



## WELCOME TO OUR FEBRUARY BOOK, HISTORIANS!

Our first meeting for this Spring is on Tuesday, February 4 at 6:30 to discuss *Midnight at the Pera Palace: The Birth of Modern Istanbul* by Charles King published in 2014. Charles King is a Professor of International Affairs and Government at Georgetown University. His best-known books are on Odessa and the Caucasus and Black Sea regions and their histories. With this book, King follows the White Russians fleeing Bolshevik Russia and the Bolsheviks fleeing Stalin into Turkey and into the tumultuous history of Constantinople/Istanbul following WWI.

*Midnight at the Pera Palace* tells the story of the end of the Ottoman Empire as it plays out in Constantinople and the beginning of the Turkish Republic as it is birthed in 1923 in a city renamed Istanbul in the 1930s. The hotel itself

is both a metaphor for the move from eastern Ottoman Imperialism to western Turkish modernity and the stage upon which much of it happens. *Midnight at the Pera Palace* is both a tale of a hotel and a story of a city overrun with refugees from all over Europe during the period between WWI and WWII. History is messy. And the ebb and flow of refugees and cultures in Istanbul during this time, all of them leaving their mark upon the city, and all of them contributing to the rich culture and the messy politics of Istanbul today contribute their own stories. The city faces both East and West, and *Midnight at the Pera Palace* shows us the promises and perils for the Turkey of the time and how that leads us to the Turkey of today under Erdogan.

King takes the reader on the Orient Express, the first major opening to the West, to the splendor of the Pera Palace Hotel, the first luxury hotel in Istanbul, built to cater to these travelers. But it is a strange group of travelers who wash up on Istanbul's shores between WWI and WWII. Mustafa Kamal, the father of modern Turkey, had a room at the Pera Palace. White Russians fleeing Bolshevik Russia stayed there. Leon Trotsky also came to Istanbul. The hotel, like the city, was always full of espionage and intrigue. Alongside the Russians were the Allied occupiers, Turkish nationalists, Nazis and the Jews and German intellectuals fleeing from them. Ernest Hemingway reported from Istanbul, and Frederick Bruce Thomas, a Russian citizen and the son of former Mississippi slaves, established one of the best-known jazz bars, Maxim, in the 1920s. King brings to life these vivid personalities with vignettes of the city and stories of the people from all walks of life who live there and take refuge there. For example, the eunuchs from the Imperial Ottoman Court formed a Mutual Assistance Society to help one another make the transition to Kamal's modern Turkish republic. King tells these and other stories to bring this place and time vividly to life.

As you read, think about what is gained and what is lost in this tumultuous period. The city is a crossroads not only of people, but also of the competing ideas of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. What about the loss of place for the long-time communities of Ottoman Christians and Jews as Turkish identity becomes framed in ever narrower terms, leading us to Erdogan's Turkey of today? And what is gained for the Turkish people as the very name "Turk" changes from something along the lines of a "deplorable" to a badge of honor? Is it better to look East or is it better to look West? And is it even possible to be both at once?

*Midnight at the Pera Palace* leads us from what was to what might have been to a glimpse of what Turkey will become post-WWII. While Turkey and Istanbul are a unique part of Asia Minor, the mixing and the clashing of East and West there mirror larger questions that we face today. Join us for a thoughtful discussion of Istanbul during a fascinating moment in its history and how that sheds light on today's Istanbul as we meet on Tuesday, February 4 at 6:30 to discuss *Midnight at the Pera Palace: The Birth of Modern Istanbul* by Charles King.

Donna McBride