The Celali Rebellions: Crisis, Transformation, and Legacy in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire

I. Introduction: Anatomy of a Crisis

Defining the "Celali"

The series of widespread provincial uprisings that convulsed the Ottoman Empire during the late 16th and early to mid-17th centuries are known collectively as the Celali Rebellions (Turkish: *Celalî ayaklanmaları*).[1] The term itself, meaning "belonging to Celal," is derived from a specific, and in many ways distinct, historical figure: Bozoklu Celal, also known as Şah Veli.[1] In 1519, during the reign of Sultan Selim I, this preacher from the Bozok region (modern Yozgat) initiated a rebellion near Tokat, fueled by Shi'ite religious fervor.[3] Though his revolt was swiftly and violently suppressed within the same year, his name was posthumously repurposed by the Ottoman state.[4] Subsequently, for over a century, the central administration applied the label "Celali" as a generic and pejorative term for a vast and disparate range of rebellions and banditry movements across Anatolia, regardless of their specific origins or aims.[1]
This terminological choice was a deliberate political act. By classifying all subsequent Anatolian unrest under the banner of a figure associated with religious heterodoxy, the Ottoman state could effectively frame complex socio-economic grievances as simple, illegitimate sedition.[9] This created a powerful narrative tool that delegitimized the rebels' cause in the eyes of the empire's Sunni orthodox establishment. The state's initial experience with Bozoklu Celal's explicitly religious and Shi'ite-inspired revolt provided a convenient and potent label to apply to later, often more secular, protests driven by the decay of the timar system, the unemployment of mercenaries, or crushing taxation.[3] This act of political branding simplified a multifaceted crisis for administrative and propaganda purposes, transforming what were often negotiations over resources and governance into a straightforward fight against heresy and treason.

Scope and Significance

The Celali Rebellions were a defining feature of Ottoman history for nearly 150 years, with documented events spanning from 1519 to at least 1659, and the most intense period of conflict occurring between 1595 and 1610.[1] These uprisings were not a single, coordinated movement but a series of overlapping revolts led by a diverse cast of characters: irregular troops (
sekban), dispossessed cavalrymen (*sipahi*), provincial officials, bandit chiefs, and aggrieved peasants.[1] The theater of conflict was primarily the empire's Anatolian heartland, the demographic and economic core of the state, with significant spillover into northern Syria.[13] Crucially, the rebellions were not, for the most part, attempts to overthrow the Ottoman dynasty or establish a new empire.[3] Rather, they were violent and desperate reactions to a profound and systemic crisis. Their historical significance is immense, as they served as both a symptom and a catalyst for the fundamental transformation of the Ottoman state. The Celali era marks the painful transition of the empire from its classical, patrimonial form—based on land grants and a feudal cavalry—into a more bureaucratic, centralized, and crisis-ridden entity reliant on cash revenues and a salaried infantry.[13] The rebellions exposed the weaknesses of the old system and violently accelerated its replacement, leaving a legacy of devastation and change that would shape the empire for the rest of its existence.

A Historiographical Prologue

The Celali Rebellions have long been a focal point for major debates in Ottoman historiography. For centuries, the dominant narrative, heavily influenced by the writings of 17th-century Ottoman observers like Koçi Bey and Katip Çelebi, framed the revolts within a "decline paradigm".[18] In this view, the rebellions were clear and tragic evidence of the empire's decay from a supposed "Golden Age" under Süleyman the Magnificent. This perspective saw the crisis as a moral and institutional failure, a fall from a previously perfect order.
However, modern scholarship since the mid-20th century has largely discarded this simplistic model, reinterpreting the era not as one of linear decline but as a period of profound "crisis and transformation".[13] This report will engage deeply with these evolving interpretations, analyzing the foundational work of Turkish historian Mustafa Akdağ, the state-centric theories of Karen Barkey, and the environmental history approach of Sam White, among others, to present a nuanced understanding of the scholarly landscape.[13] The Celali Rebellions are now understood as a historical nexus where multiple, interlocking crises—military, fiscal, demographic, and, as recently demonstrated, climatic—converged with catastrophic results, forcing the empire to adapt or perish.[13]

II. The Cauldron of Rebellion: Multifaceted Origins

The Celali Rebellions were not the product of a single grievance but rather the violent eruption of numerous, long-simmering structural problems that were ignited by a series of acute short-term shocks. The period represents a "perfect storm" in which the gradual decay of the classical Ottoman system converged with military overstretch, administrative failure, and an unprecedented environmental crisis.

The Unraveling Socio-Economic Fabric

At the heart of the crisis was the breakdown of the traditional Ottoman socio-economic order, which was built upon the *timar* system and the agrarian productivity of the Anatolian peasantry.

The Timar System in Decay

The classical Ottoman state was sustained by the *timar* system, a form of land tenure in which provincial cavalrymen, known as *sipahis*, were granted the revenue rights to an agricultural plot in exchange for military service.[10] This system provided the empire with a large, self-funding provincial army. By the late 16th century, this system was in terminal decline. The global "Military Revolution," with its emphasis on infantry armed with firearms, rendered the traditional *sipahi* cavalry less effective on the battlefield.[1] Concurrently, powerful elites in Istanbul, particularly those from the *devşirme* (levy of Christian boys) class, began to seize these land grants for themselves, often with the connivance of the central government.[3] They transformed the *timars* into private estates (*çiftliks*) or tax farms, depriving the state of both its soldiers and a stable revenue stream.[22] This process created a large and growing class of dispossessed *sipahis*—men with military training, a powerful sense of entitlement, and a deep-seated grievance against the state that had cast them aside.[3] The final catalyst for the main phase of the rebellions was a direct consequence of this decay. After the Battle of Keresztes in 1596, a roll call revealed some 30,000 *sipahis* were absent from the campaign. In a punitive measure, the state stripped them of their *timars*, instantly turning thousands of trained soldiers into desperate bandits who would form a key component of the Celali armies.[1]

Fiscal Crisis and Predatory Taxation

Simultaneously, the Ottoman central treasury was facing a severe fiscal crisis. Decades of long, expensive, and increasingly indecisive wars against the Habsburgs in the west and the Safavids in the east had drained the state's coffers.[23] This was compounded by the "Price

Revolution," a wave of high inflation across Europe and the Mediterranean caused by the influx of precious metals from the Americas, which devalued Ottoman currency and disrupted the economy.[3] The traditional trade routes through the Middle East, a major source of customs revenue, were also being bypassed by new European maritime routes.[4]
To meet its desperate need for cash to pay for its new, modern army of musketeers, the state increasingly turned away from the *timar* system and toward tax-farming, known as *iltizam*.[27] Under this system, the right to collect taxes in a certain district was sold to the highest bidder. These tax farmers, or
mültezims, having paid a large sum to the treasury, were incentivized to extract as much wealth as possible from the peasantry (*reaya*) to recoup their investment and maximize their profit.[10] This led to the imposition of crushing and often illegal extraordinary taxes (
avarız) and widespread abuse by local officials (*ehl-i örf*), who acted with impunity.[10] The systematic nature of this extortion shattered the traditional bond of trust and mutual obligation between the peasant and the state, which was supposed to provide justice and protection in return for taxes.[5]

Demographic and Agrarian Pressures

The 16th century had been a period of significant population growth in Anatolia, leading to pressure on the land, which could no longer adequately support the rising numbers.[16] This created a growing class of landless and jobless peasants. When combined with the predatory tax system, the situation became untenable. Crushed by debt and the abuses of local officials, countless peasants were forced to abandon their farms and villages, a mass exodus known in Ottoman records as
celay-ı vatan ("flight from the homeland").[5] This flight had a dual effect: it created a vast, mobile, and desperate population that provided a ready pool of recruits for bandit gangs and Celali armies, while simultaneously causing a catastrophic decline in agricultural production, leading to food shortages and further instability.[7]

The Military Revolution and Its Discontents

The global military transformation of the early modern period had profound and destabilizing consequences within the Ottoman Empire. The state's attempt to adapt to the new realities of gunpowder warfare was a primary driver of the social crisis that fueled the rebellions. The need for a modern army of musketeers led to the creation of a new class of soldiers, the *sekban* and *levend*.[1] These troops were typically recruited from the Anatolian peasantry on a temporary basis, serving provincial governors for regular pay during wartime campaigns.[3]
The problem arose in peacetime. When campaigns ended, these large bodies of trained and armed men were demobilized without pay or any means of subsistence.[3] Unsurprisingly, they

often refused to disband, instead forming large bandit companies that roamed the countryside, extorting towns and villages to support themselves.[31] These unemployed soldiers, who possessed up-to-date military skills, formed the professional fighting core of the Celali armies, transforming localized banditry into large-scale military conflict.[3]
The Celali crisis can therefore be understood as a violent and chaotic consequence of the Ottoman Empire's difficult and poorly managed military modernization. The state was simultaneously dismantling its old military-feudal structure (the *timar*/*sipahi* system) and attempting to build a new cash-based one (the *sekban*/*iltizam* system). This single, overarching policy transition created three distinct but overlapping aggrieved groups: the dispossessed *sipahis* who lost their lands and social status; the unemployed *sekbans* who were cast adrift after campaigns; and the over-taxed peasants who suffered under the predatory new tax farmers. These three groups, all victims of the same top-down state policies, formed the broad and powerful coalition that sustained the Celali Rebellions. The uprisings were not merely a reaction against the state, but a societal convulsion caused by the state's own transformative but brutally executed policies.

Political Decay and Administrative Failure

The socio-economic and military crises were exacerbated by a concurrent failure of governance. The late 16th and early 17th centuries witnessed a palpable erosion of central authority and administrative competence.[32] Sultans were often isolated in the palace, inexperienced, and unable to exert effective control over the state apparatus.[22] The administration became riddled with corruption, nepotism, and destructive factionalism.[3]
In the provinces, this decay translated into misrule and predation. Provincial governors and other officials, often having purchased their posts through bribery, saw their appointments as an opportunity for personal enrichment rather than public service.[5] The state's judicial and administrative systems failed to provide justice or security for the common people, creating a power vacuum that charismatic and ambitious rebel leaders were quick to exploit.[5] In a telling sign of the depth of the crisis, the rebellion was not confined to the lower classes. Disaffected members of the state apparatus itself, including scholars from the *ilmiye* class, military commanders, and even provincial governors, sometimes joined or led the Celali bands, lending them legitimacy and organizational skill.[1]

The Environmental Catalyst: The Little Ice Age

The final, decisive element that pushed the empire into the abyss was a severe environmental shock. Recent scholarship, most notably by the historian Sam White, has demonstrated the critical role of climate change as a catalyst for the rebellions.[13] The period from 1591 to 1596 was marked by one of the most extreme and prolonged droughts in the past 600 years in

Anatolia.[24] This was followed by several decades of erratic and extreme weather—including severe cold, frosts, and floods—associated with a global climatic phenomenon known as the Little Ice Age.[24]

This climatic downturn had catastrophic consequences. It led to repeated, widespread harvest failures, which in turn caused devastating famines and deadly outbreaks of epidemic disease among both humans and livestock.[24] This environmental crisis acted as a massive systemic shock, pushing an already stressed and fragile society to its absolute breaking point.[24] The environmental disaster was not just an incidental hardship; it was a fundamental blow to the legitimacy of the Ottoman state. The core ideology of the empire was based on the "circle of justice" (*dâire-i adliye*), a concept wherein the sultan's right to rule was predicated on his ability to provide justice, security, and prosperity for his subjects, who in turn paid the taxes that supported the army and the state.[26] The climate-induced famine demonstrated a catastrophic failure of this most basic function of governance. The state, fiscally crippled by wars, was unable to manage the crisis, failing to distribute food supplies while continuing to demand taxes from a starving populace.[23] This profound breach of the social contract shattered the state's legitimacy in the eyes of many of its subjects. The sultan's government was no longer a protector but another predator, indistinguishable from the bandits. This collapse of legitimacy helps explain why so many people from all walks of life were willing to cast their lot with the Celali leaders. For many, rebellion was not a matter of greed or ideology, but of simple survival in a world where the established order had catastrophically failed.[24]

III. A Century of Turmoil: Chronology and Key Phases of the Uprisings

The Celali Rebellions unfolded over more than a century in a series of waves, evolving from religiously inspired heterodox movements into massive, socially diverse military conflicts that engulfed the whole of Anatolia and threatened the very foundations of the Ottoman state. The following chronology outlines the major phases and key figures of this prolonged period of turmoil.

Period/Dates	Rebel Leader(s)	Region of Activity	Major Actions & Characteristics	Outcome
1519	Bozoklu Celal (Şah Veli)	Tokat, Bozok	Proclaimed himself the Mahdi; led a Shi'ite-inspired revolt of Turkmen groups.	Rebellion suppressed; Celal executed. His name becomes the eponym for future revolts.[3]
1527–1528	Kalender Çelebi	Eastern & Central	Bektaşi sheikh	Defeated multiple

		Anatolia	with alleged Safavid ties; gathered a large army (c. 30,000) of Turkmen tribes and disaffected groups.	provincial armies before being crushed by Grand Vizier Pargalı Ibrahim Pasha; executed.[37]
1598–1602	Karayazıcı Abdülhalim	Urfa, Sivas, Central Anatolia	Former Ottoman official; united dispossessed *sipahis* and *sekbans*. Established a rival administration in Urfa, proclaiming himself "Halim Şah".[1]	Co-opted with governorship of Amasya but continued rebelling. Defeated by Sokolluzade Hasan Pasha; died in hiding.[1]
1602–1603	Deli Hasan	Western & Central Anatolia	Karayazıcı's brother; led a massive army (up to 50,000). Defeated Ottoman forces, killed a pasha, sacked Kütahya, besieged Ankara.[1]	Neutralized through co-optation; appointed governor of Bosnia to remove his army from Anatolia. Later executed in 1605.[1]
c. 1605–1607	Canboladoğlu Ali Pasha	Aleppo, Northern Syria	Powerful Kurdish notable; sought to establish an independent state in Syria, a distinct secessionist goal. Minted coins in his name.[3]	Defeated by Kuyucu Murad Pasha in 1607; fled to Istanbul and was eventually executed.[5]
c. 1604–1608	Kalenderoğlu Mehmed	Western & Central Anatolia	Former official; became one of the most powerful Celali leaders. Sacked the former capital of Bursa in 1607, causing panic in Istanbul.[1]	Defeated by Kuyucu Murad Pasha in 1608; fled to Safavid Iran where he later died.[1]

1623–1628	Abaza Mehmed Pasha	Erzurum, Eastern Anatolia	Provincial governor; rebelled to avenge the regicide of Sultan Osman II, targeting the Janissary corps.	Besieged by state forces; eventually surrendered and was pardoned by Sultan Murad IV, later serving as governor of Bosnia.[1]
1647–1648	Varvar Ali Pasha	Sivas, Central Anatolia	Governor of Sivas; rebelled after refusing orders from Istanbul. Defeated a loyalist army under Köprülü Mehmed Pasha.[1]	Defeated and executed by rival Celali leader Ibşir Mustafa Pasha, who was acting on behalf of the state.[1]
c. 1648–1659	Abaza Hasan Pasha, Haydaroğlu, Katırcıoğlu	Anatolia-wide	A final wave of major rebellions by powerful provincial figures and bandit chiefs during the tumultuous early years of Mehmed IV's reign.[11]	Suppressed by the iron-fisted administration of the Köprülü grand viziers, marking the end of the major Celali era.[3]

Early Tremors (c. 1519–1595)

The initial uprisings that occurred under the "Celali" banner were fundamentally different in character from the larger conflicts that followed. They were primarily driven by religious ideology and the specific grievances of semi-nomadic Turkmen tribes in Anatolia. The prototype was the 1519 revolt of **Bozoklu Celal**, a preacher who rallied followers with a messianic, Shi'ite-influenced message against the authority of the Sunni Ottoman state.[1]
A far more significant early conflict was the **Kalender Çelebi rebellion** of 1527. Kalender, a sheikh of the influential Bektaşi order with purported descent from its founder, capitalized on widespread Turkmen dissatisfaction with Ottoman land policies and alleged Safavid propaganda to launch a massive uprising across eastern and central Anatolia.[37] His forces, swelled by various tribes and disaffected groups, reportedly reached 30,000 men and inflicted several defeats on provincial Ottoman armies.[37] The scale of the threat was such that Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent dispatched his Grand Vizier, Pargalı Ibrahim Pasha, with an elite force of Janissaries to crush it. Ibrahim Pasha combined military force with a shrewd

political strategy, offering to restore the lands and rights of some Turkmen tribes, which successfully broke the rebel coalition. Isolated and weakened, Kalender Çelebi was defeated and killed in 1527.[41] These early revolts, with their strong Alevi-Kızılbaş character, represented a clear ideological challenge to the Ottoman state, often intertwined with the ongoing geopolitical rivalry with Safavid Iran.[5]

In the decades that followed, the nature of unrest began to shift. The mid-to-late 16th century saw a rise in banditry by unemployed and impoverished madrasa students, known as *suhtes*. Initially small-scale, these movements grew in size and audacity, with *suhte* gangs raiding villages and towns, presaging the larger breakdown of provincial order that was to come.[10]

The Great Anatolian Rebellion, Phase I (c. 1596–1603)

The period following the Battle of Keresztes in 1596, which historian Mustafa Akdağ termed the first major phase of the classic Celali rebellions, saw the conflict transform into a full-scale war.[1] The leadership shifted from religious figures to disaffected members of the Ottoman military and administrative classes.

The pivotal figure of this phase was **Karayazıcı Abdülhalim** ("the Black Scribe"), a former Ottoman official (*sekbanbaşı*, a commander of musketeers).[1] He was the first leader to successfully unite the disparate bands of rebels—dispossessed *sipahis*, unemployed *sekbans*, and desperate peasants—into a cohesive and formidable military force.[3] Launching his rebellion from the city of Urfa in 1599, he established it as a center of resistance, creating a parallel administration and effectively governing the region for nearly two years.[1] His ambition was such that he proclaimed himself "Halim Şah" and issued decrees in his own name.[43] The Ottoman state, its main armies tied down in the war against the Habsburgs, initially tried to neutralize him through co-optation, offering him the governorship of the provinces of Amasya and Çorum.[1] Karayazıcı accepted the post but continued his rebellious activities, plundering the regions he was supposed to govern. The state was finally forced to dispatch a loyal army under Sokolluzade Hasan Pasha, who defeated Karayazıcı's forces in 1601. Karayazıcı fled to the Canik mountains near the Black Sea coast, where he died of natural causes in 1602.[1]

His death did not end the rebellion. Command immediately passed to his brother, **Deli Hasan** ("Mad Hasan"), who proved to be an even more destructive leader.[47] At the head of a massive army, which one contemporary Armenian chronicler estimated at 50,000 cavalry, Deli Hasan unleashed a storm of violence across Anatolia.[1] He defeated multiple Ottoman armies, captured and killed the general Hasan Pasha at Tokat, sacked the major western Anatolian city of Kütahya, and laid siege to the critical administrative center of Ankara.[1] Faced with a threat that seemed poised to overwhelm the entire province, the government in Istanbul again resorted to its strategy of co-optation. In a remarkable political maneuver, the state offered Deli Hasan the prestigious and powerful position of *beylerbey* (governor-general) of Bosnia in 1603.[1] Deli Hasan accepted, and his massive Celali

army was marched out of Anatolia and onto the Hungarian frontier to fight against the Habsburgs. This move brilliantly solved two problems at once, removing the most dangerous rebel army from the heartland while simultaneously reinforcing the empire's European war effort. Deli Hasan's career as an Ottoman pasha was short and turbulent; he was eventually executed by the state in 1605.[45]

The Great Anatolian Rebellion, Phase II (c. 1604–1610)

The removal of Deli Hasan brought only a temporary respite. The underlying causes of the crisis remained, and new, powerful leaders quickly emerged to continue the fight.
One of the most dangerous was **Canboladoğlu Ali Pasha**, a powerful Kurdish notable from the region of Aleppo.[3] His rebellion was different from most Anatolian Celali movements. He was not merely seeking a position within the Ottoman system; he aimed to carve out an independent state for himself in northern Syria, even minting coins in his own name and seeking alliances with European powers like the Duke of Tuscany.[14] His secessionist ambitions made him a primary target for the state.
Meanwhile, in western Anatolia, **Kalenderoğlu Mehmed**, another former state official, rose to prominence.[3] After being offered the governorship of Ankara as a bribe, he was rejected by the city's populace, who feared his Celali followers.[1] Enraged, Kalenderoğlu went on a devastating rampage, gathering an army said to number 30,000 and, in 1607, sacking the city of Bursa.[1] The capture and plunder of the first capital of the Ottoman Empire was a deeply symbolic blow that sent shockwaves of fear through Istanbul, with many fearing the Celalis would march on the imperial capital itself.[5]

Later Convulsions (c. 1623–1659)

By 1610, the brutal campaigns of Grand Vizier Kuyucu Murad Pasha had suppressed the main wave of the Great Anatolian Rebellion. However, the "Celali" phenomenon was not eradicated. It had become an endemic feature of 17th-century Ottoman provincial politics, a recurring pattern of defiance by powerful local actors who could mobilize armed followers.
A major resurgence occurred with the rebellion of **Abaza Mehmed Pasha** from 1623 to 1628. Abaza Mehmed, the governor of Erzurum, launched his revolt ostensibly to avenge the shocking regicide of the young Sultan Osman II in 1622, directing his ire against the Janissary corps whom he held responsible.[1] His uprising demonstrated the continued volatility of the provincial elites and their ability to command the loyalty of large *sekban* armies. He was eventually besieged and forced to surrender, but in a sign of the complex politics of the era, he was pardoned by Sultan Murad IV and re-integrated into the system as governor of Bosnia.[12]
The mid-17th century, particularly the chaotic early years of Sultan Mehmed IV's reign, saw a

final flurry of large-scale Celali-style rebellions led by figures like **Varvar Ali Pasha**, **Abaza Hasan Pasha**, **Haydaroğlu**, and **Katırcıoğlu**.[1] These revolts were finally and ruthlessly suppressed by the iron-fisted administration of the Köprülü grand viziers, who restored a degree of central authority through brutal discipline, effectively bringing the century-long era of major Celali rebellions to a close by 1659.[3]

The evolution of the rebellion's leadership is telling. The shift from religious ideologues like Bozoklu Celal and Kalender Çelebi to disaffected state insiders like Karayazıcı, Deli Hasan, and Abaza Mehmed Pasha marks a fundamental change in the nature of protest against the Ottoman state. The core grievance was no longer primarily about religious heterodoxy versus Sunni orthodoxy. Instead, it had become a violent struggle over resources, power, and the manifest failures of the state's administrative and military apparatus. The leaders of the Great Anatolian Rebellion were overwhelmingly men who had built careers within the Ottoman system. Their demands were not for a new religious order but for money, status, and positions of power. They did not want to destroy the empire; they wanted a larger and more secure share of it, or to correct what they perceived as its gross injustices. This demonstrates that by the turn of the 17th century, the primary source of instability was no longer external or ideological, but internal and structural. The state itself, through its own flawed and disruptive policies, was producing its most dangerous opponents. The crisis had moved from the fringes of the empire to its very core.

IV. The Imperial Response: Suppression and Co-optation

Faced with a crisis that threatened to tear its Anatolian heartland apart, the Ottoman state deployed a pragmatic and flexible two-pronged strategy to combat the Celali Rebellions. This approach combined ruthless military suppression with calculated political co-optation, allowing the state to differentiate between threats and manage the crisis despite being severely constrained by external wars.

The Iron Fist: Kuyucu Murad Pasha (1606–1610)

By 1606, with Anatolia in chaos and rebel armies operating with impunity, the Ottoman government resolved to end the threat through overwhelming force. The instrument of this policy was Grand Vizier Kuyucu Murad Pasha, an elderly and battle-hardened Bosnian statesman appointed in December 1606 with a clear mandate to restore order.[1] His name, *Kuyucu* ("the Well-Digger"), would become synonymous with the state's capacity for extreme and uncompromising violence.[1]

Murad Pasha's strategy was systematic and brutal. Recognizing that local Anatolian troops were unreliable and often had connections to the rebels, he assembled a disciplined,

well-paid army composed largely of loyal non-Anatolian Balkan troops and elite *devşirme* units from the capital.[48] His campaign was made possible by the signing of the Peace of Zsitvatorok with the Habsburgs in 1606, which finally freed up the empire's main military forces to deal with the internal crisis.[24]

He first marched against the secessionist threat posed by Canboladoğlu Ali Pasha in Syria. In a decisive battle near Lake Amik in October 1607, Murad Pasha's army crushed the rebel forces.[1] He then turned his attention to the remaining Celali armies in Anatolia, led by Kalenderoğlu Mehmed and others. He pursued them relentlessly, defeating them in a series of engagements throughout 1608.[1] His methods were infamous for their cruelty. His nickname, "the Well-Digger," reportedly came from his practice of executing tens of thousands of captured rebels and dumping their bodies into mass graves or dry wells.[1] The severed heads of 48 prominent Celali leaders were sent to Istanbul and displayed as a terrifying warning to any who would defy the Sultan's authority.[1] By 1610, through this campaign of methodical terror, Kuyucu Murad Pasha had hunted down and eliminated most of the major Celali leaders, with the last remnants fleeing to Safavid Iran. He had successfully restored a semblance of order to Anatolia, but at the cost of immense bloodshed, with some estimates placing the death toll of his campaigns at over 50,000 people.[3]

The Velvet Glove: A Strategy of Incorporation

Parallel to, and often preceding, the use of brute force, the Ottoman state consistently employed a policy of co-optation and negotiation.[3] This was not a sign of weakness but a pragmatic recognition that a purely military solution was not always feasible, cost-effective, or even desirable. The state proved adept at using patronage and political maneuvering to divide and neutralize its opponents.[66]

The most common tactic was to offer high-ranking state positions, particularly provincial governorships (*beylerbeyliks*), to powerful rebel leaders in exchange for their loyalty.[3] This strategy served multiple purposes. It could instantly break up a dangerous rebel coalition by peeling away one of its key leaders. It neutralized a major threat without the need for a costly and uncertain military campaign. And, in some cases, it successfully integrated the rebel leader and his armed followers into the state's military apparatus, where they could be put to use on other fronts.[16]

This policy was applied numerous times throughout the crisis. Karayazıcı was offered the governorship of Amasya in an attempt to pacify him.[1] Kalenderoğlu was initially offered the governorship of Ankara before his final break with the state.[1] The most spectacular success of this policy was the appointment of Deli Hasan as the governor of Bosnia in 1603, which effectively removed his massive and destructive army from the Anatolian heartland at a critical moment.[1] Even Kuyucu Murad Pasha, the avatar of suppression, used this tactic, offering the governorship of İçel to the local Celali leader Muslu Çavuş in 1607 to ensure his neutrality before later trapping and executing him.[53]

A State Divided and Constrained

The Ottoman state's ability to respond to the Celali crisis was severely hampered by its commitments on other fronts. For much of the most intense period of rebellion, the empire was fighting a grueling two-front war: the Long Turkish War against the Habsburg Empire in Hungary (1593–1606) and a renewed, large-scale war against Safavid Iran (1603–1618).[1] These external conflicts were a primary cause of the fiscal and military strains that fueled the rebellions in the first place. They also directly constrained the state's response. With the best Ottoman armies engaged in Hungary and on the Persian frontier, the government in Istanbul simply lacked the resources to mount a swift and decisive crackdown on the Celalis during the initial years of the Great Anatolian Rebellion.[24] This strategic constraint explains the state's early reliance on co-optation and its inability to prevent leaders like Karayazıcı and Deli Hasan from running rampant across Anatolia. It was only after peace was concluded with the Habsburgs in 1606 that the state could finally turn its full military attention to the internal crisis, unleashing Kuyucu Murad Pasha on his devastating campaign.[24]

The state's dual strategy of suppression and co-optation should not be seen as contradictory but as a sophisticated and flexible system of crisis management. This approach allowed the central government to perform a kind of political triage, differentiating between types of rebels and applying the most cost-effective solution to each. A leader like Deli Hasan, whose primary motivations appeared to be power and wealth, could be bought off with a prestigious governorship, a solution that was cheaper and less risky than a major military campaign. In contrast, a leader like Canboladoğlu, whose secessionist ambitions posed an existential threat to imperial integrity, or Kalenderoğlu, who had become too powerful and defiant to be trusted, could not be appeased. They became the necessary targets of Kuyucu Murad's campaigns of annihilation. This calculated application of force and favor, as analyzed by scholars like Karen Barkey, demonstrates the state's capacity for adaptive resilience.[64] It was a system designed to divide, manage, and ultimately overcome its internal opponents, preserving the central state by selectively deploying both violence and patronage.

V. The Aftermath: A Transformed Anatolia and Empire

The suppression of the Celali Rebellions restored a fragile order to the Ottoman Empire, but it came at a staggering price. The decades of violence left a legacy of demographic catastrophe, economic ruin, and social dislocation that permanently altered the empire's Anatolian heartland and accelerated its transformation into a new kind of state.

The "Büyük Kaçgun" (The Great Flight)

The most immediate and devastating social consequence of the rebellions was a massive, panicked depopulation of the countryside, a phenomenon that contemporary Ottoman sources referred to as the *Büyük Kaçgun*, or "The Great Flight".[11] For years, the rural population of Anatolia was trapped in an impossible position, caught between the predatory armies of the Celali rebels who plundered their villages for supplies, and the brutal counter-insurgency campaigns of state forces who often treated the peasantry with equal harshness.[24]

In response to this relentless insecurity, peasants abandoned their villages and farms en masse. They fled in every direction, seeking refuge behind the walls of fortified cities, escaping to remote mountain areas, or migrating entirely to safer regions in western Anatolia, Thrace, and the Balkans.[14] This mass displacement amounted to a demographic catastrophe for the empire's core province. Entire regions were left desolate, and tax registers from the period document a dramatic collapse in population. For instance, the populations of the major cities of Amasya and Kayseri were halved between 1580 and 1640, while the district (*kaza*) of Harput in eastern Anatolia reported a staggering 90% decline in the number of taxpayers.[1] The destruction was so complete that some towns, like Bingöl and Eğil, were entirely wiped out, and many villages that were prosperous in the late 16th century were still abandoned ruins in the 19th century.[1]

Economic and Ecological Ruin

The *Büyük Kaçgun* triggered the near-total collapse of the agrarian economy in many parts of Anatolia.[7] With the flight of the peasantry, vast tracts of productive farmland were abandoned and left uncultivated. This led to a sharp decline in agricultural output, resulting in recurring famines, soaring food prices, and a precipitous drop in state tax revenues, which further exacerbated the empire's fiscal crisis.[14]

In the long term, this devastation facilitated a major ecological and economic transformation of the Anatolian landscape. The abandoned farmlands, now empty of cultivators, were often acquired by powerful military leaders, provincial governors, or local notables. They converted these lands into large private estates, known as *çiftliks*, dedicated not to grain cultivation but to livestock ranching, which was less labor-intensive and thus more profitable in a depopulated landscape.[14] This marked a permanent shift in many regions of Anatolia away from settled agriculture and toward pastoralism, fundamentally altering the economic base of the province and its ability to provision the empire's cities and armies.[14] The destruction in Kütahya by the Celali leader Tavil Halil, for example, led to immense social and economic hardship, including rape, attacks, and extraordinary taxes imposed by the very pasha sent to stop the rebels, highlighting the dual pressures on the populace.[72]

The Armenian Exodus and Resettlement

The rebellions had a particularly severe and transformative impact on the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire. Their historical heartland in Eastern and Central Anatolia was the epicenter of the violence, and they suffered disproportionately from the chaos.[71] In response, thousands of Armenians fled westward in a mass migration that historian Sebouh Aslanian has termed the "Great Armenian Flight".[1]

This migration fundamentally reshaped Armenian demography within the empire. Cities like Istanbul and İzmir, which had small or virtually non-existent Armenian populations before 1600, became major new centers of Armenian settlement, commerce, and cultural life, absorbing tens of thousands of refugees.[1] The traveler Simeon of Poland noted that by 1610-1611, İzmir had 100 Armenian households where there had been none before; by 1657, another European traveler reported 8,000 Armenians in the city.[1] Similarly, the Armenian population of Rodosto (Tekirdağ) in Thrace grew from almost nothing to a significant community.[1] This westward shift was permanent. Despite Ottoman attempts to force the refugees to return to their devastated eastern homelands in 1609 and 1635, the new communities in the west endured and flourished.[1] The violence also had a crippling financial effect on Armenian institutions; the Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem, for example, fell into massive debt as the Celali raids cut off its primary source of revenue from pilgrims.[1]

Political and Administrative Legacy

The Celali Rebellions left a deep and lasting mark on the political and administrative structure of the Ottoman Empire. The decades of chaos irrevocably weakened the central government's direct control over the Anatolian provinces, even after order was restored.[11] The old patrimonial system of rule was shattered, forcing the state to rely more heavily on a formal, salaried bureaucracy to govern.[16]

The experience of constant insecurity also led to significant changes in the physical and military landscape of Anatolia. In response to the persistent threat of Celali raids, major provincial cities like Ankara, which had traditionally been open and unfortified, began to construct extensive city walls for protection—a feature that was uncommon in Ottoman urban design but remained for over a century.[1] Furthermore, the state established permanent garrisons of Janissaries in many provincial towns where they had previously been scarce, creating a lasting military presence to enforce central authority.[1] Finally, the period did not truly end the problem of provincial violence. Instead, it inaugurated a "legacy of institutionalized violence," where banditry and defiance by local power-holders became endemic features of Anatolian society for centuries to come.[13]

The *Büyük Kaçgun* was more than a temporary displacement; it represented a permanent "hollowing out" of the Ottoman Empire's demographic and economic core. This collapse in Anatolia fundamentally weakened the empire from within. An empire whose heartland is depopulated and economically devastated cannot sustain a policy of aggressive expansion.

The loss of Anatolia's vitality—its soldiers, its farmers, and its tax revenues—directly contributed to the military setbacks and defensive posture the empire was forced to adopt in the later 17th and 18th centuries. The Celali crisis, in effect, closed the door on the Ottoman "Golden Age" and marked the beginning of a new, more difficult era.[14]

VI. Scholarly Perspectives: Interpreting the Celali Rebellions

The Celali Rebellions have been a subject of intense scholarly debate for decades, serving as a lens through which historians have examined the broader trajectory of the Ottoman Empire. Interpretations have evolved significantly, moving from a straightforward narrative of imperial decline to more complex analyses of crisis, transformation, and state resilience. Understanding these historiographical debates is crucial for a nuanced comprehension of the period.

Scholar/School of Thought	Core Argument	Primary Cause Identified	View of the State
Mustafa Akdağ (Classical Socio-Economic)	A "struggle for livelihood and order" (*dirlik ve düzenlik kavgası*) caused by the breakdown of classical Ottoman institutions.[18]	Socio-economic decay: collapse of the *timar* system, population pressure, and predatory taxation.[19]	Declining and failing to uphold the traditional order; overwhelmed by a systemic crisis of its own making.[19]
Karen Barkey (State-Centric / Bargaining)	A process of state centralization where the state actively managed banditry through bargaining and co-optation to consolidate its power.[64]	State strategies of control and incorporation; banditry as a form of negotiation for state resources, not rebellion.[64]	Strong, adaptive, and manipulative; not declining but evolving along a unique, non-European path to centralization.[65]
Sam White (Environmental)	A profound crisis triggered and amplified by the extreme climatic events of the Little Ice Age, which pushed pre-existing tensions to the breaking point.[24]	Climate change: severe drought, famine, and ecological collapse acting as a systemic shock.[24]	Overwhelmed by an unprecedented environmental crisis that shattered its ability to provision the population and maintain legitimacy.[40]
William Griswold (Revisionist)	A complex series of conflicts with multiple	Multiple factors: socio-economic	A rational actor constrained by

	motivations; while many rebels sought integration, some, like Canboladoğlu, had clear secessionist ambitions.[19]	grievances, maladministration, and the personal ambitions of rebel leaders.[19]	external wars, using a mix of strategies, but facing genuine threats to its territorial integrity.[19]
Gabriel Piterberg & Baki Tezcan (Transformationist)	A period of fundamental political transformation, not just social unrest, leading to a "Second Ottoman Empire" with limited royal authority.[16]	A political power struggle between "absolutist" factions loyal to the sultan and "constitutionalist" factions among the military and ulema.[19]	Undergoing a radical structural change; the sultanate's power is being checked, leading to a more decentralized, oligarchic polity.[19]

The Classical Thesis: Mustafa Akdağ

The foundational modern scholarship on the Celali Rebellions was produced by Turkish historian Mustafa Akdağ in the mid-20th century. His major works, including *Türk Halkının Dirlik ve Düzenlik Kavgası* ("The Turkish People's Struggle for Livelihood and Order"), established the classical interpretation that dominated the field for decades.[18] Akdağ meticulously documented the socio-economic roots of the crisis, framing the rebellions as a direct consequence of the collapse of the classical Ottoman land tenure (*timar*) and administrative systems.[19] For Akdağ, the rebels were primarily a desperate mass of landless peasants, unemployed students (*suhtes*), and demobilized soldiers, all victims of a state that could no longer provide them with a livelihood or protect them from injustice. He made a crucial distinction between the early, religiously motivated revolts (like that of Bozoklu Celal) and the later, larger Celali movements, arguing that the latter did not seek to destroy the state but rather to find a secure place within its patronage system.[19] While his research remains indispensable, Akdağ's overall framework is deeply rooted in the "decline paradigm," viewing the rebellions as a tragic symptom of the empire's fall from a more just and orderly past.[19]

The State-Centric Thesis: Karen Barkey

In her highly influential 1994 book, *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization*, sociologist Karen Barkey mounted a powerful challenge to the decline narrative.[9] Barkey argued that the Ottoman state during this period was not weak or collapsing, but was in fact actively and flexibly managing the crisis to further its own

centralization. In her view, the Celalis were not ideological revolutionaries or peasant rebels in the European sense, but rather bandits and rogue clients whose primary goal was to negotiate for a share of state resources—offices, salaries, and tax revenues.[64] The state's response, a calculated mixture of brutal suppression and political co-optation, was not a sign of desperation but a deliberate and effective strategy of bargaining and incorporation. By selectively rewarding and punishing rebel leaders, the state could divide its opponents, prevent the formation of a unified opposition, and ultimately reinforce its own authority.[9] For Barkey, the Celali era demonstrates a unique, non-European path to state-building, one that showcases imperial resilience and adaptability rather than terminal decay.[64]

The Environmental Thesis: Sam White

A more recent and equally transformative contribution to the debate came from environmental historian Sam White. In his 2011 book, *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*, White introduced a critical new variable into the equation: the Little Ice Age.[24] Drawing on paleoclimatological data from tree rings and other natural archives, White demonstrated that the 1590s witnessed an unprecedented wave of extreme climatic events in Anatolia, including severe drought and intense cold.[24] He argues that this environmental shock was the primary trigger that pushed the empire's already significant structural tensions past the breaking point. The resulting harvest failures, famines, and epidemics created a level of desperation that made mass rebellion almost inevitable.[24] White's approach does not negate the importance of the socio-economic and political factors identified by other historians, but it convincingly argues that the sheer scale and intensity of the Celali crisis cannot be fully understood without accounting for the catastrophic environmental context in which it erupted.

Modern and Revisionist Views

The scholarly conversation continues to evolve. **William Griswold**, writing in the 1980s, accepted many of Akdağ's socio-economic arguments but complicated the narrative by focusing on rebel leaders like Canboladoğlu Ali Pasha. Griswold showed that at least some Celali leaders did have clear secessionist ambitions, challenging the idea that all rebels were simply seeking a place within the Ottoman system.[19]

More recently, historians like **Gabriel Piterberg** and **Baki Tezcan** have shifted the focus toward the political dynamics within the Ottoman ruling class.[16] They interpret the Celali era as a period of profound political transformation, not just social unrest. In their view, the rebellions were intertwined with a larger power struggle in Istanbul between "absolutist" factions loyal to the sultan and "constitutionalist" factions centered on the Janissary corps and the high ulema (scholarly-legal class).[19] This struggle, which culminated in the regicide of Osman II in 1622, led to the emergence of what Tezcan calls a "Second Ottoman Empire," a new political order

in which the sultan's absolute power was permanently curtailed and a more oligarchic, "popular state" began to take shape.[19] Other analyses have also applied Marxist frameworks, interpreting the rebellions as a form of class struggle rooted in the empire's tributary mode of production.[45]

These varied historiographical perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, the most exhaustive understanding of the Celali Rebellions emerges from a synthesis of these approaches. The rebellions can be seen as a systemic crisis of a transforming state (as argued by Barkey and Piterberg), whose deep-seated structural weaknesses (as documented by Akdağ) were exposed and catastrophically amplified by a massive environmental shock (as demonstrated by White). The state was attempting to modernize its military and financial systems, a process that created severe social dislocations. These tensions were then ignited by climate change, forcing the state to respond with its traditional methods of crisis management, such as bargaining and co-optation, all while elite factions in the capital sought to exploit the chaos for their own political advantage. This layered synthesis provides the most nuanced and comprehensive model for understanding this pivotal and violent chapter in Ottoman history.

VII. Conclusion: A Turning Point in Ottoman History

The Celali Rebellions were far more than a simple series of provincial revolts. They represent a long, agonizing historical process that marked a definitive turning point for the Ottoman Empire. The rebellions were the violent manifestation of a systemic breakdown, a watershed moment where multiple, cascading crises—structural, political, military, economic, and environmental—converged with devastating force, pushing the empire to the very brink of collapse. They were the crucible in which the classical Ottoman state was destroyed and a new, different one was forged.

While the Ottoman state ultimately survived the century of turmoil, it was fundamentally and irreversibly changed. The classical empire of the 16th century, built on the *timar* system, a *sipahi* cavalry, and a patrimonial relationship with its subjects, was gone forever. In its place stood a more bureaucratic, more fiscally centralized, but also a more brittle and crisis-prone state. Its Anatolian heartland, once the demographic and agricultural bedrock of its power, was left hollowed out, its population scattered and its economy transformed.

The suppression of the rebellions did not lead to a return to a mythical "Golden Age." Instead, it marked the painful and violent end of the Ottoman expansionist phase and the beginning of a long, difficult new era defined by internal consolidation, defensive warfare against increasingly powerful European rivals, and recurrent internal crises. The Celali Rebellions were not merely a chapter in a simple story of Ottoman "decline," but rather the defining moment of a violent, costly, and profound transformation that shaped the empire's trajectory for its remaining three centuries of existence.

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