state, technology, and society in a frontier setting. By combining economic, political, and social analysis with approaches drawn from infrastructure studies and science and technology studies, the work contributes to moving beyond traditional interpretations and to situating Dobruja within a broader historiographical framework.

The volume's significance is further reflected in its contribution to a better understanding of modern Romanian history. The book shows that the incorporation of Dobruja into the Romanian state after 1878 did not mark the beginning of a process of modernisation, but rather the continuation and adaptation of transformations already underway during the Ottoman period. The earlier-built infrastructure was taken over and further developed by the Romanian state, becoming a central element of economic development and territorial integration. In this sense, the study offers a nuanced perspective on the relationship between continuity and change, inviting a reconsideration of historiographical narratives that have tended to downplay the role of the Ottoman period, while also highlighting Dobruja's position as a space shaped by the intersection of imperial, regional, and national dynamics.

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