Soccer as a Tool for Social Control in the Late Ottoman Empire

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A Literature Review

Abstract

This literature review examines soccer's role as an instrument of social control, ideological reform, and state-building in the late Ottoman Empire in the early 1900's. Drawing on the research of Salmaan Mirza (2016), the historical scholarship of Murat C. Yildiz (2025), and supplementary academic sources, the review argues that soccer was not simply a Westernizing cultural import but a deliberately mobilized technology of governance. Ottoman state actors and intellectuals used organized football to refashion the bodies and minds of Muslim youth, combat the argument of 'Oriental bodily weakness,' and consolidate imperial identity against the forces of ethnic nationalism. The review traces the progression from elite cosmopolitan adoption of soccer through state institutionalization (via the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP)), to the ideological deployment of 'Physical Culture' (Terbiye-i Bedeniye) as a framework for producing disciplined, cooperative, and nationally loyal subjects. The literature consistently identifies Social Darwinist thought as the ideological engine driving these efforts, and highlights the deliberate gender discrimination and religious organizing of Ottoman sporting institutions as evidence of the depth and intentionality of the state's social engineering project.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, soccer, football, social control, Physical Culture, Terbiye-i Bedeniye, Committee of Union and Progress, Social Darwinism, Friday League, Salmaan Mirza, Murat C. Yildiz.

Introduction

The history of sport is, in many instances, the history of power. When a state chooses to promote a particular game, regulate its organization, and deploy its symbolism in schools and public discourse, it is doing something more than encouraging recreation. It is shaping the bodies, loyalties, and social imaginations of its subjects. Nowhere is this dynamic more richly illustrated than in the late Ottoman Empire's relationship with the game of football.

Soccer arrived in Ottoman territories in the latter half of the nineteenth century, carried by British merchants, diplomats, and railway workers who established clubs in the cosmopolitan port cities of Salonica and Istanbul. For the first decades of its presence, the game remained largely the province of non-Muslim minorities and European expatriates. But from the 1900s onward, a growing cohort of Ottoman Muslim intellectuals, reformers, and state officials began to recognize in football something more than a foreign pastime: a tool. Disciplined, cooperative, physically demanding, and spectacularly public, soccer offered a platform for the kind of bodily and social reform that the late Ottoman state urgently sought.

This literature review synthesizes the key scholarly contributions to our understanding of this history. It draws principally on the conference research of Salmaan Mirza, presented at a 2016 Harvard symposium and subsequently developed into a significant scholarly contribution; on the comprehensive historical study by Murat C. Yildiz, whose 2025 monograph The Ottoman World of Sports: Refashioning Bodies, Men, and Communities in Late Imperial Istanbul represents the current state of the art in the field; and on supplementary scholarship that illuminates specific dimensions of Ottoman sporting culture and governance.

The central argument of the reviewed literature is that soccer in the late Ottoman Empire was a technology of social control: a means by which the state and its allied intellectuals sought to produce, quite literally, a new kind of Ottoman subject. Understanding this history illuminates not only a neglected chapter in the global history of football, but also the mechanisms by which modern states have used popular culture to manage, reform, and mobilize their populations.

Methods

This review employs a narrative synthesis methodology, integrating primary scholarly sources on sport, nationalism, and social reform in the late Ottoman Empire. The reviewed literature spans conference papers, peer-reviewed monographs, and archival-based historical studies. Thematic rather than strictly chronological organization has been adopted to bring out the conceptual architecture that connects the various strands of the literature. Where scholars disagree or where the evidence is contested, those tensions are noted.

The review does not claim to be exhaustive of the Ottoman sports history literature, which has grown substantially over the past two decades. Rather, it focuses on the subset of that literature most directly concerned with soccer's role as an instrument of state power and social engineering, and specifically on the mechanisms and objectives that structured the Ottoman state's engagement with the sport.

Literature Review

1. Cosmopolitan Origins and the Complication of the Modernization Narrative

A foundational contribution of recent scholarship is the complication of the simple narrative that soccer was a straightforwardly 'modernizing' or 'Westernizing' influence in the Ottoman context. Mirza (2016) argues that the game's early adoption was driven not by a generalized cultural Westernization but by a cosmopolitan Ottoman elite whose identity was already transnational, multilingual, and oriented toward European models of civilization. For this stratum of Ottoman society, soccer was not an alien import but a natural expression of an existing cultural orientation.

This distinction matters because it shifts the analytical lens from diffusion to appropriation. The Ottoman elite did not simply receive football from the West; they selectively adopted it and, critically, reworked its meaning. What began as a marker of cosmopolitan sophistication was progressively reframed as an instrument of imperial survival. The question the literature asks is how and why this reframing occurred, and what it tells us about the relationship between sport, power, and reform in a declining empire.

Yildiz (2025) situates this transformation within the broader context of late Ottoman modernization efforts, arguing that the state's engagement with sport was part of a wider project of institutional reform that touched education, military organization, public health, and the built environment of imperial cities. Soccer was one node in a much larger network of technologies through which the late Ottoman state sought to produce a modern, disciplined, and nationally coherent population.

2. 'Oriental Bodily Weakness' and the Social Darwinist Framework

The most consistently identified ideological driver in the literature is the discourse of 'Oriental bodily weakness.' This concept, rooted in the Social Darwinist thought that dominated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century intellectual life across Europe and its spheres of influence, held that the Ottoman Empire's military and political decline was not merely structural or geopolitical but somatic: the Ottoman body itself, especially the Muslim male body, had been enfeebled by centuries of sedentary, uncompetitive, and undisciplined living.

As Mirza (2016) documents, Ottoman intellectuals and reformers internalized this diagnosis to a remarkable degree. Rather than contesting the Social Darwinist framework on its own terms, they accepted its premises and sought to apply its prescriptions. If the 'Eastern body' was weak, it needed to be made strong. If Ottoman men lacked the physical vigor of their European rivals, they needed to acquire it through systematic athletic training. Soccer, with its demands for speed, endurance, tactical coordination, and sustained competitive effort, was identified as one of the most effective available instruments for this project of bodily renovation.

Yildiz (2025) traces the specific intellectual genealogy of this position through Ottoman physical education discourse, showing how figures like Selim Sirri Tarcan—arguably the most important

Ottoman theorist of physical culture—translated Social Darwinist ideas into a practical curriculum for the reform of the Ottoman body. Tarcan's argument was that a strong empire required men with both 'strength of body and strength of soul' (beden ve ruh kuvveti), and that the disciplined environment of organized football was uniquely suited to developing both simultaneously. The game was not merely exercise; it was character formation at scale.

3. State Institutionalization: The Committee of Union and Progress and the Friday League

The transition from elite cultural adoption to state-sponsored social engineering accelerated sharply in the early 1910s, as the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP)—the modernizing nationalist party that came to dominate Ottoman politics after the 1908 revolution—recognized the mobilizational potential of organized sport. The literature identifies this period as a turning point in the history of Ottoman football, marking the moment at which the game moved from the margins of elite culture to the center of state policy.

The establishment of the Friday League (Cuma Ligi) around 1910-1912 is the clearest institutional expression of this transformation. As Yildiz (2025) explains, the league was deliberately structured around the Islamic day of rest, serving the dual function of providing Muslim players with a competitive playing schedule that did not conflict with religious observance and of symbolically distinguishing the Muslim-Turkish sporting world from the 'Sunday League' dominated by non-Muslim minorities and European clubs. The naming and scheduling of the league were not administrative accidents; they were strategic decisions designed to construct a specifically Muslim-Turkish sporting identity within the broader cosmopolitan sporting culture of late Ottoman cities.

By 1913-1915, the state's involvement had deepened further. The CUP actively encouraged the formation of new clubs, provided institutional support for physical education programs in state schools, and began to integrate soccer into the broader apparatus of youth mobilization that also encompassed scouting movements and paramilitary training. The explicit goal, as the literature makes clear, was to translate the social goods of the sport—discipline, cooperation, physical robustness, competitive spirit—directly into state strength, producing a generation of young men who were at once physically capable and institutionally loyal (Yildiz, 2025; Irak, n.d.).

4. Physical Culture (Terbiye-i Bedeniye) and the 'Strength of Soul' Philosophy

Central to the Ottoman state's use of soccer was a broader philosophical and pedagogical framework known as Terbiye-i Bedeniye, or Physical Culture. This framework, as Yildiz (2025) analyzes in detail, conceived of athletic training not as a supplement to intellectual or moral education but as its foundation. A well-trained body was understood to be the precondition for a well-formed character, and a well-formed character was understood to be the precondition for effective citizenship and military service.

Within this framework, soccer occupied a privileged position. Unlike individual athletic disciplines such as wrestling or gymnastics, football required the subordination of individual talent to collective strategy, the rapid reading and response to a dynamic and unpredictable environment, and the maintenance of physical and mental composure under sustained competitive pressure. These qualities mapped directly onto the idealized qualities of the modern citizen-soldier: cooperative, adaptive, disciplined, and resistant to panic.

The 'strength of soul' dimension identified by Tarcan and other Physical Culture theorists was not incidental to this framework; it was its culminating aspiration. The goal was not merely to produce men who were physically strong but men who had internalized the values of discipline, cooperation, and competitive effort so deeply that they expressed them spontaneously in every domain of life—in the workplace, in the barracks, in the family, and in the civic sphere. Soccer was, in this vision, a technology for producing not just better athletes but better Ottomans (Yildiz, 2025; Mirza, 2016).

5. Wrestling, Soccer, and the Politics of Traditional Sport

The literature also illuminates an important internal tension within the Ottoman sporting project: the relationship between soccer and wrestling, the game's most significant indigenous rival for the status of 'national sport.' This tension is analytically significant because it reveals the ideological priorities of the reformers with unusual clarity.

Wrestling (gures) had deep roots in Ottoman and Turkish culture, functioning for centuries as a site of masculine display, communal celebration, and the performance of physical virtue. Its status as a 'traditional' Ottoman sport made it a natural candidate for elevation in any cultural nationalist project. Yet the Physical Culture reformers largely declined to give it this status, and their reasons for doing so illuminate the specific values that soccer was meant to embody.

As Yildiz (2025) documents, wrestling was criticized by reformers as individualistic, episodic, and institutionally underdeveloped. It produced exceptional individuals but did not train the habits of sustained collective action that a modern state and military required. Soccer, by contrast, was inherently cooperative: no individual player, however gifted, could succeed without the coordinated effort of their teammates. This structural difference made soccer, in the reformers' view, the more appropriate vehicle for the kind of social engineering they had in mind. The game was not merely more modern in its associations; it was more modern in its very logic.

6. Identity, Nationalism, and the Management of Difference

A recurring theme in the literature is the complexity of soccer's role in the management of Ottoman imperial identity. The late Ottoman Empire was a multiethnic, multireligious polity in which football had initially been adopted and institutionalized by non-Muslim minorities—Greeks, Armenians, Jews—and by European residents. The state's effort to create a specifically Muslim-Turkish sporting culture through institutions like the Friday League was thus not simply a positive project of identity construction but also a reactive project of competitive positioning within an existing, ethnically differentiated sporting landscape.

Mirza (2016) argues that this dynamic produced a distinctive tension in Ottoman football between what he characterizes as 'local attachments' and 'globalizing impulses.' Ottoman Muslim intellectuals wanted to participate in the global culture of modern sport while simultaneously ensuring that participation did not dissolve distinctively Ottoman or Islamic markers of identity. The Friday League was one solution to this tension: it allowed Muslim-Turkish clubs to compete within the framework of modern organized football while retaining a scheduling structure that signaled their difference from the Christian and European sporting world.

This balancing act had implications that extended beyond sport. As Yildiz (2025) shows, the effort to construct a coherent Ottoman Muslim sporting identity was part of the broader late Ottoman project of managing ethnic and religious difference within a framework of imperial unity—a project that was becoming increasingly difficult as Balkan nationalisms intensified and the empire contracted. Soccer provided a relatively low-stakes arena in which the state could experiment with strategies of identity management that it was simultaneously pursuing, with far higher stakes, in the political and military domains.

7. Gender, Exclusion, and the Masculine Coding of Ottoman Sport

The literature also addresses the gendered dimensions of Ottoman football culture, though this remains a relatively underexplored area compared to the nationalism and reform dimensions. Yildiz (2025) notes that the sporting sphere in the late Ottoman period was overwhelmingly, and increasingly deliberately, masculine. Women were largely excluded from participation in organized sport, and this exclusion intensified after the First World War as the state sought to reassert traditional gender roles in the face of the wartime disruptions that had brought women into the workforce and public life in unprecedented numbers.

This gendering of sport was not incidental to the social control project but integral to it. The physical culture program was fundamentally a program for the production of masculine subjects: men who were strong, disciplined, cooperative, and militarily capable. Women's exclusion from the sporting sphere was thus not merely a reflection of pre-existing social norms but an active construction, a deliberate effort to ensure that the spaces of physical culture remained spaces of masculine formation and masculine sociality. The football ground was, in this sense, a gender machine as much as a reform machine (Yildiz, 2025).

Summary of Key Findings

The following tables synthesize the primary mechanisms and objectives identified in the literature.

Table 1: Mechanisms of Social Control Through Soccer

Aspect of Control	Mechanism	Objective
Physical Reform	Refashioning the 'Ottoman Body' through athletic discipline.	Combat the 'Sick Man of Europe' image and prepare a robust citizenry.
Social Engineering	Promoting meritocracy and cooperation over traditional hierarchies.	Modernize social relations and foster a 'modern' outlook among youth.
Identity Management	Balancing 'local attachments' with 'globalizing impulses.'	Create a shared imperial identity that could compete with rising nationalism.
Gendered Control	Excluding women from the sporting sphere, especially post-WWI.	Reassert traditional masculine roles in a changing workforce landscape.

Table 2: Ottoman State Objectives for Organized Football

Objective	Mechanism	Outcome Sought
National Mobilization	Friday League and school curricula.	A disciplined, loyal youth population.
Physical Reform	Soccer as antidote to 'Oriental Weakness.'	A robust citizenry capable of defending the empire.
Ideological Unity	'Strength of Soul' philosophy.	Merging Islamic values (Friday play) with modern athleticism.
Institutional Control	State-backed clubs under CUP influence.	Centralized control over popular culture and social gatherings.

Discussion

Taken together, the reviewed literature presents a coherent and compelling picture of soccer as a multi-dimensional instrument of Ottoman state power. The game was adopted, institutionalized, and ideologically elaborated in ways that served at least four distinct but interconnected state objectives: the physical reformation of the Ottoman body; the production of cooperative, institutionally loyal subjects; the construction of a specifically Muslim-Turkish sporting identity within a pluralist imperial context; and the gendered reproduction of masculine civic virtue.

What is perhaps most striking in the literature is the degree of intentionality that scholars identify in these processes. The Ottoman engagement with football was not accidental or haphazard; it was, at least from the 1910s onward, a deliberate state project, shaped by coherent ideological commitments and implemented through specific institutional mechanisms. The CUP's support for the Friday League, the integration of soccer into school curricula alongside scouting and military training, and the theoretical elaboration of Physical Culture by figures like Tarcan all point to a state that understood sport as a domain of governance and organized its interventions accordingly.

The literature also raises important questions about the relationship between ideology and practice. The reformers' vision of soccer as a technology of social transformation was ambitious and, in many respects, utopian: a game played on a field was to produce nothing less than a new Ottoman man, physically robust, morally disciplined, and nationally committed. Whether the game actually achieved these objectives—whether the Friday League produced loyal subjects as well as it produced winning teams—is a question the literature addresses only partially. The gap between reformist aspiration and social reality is a fruitful area for future research.

Finally, the literature situates the Ottoman case within a broader comparative context that invites reflection on the relationship between sport and state power more generally. The Ottoman use of soccer as a tool of social engineering was not unique; similar dynamics can be identified in the German Turnverein movement, the British Empire's use of cricket, and the Fascist regimes' orchestration of athletic spectacle in the interwar period. What the Ottoman case adds to this comparative picture is a distinctive inflection: the appropriation of a Western sport by a non-Western state in the context of colonial pressure and imperial decline, and the creative reworking of that sport's meanings to serve local projects of survival and reform.

Conclusions

The scholarship reviewed here establishes beyond reasonable doubt that soccer in the late Ottoman Empire was far more than a recreational import. It was a site of active ideological investment, institutional construction, and social engineering. Ottoman reformers, intellectuals, and state actors saw in the game a uniquely powerful instrument for the physical, moral, and civic transformation of the Ottoman subject—a transformation they believed was necessary for the empire's survival in a world governed by Social Darwinist competition.

The literature identifies three key phases in this process: an early period of cosmopolitan elite adoption, in which soccer circulated among the transnational upper classes of late Ottoman cities; a middle period of state institutionalization, in which the CUP and allied reformers organized Muslim-Turkish football through structures like the Friday League; and a mature period of ideological elaboration, in which Physical Culture theorists like Tarcan systematically articulated the connections between athletic training, character formation, and imperial strength.

Throughout these phases, the central thread is the use of sport as a technology of governance: a means by which the state sought to shape, not just reflect, the social world of its subjects. The football ground was, in the late Ottoman imagination, a laboratory for the production of a new Ottoman man. That this laboratory operated alongside—and in tension with—other projects of reform, nationalism, and imperial management only adds to its historical interest.

As Murat C. Yildiz's 2025 monograph demonstrates, the Ottoman sports history literature has matured considerably in recent years and is now capable of sustaining the kind of nuanced, archivally grounded analysis that the topic deserves. The present review identifies several directions for future research: the gap between reformist aspiration and social practice; the experiences of non-Muslim minorities within the evolving Ottoman sporting landscape; the gendered dimensions of Physical Culture beyond the relatively brief treatments currently available; and the comparative history of sport and state power in the context of late imperial modernization more broadly.

Key Themes in the Literature

- Soccer arrived in the Ottoman Empire as a cosmopolitan elite practice before being appropriated as a tool of state reform—complicating straightforward modernization narratives (Mirza, 2016).
- The discourse of 'Oriental bodily weakness,' rooted in Social Darwinism, provided the ideological justification for the state's investment in physical culture and organized football (Yildiz, 2025; Mirza, 2016).
- The Friday League (Cuma Ligi) represents the most concrete institutional expression of the Ottoman state's effort to construct a distinctively Muslim-Turkish sporting culture within a pluralist imperial context (Yildiz, 2025).
- Physical Culture (Terbiye-i Bedeniye), as theorized by Selim Sirri Tarcan, provided the pedagogical framework through which soccer was linked to the production of character, discipline, and national loyalty (Yildiz, 2025).

- Soccer was privileged over wrestling precisely because its collective structure was seen as more appropriate to the demands of modern state-building and military organization (Yildiz, 2025).
- The exclusion of women from Ottoman sporting culture was an active construction, not merely a passive reflection of social norms, and served the broader project of masculine civic formation (Yildiz, 2025).
- The Ottoman case illuminates a broader comparative history of sport as a technology of governance in the context of imperial modernization and decline.

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