

BOOK REVIEW

Choon Hwee Koh, *The Sublime Post: How the Ottoman Imperial Post Became a Public Service*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024. 272 pages.
doi:[10.1017/npt.2025.13](https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2025.13)

Choon Hwee Koh's *The Sublime Post: How the Ottoman Imperial Post Became a Public Service* offers a fresh historiographic intervention in Ottoman studies, challenging traditional narratives of state formation that oscillate between centralization, decentralization, and transformation. Instead, Koh introduces the concept of “thickening governance,” inspired by Molly Greene, to explain the Ottoman Empire's evolving bureaucratic structures between 1500 and 1840, with a primary focus on the period between the 1690s and the 1760s. This paradigm shift moves beyond the binary framework of de/centralization, highlighting the delegation of authority and the coevolutionary dynamics between bureaucrats, officials, and common subjects.

By framing the evolution of the postal system as an example of “thickening governance,” the book demonstrates how the Empire expanded its administrative reach by incorporating myriad local intermediaries such as villagers and postmasters into bureaucratic processes. This approach aligns with recent historiographical trends that emphasize the role of intermediaries and the fluidity of state–society boundaries. Moreover, the book builds on Baki Tezcan's concept of the “Second Ottoman Empire,” which emphasizes the profound transformation of the Ottoman state following the political crises of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Koh engages with this framework to illustrate how infrastructural developments, like the postal system, reflect the broader dynamics of state formation and governance during the Second Empire. Drawing on Michael Mann's concept of “infrastructural power,” Koh illustrates how the Ottoman postal system enhanced the state's capacity, weight, and reach across the Empire. The postal network is not merely a communication tool but a lens through which the evolving set of relations constituting state formation can be understood. This system's near-universal presence across the Empire underscores its role as a key site for examining the interplay between imperial authority and local agency.

Rather than simply providing a chronological narrative, the book is organized thematically, examining how various figures – both human and non-human – contributed to the formation and expansion of the Ottoman postal network. Chapter 1 lays the groundwork by tracing the early history of Ottoman postal operations, emphasizing how it initially relied on *ad hoc* horse confiscations before evolving into a more structured relay network. This transition, which began in the sixteenth century, highlights a broader transformation in imperial governance, as the state moved from arbitrary requisitions to an increasingly bureaucratic and systematic mode of governance. By establishing fixed post stations and regulating access to horses, the

Ottoman administration sought to create a more efficient, albeit imperfect, communication network that would serve both military and administrative needs.

Chapter 2 examines the couriers (*ulak*) responsible for physically transporting imperial decrees and official correspondence. Koh presents couriers not only as logistical agents but also as figures of both necessity and disruption. She illustrates how they were often depicted as unruly and exploitative by Ottoman chroniclers, local communities, and European travelers, sometimes resorting to coercion and violence to secure fresh horses. Yet, despite their negative portrayal, couriers were indispensable to the Empire's administrative machinery, as they ensured the swift and reliable transmission of official orders across vast distances, maintaining governance and military coordination.

Chapter 3 explores the transformation of the *ulak* into the *tatar*, reflecting the Ottoman state's increasing attempts at bureaucratic regulation. As the eighteenth century progressed, couriers were gradually integrated into formalized state structures, given uniforms, and subjected to greater oversight. This transition signifies an effort to curb the disorderly nature of early postal operations while institutionalizing communication networks. Tatars, unlike their predecessors, were no longer independent agents but fully embedded in the bureaucratic hierarchy, illustrating the Empire's growing infrastructural power. Chapter 4 is crucial in understanding the legislative interventions that shaped this process. Koh challenges the prevailing argument that Sultan Mustafa II's 1696 reforms represented a shift toward privatization, instead demonstrating how they reinforced state control by standardizing horse requisitioning, imposing nominal fees, and integrating the postal network more tightly into the imperial bureaucracy. She argues that rather than surrendering postal operations to market forces, the Ottoman bureaucracy sought to regulate and rationalize its infrastructure, introducing measures to standardize horse requisitioning and imposing nominal fees while maintaining state oversight. These reforms, though well-intentioned, often resulted in administrative friction, as local actors adapted them to their own needs, sometimes subverting imperial directives.

Chapter 5 demonstrates how financial administration became central to the functioning of the postal system. Through an analysis of registers like the *menzil defteri*, Koh illustrates how book-keepers played a pivotal role in tracking postal expenditures, stabilizing fiscal operations, and systematizing communication costs. Then, in Chapter 6, she highlights the role of postmasters as key intermediaries who not only facilitated postal operations but also compiled *in'āmāt defteri* (Fee Waiver Registers). These records, which documented exemptions from postal fees for designated individuals or groups, helped standardize operations and ensured a level of bureaucratic accountability, integrating provincial administration with the imperial center while also allowing for a degree of local flexibility.

Chapter 7 shifts focus to the rural communities that sustained the postal system. Koh challenges the notion that villagers were merely passive subjects burdened by the Empire's logistical needs. Instead, she demonstrates that they were active participants who shaped the workings of the postal network by negotiating their obligations, resisting local and central authorities' excessive demands, and, in some cases, collectively petitioning the state. The use of nested suretyships, where entire communities were made collectively responsible for the upkeep of relay stations

further illustrates the reciprocal nature of governance, as the state and local actors engaged in negotiation and adaptation.

Finally, Chapter 8 explores the systemic vulnerabilities of the Ottoman postal network, particularly during times of economic distress. It details how horse shortages, liquidity crises, and infrastructural failures often disrupted postal operations, revealing the limits of thickening governance. Focusing on the transition from deferred payment to cash-based payment systems, Koh demonstrates how these fiscal mechanisms added new layers of bureaucratic complexity. While the deferred payment system alleviated immediate cash burdens, it often led to accumulated debts and strained local resources, whereas the cash payment system, though designed for efficiency, introduced liquidity pressures that many provincial actors could not sustain.

These financial shifts not only expose systemic vulnerabilities but also highlight the unintended consequences of administrative reforms. This aligns with theoretical frameworks from Science and Technology Studies (STS), particularly the concept of “infrastructural inversion,” where moments of failure make otherwise invisible systems visible. That is, when infrastructure works smoothly, it tends to go unnoticed, but when it breaks down – whether due to shortages, inefficiencies, or disruptions – its underlying mechanisms and dependencies become apparent. The breakdown of the Ottoman postal system, thus, revealed the financial strains on provincial communities and the challenges of sustaining logistical networks.

One of the book’s key strengths is its innovative use of primary sources. Koh integrates a wide range of Ottoman archival materials including imperial decrees, fiscal registers, court records, and travelogues, such as Evliya Çelebi’s *Seyahatname*, as well as postal system-specific registers like *menzil defteri* (Comprehensive Post Station Registers), *in’āmāt defteri* (Fee Waiver Registers), and fiscal documents from the *mevkūfāt kâlemi* (Bureau of Contributions in Kind). This multi-source methodology allows her to uncover hidden narratives, such as the economic pressures faced by villagers obliged to support postal stations and the bureaucratic dilemmas surrounding liquidity crises.

While the book excels in its analytical depth, certain areas could present opportunities for further research. The connection between different actors sometimes feels fragmented; for instance, the relationship between villagers’ collective actions and the evolving role of postmasters could be more tightly integrated. Additionally, some concepts, such as the normative implications of “thickening governance,” are treated as self-evident and could be unpacked further, especially in relation to resistance mechanisms at the local level. Another aspect that could be expanded is the actual content of the letters transported through the Ottoman postal system. While Koh meticulously reconstructs the logistical and bureaucratic dimensions of postal operations, the absence of surviving correspondence prevents a deeper exploration of the political, economic, and social discourses that these networks facilitated.

This omission raises broader historiographical questions: How did the content of imperial decrees, petitions, or private communications shape governance, diplomacy, or local resistance? Without access to the textual substance of these exchanges, the book’s analysis remains confined to the infrastructure of communication rather than its ideological or rhetorical functions. This future research agenda is particularly

significant given that early modern Ottoman politics was often mediated through written orders and petitions, which not only conveyed authority but also structured the terms of negotiation between the imperial center and the provinces. The inability to reconstruct these textual interactions limits our understanding of how governance was not just enacted logistically but also articulated discursively.

These issues notwithstanding, *The Sublime Post* is a significant contribution to Ottoman historiography, offering a nuanced analysis of state formation and evolution through the lens of postal infrastructure. Koh's focus on everyday actors and bureaucratic practices provides a compelling narrative that bridges the gap between political, social, and economic history. The book's historiographic and analytical insights make it an essential read for students of Ottoman history and state formation. Furthermore, it opens avenues for future research, both theoretically and archivally, encouraging scholars to examine the complexities of Ottoman governance and infrastructural development.

Furkan Elmas 

Department of History, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Email: felmas@sas.upenn.edu