

THE *PROTÉGÉ* SYSTEM IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE AND ITS ABUSES

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Following the establishment of regular diplomatic relations between the Ottoman Empire and foreign states in the sixteenth century, the Ottomans began to face what came to be known as the *protégé* system, which later proved to be the most dangerous threat to the very existence of their empire. This was the notion of foreign protection for the non-Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire.

All ambassadors received from the Sublime Porte (Bab-ı Ali - Ottoman government) a number of *berats* (charters, patents, or warrants), which were renewed with each new ambassador. Although the *berats* were given to them for the protection of their own servants only, some of the ambassadors began, by an abuse of privilege, to sell these charters to the wealthy *reaya* (*rayah*) - Greeks, Armenians, or Jews: so that the suburbs of Galata and Pera, in the Ottoman capital, had come to be peopled very largely by privileged persons called *Berathis* (or Barateers)¹. These *protégés* were mainly the Christians and Jews of the Ottoman Empire over whom the great powers assumed protective roles for political, economic, and religious considerations.

The French claimed religious protection over the Christians in Turkey by the Capitulations of 1673 and 1740;² whilst the wording of the Treaties of Karlowitz (1699), Passarowitz (1718), and Belgrade (1739) appeared to place Austria in an analogous position with regard to the Roman Catholics in the Ottoman Empire. Most-favoured-nation treatment was conceded to England by article 16 of the English Capitulations, and to Netherlands by article 40 of the Capitulations of 1680. The Republic of Venice was granted certain rights of protection in 1718; whilst the Treaty of Kutchuk Kainardja of 1774, skilfully misinterpreted by the Russians,

¹ G F. Abbott: *Under the Turk in Constantinople - a record of Sir John Fish's Embassy, 1674-1687*, London 1920, p. 285.

² A. Schopff: *Les réformes et la protection des Chrétiens en Turquie, 1673-1904*, pp. 1-2; see also Public Record Office, Confidential, Print, Turkey No. 9675.

provided a legal pretext for the Tsars to intervene in the internal affairs of the Ottoman Empire.

At first the system of protection was limited to individual Ottoman Christians and Jews, recruited locally to serve the foreigners as vice-consuls, interpreters, commercial agents, and more menial employees. The person concerned was given a *berat*, whose terms resembled diplomatic immunity, including, in some instances, exemption from Ottoman criminal jurisdiction, reduced customs levies, and other commercial privileges. Thus, by this system, Ottoman subjects gained the status of protected persons; procured the protection of the consuls of European states and their means of redress; and became entitled to the privileges granted to European merchants under the Capitulations. This meant that they could under-cut their unprotected Ottoman competitors and acquire a quasi-monopoly of the wholesale trade within the Empire³. Thus, most of the foreign trade of the Empire, and the professional services connected with that trade, had come under the domination of Greek and Armenian merchants⁴.

As long as the Ottoman Empire was strong, the *protégé* system did not create a problem; but as the Empire began to decline, any kind of European protection became increasingly attractive to the Ottoman subjects, but extremely dangerous to the Ottoman state. Christians and Jews, with no claim whatever to *berats*, began to obtain them. 'Twenty years ago', wrote Volney in 1785, 'they were given to understand that it was more lucrative to sell them (the *berats*). The present price is from 5 to 6,000 livres'⁵.

The extent of the abuse may be gathered from the report that, in 1793, the governor of Aleppo complained to the Sublime Porte that the number of consular dragomans (interpreters) in that city amounted to about 1,500, all exempted from taxation and engaged in commerce. A special commission was sent from Istanbul to make investigation, with the result that all but six were deprived of their *berats*, real or fictitious, and

³ Gibb and Bowen, I, part 1, p. 312.

⁴ Accounts and Papers, vol. LXVI, 1871, p.739; 1874, p. 1075; Foreign Office documents: FO 526/13.

⁵ Chasseboeuf di Comte de Volney: *Voyage du Egypte et en Syrie, 1783-5*, II, 2nd ed. Paris, p. 278; see also Alfred Wood: *A history of the Levant Company*, London 1935, p. 135.

in spite of their offers of bribe, were sent to the Ottoman capital for punishment⁶.

As *berats* began to decline in importance, a new threat arose. The powers increasingly pressed claims to the protection of entire communities. The Russians claimed protection over the Greeks, and early in the nineteenth century over the Armenians; the French over the Catholics; the British and the Prussians over the small Protestant communities, and occasionally over the Jews. To counteract this so-called European protection over the Ottoman minorities, the Ottomans asserted the same claim for the Muslim communities under Christian rule; for, Russia in Central Asia, France in Algeria, and England in India, all ruled substantial Muslim populations.

Thus, since the eighteenth century, the position of the Christians in the Ottoman Empire had been transferred in Muslim eyes. From being *dimmis*, people protected by Islam, with their rights and obligations set by tradition, they had become too arrogant, or too friendly with the enemy. As the power of the European states increased, Christians and Jews began to occupy a status resembling that of residential aliens. Their rights, privileges, and obligations were now fixed, not by tradition, but by foreign powers. Being no longer protected by Islam, they became people protected by Russia, France, England, and other powers of the *dar al-harb* (domain of war), rather than by the *dar al-Islam* (domain of Islam). They were no longer entitled to the protective status of Ottoman citizens⁷.

In the nineteenth century, as a result of the increased political and economic influence which the great powers exerted on the Ottoman government, their protection of the Ottoman minorities continued and intensified. By the middle of the century, not only the holders of *berats*, but all the aggrieved members of *millets* within the reach of a foreign consul, looked to him for protection and redress⁸. European diplomats in Istanbul, and their consuls in the major Ottoman cities, persisted in abusing

⁶ Kamil el-Gazzi: *Nahr el-Dahab fi ta'rih Haleb*, III, p. 311; Gibb and Bowen, I, part 1, pp. 310-11.

⁷ Braude and Lewis, *Christians and jews in the Ottoman Empire*, I, pp. 28-32.

⁸ Charles Issawi: 'The transformation of the economic position of the Millets in the nineteenth century', in Braude and Lewis, I, p. 275; see also Public Record Office, FO 371/3410/132748, for a concise history of the various Capitulations granting protection to Ottoman subjects, dated 30.7.1918 - memorandum by S. Ferrier.

the privileges granted to them through the Capitulations, by extending the rights given to their own nationals, to some non-Muslim Ottoman subjects, for their own ulterior motives, and interfered in the proceedings of Ottoman tribunals.

During the Napoleonic upheaval, the Ottoman government decided to curb and eradicate this protection racket. It sent circular notes to the embassies concerned, on 17 January 1806, stressing the condition that the *Berathls* (those who had *berats* of protection) should conform to the terms of their charters. 'Strictly speaking', observed Charles Arbuthnot, the British diplomatic representative in Istanbul, in a despatch to his Foreign Secretary Charles James Fox, on 5 May, 'the Porte... has justice on its side. The *Berathls* should either give up their "Patents of protection", or should retire to the particular place of residence specified therein'. Arbuthnot believed that the Porte's move was particularly directed towards Russia, as the Court of St. Petersburg had 'too freely granted (citizenship) to Turkish subjects, despite the Russian Ambassador d'Italinsky's repeated exhortions to his government to act more discreetly'. So determined was the Porte in this matter that, the Kâhya Bey had asked the French dragoman to inform M. Ruffin of the French mission, who had protested most strenuously against the conduct of the Porte that, should the consequence of this dispute be a declaration of war against ten foreign powers, the Sultan would rather accept that than desist from his resolution. Both the Sultan and the Porte were determined 'to get rid of foreign influence'⁹.

We learn from a report which M. Pisani, the British dragoman, prepared for Arbuthnot, that the English, Russian, German, and French missions possessed the greatest number, each of them having about forty *berats*. Obviously, these powers, particularly the last three, raised objections to the reform or abolition of the system. With the exception of a number of Turkish subjects admitted into Russian protection, under the description of *Berathls* or *Fermanhls*, certain Greeks of the Archipelago, and other parts of the Ottoman Empire, had obtained Russian patents of protection indiscriminately. Many of them, after a trip to Russia, changed their dress, and returned to the Empire as naturalised Russian subjects, claiming and enjoying every privilege, which was secured to Russia by the treaties. There was also a great number of Greek-built vessels, with Greek masters and crews, who navigated under the Russian flag, and enjoyed privileges and advantages which no other *reaya* had¹⁰.

⁹ FO 78/50: Charles Arbuthnot to Charles James Fox, Pera despatch, 5.5.1806.

¹⁰ Ibid.

By the beginning of June 1806, relations between the Porte and the Russian mission took a very serious turn. The discussions about the *berats* had irritated both the Russian Ambassador M. d'Italinsky and the Minister of the Porte; and the latter, as if wishing to hasten the rupture which, to many persons seemed inevitable, gave orders to revoke at once all the privileges which had long been tacitly ceded to the subjects of Russia. The Porte particularly objected to the Russian flag, and to the Russian right of citizenship granted to Turkish subjects by the Court of St. Petersburg. With regard to the flag, in particular, instead of the notification being officially made by the *Reis Efendi* (Ottoman Foreign Minister), a mere verbal message was sent to M. d'Italinsky by one of the Kaptan Pasha's (Lord High Admiral) junior officers, that none of the Sultan's Greek subjects would henceforth be allowed the protection of the Russian flag; and to such Greeks who had procured the flag, an intimation was made that, within eight days, they must either deliver up their Russia patents, or all their property would be confiscated. A similar declaration was also made to those who, by a residence in the Russian dominions, had obtained the privilege of becoming Russian subjects. M. de Italinsky remonstrated with the Porte on other subjects of litigation, but of no avail. He therefore decided to inform his government of what had passed.

Believing that England had an influence in the Ottoman Empire, which, on proper occasions might tend to guide the conduct of the Porte, British Ambassador Arbuthnot decided to act. He sent his dragoman to the Porte to inquire whether a war with Russia had been decided upon, and that if it had not, to bring to the *Reis Effendi's* serious consideration whether, if the measures then being pursued by the Porte were persisted in, it would long be in their power to avoid a war, as the Russian Emperor's 'own dignity and interests would make it his duty to resent the injurious conduct to which he was now exposed'. The dragoman was further directed to declare that a war with Russia must inevitably be accompanied by one with England, who would unite with Russia if hostilities should commence, as the Ottoman government would undertake such a war with the assistance of France. England would not then be able to continue on terms of friendship with a state who had made a common cause with England's enemy.

The intended effect was produced. The Porte was much alarmed at what M. Pisani had told them. The Grand Council was held, and with the help of the Sultan, they decided to appease the Russian minister.

Meanwhile, the Russian Foreign Minister, Count Woronzow, instructed d'Italinsky to negotiate with the Porte, and to suggest that, until a *reyaya* or Greek subject of the Sultan had resided for three years in Russia, he would not be considered as a Russian subject, and consequently, could have no right to the Russian flag¹¹. The issue was thus solved for the time being.

The Russian consuls, however, continued to abuse their diplomatic privileges. In particular, after the Turco-Russian war of 1828-9, the Tsar's consuls at Trabzon and Erzurum, along with the commanders of the Russian forces that had occupied Kars, Bayazit, and Erzurum during the war, concentrated their efforts to entice the non-Muslim Ottoman subjects to emigrate to Russia, and issued certificates putting them under Russian protection. They freely offered protection, especially to Ottoman Greeks and Armenians¹².

The Tanzimat reforms of 1839 did not do much to inculcate in the non-Muslim minorities of the Ottoman Empire a spirit of patriotism in the form of Ottomanism. They continued and intensified their intrigues with foreign powers. For example, British vice-consul G.S. Stevens at Trabzon wrote to his ambassador in Istanbul, Sir Stratford Canning, on 16 May 1848 that, a number of Greek Christians of the town had, within the past few months, become Russian subjects, and that a larger number were on the eve of obtaining similar protection. The Christians there were mostly traders with Georgia, and after a short residence on the coast, where they resorted to trade, procured Russian passports. Their chief object in changing their nationality was to facilitate their commercial affairs, and to evade the payment of taxes. Some of them obtained Wallachian passports, and these were afterwards exchanged for those of Russia. 'It is impossible not to consider this business as a great abuse, and detrimental to the Turkish Government which, if it wishes to prevent a general desertion amongst its Christian subjects here, should take some decisive measure to put a stop thereto. If this is not done, every Rayah here will belong to Russia in the course of a few years', warned the vice-consul¹³.

¹¹ Ibid.: Arbuthnot to Fox, Pera desp., 6.6.1806; see also Enver Ziya Karal: *Osmanlı Tarihi* (Ottoman History), vol. VII: *Islahat Fermanı Devri, 1861-76* (the period of the Reform Decree), Ankara 1977, pp. 174 f.

¹² FO 78/1396: Stevens to Clarendon, Trabzon despatch, 16.5.1858.

¹³ FO 195/294: Stevens to Canning, Trabzon despatch, 16.5.1848.

By the end of the Crimean War (1853-6), this practice spread throughout every province of the Ottoman Empire, so that 'thousands of native-born Christians in all the chief centres of commerce' came under the protection of European powers, observed Sir Edmund Hornby¹⁴. Hornby, who was sent to Istanbul in 1855 as a British commissioner to deal with the Ottoman public loan, and who was two years later appointed judge of the British supreme court there, writing *circa* 1856 observed:

'These protected Ottoman subjects were looked upon as the subjects of Russia, if they were of the Greek faith; of Italy, France, and Austria, if they were of the Roman faith; and of England and Germany, if Protestants. All the Powers abused the privileges they assumed, i.e. of granting protection - none more so than the Russians, the French, the English; the latter having acquired a protection over the Ionian Islands, granted passports right and left, so that many thousands more than the whole population of the seven islands, placed themselves under British protection in the Levant, whilst as many so-called Italians registered as Maltese, to say nothing of genuine Greeks and Armenians who managed to get English passports under one pretence or another...'¹⁵

Since the termination of the Crimean War many Ottoman subjects, especially among the Christians, had expressed a wish to receive Russian passports. They were told that they ought to take the oath of allegiance, at once, of the towns authorised to administer this. All they had to do was simply to produce a certificate that the oath had been made, and the Russian consular authorities extended their protection to them immediately. It is surprising, commented G.A. Stevens, the British vice-consul at Trabzon, 'to see with what rapidity the Russian subjects are springing up in this direction'¹⁶.

The secret plan of Russia was to draw to herself, particularly the Christian population of the Ottoman Empire, as revealed by a number of British consuls in Turkey. In January 1858 the Earl of Clarendon wrote to Mr. Alison, referring to the reported intention of France and Russia to

¹⁴ Sir Edmund Hornby: *An Autobiography*, Boston 1938; see also Karal VII, p. 175 A. Üner Turgay: 'Trade and merchants in nineteenth century Trabzon: elements of ethnic conflict', in Braude and Lewis, I, pp. 295-6.

¹⁵ Hornby, pp. 92-3.

¹⁶ FO 78/1396: Stevens to Clarendon, Trabzon despatch, 13.1.1858.

establish a joint protectorate over the Christian subjects of the Porte, and instructed him strongly to advise the Porte 'to resist this pretension before it becomes an established practice'¹⁷. About a month later, the British vice-consul at Trabzon, G.A. Stevens, wrote to Clarendon that the placing of agents at even the most insignificant roadstead on the coast, and in many small places in the interior, the arrival at Trabzon of medals, money, jewelled rings, and other presents for interpreters, Turkish assistants and servants of the Russian consulate, all tended to lead him to the conclusion that Russia had insidious plans for the Ottoman Empire. He warned that, unless measures were taken immediately by the Ottoman government to protect properly the Muslims and non-Muslims, that government would find itself, 'in the short space of four or five years, deprived of, if not all, the better portion of her Christian subjects' in those parts. Thousands had already, within the past eighteen months, taken Russian protection¹⁸.

Meanwhile the Russians carried on their 'unjust policy with impunity'. The number of Greeks styling themselves Russian subjects increased daily, and their insolence and arrogance towards the Turks became, at times, unbearable. The British consul at Samsun, F. Guarracino, was present in the Ottoman governor's room, with the Russian vice-consul, some time in August 1858, when a Greek peasant named Ahabanoglou, who had, in the course of a month, gone over to and returned from Georgia with a simple certificate, not passport, 'insulted the Pasha in a most barefaced way'. The governor had merely asked the man, if he insisted on considering himself a Russian, to finish his affairs and leave the place for Russia within a week. This he was obliged to do, but instead of proceeding to Russia, he embarked for Trabzon, and the British consul was told a few days earlier by the chief of the Greek community there that, Ahabanoglou had lodged a complaint in the Russian consulate at Trabzon against the governor for losses caused to him by his having 'forcibly expelled him'. 'It is hardly to believe that the Russian Government can countenance, or know, of some of the acts of its agents in Asia', remarked Guarracino; 'at the same time, if things are allowed to go on as they are now, while high functionaries in Europe are working to maintain

¹⁷ Accounts and Papers 44, 1877, XCII, 4033; Earl of Clarendon to Mr. Alison, F.O. despatch, 21.1.1858.

¹⁸ FO 78/1396: Stevens to Clarendon, Trabzon despatch, 19.2.1858.

the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, petty Russian employees appear to be effectively labouring for its dismemberment in Asia¹⁹.

In the years succeeding the conclusion of the Treaty of Paris (1856) Britain made constant representations to the Porte on behalf of the Christians in the Ottoman Empire. In 1858 joint British and French action was taken to obtain satisfaction for the outbreak at Jeddah, and in 1860 concerted measures were taken by the great powers to protect the Christians in Syria. In the protocol signed by Austria, France, Britain, Prussia, Russia and Turkey, at Paris, on 3 August 1860, relative to the restoration of tranquillity in Syria and the protection of the Christians, it was formally stated that no power sought, or would seek, any exclusive influence in the fulfilment of their obligations²⁰.

Nevertheless, in 1860, the American legation in the Ottoman capital estimated that the number of Ottoman subjects in Istanbul that enjoyed foreign national status was about 50,000²¹. In addition, many Ionian and Maltese Greeks, and Armenians from Persia, travelled and conducted their business with British and Russian passports, respectively. The French consuls, too, were doing their utmost to woo the Christians. According to acting British consul William G. Abbott at the Dardanelles (6.6.1860), many of the inhabitants of Maitos, a town on the Thracian Chersonesus, all of whom were Greek *reaya*, had received nominal Latin protection at the hands of the Abbé Spadaro, the Curé of the Roman Catholic Church there, which was under the immediate protection of the French vice-consulate. The abbé first tried to gain the goodwill of these people by what his church styled as 'acts of charity'. Probably he was furnished with funds for this purpose by the Roman Catholic bishop of Istanbul, or received a small fee from those to whom he delivered a document, conferring on its holder the nominal title and privileges of the Latin *reaya*.

No attempt was made to instil into the minds of these Greek Orthodox *reayas* principles subversive of the doctrines of their own creed; but this was either characteristic of the 'stealthy and gradual course' pursued by the emissaries of the Church of Rome when preparing the way for

¹⁹ FO 195/597: Guarracino to Bulwer, Samsun despatch, 6.8.1858.

²⁰ FO 371/3410/132748.

²¹ The United States National Archives: Legations, Dispatches, Turkey, vol. 16: Williams to Cass, 17.9.1860.

propaganda, or a purely political scope was intended. If the latter, 'the question arose as to what other object could be in view, but that of gradually alienating the sympathies of these people from their rightful sovereign, and a prelude to eventually drawing them off altogether from his allegiance' asked the British consul, who went on to observe: 'An abundant source of evil arises from this injudicious practice on the part of my colleagues (French and Russian), who, I regret to say, uphold the Christian indiscriminately, even in matters when he is manifestly the offending party, and thus to the prejudice of the Turk'. The root of the evil, believed the consul, was that the protection had assumed an official character. Its exclusive extension to the Christians tended to excite religious animosities between them and the Muslims.

The consul concluded his report with the following remarks:

'Were my colleagues to confine their interference within the limits of friendly advice, and laying aside all party spirit and sectarian views, stretch out a helping hand, not only to the Christian, but in case of need, to the oppressed Mussulman, and the persecuted Israelite, how much bitter strife would be avoided, and what vast benefits would accrue to this Empire; whilst the conscientious adoption of such tolerant conduct would be not altogether an unfitting tribute of friendship and admiration, due to that monarch, who in granting full liberty of conscience throughout his dominions, stands unrivalled, in this respect, by other Sovereigns save by the Ruler of our own free lands'²².

With so many non-Muslim Ottoman subjects under her protection, Russia had acquired additional pretexts for involving herself in the affairs of the Porte, and in the operations of local governments, particularly in commercial matters. She was also gradually gaining the allegiance of that portion of the Ottoman population seeking her protection, while alienating them from their own government. According to British Foreign Secretary Lord Russell, Russia's object seemed to be always the same, though she varied her means to preserve the consistency of her end. From the time of Catherine II to the commencement of the Crimean War, she had endeavoured to influence the Sultan's Christian subjects through the Ottoman government. Since the peace of 1856, however, she strove to influence the Sultan's government through his Christian subjects. For more than a century she had been aiming 'to rule indirectly'.

²² FO 78/1525: Abbott to Bulwer, Dardanelles despatch, 6.6.1860.

The Treaty of Paris (1856) had contemplated to substitute a collective protectorate of the five powers for the Ottoman Christian subjects in place of the exclusive protectorate of one power alone, which was expressly renounced and abolished by that treaty. This collective protectorate, Lord Russell explained to British Ambassador Sir Henry Bulwer in a despatch on 13 September 1860, was most difficult to apply. There was the danger that the Sultan's Ministers might abuse their influence, and that, while they grew rich 'by oppressing the country', they relied on foreign support against the resistance which such oppressions were likely to create. These Ministers had sought to enrich themselves in office by courting the support of particular foreign powers, and by taking advantage of the jealousies and rivalries among the foreign representatives in Istanbul.

He went on to claim that Britain wished to maintain the Turkish Empire, because this was conducive to British interests; besides, its subversion might lead to 'a scramble for its fragments', which could cause a general European war that might dangerously upset the balance of power. He believed that the continuance of the Sultan's rule would promote the interest of his subjects. Moreover, Russell observed that the Turkish Empire was inhabited by various peoples among whom the Turks alone, whatever might be their faults, were capable, in the existing condition of those peoples, to be the governing body. To substitute a single Christian power for the Muslim power in those territories would be impossible, and the subversion of the Muslim government would involve, as its consequence, the dismemberment and partition of the Turkish Empire with dire results²³. Russell was thus reflecting the British policy towards the Ottoman Empire for whose preservation Britain was striving for reasons so cynically expressed by the Foreign Secretary. In the absence of these reasons, however, Britain would not hesitate to join Russia, as she would do in 1908, and other contenders for the estate of the 'sick man of Europe', in order to dismember that Empire.

The genesis of the 'Eastern Question' in the latter part of the nineteenth century gave a further pretext to some of the great powers, to use or abuse their protective roles in attempts to detach huge chunks of territories from the Ottoman Empire to form an autonomous Bulgaria, and

²³ Turkey No. 17 (1877), Part II, no.80, pp. 89-91: Russell to Bulwer, F.O. despatch, 13.9.1860; for more information on the protégé system see Ali İhsan Bağış: *Osmanlı Ticaretinde gayri Müslimler* (Non-Muslims in Ottoman Commerce), Ankara, 1983.

an independent Serbia, Montenegro and Romania (Treaty of Berlin, 1878); and to impose a collective protection over the Ottoman Armenians in lieu of Russian protection extended to them in the preliminary Treaty of San Stefano (1878).

The protection racket continued until the destruction of the Ottoman Empire in the Great War (1914-18). It was finally laid to rest by the Treaty of Lausanne (July 1923), during the negotiations of which the Turkish delegation under İsmet (İnönü) refused bluntly to accept any special rights, extra-territorial and supra-national privileges, or protection, for any minorities remaining on Turkish territory.