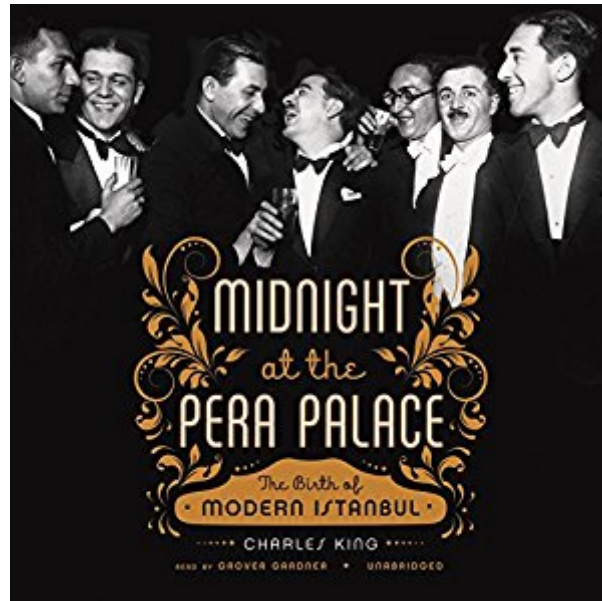




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# **Midnight At The Pera Palace: The Birth Of Modern Istanbul**



## Synopsis

At midnight, December 31, 1925, citizens of the newly proclaimed Turkish Republic celebrated the New Year. For the first time ever, they had agreed to use a nationally unified calendar and clock. Yet in Istanbul - an ancient crossroads and Turkey's largest city - people were looking toward an uncertain future. Never purely Turkish, Istanbul was home to generations of Greeks, Armenians, and Jews, as well as Muslims. It welcomed White Russian nobles ousted by the Russian Revolution, Bolshevik assassins on the trail of the exiled Leon Trotsky, German professors, British diplomats, and American entrepreneurs - a multicultural panoply of performers and poets, do-gooders and ne'er-do-wells. During the Second World War, thousands of Jews fleeing occupied Europe found passage through Istanbul, some with the help of the future Pope John XXIII. At the Pera Palace, Istanbul's most luxurious hotel, so many spies mingled in the lobby that the manager posted a sign asking them to relinquish their seats to paying guests. With beguiling prose and rich character portraits, Charles King brings to life a remarkable era when a storied city stumbled into the modern world and reshaped the meaning of cosmopolitanism.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Having lived in Turkey for extended periods and having stayed at the Pera Palace more than once, I approached the book without much thought about discovering anything new. I was wrong. This is a brilliantly written account of the conversion of the Ottoman Empire into the modern republic of Turkey using the hotel as a touchstone illustration for the changes that came about. At the time it

was built - when the first railway line reached Istanbul in the mid 1800s - there were many more Greeks, Europeans, Armenians, and others in Istanbul than there were actual Turks. The Empire ruled by the millet (now usually translated "state") system by which each ethnic group administered justice to its own "people," and they in turn felt no shared national identity with each other or with the Turks (a term then applied mostly to Anatolian peasants). By the time you reach the last page, you have a clear idea of the growth of the nation, the role of Turkey (and Istanbul in particular) as a haven for those fleeing their own countries (most of a chapter on Trotsky's refuge in the Princes' Islands), and later as an escape route for East European Jews fleeing Nazi extermination programs. (The later Pope Paul XXIII's role as Papal legate had a big role here.) All in all, one of the most informative and gripping books I've read in years!

To focus on this highly complex and relatively unknown time is so difficult that it is almost overwhelming when one realizes exactly what Dr. King has done here... This is an amazing read, not just for history but for the characters that populate its pages. I visited Istanbul some years ago, and want to go back (NOW!) after reading most of this (not quite done yet). Dr. King's elegant writing style makes this book so accessible - it's not like reading so many of those drier-than-dust scholarly books. Yet he has done impeccable scholarship with this work about a time that is not well-known and which events are even less known to the general public. Thanks for a great book on Istanbul, Dr. King (which is NOT, as another reader noted, a travel guide! - shape up your categories quickly!)

I read this book on the basis of a favorable review in the Economist. Although I am not particularly interested in Turkey or Istanbul, I found this a fascinating read, chockfull of interesting characters and incidents. The author recounts everything from the occupation of Istanbul by the allies after WWI, the White Russians flooding into the city after the Russian Revolution, the first beauty pageants in Turkey (progress?), the American spies' theme song in the city during WWII, and efforts to save Jews from Nazi-occupied Europe by transit through Istanbul. Generally the societal and cultural changes in Turkey between the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Ataturk's republic must rank as one of the most wrenching cultural changes in recent history. All of this was unknown to this reader, so I found it very interesting. A couple of minor criticisms:---the book occasionally covers topics that didn't particularly interest me, but overall the "interest quotient" was very high.--while the book includes endnotes, at least in the kindle version there are no references to the notes in the text itself; looks like a sloppy mistake.--i see that this book is rated #1 for Turkish travel

guides at , but I think this would generally be a poor travel guide, as it doesn't talk much about many places in the city other than the Pera Palace, Taksim Square, and Hagia Sophia. However, this book would probably be an excellent "background read" before a trip to the city, although the reader has to recognize that many aspects of the city from this period disappeared long ago...

Fascinating historical background of a melting pot of Eastern and Western politics, religions, philosophical and military influences. Islam, Jewish, Christian, Russian Orthodox and Catholic did overlap and learned not only to live together, but also how to govern together. The social and political power exchanges are interestingly presented for the reader to better understand the critical historical role of Istanbul/Constantinople. In parts of the story, I found the detail exhausting, though accurate. However, a good read which I am glad to have experienced!

My first visit to Istanbul last year was enough to show me that under the veneer that is Istanbul today there has to be a rich explanatory history of clashes and meldings of cultures, nationalities, religions and peoples. I found many of these explanations in *Midnight at the Pera Palace*. I returned to the city recently during the 2015 elections (during which time I finished the book) which surely mark a new crossroad in Turkey and Istanbul's history. We watched the sunset from the terrace of the Pera Palace, a rich experience for anyone who has enjoyed the book as much as I did. We saw no spies (or perhaps we did?). In the second part of the book, the author reveals meticulous detail of the inhumanity and desperation of Jewish refugee migration during WW2 via the essential conduit of Istanbul en route to Palestine. What is so disturbing is how in today's deeply troubled world - and particularly in this region - we again have the abject misery of refugees and migrants fleeing injustice, persecution and war. It seems that generations of humankind are unable to learn lessons from the cruel mistakes of previous generations. This realisation made the read all the more poignant. Authors like Charles King do us great service in helping us to understand and learn from history.

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