



Summary :

Presentation of the communal organization of the Greek-Orthodox population in Constantinople from the beginning of the reform era (Tanzimât) until the signing of the Lausanne Treaty.

Date

1839-1923

Geographical Location

Constantinople (Istanbul)

1. Introduction

From the 1820s onwards the Ottoman sultans gradually introduced and implemented a series of reforms, widely known with the name [Tanzimât](#), aiming to modernize their empire and recover from decline. Theoretically the Tanzimât era commenced on November 3rd 1839 with the issuing of the Imperial Edict of Gülhane, which condemned anarchy in tax payments and abuses of tax-collectors, while at the same time granting all Ottoman subjects, regardless of their religious identity, the guaranteed protection of the sultan.

It must be stressed, however, that this official proclamation of 1839 (which cultivated great hope among the non-Muslim population of the empire) did not include anything on religious freedom per se. In fact, the first legal document categorically guaranteeing the unimpeded practice of religious duties for all Ottoman subjects was the imperial decree issued on February 18th 1856. The timing was not coincidental: the Crimean war offered Europeans the opportunity to demand the immediate implementation of reforms. This date as well, however, is also rather conventional with regard to the adoption of a new legal and administrative system for the [non-Muslim communities](#), based on the official incorporation of the (already existing) participation of laymen in communal administrative bodies. The secularization process in the millet system was gradual and did not occur immediately. The developments during the mid-1850s only verify and formalize this process.

2. Fundamental regulations

From this period of time onwards, every one of the different non-Muslim components of Ottoman society processed and applied “fundamental regulations” (nizamname), which included the basic principles according to which each community would operate in the future. At all cases, the religious leaders (the patriarchs for the Greek-Orthodox and [Armenian](#) populations, the arch-rabbi for the [Jews](#)) represented the highest authority for each millet, through which the Ottoman state negotiated and communicated.

However, while the (Gregorian) Armenians and the Jews seized the opportunity and used their “fundamental regulations” to minimize (or eliminate) the power of higher clergy, the Greek-Orthodox were not able to marginalize the [Patriarchate](#), though managed to noticeably attenuate the role of the Church; consequently, at least in paper, the Patriarchate continued to take part in the administration of the Greek-Orthodox “nation” considerably more than the arch-rabbi or the Armenian religious authorities did in the administration of their respective millets.

3. General Regulations of the Greek-Orthodox millet

In 1847, after repeated requests and successive petitions by laymen wishing to clear the finances of the Orthodox clergy, the Porte commanded patriarch [Anthimus VI](#) and the Holy Synod to proceed to reforms with regard to the election of prelates, the composition of the Holy Synod, the community’s treasury etc. On April 13th 1847 the National Assembly was formed, on the results of which the members of the National Provisional Council were based to process, between 1858 and 1860, the General Regulations (fundamental document for the Greek-Orthodox “nation” from 1862 until the end of the Ottoman era).



3.1. Central bodies of administration for the Greek-Orthodox millet

By stressing and confirming the breadth of power the hierarchy of the Greek-Orthodox clergy managed to maintain despite the general climate of secularization, the General Regulations introduce a “double-headed” administration: on the first hand the Holy Synod, consisting of 12 metropolitans of the Ecumenical See; on the other hand the Permanent National Mixed Council (PNMC), a 12-strong body as well, 8 of which were laymen with no apparent connections to the church, while the remaining four also served in the Holy Synod. One of the four synodic metropolitans presided over this mixed body, whose composition was yearly changed with the replacement of half of its members.

Either belonging to the clergy or laity, the officials of PNMC were elected. The metropolitans were appointed after elections within the church, while laymen were appointed by representatives elected by the total population of Greek-Orthodox inhabitants of [Constantinople](#). In order to conduct the election, the archdiocese of Constantinople was divided into parish sectors. In each sector the general assembly of parishes elected one or two representatives – depending on the case. The total of 26 representatives from the parishes comprised, along with the Holy Synod, the electoral body that would select the eight lay members of the PNMC.

The *ratione materiae* responsibilities of these two bodies were quite different and sometimes complemented one another. Besides the appointment of metropolitans around the empire, the Holy Synod was also responsible for the spiritual matters of the “nation”. Specifically, it undertook the protection of the Christian Orthodox population from external pressure to convert their religious beliefs. The financial administration and operation of “national” schools was under the supervision of the PNMC. This body also heard cases of domestic and hereditary law, but did not have jurisdiction for cases of practical law which fell under the sole jurisdiction of Ottoman courts.

The fact that almost all of the central boards of the Greek-Orthodox communities were housed in the Patriarchate building, speaks volumes of the primacy acknowledged –at least on a symbolic level– to the religious element. Besides the PNMC, which convened in [Fener](#), the secretariats of conveyance and passports’ issuing, the committee of education, the prudential committee, the “national treasury”, as well as the registrar’s office are included in lay services accommodated in an ecclesiastical building.

During the second half of the 19th century and until 1923, the Greek-Orthodox population of the Ottoman Empire were governed by the Patriarch of Constantinople with the assistance of the Holy Synod and the PNMC. The promises that the imperial decree of 1856 left, which were clarified and confirmed with the General Regulations of 1860-1862, resulted in the formation of a relatively autonomous legal context – at least with regard to social and cultural activities. The field, where the general rules drafted in these documents were mainly implemented, was the parishes; there, through everyday practice, the communal administration was gradually build.

3.2. The parishes/communities of Constantinople

There were several orthodox parishes in Ottoman Constantinople: the Archdiocese of Constantinople¹ was comprised of 42 parishes,² while dozens of others fell under the jurisdiction of the neighboring dioceses of Derkoi, [Chalcedon](#) and Prince’s Islands.³ Each one of these parishes constituted a separate administrative component usually named “community”.

However, the use of these words sometimes creates confusion. Within the reality of the Greek-Orthodox administration in the Ottoman capital “parish” did not necessarily also mean “community” – and vice versa. Even though the two terms were usually synonymous, they did not always correspond geographically. It is often the case, for example, that a community was comprised of more than one parish. The case of the [Stavrodromi](#) (Pera/Beyoğlu) community, which was comprised of three parishes, is the most well known example. Even though it was rarer, sometimes even more parishes constituted a single community, a practice mostly recorded in regional districts. The Greek-Orthodox community of Kuzguncuk (Khrysokerasos) was comprised of two parishes and churches dedicated to St. Panteleimon.

From the 1860s onwards, the Greek-Orthodox parishes/communities in Constantinople were administered in a common system. This



system was not a creation of the Tanzimât era, but originated in previous practices. The innovation introduced by the General Regulations is the introduction, via a fundamental document, of a certain type of communal organization, the implementation of which was important to expand in order to provide cohesion to the way the Greek-Orthodox population of Constantinople was administered. Another relevant novelty: from 1860 onwards, communal administration was executed exclusively by laymen.

Theoretically, according to the statutory rules adopted by the various parishes/communities after 1870, these lay rulers are only executors of the will and decisions of the parishioners' general assemblies, which were in fine the highest authority within the parish microcosm. In effect, however, the elected members of the communal administrative bodies are known to exceed the boundaries and content of the commands they received by the people and took initiative; for these initiatives the general assembly of the parishioners was often advised only ex post facto.

In most of the parishes of small and medium size, the executive power was restricted to a singular administrative body, called "governing committee" and dealt with schools and churches located within the parish's geographical limits. In more populous parishes/communities a distinction was made between **boards** overseeing the operation of schools, and committees administering churches.

Regardless of their composition, committees and boards were obliged to compose accounts in regular intervals and submit every year their financial transactions to the control of the prudential committee, an administrative body elected for this purpose by the parishioners' general assembly.

Densely-populated areas and covering large geographical locations, the communities of Stavrodromi (Pera/Beyoğlu) and [Tatavla](#) (Kurtuluş) were equipped with a significant administrative network to monitor "common" affairs, especially those with regard to the operation of schools and churches. The complexity of this system, however, remained rather superficial until the end of the Ottoman Empire, to the degree that it was solely confined to the executive bodies of the communal will. Actually, in these cases as well the structure and rules are the same with the ones applied to all the other Orthodox parishes in Constantinople: general assembly of the parishioners, executive administrative body and prudential committee.

Much more than other sectors of communal bureaucracy, the transactions in the registrar's office attest to the impressive extent of its jurisdiction, but also the sheer volume of documents produced by the communities from the 1870s onwards. Until this period, parish records only included –at the best of cases– baptismal and death records, as well as many "free-to-marry" certificates. In short, these records were characterized by the great heterogeneity of information they contained, while they probably did not exceed the community's limits, their use being limited only to an intra-parish level.

3.3. Homogeneity of administrative procedures

During the last quarter of the 19th century, the administrative procedures were being homogenized. From then onwards the communal clerks did not compose certificates and affirmations freely and as they willed; on the contrary, they started filling in special forms and producing documents according to certain prototypes. In various sectors of the administration, especially with regard to issues concerning the registrar's office, the parish/community also functioned as a quasi first-degree level of jurisdiction. For each change in his personal status, the parishioner would first address the relevant office of his community, which issued (after conducting the necessary research) a certificate. Those parish documents contained information (the authenticity of each was certified by the parish authorities' seal), which would be used in the second stage of the process by the Patriarchate's Registrar Office, in order to compose the "official" deed that the applicant would then present to the Ottoman authorities. Characteristic of the Ottoman state at the time of the Tanzimât era is that the concentrative control also applied to the case of the millet: for matters appertaining to their members, the parishes did not have direct contact and access to the Ottoman administration, but "communicated" with it through the Patriarchate of Constantinople, supreme authority among the Greek-Orthodox population on the sultan's territory. At the same time, however, how can one miss the contradiction between the choice of concentrative administration on the one hand and the extensive jurisdiction granted to the non-Muslim communities (a contradiction reflecting only one of the many paradoxes brought by the Tanzimât)?



3.4. Registrar documents and other parish certificates

Among the documents issued by the various registrars' offices of the Greek-Orthodox communities of Constantinople, the certificates of inheritance are, relatively, the most numerous ones. The issuing of such a document required the data verification by the communal clerks, the affirmation of which was requested by the applicant. In effect, when either the inheritors or the devisors did not originate from Constantinople, meaning that research in other areas was needed in order to confirm the information, mistakes and omissions were frequent. Let it be noted, however, that with the exception of cases of inheritance involving real estate, the certificates of inheritance issued by the parishes and addressed to the Patriarchate did not exceed the jurisdiction boundaries of the Greek-Orthodox millet, since inheritance cases were firstly settled within the community.

Other documents issued by the communal authorities include affirmations of guardianship (in which the community only attests –or not– to the legal action ability of a person applying as a guardian; these documents are of an advisory nature), “free-to-marry” certificates (which asserted that there was no impediment to marriage for the applicant) and burial permits. Parishes also retained the right to issue passports and permanent residence documents (tezkere-i osmaniye). In these cases as well, however, the parish only processed the first phase of the administrative procedure: the final documents were issued by the proper “Ottoman Office” of the Patriarchate, based on data included in the parish certificates.

Lastly, as clearly concluded by the 1902 Certificate Law, the censuses of the non-Muslim population of the empire also fell under the jurisdiction of the various communal authorities. Registrars' offices of Orthodox parishes compiled the necessary catalogues before forwarding them for further process to the proper services of the Patriarchate, which –on their part– would notify the Population Department ((Nüfus Müdürlüğü) of the imperial Department of Internal Affairs (Dahiliye Nezareti).

1. The Archdiocese of Constantinople includes the old town within the city walls, as well as the districts of Galata and Pera and the villages of the European shore of Bosphorus up to Neochori (Yeniköy).
2. According to the newspaper *Anatolikos Astir (Eastern Star)* of March 11th 1887, the parishes belonging to the Archdiocese of Constantinople at that particular year are: Fanari (Fener), Cibali, Mouchlion, Potiras, Balinou, Taxiarchis, Xyloporta (Lonca – Ayvansaray), Edirne Kapu, Salmatombrouki, Sarmasikion, Eğri Kapu, Topkapı, Tekfur Sarayı, Exi Marmara (Altmermer), Agios Konstantinos (St. Cosntantine) of Ypsomatheia (Psamatia, Samatya), Analipsi (Ascension) of Ypsomatheia, Agios Georgios (St. George) of Ypsomatheia, Agios Nikolaos (St. Nicholas) of Ypsomatheia, Beligradion, Agia Kyriaki of Kontoskali (Kumkapı), Panagia Elpis (Virgin Mary of Hope) of Kontoskali (Kumkapı), Vlanga, Hasköy, Tatavla (Kurtuluş), Feriköy, Evangelistria, Stavrodromi (Beyoğlu, Pera), Agios Nikolaos (St. Nicholas) of Galata, Christ of Galata, Panagia Kaffatiani (Virgin Mary of Kaffa) of Galata, Agios Ioannis (St. John) of Galata, Diplokionio, Panagia (Virgin Mary), Pangaltı, Ortaköy, Kuruçeşme, Mega Revma (Arnavutköy), Bebek, Boyacıköy, Steni (İstinye), Agios Nikolaos (St. Nicholas) of Neochori (Yeniköy), Virgin Mary of Neochori.
3. During the 1870s, the Derkoi diocese included 41 villages, where 3,874 Greek-Orthodox families resided (approximately 25,000 people). As far as the Chalcedon diocese was concerned, 29 townships and villages fell under its jurisdiction.

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Glossary :

	board of schools
The board of schools (ephoreia) consisted of members either elected by the community or nominated by a commission. They were authorized to supervise the proper functioning of the educational institutions.	

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