THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE OTTOMAN MILLET SYSTEM AND THE RISE OF NATIONALISM IN THE BALKANS: A CASE STUDY OF CHURCH DISPUTES IN FLORINA

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Introduction

The Balkans possess a highly diverse religious and sectarian composition and have historically been a region where various nations have striven to assert and maintain their national identities. The issue of churches and schools, which incited hostility and conflict among Christian Orthodox elements within the Ottoman Empire, arose when the "millet system"—established to govern Ottoman society—lost its efficacy due to the nationalist movements that emerged from the 19th century onwards (Karal 2003: 84 see also Faroqhi 2005). Regardless of their place of residence within the empire or the language they spoke, non-Muslims were members of a nation whose administrative center was located in Istanbul (Eryılmaz 1992: 13). Under the millet system, the Ottoman Empire recognized three primary nations: the Greek, Armenian, and Jewish nations. Each of these nations comprised various ethnic and linguistic groups that were subordinate to the Patriarchate through their respective clergymen. The Greek nation encompassed not only ethnic Greeks but also all Orthodox Christians, including Serbians, Romanians, Bulgarians, Wallachian's, Orthodox Albanians, and Arabs (Ortaylı 2005:67).

This study aims to illuminate the church disputes between Greeks and Bulgarians in Florina through an analysis of Ottoman archival records. In the 19th century, the

issues surrounding churches and schools in the Balkans, particularly in Macedonia, have been extensively discussed in prior scholarship (Yenidünya 1999; Abdula 2013; Roudometof 2002; Brooks 2015; Mazower 2000; Dakin 1966; Yıldız 2008, Taşcan 2011 etc.). The complexity and breadth of the subject matter and geographical scope necessitated a focused sample, leading to the selection of Florina as the case study. Florina presents a unique microcosm for examining these conflicts, as Muslims were also involved in the church disputes occurring there. This involvement of multiple religious communities adds a significant dimension to understanding the broader socio-political landscape of the region during this period.

The Ottoman Millet System and The Rise of Nationalism in The Balkans

As the Ottoman Empire expanded its territory, the population under its rule became increasingly differentiated with the vast geography that was annexed to Turkish territory, and the confidence-building policies implemented towards this population also succeeded in ensuring the loyalty of the new participants / non-Muslim elements. In this way, a new system that could blend Muslims and non-Muslims in the same pot was created. This system, in which the subjects were categorized according to their religion and sect instead of their ethnic identity, was called the "millet system" (Ortaylı 2005:66; Yücel 2014:1).

The Ottoman Millet System was a unique administrative structure that recognized the diverse religious and ethnic communities within the Ottoman Empire (Faroqhi 2005). The Ottoman rulers acknowledged the existence of various religious and ethnic groups within the empire and respected their distinct identities and practices. Instead of organizing communities based on territorial boundaries, the millet system granted each religious community a degree of autonomy in managing its internal affairs, such as personal status matters and religious practices (Davison 2005; Findley 2010). The millet system allowed each religious community to maintain its cultural traditions, language, and legal practices under the supervision of its own religious leaders and institutions. By providing a framework for different religious groups to coexist peacefully, the millet system helped prevent large-scale religious and ethnic conflicts within the empire. The system of legal pluralism allowed communities to resolve disputes and grievances through their own community courts, contributing to a sense of order and security within the empire (Barkey 2008; Gavrilis 2015). Intermediaries played a crucial role in maintaining the millet system, acting as liaisons between the imperial state and the various religious communities to ensure smooth governance.

The millet system evolved over time, especially during the nineteenth century Tanzimat reforms, to address challenges such as rising nationalism and external pressures while striving to modernize citizenship and equality among subjects (Davison 2005). Overall, the Ottoman Millet System was seen as a successful example of non-territorial autonomy that allowed for the peaceful coexistence of diverse religious and ethnic groups within the empire, contributing to social stability and governance (Barkey- Gavrilis 2015).

The Ottoman Millet System had a significant impact on Balkan societies during the Ottoman rule. The millet system allowed for the recognition and organization of various religious and ethnic communities in the Balkans, providing a framework for coexistence and governance. Different religious communities in the Balkans, such as Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Muslims, were able to maintain their cultural and religious practices under the millet system, contributing to the preservation of their identities. While the millet system provided a degree of autonomy and stability, it also sparked nationalist sentiments in some Balkan societies, leading to movements for independence and the eventual dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the region (Kursar 2013: 97-108).

Another significant decree that brought substantial changes to the community structure following the Tanzimat was the Reform Edict issued on February 18, 1856. This edict promised three major reforms to non-Muslim subjects in the context of constitutional development. First, it ensured that Muslims and non-Muslims would receive equitable representation in provincial and municipal councils. Second, it stipulated that non-Muslims would be included in the Meclis-i Ahkam-ı Adliye. Third, it mandated the reorganization of the "millet" system of non-Muslims, allowing laypersons, in addition to clergy, to participate in their councils (Ahbab 2015: 52-53).

As the millet system weakened due to the rise of nationalist movements, the state-initiated efforts to abolish it following the Tanzimat Edict. These new efforts aimed to replace the millet system with the concept of "Ottoman citizenship," emphasizing the equality of nations. This new citizenship legislation sought to eliminate the differences in legal status and lift all social and legal restrictions imposed on non-Muslims. These restrictions were altered in favor of non-Muslims by the 1856 Reform Edict. Taking advantage of the legal gaps created by this edict, non-Muslims swiftly began issuing their own nationality charters, fostering their national identities. This trend among non-Muslims was accompanied by various responses. To address this issue, the Ottoman State introduced the Ottoman Citizenship Regulation on January 28, 1869, attempting to resolve the matter through this new legislation (Serbestoğlu 2014).

Among the non-Muslim nations in the Ottoman Empire, the Orthodox were the largest (Glenny 2000: 71-72; Akarlı 1972: 77-84; Zarogianni 2023:94). Since the majority of the Orthodox were Greeks, the Patriarchate of Fener was called the Greek Patriarchate. The other nations affiliated to this patriarchate were Bulgarians, Serbs and Montenegrins. However, Bulgarians established the independent Bulgarian Church in 1870 due to the intimidation policy of the Orthodox Patriarchate against them (Eryılmaz 1992: 43).

As a consequence of the burgeoning nationalist movements in the Balkans, regulations were formulated, and communities striving to establish their national identities took measures to delineate their distinctions. These efforts were undertaken soon after their successful struggles against the Ottoman Empire. Prior to the decree of 1870, Bulgarians were incorporated into the Rum Millet within the Ottoman Empire's millet system (Taşcan 2011; Yıldız 2008:17-22). The separation of the Bulgarian Church contributed greatly to Bulgarian nationalism and Bulgaria gained its independence in 1878. After the separation of the Bulgarian Church from the Greek-Orthodox Church, many churches and schools in Macedonia were in dispute as to whether they belonged to the Patriarchate or the Exarchate (Yosmaoğlu 2014:53-60). Abdülhamid II exploited this conflict to the Ottomans' advantage, thereby postponing the formation of Balkan unity. However, the Committee of Union and Progress addressed this issue in Macedonia by enacting the law on churches on October 3, 1910. This led Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria to unite and declare war against the Ottoman Empire (Eryılmaz 1992:44).

The Bulgarian Exarchate expressed dissatisfaction with the jurisdiction delineated in its founding decree. Seeking to expand its authority, the Exarchate invoked Article 10 of the edict *which stated that the Exarchate could establish further dioceses in places where 2/3 or more of the population voted in its favor in organized plebiscites* (Zarogianni 2023:99). The persistent efforts of the Bulgarian community to enforce this article proved successful. In plebiscites conducted in dioceses such as Ohrid and Skopje, 90% of the Orthodox population voted in favor of affiliation with the Bulgarian Exarchate. These developments significantly intensified the conflict between the Exarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate (Yücel 2014: 55). This tension between the Bulgarian Exarchate and the Greek Patriarchate is also manifest in the case of Florina.

The Case of Florina

In the 19th century, the population of the town of Florina, located in the province of Monastir, was composed of diverse ethnic groups, including Muslims, Bulgarians, Greeks, Vlachs, and Jews (Sakaoğlu 2007; 78). The multi-ethnic composition and strategic geographical location of Florina contributed to the church and school conflicts that arose in the 19th century.

In the town of Florina, Bulgarians wanted to build a church in the neighborhood named Cami-i Atik. As it is understood from the telegram sent to the local administration with the signatures of the Muslim inhabitants of this town: Bulgarians wanted to build a church between the two mosques in the neighborhood of Cami-i Atik. The Muslims living in this town objected to this and wanted to prevent the construction of the church (BOA, DH.MKT. 1619/133 27 Apr 1889). In response to this telegram sent by the people of the neighborhood, it was understood that the construction of the church in question had been permitted by the sultan's edict, but the construction could not be started due to the intervention of some of the Muslim residents with the encouragement of the Greeks. The Ministry of Justice and *Mezahib* informed the Province of Manastır that there was no Islamic neighborhood in the vicinity of the church planned to be built, as claimed by the Muslims, and therefore there was no objection to the construction of this church (BOA, DH.MKT. 1626/14 4 Jun 1889). It is understood from the official records that the Greeks allocated the church outside the town of Florina only to their own nation and the Bulgarians had no place to worship (BOA, DH.MKT. 1601/115 6 Mar 1889).

Although the Greeks had allocated the church outside the town of Florina to themselves and the Bulgarians, who had recognized the Exarchate, had been deprived of the performance of the liturgy, the construction of a church for them had been granted a licence, but the construction of the church had not yet begun due to the interference that had occurred at the site. As a result of the research carried out upon the petition submitted by the Bulgarians regarding the prevention of this interference, it was determined that there was no church where Bulgarians could worship. Accordingly, Nona Petro and Dimitri Taranyan donated 20.000 kurus to build a church in the slum neighborhood of the town. The research carried out before the construction permit was granted revealed that although the land where the church was to be built was located in the Cami-i Atik neighborhood, there were no mosques or Islamic houses around it, it was located among the Christian houses in the slum neighborhood and was owned by Bulgarians. Although it is in a location where people can worship freely without disturbing other nationalities, the Greeks want to prevent the construction

of this church due to the dispute between the Greeks and Bulgarians (BOA, ŞD. 2541/13, 18 Feb 1889; DH.MKT. 1633/75, 30 Jun 1889; DH.MKT. 1641/11, 22 Jul 1889).

Church disputes between Greeks and Bulgarians escalated into legal disputes as well. Askir Vasil was dispatched from the Istanbul Police Directorate through Thessaloniki to apprehend tablakar Niko, who allegedly assaulted his sister Katerine and his brother Kostantin's family, Elen, during a confrontation at the church in Florina (BOA, ZB. 447/3, 28 Mar 1891).

In the communication made upon the complaint about the intervention of Bulgarians in the church belonging to the Greeks in the village of Nolyan in the province of Florina, it was understood that the church was handed over to the Greeks upon the complaint of the Greek metropolitan, but the Bulgarians continued to worship in the church. In a village with two churches, a church should be allocated to each side, and in villages with one church, the churches should remain common between the members of both nations (BOA, DH.MKT. 1909/105, 11 Jan 1892).

In another example, in the church and school shared by Greeks and Bulgarians in the village of Pir Kopani in Florina, the Bulgarians did not want to hold services together with the Greeks and did not want to educate their children in the church and school, where the Greeks had 90 inhabitants and the Bulgarians had 807 inhabitants, and it was thought that unless a decision was made by the state about this problem, incidents between the two nations would escalate. Accordingly, the matter was resolved with the abandonment of the church and school to the Bulgarians and the Bulgarians giving compensation to the Greeks (BOA, BEO 122/9079, 14 Dec 1892). Since the Bulgarian population was larger, it was considered logical to leave it to them. If this is not accepted, the other nation has the right to build its own church, but they must continue to share the church (BOA, BEO 275/20625, 13 Sep 1893).

In another example, a telegram sent by the mukhtar of the town of Tarsiye in the province of Florina with the complaint that the church, which was built jointly by 100 Bulgarian households and 28 Greek households, had been seized by the Greeks and what should be done about it was consulted with the Ministry of Justice and Mezahib. It was understood that the church in question was affiliated to the Greek patriarchate and that they had been holding services together until today (BOA, BEO 331/24762, 21 Dec 1893; BEO 340/25478, 8 Jan 1894).

According to the official record dated 8 May 1904, in the village of Zelih in Florina, there were 297 Greeks in 76 households and 1349 Bulgarians in 202 households.

While Greeks were celebrating mass in the church of Aya Dimitri outside the village and Bulgarians were celebrating mass in the church of Aya Yorgi inside the village, the Greek Metropolitan forcibly took the church of Aya Yorgi from the Bulgarians and gave it to the Greeks. Although the Bulgarians outnumbered the Greeks in terms of population, it was unfair to take the church away from the Bulgarians (BOA, TFR.I.MN 38/3798).

On 4 July 1910, according to the draft law submitted to the parliament, a number of rules were put on the agenda in order to prevent the church and school disputes between Greeks and Bulgarians (BOA., İ.MLU 2/18). Before this draft law was submitted, the issue of churches and schools between the Bulgarian nation and the Greek nation had grown to such an extent that the Bulgarians organized a meeting in Florina against the pressures of the Greek patriarchate (BEO. DH.MKT. 2767/31).

Conclusion

By situating the Florina church disputes within this broader context, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how local conflicts were influenced by wider imperial policies and nationalist movements. The involvement of Muslims in the Florina disputes also offers a unique perspective on the intercommunal dynamics and the impact of Ottoman reforms on different religious communities. This case study illustrates how the Greeks effectively utilized the Ottoman bureaucratic framework to counteract Bulgarian efforts aimed at expanding their religious influence. Even if they could not prevent it, they managed to slow down the construction of the church in Florina.

It can be argued that the church disputes between Greeks and Bulgarians were not solely the purview of nationalist ideologues or religious leaders but also profoundly impacted the quotidian lives of ordinary individuals. These conflicts permeated various aspects of daily existence, influencing social interactions, economic activities, and local governance. The disputes over ecclesiastical control and educational institutions often dictated community affiliations, marriage alliances, and even access to social services, thus embedding the larger national and religious struggles into the very fabric of everyday life. Moreover, the involvement of local populations in these disputes underscores the interconnection between macro-political movements and micro-social realities, revealing the complex ways in which national identity and religious allegiance were negotiated on the ground level. This perspective aligns with the broader historiographical debates on the interplay between elite political strategies and

grassroots social dynamics in shaping historical outcomes in the Balkans during the late Ottoman period.

In instances where local administrations proved incapable of resolving disputes between Greeks and Bulgarians, the province escalated grievances by forwarding complaints to central authorities, specifically the ministries. This bureaucratic recourse exemplifies the Ottoman Empire's administrative response to localized conflicts over church ownership and educational jurisdiction, highlighting the hierarchical nature of governance and the role of provincial administrations as intermediaries between local communities and imperial authorities. Such actions underscored the empire's efforts to maintain order and adjudicate intercommunal disputes within a legal framework governed by Ottoman law and policy. The practice of referring disputes to central ministries reflects broader historiographical debates on imperial governance and the balance between centralized authority and local autonomy in multiethnic and multi-confessional societies.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the Ottoman government endeavored to adjudicate church disputes based on demographic majority as a means of achieving equitable resolutions. However, as evidenced in the case of Florina, the government also employed compensatory measures to mitigate potential grievances and prevent one community from feeling marginalized. This practice involved ruling that the community granted official worship rights in disputed churches should provide compensation to the opposing community, reflecting the Ottoman state's pragmatic approach to managing intercommunal conflicts within its diverse and multi-confessional domains. Such measures underscored the empire's attempt to balance legal principles with social harmony, navigating the complexities of religious rights and communal tensions through institutionalized frameworks. This historical episode exemplifies broader scholarly discussions on Ottoman governance strategies and the dynamics of religious coexistence in the late imperial period.

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