



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his/her own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.

Please respond to the following questions, using the form below as a template. Research Report, along with your Final Report, is due within 30 days of the end of your grant. Please e-mail your Final and Research reports to iaro@irex.org.

TOLGA U. ESMER

1. Title of Research Proposal:

Original Title: “Religion and Rebellion: the Cultural Politics of Christian and Muslim Notables in Ottoman Bulgaria, c. 1750-1839”

New Title: “Religion and Rebellion in the Life, Practices, and the World(s) of the Balkan Bandit Kara Feyzi (c. 1790-1835)”

2. Topic of Research

I initially envisioned a broader study of relations between Muslim and Christian notables from the mid-18th century to the 1830’s in order to understand how changes in these relationships ultimately affected the nature of Christian and Muslim relationships in Ottoman Balkans (in the Plovdiv region in particular). However, I am now limiting my work to a prosopographical study of one man, Brezник A’yānı Kara Feyzi, his son Znepole A’yānı Kara Feyzizāde Ali Beğ, and their network of clients and patrons from the 1790’s until the 1830’s because of the amount of sources I have found on this man and his retinue in the national archives in Sofia and Istanbul this year.

In my research, I explore the ways in which one Muslim rebel-turned-notable (Muslim notable = *a’yān*), Kara Feyzi, and his social network negotiated power, prestige, piety and economic resources with other local Christians, Muslims, and the Ottoman

“state” during their widespread rebellions in Ottoman Bulgaria from 1790 to 1835. What makes Kara Feyzi a fascinating case-study is that not only local Christians and Muslims—both rich and poor—but also some of the highest-ranking, disgruntled Ottoman officers joined his rebellions. By focusing on Kara Feyzi and his networks’ cultural and social practices as well as on competing contemporary discourses on banditry and rebellion, my project seeks to understand how the agency of individual Muslims and Christians, the Ottoman government’s intervention into provincial social order, and local communal politics converged to redraw the boundaries of moral and political communities in Balkan society *prior* to the emergence the Balkan nation-state and nationalism.

3. Relevance and Contribution to Field

Historians of the Ottoman Empire and Balkans have traditionally focused on two general developments that began after the mid-19th century: the imperial efforts to reform and revitalize the Ottoman Empire (i.e. the *Tanzimat* period) and the emergence of Balkan nation-state formation processes. Ottomanists and Balkanists throughout the world associate the rise of Muslim and Christian notables’ (i.e. *a’yān* and *çorbacı/čorbadžī*) in the eighteenth century with the “decline” of the “central,” early modern Ottoman state and the subsequent anarchy and oppression of all local peoples. Moreover, *ultra-secularist*, Ottomanist historiography in the West and Turkey associates Muslim notables with other “unruly” elements of Ottoman provincial society, such as the *‘ulemā* (i.e. Muslim clerics) and the janissaries (the Sultan’s imperial guard), often labeling them “Islamic fanatics” that wreaked havoc in the country-side and created obstacles to the state’s “modernizing” and “re-centralizing” reforms. However, such links between the notables and “fanaticism” have been posited without providing concrete examples of the Muslim notables’ piety, their patronage of and participation in local religious institutions and/or Sufi orders, or even how piety and patronage function in Ottoman-Balkan society. The Muslim and Christian notables’ diverse social origins, numerous economic occupations, and inconsistent political actions make it impossible to present them as “Islamic fundamentalists,” a “unified, Christian nationalist bourgeoisie,” or “treacherous collaborators with Ottoman feudalism.”

As I will endeavor to demonstrate, the practices of Kara Feyzi and his retinue offer a unique opportunity to begin to understand and re-write this very nebulous period in Ottoman-Balkan history because of the exceptional amount of official Ottoman and period Christian sources concerning he and his retinues’ lives and practices. Not only local Christians and Muslims—both rich and poor—but also some of the highest-ranking, disgruntled Ottoman officials who were charged with destroying Kara Feyzi ultimately joined his rebellions in the end.

What makes this project even more interesting is that there are so many different layers of Bulgarian historiography that inform our understanding of this period. Kara Feyzi also plays a significant role in Bulgarian national memory and popular culture, and throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, his memory has been resurrected in Bulgarian intellectual and cultural life. Among some of his most recent manifestations has been his role in the historical novel of Vera Mutafčieva, *Letopis na Smutnoto Vreme* (The Chronicle of a Confused Time). It is after the publication of this novel that the

“fictional Kara Feyzi” is often conflated with the “historical Kara Feyzi,” and one can clearly see this even in contemporary Bulgarian historiography on the Ottoman Empire. Thus, a study of Kara Feyzi and all of the Ottoman and Bulgarian documents associated with him is not only a study of the enigmatic late 18th and early 19th centuries, but all of his manifestations in Bulgarian intellectual and cultural works throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries also makes this a study of how the Bulgarians have remembered Ottoman rule throughout the past century.

4. Approach and research methodology; list of research sites

My dissertation project is a micro-history that combines interdisciplinary approaches to understand not only the nature of one man and his retinue’s power, piety, manipulation of economic resources, as well as their complex interaction with Balkan society and the Ottoman “state” but also how the practices of these social networks affected Christian-Muslim relations in the Ottoman Balkans

In my research in Bulgaria and Turkey, I have examined hundreds of detailed letters in Ottoman Turkish written by only a handful of Ottoman administrators in the Balkans that give me weekly records of Kara Feyzi’s rebellions, and I have collected and read several of Kara Feyzi’s own letters addressed to the Sultan. I have found a large majority of these sources (*Hatt-ı humayün* - correspondence either from the Sultan or those bearing his comments in the margins) from the Başbakanlık Archive in İstanbul. From the Ottoman archives in the National Library “Kiril and Methodius” in Sofia, I have collected sources from various local archives, various collections such as the OAK, BIA, Central Government Archives, Ottoman court records from Sofia as well as other parts of Ottoman Bulgaria, etc. Many of the sources I found in the Sofia archives are records written by local officials in the Balkans – both Christian and Muslim – to other local officials in the Balkans concerning the rebellions and general practices of Kara Feyzi and his retinue.

Among other sources from the archives in İstanbul, I have also collected sources from the Cevdet Askeriye, Cevdet Dahiliye, Cevdet Maliye, Rumeli Ahkâm/Şikayet defterleri (complaint registers from the Ottoman Balkans), Rumeli Mühimme defterleri, etc. collections.

With regard to Muslim narrative sources, I have found some local hagiographies and chronicles written by contemporaries of Kara Feyzi in Bulgaria. I have found a number of these in the Atatürk Library in İstanbul. In Bulgaria, I have examined the correspondence of contemporary Bulgarian church officials and notables, chronicles, published marginal notes (*pripiski*) from old church records, and other narrative genres from the period, such as neomartyrologies and early nineteenth century ethnographic collections. It is the interesting dialogue between these sources that allows me to talk about how Christian-Muslim relations change between these **people**.

I have also visited a number of ethnographic museums in Bulgaria and have learned of some important local sources that I intend to use in my research. Some of these venues were in: Plovdiv, Asenovgrad, Breznik, Samakov, and Trün. Since Kara Feyzi and members of his retinue also occupy a large space in Bulgarian folklore and legends, I have benefited from trips to the Folklore Institute in Sofia as well as the Sofia University, Institute of Balkan Studies, and the BAN libraries.

5. Research findings and preliminary conclusions

I view the issue of justice as particularly important in this context as the struggle among different social and religious actors in the Ottoman Balkans was not merely a struggle over work, property, and grain, but also over appropriations of symbols. In the political theory of the Ottoman sultanate, justice was central to the social contract between the Ottoman subjects (regardless of religious allegiance – in theory) and the Sultan. Just as Kara Feyzi appealed to the Sultan's justice, so did Christian leaders from Ottoman Bulgaria and Serbia who drafted letters regarding Kara Feyzi and his clients' practices to the Sultan, reminding him that justice was not being implemented in his provinces and that his subjects were unjustly suffering. Long acculturated to the Ottoman legal system and frequently resorting to the Ottoman religious courts in handling their own everyday transactions such as divorce, inheritance, and business partnerships, some Ottoman Christians therefore dealt with the social disruptions like Kara Feyzi's activities by mobilizing the Ottoman state's and Islamic discourse on justice. The issue of justice thus spanned the communal divides, and it is my belief that by focusing on how Christian and Muslim Ottomans wrote about justice we can come closer to an appreciation of the moral and ethical outlook of Ottoman society and expectations various groups in the Balkans had from the state.

Banditry in the Balkans became the politicized site of contestation in which the religious, socio-economic, and political concerns of various groups converged to highlight new tensions and redefine new relations. In the case of Kara Feyzi and all those joining and fighting him, men and communities that were socially peripheral became symbolically central, and what emerged was a society with multiple, nonnegotiable rifts. The Ottoman officials' attempting to eliminate banditry and rebellion on the one hand, and encouraging and participating in it on the other, only legitimated them as a form of resistance. In previous periods the Ottomans could channel all of these diverse religious, ethnic, and socio-economic groups in the Balkans toward a common enemy to the north, and all of the paradoxes and ills of a diverse, cosmopolitan empire could articulate themselves *on other peoples' soil*. Now that the Empire's rivals were too strong and the borders were increasingly impermeable by the end of the 18th century, all of antagonisms, paradoxes, ills, and abuses' of such a diverse and cosmopolitan society imploded in the Balkans in the form of rebellion and widespread banditry. To be sure, the impact these developments had on Ottoman and Balkan society is irrefutable: 1807 some of Kara Feyzi's friends and foes marched from Ottoman Bulgaria, dethroned the Sultan, and replaced him with Sultan Mahmud II. Moreover, by the end of this period, Greece was an independent state, and Serbia became autonomous, and the objectification of difference was well underway in the Ottoman Balkans.

6. Future research agendas

In addition to writing on the discourse of rebellion and inter-confessional relations during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, I am also interested in the contemporary uses of history in inter-confessional relations between Christians and Muslims in the Balkans. Thus, I intend to do research on the role of history and memory in communal relations in the Balkans. This type of cultural project also encompasses the study of

contemporary literature and film as well as interviewing various groups in modern Bulgarian society.

After completing my dissertation and the initial steps to ensure its publication as a monograph, I may begin to study the role of the Orthodox Church in the Ottoman Empire since this is one of the most understudied yet most fascinating aspects of communal relations in Ottoman studies. I am particularly interested in Balkan Christians who made pilgrimages to holy cities in the Middle East and appropriated Muslim titles of prestige such as *hadži* (one who make the pilgrimage to Mecca in Turkish/Arabic) as well as Ottoman/”Islamic material culture.”

7. Policy recommendations

Although I believe that US policy falls beyond the bounds of my expertise since I focus more on cultural realms rather than “US Security,” I do believe that the US can play a larger role in promoting the cause of inter-confessional understanding and education in Bulgaria. For instance, there are plenty of scholars and organizations in Bulgaria committed to promoting religious tolerance and understanding between religious and ethnic groups in Bulgaria; however, the Bulgarian government and even European Union have only promoted limited funding toward these scholars and organizations.

There are a number of scholars who study or who would like to continue Ottoman-Balkan studies, and this new generation of scholars offers an alternative to the traditional, anti-Muslim, anti-Turkish, Bulgarian nationalist sentiment of some of the previous generations of scholars; however, it is very difficult to pursue such programs of study in Bulgaria today since many competent and aspiring young Bulgarians have focused almost exclusively – and understandably – on improving their material circumstances and living a “western” life along with all of its accoutrements and niceties rather than dealing with Bulgaria’s past. Thus, a whole young generation of non-academic, Bulgarian “intellectuals” unconsciously harbor many of the sentiments of older generations of Bulgarians toward minorities in the country and towards Islam in general – they have not been forced to think about the Ottoman past or even what the Bulgarian government did to ethnic Turks and other Muslims only 10-15 years ago.

The challenge of integrating the Balkans and its past into broader European perspectives is not just an academic one. The European community and the US have committed to building more stable and more democratic states and societies in the Balkans, but that goal clearly cannot be achieved only through economic investment, political initiatives, or by building US air and army bases. Creating the social and cultural conditions that would encourage such developments demands a better understanding of both inter-communal relations and the Christian and Muslims’ shared history in the region.