

RELIGION & POLITICS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

This Strategic Research Initiative concentrates on the interaction between religion and politics that has always served as a crucial determinant in the evolution of state and society in Turkey and the Black Sea region across time. Political ways of mobilising for, maintaining and contesting leadership and authority have often been expressed and transmitted through the use of religion. This theme has at times also merged with discussions on tradition and modernity as well as change and continuity regarding the development of state and society. In the Turkish context, this has not just influenced the evolution of the domestic environment and political systems but also had an impact on Turkey's international standing and behaviour. Likewise, the balance between religion, state and society has also accompanied processes of state formation and nation building for other countries around the Black Sea, including during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

Religion as legal strategy in the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean

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Uskoks, Cossacks, Knights of St John and the North African (Barbary) corsairs were all notorious perpetrators of maritime violence in the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean, but one of the biggest threats to commerce in these waters in the late 18th and 19th centuries came from imperial Russian naval forces. The frequent conflicts between the Russian and Ottoman empires made crossing the Black Sea and the Aegean a perilous affair; in addition to the regular hazards of sea travel, merchants now had to contend with being hunted as prizes by the naval forces of the warring empires. From the late 1760s, when Russian naval forces began to encounter Ottoman subjects at sea, the religion of Ottoman merchants mattered a great deal to Russian naval activity, particularly in wartime. As part of Russia's military strategy, Russian naval forces captured predominantly Muslim vessels and cargo; meanwhile, Russian admiralty courts released wrongly seized Ottoman Christian ships to their owners.

The capture of enemy ships and their cargo by belligerent nations is governed by a part of the law of nations known as 'prize law'. When vessels commissioned by Russia, whether privateers (privately-armed ships sailing under the Russian flag) or regular naval forces, seized military or merchant ships – that is, prizes – their captures were adjudicated in admiralty courts. These admiralty courts, set up on ships and in Russian ports, became venues for enforcement of the Russian policy to intercept enemy trade. My research, which has been generously funded by a British Institute at Ankara study grant, examines the deployment and strategic use of religious identities in Russian admiralty courts in the Black Sea and the eastern

Mediterranean in the late 18th and 19th centuries. By the early 19th century, taking prizes had become a far more pronounced aspect of Russia's wars against the Ottoman empire and its campaigns of conquest around the Black Sea, rendering Russian prize law and legal strategies in Russian prize courts a significant part of the legal geography of the Black Sea region.

Although religion had little to do with the outbreak of the Russo-Ottoman wars of the 18th century, it played an important rhetorical role in Russia's strategic activities. Manifestos and proclamations played on Christian subjects' natural affinity with Orthodox Russia, urging them to rise up against the Muslim yoke. Orders to Russian ships and privateers, which permitted them to intercept trade heading to Istanbul, classified the ship and its cargo according to religion rather than a political or ethnic affiliation. Pace S.M. Soloviev, who painted the Russo-Ottoman conflicts as a standoff between Orthodox Christianity and Islam with the liberation of the Ottoman empire's Christian subjects as an important goal for the Russian side, there were many geopolitical goals at play in these wars (Soloviev 1994). I.M. Smilianskaia, for instance, points to evidence that the Russian side considered access to the Black Sea as the primary aim of the 1768 war (Smilianskaia et al. 2011: 72), an issue which peace treaties at the end of subsequent wars revisited. Nevertheless, confessional categories had an important place in the daily operations of Russia's strategic forces as well as their interactions with the local populations in the theatre of war.

In the 1768 and 1787 wars, Russia's policy emphasised the susceptibility of Muslim cargo to capture; however, other orders and rescripts suggested that all non-Christian cargo would be considered good prize. Catherine II's instructions to Count Aleksei Orlov, commander of Russian forces in the Aegean Sea during the 1768 Russo-Ottoman war, stressed

that the 50 blank privateer patents attached to these instructions were to be used to capture Muslim cargo only (*MIRF*: 382–83). In another order, quoted by Vice-Admiral Elmanov to the prize commission in 1771, Catherine had apparently instructed Orlov that not only Muslim but also Jewish goods were subject to requisition. These classifications are not surprising, as religious identities were, in fact, organising principles of both the Russian and Ottoman empires. But Catherine’s instructions do raise questions of how Russian cruisers and privateers might learn the confessional identity of a ship or its cargo from the flag under which it sailed.

Not unaware of the potential for abuse of the liberties granted by the privateer patents, Catherine II was concerned that Russia’s co-confessionalists would fall prey to eager privateers. She expressed this concern in several of her letters to Orlov before sanctioning privateering as part of the First Russian Archipelago Expedition during the 1768–1774 Russo-Ottoman war. Alongside her instructions to seize Muslim goods, Russian privateers were further cautioned to leave untouched European commerce and particularly non-contraband goods peddled by Greeks, as they were practitioners of Russia’s own faith. The *Rules for Privateers*, issued and distributed in 1787, contains several articles warning privateers not to harass vessels sailing under Christian flags and further articles address Greeks in particular. The special status enjoyed by Ottoman Christian Greeks in this regard is also observed by Molly Greene, who documents the great lengths to which Ottoman Greeks went to prove their Christianity to the Maltese prize tribunal

(Greene 2010). Its Christian ownership exempted Greek cargo from the *corso*, the permanent war the Catholic Knights of Malta waged against the Islamic Ottoman empire. However, the Russian story differs in several ways. For one, the Russians were not in a protracted war against Islam (in fact, Catherine the Great’s reign exhibited a streak of toleration towards Muslims inside the borders of Russia’s own empire), but were, rather, involved in several discrete wars with the Ottoman empire. More importantly, Russians did not need proof of Greeks’ Christianity, but in fact emphasised it to inhabitants of the Greek archipelago and to other Christian populations of Ottoman Europe in order to recruit them to assist Russia’s military forces. The primacy of ‘Greek’ in Russian political discourse suggests that Ottoman Greek merchants did not need to make a case for having a special status – distinct from other subjects of the Ottoman empire – to Russian authorities, as it was that Russians made the case for them. On the contrary, this special status was exploited and reinforced as a legal strategy by Ottoman Greek merchants. Appealing their captures before Russian prize tribunals, therefore, Ottoman Greek subjects instead sought to prove their ‘Greekness’.

When Russia’s main theatre of operations moved to the Black Sea in the first decade of the 19th century, Russia began to pursue merchant ships under both Ottoman and neutral flags more actively. During the 1806–1812 war, within the span of a few months after the ceasefire between the Russian and Ottoman empires fell apart in March 1809, the Russian government’s policy swung from allowing Ottoman trade to continue to arrive in Russian ports, to



Naval chart of the islands of Paros and Naxos made by Russian naval officers between 1774 and 1780. The port of Auza on the island of Paros (left) was the seat of the Russian Admiralty Commission and Prize Commission in the First Russian Archipelago Expedition of 1769–1774 (map 22 from the printed version of the *Atlas of the Archipelago* compiled by I.I. Golenishchev-Kutuzov, V.P. Fondezin and I.M. Bersenev, St Petersburg 1798).

banning all Ottoman vessels from Russian ports, to arresting all Ottoman vessels in Russian ports despite their explicit intentions not to do so only months earlier. Orders to Russian frigates cruising in the Black Sea instructed them to intercept Ottoman trade at sea for various reasons, both to deal a blow to Ottoman commerce but also to prevent any communication with or assistance to ‘mountainous peoples’ (*gortsy* or *gorskie narody*), which included Circassians, Abazins and Kubans on the eastern side of the Black Sea. In these circumstances, even neutral-flagged ships were not immune from persecution, and were often stopped under suspicion of carrying Ottoman trade, Ottoman subjects or other contraband on the basis of flimsy evidence (usually rumours or reports from other merchant ships). In one particularly notable example, a squadron under the command of Captain Svinkin captured eight vessels sailing under then-neutral French flags in 1811 on the suspicion of contraband and illegal trade with the Abazins, on the eastern side of the Black Sea. Despite what appeared to be proper documentation, the prize commission was reluctant to recognise the ships’ neutrality on the basis of certain inconsistencies in their paperwork and several of the ships and their cargo were condemned as good prize.

The new reality of the perilous Black Sea environment in the first decade of the 19th century is most evident from the admiralty records held in the Russian State Naval Archive. Many of the original records of the prize commissions in Russia’s Black Sea ports seem to have been lost, so it is difficult to gauge the sheer numbers of merchant vessels captured by Russian forces on the Black Sea in this time period. However, often merchants contested or appealed their captures, and their petitions were reviewed by the Admiralty, and often the Committee of Ministers and the State Council. In some cases, even the emperor weighed in on merchant appeals to clarify Russian policy.

Although the government’s 1806 Law on Prizes did not codify Ottoman Christians’ neutrality into law (a change from previous laws), from the government’s reasoning in its decisions on merchant appeals it is evident that Russia’s practice of equating Orthodox Christian ‘Greekness’ with neutrality carried over into the 19th century. In evaluating these petitions, the local prize commissions or the central Admiralty in St Petersburg relied on the content of instructions to the cruisers who made the capture as well as the latest rescripts emanating from the Russian monarch. The latter generally provided precedent that helped decide these appeals. Even as late as October 1809, Emperor Alexander I’s rescript to Governor de Richelieu in Odessa instructed him to permit Greek vessels from Anatolia into Russian ports, reasoning that ‘while these peoples [*narody*] are subjects of Turkey [sic], but more have remained under its yoke, and have an allegiance to Russia’. Indeed, the October 1809 rescript was the basis of many appeals by Greek and Armenian (also Orthodox) merchants whose ships were

captured in the Black Sea. Often these appeals were successful, and after much bureaucratic turmoil the petitioners’ requests were met and their property, or its monetary equivalent, was returned to them.

However, it is evident that there was some tension between the personal and institutional incentives to capture prizes and the exclusion of Ottoman Christians from the legal realm of good prizes. For instance, when the Committee of Ministers – a high-level body in the Russian government – reviewed the capture of *Meleksa*, an Ottoman-flagged vessel belonging to two Greeks, Harlampi Simionov and Yanni Georgiev, they determined that, since the ship was captured in 1809 before the October rescript, this vessel should be good prize as it was heading to an Ottoman port city when it was taken. Moreover, while this stipulation was issued for this one ship, it was read as an amendment to Russian policy and accompanied further instructions issued to other frigates in 1811 suggesting that all Christian vessels heading to Ottoman ports may be taken as prizes. Without a doubt, this lack of clarity only encouraged Russian frigates to capture as many merchant vessels as they could, only to let the bureaucrats sort out the objections later.

Few have examined the effects of Russia’s maritime politics on the patterns of Black Sea trade or within the broader contexts of Ottoman capitulations and the consular networks of the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean. My research suggests that Russia’s legal stance towards Ottoman trade and the general exclusion of Ottoman Christians from capture on the Black Sea helped shape these systems. The passage of the 1806 Law on Prizes and further development of prize law institutions allowed Russia to maintain control over the Black Sea and to regulate trade in both its own ports as well as other Black Sea port cities. If the numerous appeals by merchants are to be believed, any of Russia’s captured prizes brought the merchants in question to disastrous ruin, just as restitution saved them from bankruptcy. Despite its muddled and imprecise policies, Russia’s general exception of Christian merchants sailing under the Ottoman flag and subsequent restitution of some property to many wronged merchants enabled particular kinds of trading networks and patterns of trade on the Black Sea until the middle of the 19th century.

References

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