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Caring for the sick man? Russian and Greek reactions to the Ottoman reforms (1856–1908)

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Before the Crimean War (1853–1856), Greece and Russia had had a long and complicated relationship to the Ottoman Empire and especially to its sizable Orthodox Christian minority. The Sick Man of Europe was trying to cure himself quite vigorously from 1856 to 1908 but most contemporary Western and Balkan observers as well as modern historians did not rate Ottoman modernization efforts very highly. Unlike their Russian counterparts, implemented in the same time period, they are never labeled as ‘Great Reforms’.

This article will demonstrate that during Tanzimat and its sequels, even Turkey’s arch-rival yet similarly dynastic empire, Russia, supported Ottoman secularization and religious equality short of removing residual Christian Orthodox autonomy. Surprisingly, a very different polity, the ethnocentric Greek nation-state had similar reactions hoping to enable Ottoman Greeks to dominate the Sultan’s realm politically and economically. After the Crimean War, Russia’s motive was also to extend its influence through the traditional Ottoman institution – the Patriarchate of Constantinople – without destroying the Ottoman Empire or even engaging in conspicuous unilateralism and thereby provoking another conflict with the other Great Powers. While St Petersburg attempted to steer Ottoman reforms along federative lines advocating broad autonomy for Christian majority provinces, Athens backed the Sultan’s direct rule except in ethnically Greek areas like Crete.

Roderic Davison was one of the first historians to emphasize the Tanzimat’s successes not just its failures in his classic account of the transformations between 1839 and 1876.¹ These chronological limits reflect the still widespread received historiographical wisdom that Tanzimat ended in 1876 or 1878 at the latest. Selim Deringil set himself a difficult task of rescuing Abdulhamid II’s reign for the history of Ottoman modernization. Far from dragging his realm into a dystopian medieval caliphate, the notorious ‘Red Sultan’ was building a modern territorial nation² ‘molding Tanzimat reforms to his advantage’.³ In fact, although their ‘rationality’ was disguised by the traditional servile rhetoric,⁴ between 1876 and 1908 the bureaucratic elites continued to absorb Eurocentric notions of modernity and civilizing mission while Orientalizing their fellow Ottomans in backward outlying provinces.⁵ Under Abdulhamid II, as earlier, Russian and Greek diplomats continued to defend the vestiges of Christian Orthodox autonomy.

Since the capture of Constantinople in 1453, the *millet* system allowed the Ottoman government to satisfy the demands of Islamic law and to follow the tradition of the Arab caliphs. The existence of parallel legal regimes for different confessional groups was also a form of cost-saving indirect rule reminiscent not just of pre-modern empires but also of modern colonial bifurcated states.⁶ Religious barriers should be easier to overcome than racial ones so it was not an impossible task to create one Ottoman civic nation after the first serious start given by the Hatt-i Sherif of 1839 and especially by the Imperial Reform Edict of 1856.