

# MIDNIGHT AT THE PERA PALACE: THE BIRTH OF MODERN ISTANBUL

## *EVENT SUMMARY*

On September 24, 2014, the Wilson Center's Global Europe Program hosted **Charles King**, Professor of International Affairs and Government at Georgetown University and former Wilson Center Fellow for a discussion of his new book *Midnight at the Pera Palace: The Birth of Modern Istanbul*. In discussing his book, Dr. King was also joined by **Thomas de Waal**, Senior Associate of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The conversation and subsequent question and answer session were moderated by **Christian F. Ostermann**, Director of the Wilson Center's Global Europe Program.



On September 24, 2014, the Wilson Center's Global Europe Program hosted **Charles King**, Professor of International Affairs and Government at Georgetown University and former Wilson Center Fellow, for a discussion of his new book *Midnight at the Pera Palace: The Birth of Modern Istanbul*. Throughout his career, Mr. King has researched nationalism, ethnic politics, transitions from authoritarianism, urban history, and the relationship between history and the social sciences and has published seven books, including *Odessa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams* and *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*. This newest book focuses on the era of transformation that led to the emergence of modern Istanbul. In discussing his book, Dr. King was also joined by **Thomas de Waal**, Senior Associate of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The conversation and subsequent question and answer session were moderated by **Christian F. Ostermann**, Director of the Wilson Center's Global Europe Program.

Mr. King argued that, at its height during the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul was a model and a point of envy for cities around the world. However, the end of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century changed the face of the great city, and an era of turmoil and transformation ensued. In this period, the city was occupied and divided by enemies and by World Wars, the traditional government structure was overturned and authoritarian rule dominated, and refugees from all over the region—from Armenia, Greece, the Balkans, and most prominently, Russia—took up residence in or passed through the former capital. As a result, Istanbul became the center of a world in which people were remaking their lives and dealing with the struggles of an uncertain future. This meant reformative thinking in all aspects of life: from religion and culture to transportation and gender relations.

According to Mr. King, the Pera Palace, a traveler's hotel along the route of the Orient Express, was a symbol of this era of transformation. Its diverse ownership and guest list were examples of the city's multicultural nature and its luxurious accommodation an example of the city's cosmopolitanism. The incredible cast of characters—including writers, politicians, diplomats, performers, and entrepreneurs—that passed through the hotel was critical in creating the republic that we know today; they contributed to its political, economic and cultural development. Much unfolded at the Pera Palace, and today, says Mr. King, hidden histories like those found there are all over the city.

Mr. King's book *Midnight at the Pera Palace: The Birth of Modern Istanbul* tells the story of Istanbul's great transformation and how people dealt with the chaos of their changing environment, and brings to life a remarkable era when the city of Istanbul stumbled into the modern world.