**THESIS PROSPECTUS**

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY**

**Submitted to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**for the MA Degree in History**

Candidate:

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Answering the Eastern Question: British Influence on Ottoman Tanzimat Reforms

(Working Title)

British foreign ambassadors and the British Foreign Office influenced the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms through the diplomatic correspondence and promulgation of British interests. British Ambassador Stratford Canning, First Viscount Stratford de Redcliffe depicted how entangled the Ottoman reforms and British interests were as follows, “Be that as it may, the reasons which recommend so strongly a progressive execution of the Sultan’s Decree, remain unaltered, and few can shut their eyes to the great European interests involved in the performance of that duty.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The Ottoman crown initiated these reforms, in part, to satisfy the needs of its subjects, such as to quell rebellions and remedy their economy. Domestically, the reforms addressed the Empire’s lack of monetary resources, as well as the growing political imbalance. Further, the reforms focused on the Ottoman Empire’s desire to increase and strengthen their ties with Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia. The British desired a positive outcome of *Tanzimat* policies and reforms for their own reasons. It extended control over the Ottoman Empire in an effort to improve its government to the advantage of British interests. The British based the Ottoman improvements on their Western ideals of reform and modernity. Hence, the period of *Tanzimat* reforms led to an intricate political relationship between the British and the Ottomans.

This thesis is analyzing the British-Ottoman relations during the Tanzimat Period.[[2]](#footnote-2) The relationship between the British and Ottomans is exemplified through the Ottoman efforts toward modernity. The British heavily influenced the administrative institutions undergoing change during the Tanzimat period. It is important to note that the Ottoman and Germans developed an intimate relationship during the nineteenth century. Their relationship culminated in the eventual Ottoman backing of the Germans in World War I. However, the Ottoman-German relationship did not result in the alteration of Ottoman administrative foundations. Instead, the British held a firm grip on the Tanzimat reforms and led the modernization attempts of the Ottoman Empire.

This research argues that the *Tanzimat* reforms did not happen in isolation from the outside world. Instead, the British government and ambassadors played significant roles in the implementation of reform policies. The British influence was felt mostly on Ottoman judicial and administrative reforms. The British utilized many techniques to ensure the Ottoman Empire initiated favorable political, social, economic, and religious reforms. Such methods varied from ambassador suggestions to veiled threats from Her Majesty’s Government. Accordingly, the British and the Ottomans developed an intricate political relationship that cannot be easily separated into distinct spheres. Instead, they both operated in correlation with one another. One of the aims of this thesis is to emphasize the complexities of the British and Ottoman relationship. In doing so, it will seek answers to the question of how this affiliation impacted the *Tanzimat* reforms.

The Tanzimat era of reform began in 1839 and ended in 1876. In 1839, Sultan Abdulmecid I (r. 1839 - 1861) proclaimed the Gülhane Edict which aimed to establish equality for all men under the law, a unified tax system by ending tax farming, and reform the military system. The Gülhane Edict stated, “These institutions, as the text of the Hatt-i Sherif itself expresses, were directed primarily towards three objects – namely, first, the measures necessary to ensure to all the subjects of the Empire, Musulmans or Raïas, perfect security of life, honour, and fortune ; second, a regular system of imposing and collecting taxes ; third, an equally regular system of military levies, and the duration of military service.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The edict propelled the Ottoman Empire into an era that attempted to modernize and secularize the state while centralizing the state’s power. The Sultan adopted a particular view on modernity, reflected in these reforms, based on the British sense of modernity. These reforms altered the foundation of the Ottoman Empire. The Gülhane Edict pushed towards secularizing the administrative and bureaucratic institutions of the Ottoman Empire, notably the Porte, judicial system, and *ulema* (religious scholars). However, there is a great deal of variety in the finalization and success of the reforms. Due to their promises of equality for non-Muslims, unforeseen problems and opposition arose. A wide spectrum of provinces struggled in the implementation of the reforms, which were not uniformly imposed throughout the empire. Rather, the first phase in the Tanzimat reforms behaved more as promises than effective policy. Thus, under British pressure, Sultan Abdulmecid I instituted the Imperial Reform Edict of 1856, beginning the second phase in the Tanzimat reforms.

The British placed external pressure on the Ottoman government to implement the Imperial Reform Edict. The economic, political, and social ramifications of the decline of the Ottoman Empire have been on the European agenda since the late eighteenth century. The Eastern Question, in other words what would happen to the Ottoman lands, especially in the Balkans, if the empire collapsed, first became an issue after the Russo-Turkish War of 1774. The Great Powers – Great Britain, Prussia, Russia, France, and Austria – saw the decline of the Ottoman Empire as eminent and wanted to preserve their own interests within the empire. Great Britain believed that the preservation of the Ottoman Empire ensured the longevity of British interests. The British’s desire to maintain the Ottoman Empire led them to support the Ottomans throughout the Crimean War (1853-1856). The Crimean War involved the Russians, British, French and Ottomans fighting over rights of Orthodox Christians within the Ottoman Empire. The British provided the majority of men and firepower against the Russians, preventing them from gaining Ottoman territory. After the Crimean War, the Ottoman government continued to promulgate British interests. Thus, one primary reason for Sultan Abdulmecid I and Grand Vizier Mustafa Reşid Pasha’s implementation of reforms in 1856 to extend the rights of non-Muslims within the Empire meant to strengthen the Ottoman Empire’s position within the “Concert of Europe,” and ensure the continued aide from Britain. The 1815 Treaty of Paris established the idea of the “Concert of Europe,” which established guidelines to prevent another war between the powers of Europe.

The previous inaccessibility of archival documents hindered Ottoman historiographical research. However, this is not the only reason for the delay in the dissemination of Ottoman documents and the opening of Turkish archives. With the creation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the political context dissuaded those with archival access from writing anything negative about the newly established government. Instead, the new Republic wanted to distance themselves from their former Ottoman history. Therefore, much of Ottoman history was placed within Eurocentric works, which delineated the Ottomans as a second-rate empire. However, beginning in the 1960s, with the opening of archives and increased access to documents in Turkey, more information about the Ottomans has come to the surface. Now, however, those who seek to study the Ottoman history no longer have to solely look within European archives for the mention of the Ottoman Empire. Rather, primary sources are available to those whose linguistic abilities allow for the analysis of original Ottoman bureaucratic documents. Ottoman historians fall into the trap of nationalist sentiments surrounding Ottoman uniqueness, believing they have societal features incomparable to others. If that is not the case, they fall into the Orientalist trap, defining the Ottomans as the “other” in European standards.[[4]](#footnote-4) Due to this increase in available sources, there has been a movement by Ottomanists to dispel Eurocentric historiographical myths and misconceptions surrounding the Ottoman Empire politically, economically, socially, and religiously.[[5]](#footnote-5) Due to this shift, scholars since the 1970s have placed the Tanzimat era of reform into an inclusively Ottoman narrative.

Historical scholarship on the Tanzimat era, tends to focus on either the administrative changes or its effectiveness of the changes felt by the minority groups within the Empire. The discussion of foreign influence is usually brief. Instead, historians focus on the comparison of the Ottoman reform process to similar processes in Europe. *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, by historian Niyazi Berkes, expands on how the Tanzimat reforms drastically altered the foundations and institutions of the Ottoman Empire and led to the further need for constitutional reform.[[6]](#footnote-6) Berkes argues that the Ottomans shifted away from Islam as their central tenant, secularizing their judicial and ecclesiastical institutions. The secularization of the Ottomans remains central to Berkes’s argument throughout his work. However, he does not include an in-depth inclusion or analysis of the British influences on the changes in Ottoman institutions.

A decade after Berkes, historian Halil Inalcik turned the attention of the historical literature to the discussion of the execution of the Tanzimat reforms in provinces throughout the Ottoman Empire. In his work, Inalcik asserts that the central government worried that mistaken interpretations and abuse would arise.[[7]](#footnote-7) The author delineates how confusion stemmed from the dissemination of the Edicts, as the Ottoman government struggled in their execution. Inalcik focuses on the ramifications the unsuccessful implementation of the Edicts caused on the status quo of the Ottoman Empire. However, Inalcik leaves out the British influence present within the Edicts and discern whether that played a factor into its unfavorable execution. In 1980*,* historian Charles Finley brought the the role of The Sublime Porte on the Tanzimat reforms to the center. Finley discusses the weaknesses of the Gülhane Edict and the difficulty the administration had in imposing the new reforms. In his work, Finley points to a negative Western influence on the Tanzimat and argues that they delegitimatized the reforms.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, Finley does not discuss the overarching influence the Western powers, whether Britain, France, Germany, or Russia, have in the developing and instituting the reforms. Instead, he mentions the perceived influence Western prototypes might have had on the Edict.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Recently Selim Deringil asserts that the Reform Edict of 1856 was also more influenced by foreign powers than the Glhane Edict of 1839. Foreign powers wanted to get rid of anything they believed to be “uncivilized” in the creation of the new Ottoman society.[[10]](#footnote-10) Elizabeth Thompsonargues that the Tanzimat reforms did not mean a step away from Islam. Instead, she adds, Islam shared traits and cultural values with Europe that could lead to the progression of the Ottoman Empire.[[11]](#footnote-11) This author argues that Europe never held the primary inspiration behind the Gülhane Edict and that it came from Ottoman traditions.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, Thompson only allows a few pages to discuss the Tanzimat Reforms before moving to a different topic. The cursory glance over the two Edicts and the European influence does not narrate the full story. While there is a flurry of secondary source material on the *Tanzimat* reforms, much of the scholarship discusses the British, or European, involvement in a limited manner. This thesis will contribute to the broader historiography by analyzing the influence of the British on the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms.

I have found multiple volumes of relevant correspondence between various British officials. These documents, located in *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print,* either originated in the Ottoman Empire or were sent to British officials stationed within the Empire. Many of these original documents relate to the Tanzimat period of reform and underline how the British officials were in constant communication with the Ottomans throughout this period. Furthermore, the documents showcase the intricate diplomatic relationship the British held over the Ottoman bureaucracy in relation to the implementation of the reforms. Additional primary sources used will focus on British ambassadors who engaged directly with the British intervention of Ottoman administrative reform policies and their effects on the Ottoman subjects. Archival material from the British National Archives in Kew, as well as the *Confidential Print: The Middle East, 1839-1869* collection that is available, for purchase, digitally through Adam Matthew Digital UK is currently requested through the Sam Houston State University Library system. I will also examine relevant newspapers to provide what information the British found prioritized in regards to the Turkish Reforms. Pending further research and the transcription of letters, additional primary source documents may be needed. Thus, supplemental archives, newspapers, and letters may be added.

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2. My linguistic abilities prevent me from studying of the French-Ottoman, German-Ottoman, or Russian-Ottoman political relations. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jean Henri Abdolonyme Ubicini, *Letters on Turkey: An Account of the Religious, Political, Social, and Commercial Condition of the Ottoman Empire,* trans. Lady Easthope (New York: Arno Press, 1973), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Suraiya Faroqhi, *Approaching Ottoman History: An Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Ottomanization,” in this context, defines a unique and solitary Ottoman Empire through the promulgation of Ottoman influences on Western states and the diminishment of any foreign influences on the Ottomans. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill, 1964), 147, 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Halil Inalcik, *Application of the Tanzimat and its Social Effects* (Lisse: The Peter De Ridder Press, 1976), 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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12. Thompson, *Justice Interrupted,* 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)