ÖAW

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CONVENOR

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Illustration: "The Bosnian Crisis", Le Petit Journal, October 18, 1918

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BRILL

ÖAW Austrian Academy of Sciences

JESHO International Workshop

Was There an Ottoman Decline?

Oct. 15-16, 2025
Start: 18:00

Austrian Academy of Sciences
4th Floor, Seminar Room 5
Dominikanerbastei 16
1010 Vienna

Was There an Ottoman Decline?

In the existing literature on the breakthrough to modernity and the "great divergence," a considerable number of scholars have attributed the so-called rise of the West to specific institutional factors. More specifically, the defining character of Western civilization is said to reside in the notion of secure property rights, a notion that was developed at a relatively early stage in history, especially in European "core areas" such as England, France and the Netherlands. This line of thinking goes back at least to the work of the economic historian Douglass North and in recent years has been embraced by eminent scholars such as Avner Greif, Timur Kuran, and James Robinson. This body of scholarship produced by institutionalists is premised upon the assumption that state formations in the East (chiefly, the Ottoman Empire, Qing China, Mughal India, and Tsarist Russia) privileged institutional arrangements that excluded the populace from the enjoyment of rights on their possessions. Another line of thought, and one famously advocated by Max Weber, holds that the "failure" to be the same as Europe should ultimately be laid at the door of culture. This is a type of explanation that can be termed "residual," which enjoys great traction throughout the media and in populist thinking to this very day. Whatever the cause, either legal or cultural, the divergence between West and East led to a "decline," which favoured European colonialism. There is, of course, a profound circularity in this type of reasoning because no two cultures are the same by definition.

The event aims to tackle these questions from a non-Eurocentric perspective by inviting historians specialising in different parts of Asia from the medieval period to the 20th century. Designed to reflect upon the multifarious experiences of history-writing across Asia, this workshop encourages scholars to reflect on the meaning of decline from the perspectives of their own periods, regions, and materials. The aim of this event is to highlight cutting-edge research on distinct fields of Asian studies and provide space for an academic conversation on what the past might signify for the political and cultural histories of individual regions and for the history of Asia as a whole.

Program

October 15, 2025

JESHO Lecture on Asian History

18:00

Welcome and Introduction

Paolo Sartori, Austrian Academy of Sciences

18:10

Keynote

Cemal Kafadar, Harvard University
The Nagging Question of Ottoman Decline

October 16, 2025

A Roundtable Discussion on the Annual *JESHO* Lecture

10:00

Dana Sajdi, Boston College, NY,
Abdurrahman Atcil, Sabanci University, Istanbul,
M'hamed Oualdi, EUI, Florence,
Evrim Binbaş, University of Bonn
Responses to Cemal Kafadar

12:00

Reception