# Transcript for “Greeks and Muslims in the Classical Ottoman Empire” Episode 1 of the BASEES Podcast

***Dr. Samuel Foster (SF):*** Welcome to Eastern Europe’s Minorities in a century of change, a podcast on the history of minority experiences in Central and Eastern Europe during the 20th century. This series is part of the Institute of Historical Researchers’ Centennial commemoration: Our Century looking back, thinking forward. It has been organized by the BASEES Study Group for Minority History.

It was made possible through the help and support of the British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES) and the Stanley Burton Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at the University of Leicester.

The study group is a forum devoted to researching minorities in the national and regional histories of Central, Eastern, and Southeast Europe and promoting closer scholarly collaborations. For more information, please visit our website at [studygroupforminorityhistory.com](http://studygroupforminorityhistory.com/).

On this episode, Professor Molly Greene at Princeton University talks to us about minorities in the Ottoman Empire's classical period.

Molly, welcome to the podcast. Can you start by telling us a little about yourself and how you became interested in this particular area of history?

***Professor Molly Greene (MG)***: Thanks very much for having me, it's a pleasure to speak to you. A lot of it was really quite accidental. I went to Greece as an undergraduate, and like many actually probably millions of people before me fell in love with the physical beauty of the country.

But unlike most people, I was never interested in the classical past, but in the modern period, so after university I lived in Greece for four years. And completely, I have to admit, missed the Ottoman past. My orientation was very modern. At that time, Turkey and the Ottoman past was really very invisible in Greece, and I wasn't looking for it.

Then I went off to Graduate School and left the Greek world behind with some regret because I thought studying modern Greece was simply too narrow, and I had simultaneously been pursuing an interest in the Middle East and studying Arabic. I went to Near Eastern Studies at Princeton with the idea of studying the modern Middle East.

And a couple of things happened. First, it turned out that there was an outstanding program in Hellenic Studies at Princeton, which I didn't even know about, and the director of the program, which had just gotten started—Dimitri Gondicas, I remember he was the first person who said to me, You have to study Turkish.

And I said, Why would I study Turkish?

And he said, Because there's this whole Greco-Turkish world out there that people aren't working on.

And I said, Oh. I kind of mulled that over. And then it's just background to the modern Middle East.

I took a course on the Ottoman Empire with Cemal Kafadar who was then at Princeton. And a light bulb went off that I could study the Greek world within a larger context than the nation state of Greece, within the context of this vast and long lasting empire. Then I found that the Hellenic World—pre the nation state—was actually more interesting, and I went back and back in time.

So it really happened at the graduate level, and I've been, you know, very happy teaching and researching about this vast Hellenic world with, you know, all sorts of links to, even the present today.

***SF***: For the benefit of our listeners, what was the Ottoman Empire, and why has it been described as having no minorities before 1800?

***MG***: Yeah, well, the Ottoman Empire. I would say it had no minorities before of the 19th century because it was an empire.

Empires are generally described, and I subscribe to this, as polities that are expansionist. Then as they expand, they maintain distinction and hierarchy, every time they incorporate new communities.

Throughout history, most people have lived in political units that did not pretend to govern a single people, and that certainly accurately describes the Ottoman Empire.

Nation states, by contrast, are based on the idea of a single people in a single territory as a unique political community. The nation state proclaims the commonality of its people, while the concept of empire presumes that different people within the polity will be governed differently. And this patchwork of people explains why there were no minorities in the Ottoman empire, and why I could bring it to my own work. It's wrong to think of the Greek Orthodox prior to the 19th century as a minority.

And another point to bear in mind is that for a minority to exist, there has to be a majority, and there was no majority either.

And I say that of course the Muslims were a demographic majority. But majority implies the idea of representation, and in this case that would be the Sultan as representative of the empire's Muslim population. But of course, the Sultan was an imperial ruler. This wasn't a democracy, and he didn't represent anyone. The Sultan expected loyalty and in exchange he provided protection, at least theoretically.

So for instance, my students are always surprised there's a series of very interesting Fermans, or Imperial orders, published years ago by Uriel Heyd I think, about disputes over buildings in Jerusalem. This in the 16th century, and you see the Sultan intervening on behalf of Christians to protect their right to a church against Muslim attempts to close down the church.

It's very, very hard to imagine the Israeli state today intervening on behalf of Palestinians, because the Israeli State represents the Jewish nation. The Israeli nation—however you want to define it—the Ottoman Sultan reserved to himself the right to adjudicate amongst the various groups, because he's the Sultan.

The major axes of differentiation in the empire enshrined in law were three. The first was religion. Muslims and non-Muslims were ruled differently, with the former being favored.

The second was the divide between the ruling class, which collected taxes, and the taxpayers, Muslim non-Muslim alike, who of course were in the majority.

Finally, there were free and enslaved. But these were not the only distinctions. There were a myriad of other distinctions. The families who helped the Ottomans conquer the European provinces, for example, held onto their special status for many generations. The Roma population was always taxed as a group, regardless of religious affiliation. Tax exemptions were granted to those performing special services, and so on and so forth.

So this patchwork of special arrangements is why thinking in terms of majority and minority is misleading.

Which isn't to say that the Sultan, of course, every ruler, has an association with the religious tradition, and this was an Islamic empire in the sense that the state supported and the Sultan was active within mostly within the Muslim tradition.

But that doesn't translate into majority and minority.

***SF***: **Thinking a bit about the subject of Greece in particular, what was the significance of the Hellenic people within this wider empire?**

***MG***: I think here we have to underline, first and foremost, above and beyond anything else from the Ecumenical Patriarchate. If we talk about the significance of the Hellenic people for the Ottomans as opposed to the other way around, right? What did the Ottomans mean for the Greeks?

And I say that because the Ecumenical Patriarchate was a vital institution in helping the Ottomans ruled the empire, and particularly as European provinces where Christians were orders were always demographically superior.

I say this because even in the wake of the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans, the Church continued to control a vast clerical bureaucracy and a great deal of property.

It collected taxes on both its personnel and on its property, and turned over a portion of those taxes to the Sultan.

It's interesting there's a moment in the late 16th century when the legal basis on which monasteries continued to exist is potentially threatened by a reinterpretation of Islamic and Sultanic law. I won't go into the details—and there's the possibility that the monasteries on the peninsula of Mount Athos could be dissolved. The monks write to the Sultan and say you know, if you do this we will scatter to the four corners of the Earth, and no one will be here to cultivate the land. And the Sultan was like alright, maybe we can adjust things a bit, right?

Because until the 19th century, until I think the second half of the nineteenth century I think it's safe to say, there are always too few people for the land, as opposed to later. You need to keep people on the land. And the church and monasteries and people working on monastic estates were vital for Ottoman revenues.

One common characteristic of empires—and the Ottomans certainly share this is that they need the skills and knowledge and authority of people from the conquered society—elites who could gain from cooperation. The church as an institution certainly performed that function for the Ottomans. In many ways they showed the Ottomans how things were done, particularly in the Balkan provinces.

There are countless imperial orders to provincial authorities commanding them to allow church personnel to collect taxes and not stand in their way. The church was not the only one, neither within Christian society nor within the empire as a whole. It was not the only institution, but it was certainly one of the most important and one of the most long-lasting.

And of course the Ecumenical Patriarchate is still in Istanbul today.

It's common to speak of Fatih Mehmet the Conqueror of Constantinople in 1453 as granting this authority to the new Patriarch. And this is true, but it's also the case that for many years before 1453, the church—faced with the rapidly shrinking territory of the Byzantine Empire—instituted new policies and engaged in some very adroit diplomacy, in order to extend its authority outside and beyond the territory.

This is a very significant change since empire and church had always been seen as synonymous in Byzantium. The church had to watch during the Byzantine centuries as the Serbs and Bulgarians established their own patriarchates. Now, several energetic patriarchs in the second half of the 14th century were able to take advantage of the difficulties of the Serbs and Bulgarians due to the Ottoman advance.

For example, the defeat of the Serbs at the Battle of Maritsa in 1371 was not simply a story of the Ottomans and the Serbs. In Constantinople, the patriarch used the defeat to bring the Serbian church back under his jurisdiction.

Similarly, in 1393, after the Ottoman capture of Tarnovo in today's Bulgaria, the Ecumenical Patriarch brought that church too back into the fold. An independent Bulgarian church would not be established again until 1870.

So by these actions in the 14th century, the Ecumenical Patriarchate put itself in a position of strength, a good half century before the fall of Constantinople.

Let me just say a word about Muslim-Christian relations, which are the relationship of ordinary Christians and Muslims, which of course is a vast and complicated subject.

I'm just going to relay one anecdote to you which I think I particularly value because it shows how Christians and Muslims lived, both in close proximity, inhabiting the same world, but also the underlying tensions in that relationship. And scholars have pointed out that because religious difference was enshrined ideologically as the most important difference in the empire, social problems, social tensions were always understood in religious terms.

So this is an anecdote from a collection of books about neo-martyrs, put together by Greek authors in the 18th century about people who died for the faith. I can say more about that if you want, but that's just for background.

So we are at the end of the 17th century. It's August, and a goldsmith named Vangelis—he and his friends are celebrating in Istanbul a religious festival connected to the Virgin Mary. The group of celebrants included both Christians and Muslims. This was very, very common in the Ottoman Empire, and the Muslims were recent converts to Islam.

Conversion to Islam is not limited to one period. It’s going on throughout the centuries, sometimes greater, sometimes lesser.

Carried away by the festivities, the friends Christians and Muslims decided to change outfits and Vangelis the Christian ended up wearing a headgear of a Muslim friend, which was interpreted in the empire as you have now converted, if you put on headgear.

The next day, those very same friends, the Muslims, denounced him to the authorities, saying that since he had put on a turban, he was now a Muslim.

So Vangelis refused to embrace Islam, therefore he was an apostate and was executed.

In this tragic story, we see both the easy camaraderie that could exist between Christians and Muslims, in this case, because the former had only recently declared their allegiance to a new religion and clearly still had ties to their old life. At the same time, such close proximity was fraught with danger for both.

What seems like an astonishing about face on the part of the Muslims is rendered somewhat more comprehensible by the fact that at the end of the 17th century in Istanbul, an Islamic revivalist movement known as the Kadizadeli was still very, very, very powerful.

And this is speculation, but it seems plausible that one day after the festivities, maybe they had a lot to drink the day before, the Muslims must have worried about the price they might have to pay for attending a Christian festival with Christian friends.

And of course, for the Christians, the vulnerability was even greater. So I think this close contact but underlying tension is a very enlightening a way to think about Christian-Muslim relations. In the countryside, in my opinion, things were more relaxed, but this is in the imperial capital.

***SF*:** Fascinating, and how, just briefly, how did Greece’s revival as a modern nation-state affect this very convoluted dynamic?

***MG****:* Yeah, it's only in recent years that the Greek Revolution and the establishment of the Greek state has been integrated into Ottoman history—an omission that now, looking back, seems remarkable, right? The point of view from Ottoman history as well, this piece of territory is no longer part of the Ottoman Empire, so it's not interesting to us.

But actually, a lot of people are working now on the effect of the Greek revolution on the Ottoman state. The argument is, and I find it very convincing, is that 19th century Ottoman history, especially the history of the Tanzimat—as the reforms are known—cannot be properly understood without connecting them to the Great War of Independence, something that has been sorely lacking in the earlier classical histories of the Tanzimat Period, what with scholars like Şükrü Ilıcak and others have shown is that the first loss of territory to a national revolution—and it took a while for the Ottoman ruling elite to understand that it *was* a national revolution—triggered a very wide-ranging set of reforms in the empire.

Perhaps the most long-lasting important one was the perceived need to create a self-mobilizing proto-citizen.

Here we start to move more towards this majority-minority paradigm. In other words, from now on, the Ottomans would move beyond their rather loose exchange of loyalty for protection and attempt to tie its subjects more closely to the state and its projects.

There is debate as to what extent this attempt included all of the Sultan’s subjects, regardless of religion or ethnicity. Some people say this really became a state for the Muslims as early as the 1820s, others say as late as 1912.

There was still the possibility for a multi-national, multi-religious Ottoman Empire, but it's a huge debate in 19th century, so there's debate about to what extent this attempt included all of the Sultan’s subjects, but certainly at the time of the revolt in 1821, there was an explicit appeal to the Muslims of the empire as Muslims against the infidel Christians.

The Sultan tried to arm ordinary Muslim subjects—Anatolians mostly—with an appeal to what can actually be called patriotism, a rather new concept, but this fails spectacularly.

People weren't interested in going and fighting the Greeks, and the Sultan, Sultan Mahmud, had to fall back on the Albanian mercenaries that he had been relying on since at least 1750 with disastrous results.

Once the revolution was concluded and the state of Greece was established in 1830, he and subsequent sultans turned with determination to the project of creating the citizen soldier, something that eventually succeeded.

I mentioned that the Greek Revolution has until recently not been treated as part of Ottoman history. Similarly, until recently, the conventional narrative of the Ottoman period in Greek history reaches its terminus in 1821.

Greek history is from there on treated as the history of the nation-state of Greece. The Ottomans appear only as military foes, as the Greek state tries to extend the border of its own fledgling state.

This approach too has been challenged in recent years. What we realized now is that many citizens of a nation-state which occupied a small and rather poor territory at the southern tip of the Balkan Peninsula, many of these citizens chose to immigrate to the Ottoman Empire.

This was due not only to the relative poverty of the state, but also due to the fact that the Greek state, as with other European nations before it, was able to negotiate a favorable status for its citizens in the Empire. Thus they could enjoy the benefits of the economic opportunities in the empire at a time when trade was booming while enjoying a protected diplomatic status.

The Greek state too was happy to extend its citizenship to Christians living in the empire, people who had never set foot in Greece as part of this expansionist policy.

I mean, of course this was extremely upsetting for the Ottomans, returning again to the theme of the impact of the Greek Revolution on the Ottoman Empire. The scholar Berke Torunoğlu has argued that the Ottoman project they’re developing and the Ottoman nationality and its origins is not, as is usually seen in a general imitation of European norms, but rather from the very real problem of his strange subjects: that his Christian subjects of the Sultan who had taken up Greek or Russian citizenship.

In short Greek and Ottoman history remain very tied up with each other, long past the revolution of 1821. In my current project, which is a history of this longstanding trope of Christian flight to the mountains, I was interested to see that after 1821, these migratory patterns to Istanbul, as people would spend six months out of the year in the imperial capital because you couldn't make a living 12 months out of the year in the mountains. The magnitude of these migratory patterns continued and even intensified.

***SF:*** You mentioned a Christian flight to the mountains as well as some issues about subjects being willing to die for their faith. Could you tell us a bit more about this particular episode?

***MG****:* Yeah, this Christian flight to the mountains is a popular trope across much of the Balkans. Ordinary people will talk about it, as well as a thesis put forward by historians—almost all of them, Balkan historians themselves, writing about the Christian populations in the Balkans.

You see this in Bulgarian, Romanian, and Greek stereography, less so in the case of let's say Bosnia, which is interesting.

So this argument posits that the early centuries of Ottoman rule brought about a massive displacement of Christian populations from the fertile plains to the mountainous regions, while the conquerors themselves settled in the more fertile lowlands.

This is actually not a trope that's limited to the Ottoman period, although it has particularly nationalist overtones then. But you can read about similar things about the effect of the Roman conquest of the Balkan world, that the Albanians or the Romanians who are the original people who fled to the mountains while the Romans were in the plains.

This is more generally how people think about mountains, as places that people flee to, and certainly in the case of how this functions in the Greek world. Flight and the mountain as a refuge is a part and parcel of this point of view, especially at the popular level.

Still, today in Greece, people will tell you that during the Ottoman period they were free up in the mountains, a place where they say the Turks never dared to set foot. But we actually have no studies, however, of mountainous spaces as such, in the Ottoman Empire.

I mean there are studies of people who are *in* the mountains, but without talking about the mountains as significant, although the empire itself was extremely mountainous. A recent GIS study puts the Ottoman Empire's topography at 74% mountainous, making it one of the most mountainous empires in world history.

This is what my current research is about, with a focus on the Pindus Mountains of Western Greece, and sort of challenging this idea of refuge, flight, remoteness, isolation. One thing I'm already certain about, the mountains may have been seen as remote, but that does not mean they were not connected to the larger world.

I recently published an article on a monastery building in the Pindus in the middle of the 16th century. Of course, this monastery, like all monasteries, presented itself as a retreat from the world, considering that it was in the mountains, one could say that it was a double retreat: from the Muslim population in the plains and from the secular world.

In fact, it is clear that the monastery was established, at least in part, to develop and protect a route across the mountains. In addition, it quickly came under the control of the Patriarch in Istanbul, thus indicating that this infrastructure project had the endorsement of the imperial capital.

So this whole flight to the mountains is for me, within the context of what is territorially Greece today is the subject of my current research. By the way, we were speaking about this earlier, British officers serving in Greece and Albania in World War Two always talked about going into this traditional mountain world that had been closed off for centuries, and it is simply not the case.

***SF****:* And thinking about this in our current context, and also maybe relating back to your earlier experiences of living and working in Greece and the Republic of Turkey, how is this period of Ottoman rule remembered in modern day Greece and Turkey, if at all?

***MG*:** It's difficult to answer for Turkey because there is a large scale revisionist project going on now in Turkey, and its emphasis on which parts of the empire, which time period is changing so fast. Under Erdogan, certain sacrosanct narratives of the founding of the modern Turkish state—that it was completely divorced from the Ottoman Empire, that in the end all the peoples of the Ottoman Empire rejected the Ottoman Empire, including finally even the term. And this is changing.

Whether it's from Erdogan re-implementing certain ceremonials that the Sultans engaged in, like sponsoring evening meals during Ramadan, so acting in a Sultanic fashion, and the use of Ottoman motifs—like the Ottoman Tulip in subway stops. There's a general revival of the Ottoman past.

I'm not saying it's historically accurate, it’s often kitschy, but there's a new positive attitude, at least on the part of the state and some part of the population towards the Ottoman past.

But the period that continues to be most controversial is the teens and the 1920s.

Erdogan is trying to—he can't dislodge Ataturk from the pantheon, but he's trying to somehow make him less anti-Ottoman, by revising certain key aspects of his story: that in fact he had more loyalty to the Sultan than we think. This is what's going on in Turkey, changes to the iconography of the cemetery at Gallipoli. I could go on and on.

In Greece there's a split, I would say amongst the vast majority of the population. It kind of reminds me of this country. I mean people of the US have done so much to rewrite the history, let's say of slavery and of race in the US, but the vast majority of the population is completely unswayed by all of this historical work. Some of the things in some of the textbooks that are written today, they could have been written in 1945.

And I would say amongst the Greek population generally that is still the case. People still believe in the most ridiculous kind of myths, like the supposed secret schools where Greeks were secretly taught the Greek language.

This completely misunderstands the Ottoman Empire. In the age of nationalism, education is a weapon. The Ottomans had no interest in suppressing Greek education. It wasn't education for the nation, it was education to be a good Christian.

This coexists since the 1980s with attempts to get beyond this restrictive view of Greek history. This is a very, very lively scholarly scene in Greece. Greek scholars now learn Ottoman, Turkish. They go to the Ottoman archives. And, despite all of the economic pressures and all the difficulty that Greece has had, excellent work on Ottoman history it is being written today in Greece, which was not the case when I first went in the early 1980s.

***SF*:** And finally, where can people go to learn more about this fascinating topic?

***MG***: Well, I don't usually recommend my own books, but Edinburgh University Press embarked on a project, probably a good ten years ago now, if not earlier, of writing a continuous history of the Greeks, from Antiquity to the present.

I wrote the volume on the Ottoman Period up until 1770, and then Tom Gallant took over for the 19th into the 20th century and wrote a book about the 19th century that includes the Ottoman Empire, rather than the usual 1821. That is the Edinburgh History of the Greeks. I forget what our volumes are called. I have the volume on the Ottoman period and then Tom Gallant has the volume on the 19th century, I think going up to 1922, which is when the irredentist dreams of Greece died. So those are two I think quite accessible histories of the Greeks during this period.

***SF:*** Molly, thank you very much for your time.

***MG:*** Thank you.