GALATASARAY LYCÉE: THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT OF TURKISH MODERNIZATION

More Than a School: In a Multireligious Empire, the Audacity to Give Birth to the Secular Citizen, Science, and Common Reason

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There are institutions that cannot be understood through chronology alone. One may know their date of foundation without truly grasping what they represent. The Lycée de Galatasaray is not such an institution. It was not founded merely as a school, but as a mentality, a political choice, and a vision of civilization. To recount the history of the Lycée de Galatasaray is therefore to recount how, in this country, modernization demanded risk, determination, and a keen awareness of historical responsibility.

More Than a School: Modernization Through the Human Being

When the Lycée de Galatasaray opened its doors in 1868, the Ottoman Empire already knew that reform, on its own, was no longer sufficient. Laws could be promulgated, regulations drafted, and diplomatic gestures multiplied; yet the human type capable of carrying these texts, applying them, and above all internalizing them had been exhausted. The true bottleneck of modernization lay there. The Lycée de Galatasaray emerged precisely as a lucid and courageous response to this impasse: to modernize not through legal texts, but through the human being.

For this reason, the Lycée de Galatasaray was not an educational investment in the classical sense of the term, but a conscious project of human formation. The fact that Muslim and non-Muslim students were educated under the same roof, according to the same curriculum and within the same intellectual discipline, went far beyond a simple pedagogical innovation. It represented the effective erosion, in everyday life, of the system of confessional communities (millet), and the transformation of Ottomanism from an abstract loyalty into a shared practice of reason.

From this perspective, the Lycée de Galatasaray was not conceived as a space of compromise, but as a deliberately constructed site of tension—not to suppress differences, but to compel thinking together. This founding choice determined, from the outset, the very character of the institution.

Ottoman Reason of State and the Founding Will

The founding of the Lycée de Galatasaray is often explained through "Western influence" or supposed "external pressures." Yet the creation of this institution was the result of a long, conscious, and strategic maturation within Ottoman reason of state itself. Under the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz, particularly in the 1860s, the highest circles of power clearly recognized that modernization could no longer advance through fragmented and piecemeal reforms. To confront the administrative, legal, and diplomatic competition of the modern world, the Empire required a new educational core.

Within this framework, the Lycée de Galatasaray was conceived not as a foreign or confessional school, but as a central public institution, founded by the sovereign's will and placed under the direct authority of the state. From the elaboration of curricula to the selection of teachers, from student admissions to disciplinary regimes, every stage was monitored and controlled by central power. In this sense, the Lycée de Galatasaray was not a marginal laboratory, but the official showcase of Ottoman modernization.

The support granted by Sultan Abdülaziz to the Lycée de Galatasaray was neither limited to financial backing nor to a symbolic gesture. It reflected the explicit acknowledgment that traditional educational channels were no longer sufficient to train the cadres capable of carrying the Empire's future. The sovereign's observations during his travels in Europe testify less to a desire for imitation than to a determination to reconstitute state capacity. The Lycée de Galatasaray was the institutional expression of this ambition.

From the standpoint of the Ottoman government, the institution was not merely a school, but an instrument designed to produce a common political language within a multi-religious empire. Educating children from different communities together meant preparing a generation capable of serving the state while sharing the same conceptual references. This represented an attempt to institutionalize Ottomanism through education. In this respect, the Lycée de Galatasaray stands as one of the last major efforts aimed not at dispersion, but at collective reconstruction.

On the Same Line as the European Pedagogical Revolution

The orientation toward the French educational model is often reduced to the language of instruction or the "Western" character of the curriculum. Yet the stakes are far deeper. The Lycée de Galatasaray aligns itself not with the aristocratic tradition of the Second Empire, but with that of the secular citizen's school of the Third Republic.

The central figure of this pedagogical revolution is Ferdinand Buisson[1], one of the principal intellectual architects of free, compulsory, and secular education in France. Buisson defended a conception of

[1] ***Ferdinand Buisson (1841–1932)***
Ferdinand Buisson was one of the founding figures of the ***secular, free, and compulsory education system*** *of the French Third Republic. He served for many years as* ***Director of Primary Education*** *at the Ministry of Public Instruction and was among the principal intellectual architects of the* ***Jules Ferry reforms****. Buisson consistently defended the idea*

education that removed religion from the public sphere without denying individual conscience, and that placed the school at the heart of reason, science, and citizenship. After the defeat of 1870, the decision was clear: it was not the army, but the school that would rebuild the state.

This conception—both pedagogical and political—found in the Lycée de Galatasaray a bold field of experimentation in a multireligious context. The objective was not to produce a docile elite, but individuals capable of thinking, judging, and bearing civic responsibility.

The First Day: Ernest de Salve and the Foundational Order

From the very first days, it was not only students who crossed the threshold of the Lycée; a modern educational order took root as well. The institution's first director, Ernest de Salve[2], conceived Galatasaray neither as a disciplinary barracks nor as a space of unrestrained freedom, but as a public place governed by reason, order, and equality. Schedules were fixed with precision, common rules clearly established, and relations between teachers and students defined without ambiguity.

For de Salve, discipline was not intended to produce obedience, but to make collective thinking possible. Students of different confessions sat on the same benches and attended the same classes; they did not renounce their identities, but neither could they derive privilege from them. This organization attracted the attention of Europe's intellectual circles: analyses published in *Revue des Deux Mondes* emphasized that, for the first time, Ottoman education was situated within a public and secular framework transcending confessional boundaries.

The First Students and Multireligious Life

At the opening of the Lycée de Galatasaray, 341 students were enrolled: 147 Muslims, 48 Gregorian Armenians, 36 Greek Orthodox, 34 Jews, 34 Bulgarians, 23 Latin Catholics, and 19 Armenian Catholics. This composition was not the product of chance, but the expression of a deliberate and programmatic choice.

The school administration paid particular attention to ensuring that the religious obligations of each group were respected. Muslim prayers, Sunday services, Christian feast days, and observance of the Sabbath

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*of removing education from the influence of religious communities in order to place it at the center of **public reason** and **civic consciousness**. This conception became one of the pillars of the construction of the modern republican ideal in France through the school. Viewing education not merely as a pedagogical field but also as a **political and moral foundational space**, Buisson was awarded the **Nobel Peace Prize in 1927** for his contributions.*

[2] ***Ernest de Salve (1828–1898)***
*As the first director of the **Lycée de Galatasaray**, Ernest de Salve did not merely assume an administrative role at the institution's founding; he played a decisive part in embedding a **modern pedagogical order** in both the classroom and the daily life of the school. Trained in France in the principles of contemporary education, de Salve conceived Galatasaray neither as a school of military discipline nor as a space of lax freedom, but as an educational model grounded in **order**, **equality**, and the idea of a **secular public sphere**. He regarded the common education—without privilege or distinction—of students from different religions and communities as an essential condition of **modern citizenship**. This approach became one of the defining structural features of the Lycée de Galatasaray's institutional character over the long term.*

were integrated into the organization of school life. Religion was neither denied nor instrumentalized; it was recognized as belonging to individual conscience, while the school remained the common space of reason. This practice constituted a concrete prefiguration of what would later be designated as secularism.

Tevfik Fikret and the Line at the Gate

This mentality found its most striking expression during the insurrection of March 31, 1909. As reactionary crowds flooded Istanbul chanting religious slogans, the Lycée de Galatasaray was directly threatened. Its director, Tevfik Fikret, stood at the entrance gate of the institution and pronounced the words that would be etched into history:

“To destroy the Lycée, you will first have to trample over my corpse.”

This was not a literary posture, but a founding gesture. On that day, it was not merely a public building that was defended, but the very frontier of modernization: the secular school as a line of civilization.

A Republic Before the Republic

The principles that the Turkish Republic would later adopt as official foundations—secular education, coeducation, the primacy of science, the learning of foreign languages as instruments rather than as signs of alienation—did not emerge ex nihilo in 1923. They were experimented with, tested, and at times contested well before that date, within the concrete space of the Lycée de Galatasaray. The Republic did not invent this path; it followed it and institutionalized it on the scale of the state.

At the Lycée de Galatasaray, secularism was not an ideological slogan but a daily practice: religion was respected without being normative, acknowledged without organizing knowledge. Science was not an ornament of modernity, but a criterion of truth. The coexistence of languages and cultures did not aim at erasing identities, but at inscribing them within a common horizon of rationality. In this sense, Galatasaray functioned as a prefiguration—sometimes uncomfortable—of what the Republic would later seek to generalize.

This pioneering character also explains the resistance the Lycée encountered. Every anticipation is, by definition, exposed. To be ahead is to be visible; to be visible is to be vulnerable. Galatasaray Sultani (the Imperial Lycée of Galata-Serai) did not merely prepare the Republic; it also experienced, ahead of time, its fractures, controversies, and lines of conflict.

This is precisely what gives it a singular historical value: that of a place where modernization ceased to be abstract and became lived, contested, and at times physically defended.

Thus, when the Republic was established, it found a terrain already prepared: individuals, intellectual habits, and a certain conception of public service and civic responsibility. The Lycée de Galatasaray appeared not as an anomaly inherited from the past, but as one of the strongest links of continuity between the declining Empire and the new state.

A Silent but Disturbing Legacy

To look at the history of the Lycée de Galatasaray today is neither an exercise in nostalgia nor a smooth celebration of heritage. It is an act of active memory. For this legacy does not reassure; it questions. It does not console; it compels comparison. It reminds us that modernization has never been a comfortable, consensual, or definitively secure process.

This legacy is silent because it does not impose itself through slogans. It is disturbing because it highlights a gap: the gap between what this institution managed to think, organize, and defend as early as the late nineteenth century, and the hesitations—or even regressions—that sometimes mark the present. It shows that secularism can be lived without brutality, that pluralism can be structured without relativism, and that science can be central without becoming dogmatic.

The Lycée de Galatasaray is not a frozen monument, but a demanding reference point. It obliges those who claim it—or observe it from afar—to confront an uncomfortable question: what do we do today with this heritage? Not to repeat it mechanically, but to be worthy of it. For a heritage that no longer weighs upon us is a heritage already lost.

It is precisely for this reason that the Lycée de Galatasaray remains alive—modest in its forms, ambitious in its principles, local in its roots, universal in its horizon, and still capable, more than a century after its foundation[3], of unsettling easy certainties and reminding us that modernity is never given once and for all: it must be carried, defended, and rebuilt.

[3] *Founded in 1868, Galatasaray Lycée will mark the 160th anniversary of its founding in 2028*.

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