

From Medals to Mugs: Ruler Visibility, ‘Ruler Objects’, and Sociability in the Late Ottoman and Russian Empires

Darin Stephanov, Postdoctoral Researcher at Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Aarhus, Denmark

The purpose of this paper is to study one aspect of popular consumer culture in the late Ottoman and Russian Empires, namely, the proliferation of objects carrying images and/or symbols of the respective rulers, such as portraits, monograms, and related regal/heraldic imagery. First, it provides a brief overview of historical developments and respective cultural policies leading up to such mass-scale objectification of royalty in each empire. In the process, it introduces a novel theoretical framework, based on the concept of modern ruler visibility, conveyed via the annual secular public ruler celebrations (royal birthday, accession day, etc.). Second, drawing on a large body of archival and printed evidence from the two empires, the paper analyzes the drivers and dynamics of desirability of ‘ruler objects’ and the linkages between the respective non-market and market channels of distribution. In this vein, it identifies two shifts in dissemination and socialization over time: a) from elite members to commoners, and b) from the public to the private sphere. For example, the appeal of status symbols, such as medals and orders, which form the bulk of early ‘ruler objects’, meant for elite socialization only, grew exponentially over time as did their royal bestowal thereby extending the realm of symbolic cooptation of the populace. At the same time, the increasingly ceremonious decoration of new public buildings with ‘royal objects’ at their inauguration elicited a more intense competition between private companies for the right to do the same (via advertisement boards, store front logos, endorsements, etc.). Both trends originated in the above-mentioned festivities and served as vehicles for subject loyalty and monarchic patriotism. In addition, the paper sheds light on empire-specific trends, such as the Ottoman shift away from ruler visibility in the 1880s and 1890s, under Sultan Abdülhamid II, which led to a split in royal objectification: a) away from portraits, towards “Long Live the Sultan” banners for Muslims and b) unchanged for domestic non-Muslims. Thus, faith also became a determinant of consumer culture. Finally, this paper demonstrates the limits of royal objectification by reviewing actual cases of monarchic hyper-sensitivity and censorship on the consumption of royal images (in pubs, brothels, etc.) despite their owners’ best intentions in order to avoid disrepute or trivialization. In short, the paper addresses some key intersections between changing notions of monarchic sovereignty and legitimacy, on the one hand, and nascent consumer trends and popular belonging, on the other.