

THE COMMERCIAL LAW OF DHIMMIS IN MODERN OTTOMAN HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

In the multi-ethnic structure of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish-Muslim population was predominantly employed in military and bureaucratic positions, while non-Muslim subjects played an active role in nearly all areas of commerce. Among them, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews held particularly privileged positions. These communities were not only prominent in domestic trade but also played a leading role in the empire's commercial relations with foreign countries. As a result, legal changes concerning dhimmis (non-Muslim subjects) emerged during the modern period of the Ottoman Empire. During the reform era that began in the 19th century, non-Muslims benefited the most from reforms related to the commercial sector.

Keywords: Dhimmi, Ottoman Commercial Law, Legal Status of Minorities, Tanzimat Reforms, Economic Integration in the Ottoman Empire.

INTRODUCTION

The Ottoman Empire, which spanned a vast geographical area, provided significant opportunities for the development of trade. The long-standing trade networks of Anatolia, the Middle East, and the Balkans continued to expand during the Ottoman period. The Ottoman administration allowed non-Muslim communities—who had lived on these lands for centuries—to lead many of these commercial relations.

This study, which consists of two main sections, explores the roles and legal status of the non-Muslim subjects (*dhimmis*) in the field of commerce within the Ottoman Empire. The first part focuses on the three main non-Muslim communities active in trade—Armenians, Greeks, and Jews—and examines the commercial relations they engaged in and the roles they assumed. The second part of the first section discusses the Ottoman Empire's commercial relations with foreign countries and highlights how *dhimmis* played a significant role in these interactions.

The second main section of the study, which forms the core of this research, clarifies the legal rights of *dhimmis* in the Ottoman Empire regarding trade and how these rights evolved chronologically.

The aim of this study is to investigate the commercial law of non-Muslim communities living in the Ottoman Empire from a historical perspective. For this purpose, it examines how trade law developed during the modern period of the empire and how non-Muslims benefited from these legal reforms. In the course of the research, both historical and legal academic sources have been utilized.

This study argues that the legal status of non-Muslim communities (*dhimmis*) in the Ottoman Empire was not merely a religious classification but served as a key structural element shaping their economic participation. By analyzing the legal and institutional frameworks of the Ottoman system—particularly during the Tanzimat and Reform eras—the article explores how dhimmis, especially Jews, Armenians, and Greeks, navigated and benefited from these evolving legal environments in trade and property ownership.

1. Commercial Sectors in Which Dhimmi Were Active in the Ottoman Empire

During the classical period, various measures such as supporting East-West trade, keeping the Black Sea closed to foreign merchants, controlling major overland trade routes between Asia and Europe, and ensuring the protection of urban centers enhanced the importance of commercial activities.

In its founding period, the Ottoman Empire aimed to maintain the ongoing economic development in Anatolia and followed an economic policy in this direction. Therefore, it did not

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obstruct the activities of foreign merchants. With the conquest of the Middle East and the Balkans, the empire gained a significant commercial position in global trade—especially in Asia-Europe commerce—and took control over major trade routes. Aware of the significance of this trade, the state built roadside inns (caravanserais) and ensured the security of transportation routes.

However, since the primary founding element of the state, the Muslim Turks, were largely engaged in governance and military affairs, they neglected economic activities. This gap was filled by dhimmis (non-Muslims) and foreigners. In order to both encourage foreigners and revive trade—and as a demonstration of the empire's strength—certain commercial privileges were granted under the name capitulations (trade agreements) (Ayyıldız, 2017, p. 591; Şenel, n.d.).

Following the conquest of Istanbul, one of the most significant changes was the replacement of the Italians, who had lost their dominance, by non-Muslim Ottoman subjects, particularly Armenians, Jews, and Greeks. Unlike in the pre-Ottoman period, when the Genoese largely excluded local populations from overseas commerce, after the conquest both Kaffa and Galata saw Greeks taking over the large-scale commercial roles previously held by the Italians (Köse, 2001, p. 234).

As a result, dhimmi merchants such as Armenians, Greeks, Jews, along with Arabs, played key roles in trade. However, the central government was careful to prevent any one group from becoming too dominant and took precautions accordingly. In addition to non-Muslims and foreigners, the Turkish-Muslim population also participated in domestic and international trade. Indeed, in commercial hubs such as Bursa, companies established by Turkish merchants engaged in foreign trade were known to exist. Some Turkish merchants were even active in foreign countries (Şenel, n.d.).

Armenians:

The esnaf (guild) registers indicate that dhimmis were included in the same guild structures as Muslims. In these registers, Muslims were listed first, followed by Christians, and finally Jews. Due to their knowledge of foreign languages, dhimmis gained advantageous positions in both commerce and public service. Professions such as goldsmithing, money changing, banking, and architecture were predominantly carried out by dhimmis within the empire.

For example, an examination of the sharia court records of Bolu during the reign of Mahmud II reveals that a significant portion of the non-Muslim population there consisted of Armenians, who were engaged in a wide variety of professions. Commercial activities such as goldsmithing, money changing, timber trade, peddling, and coffeehouse management were generally dominated by the Armenian population.

Additionally, the Polish traveler Simeon, who visited Bolu in 1613, noted that Armenians in the city were also engaged in dyeing and kaftan-making (Demirağ, 2002, p. 20). Furthermore, Armenians were more likely than Greeks to speak Turkish in their homes, which enabled them to establish smoother business relations with the Turks.

By the last quarter of the 19th century, in parallel with their rising influence within the empire, Armenians also began establishing connections with the outside world. These connections extended beyond Europe and Russia to include Iran and India (İlgen, 2007, p. 102).

Greeks:

It is understood that the Greek population played a particularly important role in the integration of their regions into the global market. Leveraging both their external networks and their influence within the region, Greeks succeeded in dominating every aspect of trade—from large-scale international commerce to medium-sized regional trade, from retail in small urban shops to wholesale trade.

Greek merchants expanded their influence in nearly every sector, from textiles to figs, raisins, olive oil, and liqueurs, and competed with both Armenians and British merchants in these fields. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Greek merchants are reported to have controlled approximately 40% to 50% of the Ottoman Empire's trade with Western countries—an indication of the extent of their economic impact (İlgen, 2007, pp. 101–102).

Jews:

Starting from the 16th century, the increase in the Jewish population in Bursa led to a revitalization of economic life. Thanks to their talents in economics and bureaucracy, Jews enjoyed significant

opportunities. As a result of Jewish migration to Bursa, economic competition intensified between local Jews and new arrivals. Court records also indicate that rental agreements made by Jews in Bursa contributed to the vibrancy of the local economy. The lack of professional restrictions on Jews also played an important role in their contribution to commercial life (Sercan, n.d.).

The professions and business sectors of Jews living in Bursa covered a wide range. Jews were generally involved in law, guardianship, woolen cloth trade, tax farming, jewelry, mining, and also engaged in the trade of leather, rice, fish, dye, wool, silk, wine, marble, grapes, and raisins. Particularly in transferring goods from east to west, Jews often took on transportation roles. During the 16th century, Jewish commercial activity in Bursa was especially concentrated in the silk trade. Their involvement in trade also became a major source of income, and Jews were known for their wealth in the city (Sercan, n.d.).

From the mid-19th century, Jews became the most economically dominant group in Thessaloniki, working as commission agents or retail traders. They exported grain, tobacco, and oil, while importing coffee, sugar, and oil. Their main source of income was the grain trade. From the 1870s until the Balkan Wars, Jews also dominated industries such as cotton, flour, and brick production. Meanwhile, Greeks continued in retail trade, and there were also Franks, who mostly traded with Western Europe. The most prominent industries in Thessaloniki included thread, weaving, flour, tile, brick, soap, tobacco, and cigarette production (Yıldız, 2012, p. 40).

By the 1830s, non-Muslim merchants dominated commercial activity in all major cities of the empire. Exemptions and protections granted through commercial agreements positioned minorities not only as intermediaries between Ottoman producers and European capitalists until the end of the 19th century but also as conduits for European financial capital within the empire. By the century's end, not a single Muslim-Turk was listed among Istanbul's prominent bankers. Among the forty major bankers: 12 were Greeks, 12 Armenians, 8 Jews, and 5 Levantines. The capital-driven Istanbul financial market was monopolized by minorities: 18 of the 34 leading moneylenders were Greeks, 6 were Jews, and 5 were Armenians. In the Balkans, financial markets were under Greek dominance.

During the Tanzimat period, industries aimed at fulfilling daily needs developed in cities like Istanbul, Bursa, Tokat, and Baghdad, producing items such as plows, iron, steel pipes, locks, knives, small steam engines, gunpowder, and carpets. However, these industrial facilities were often directly managed by minorities or their advisory positions were occupied by non-Muslim subjects. Toward the late 19th century, half of the businesses with five or more employees were owned by Greeks, while the combined share of Armenian, Jewish, and foreign-owned enterprises reached 35%. Turkish-owned businesses accounted for only 15%, ranking just after Armenian firms. British financial expansion in the Ottoman Empire also relied on non-Muslim networks. In 19th-century Egypt, many European banks were under Greek control. Prior to the Greek dominance of Ottoman commercial and financial relations in the late 19th century, Jews had played a central role in Anatolia's urban artisanry, farming, shopkeeping, money changing, and lending. Up to the 18th century in Istanbul, doctors, diplomats, and bankers in public service were primarily Jewish, and Jewish merchants also dominated long-distance trade with European markets (Köse, 2001, p. 230).

1.1. Trade Relations with Christian Countries

England

Initially, trade between England and the Ottoman Empire was controlled directly by English merchants. However, over time, this trade underwent a significant transformation. Following the dissolution of the Levant Company in 1825[†], the English monopoly over Eastern Mediterranean commerce was lifted. As a result, British merchants in the Ottoman Empire began founding family-owned trading houses to fill the void, which quickly spread across the region.

During this period, European merchants increasingly collaborated with local intermediaries, whose importance and influence grew. Trade with the Ottoman interior came to rely largely on Greek,

[†] For detailed information, see: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/levant-compan>

Armenian, and Jewish commission agents. The higher educational level, work ethic, business experience and skills, familiarity with Turkish customs and language, and fluency in European languages made these local non-Muslim intermediaries indispensable to European merchants. Small-scale commerce, manufacturing, money lending, and coastal trade were almost entirely in their hands. Acting as local retailers, they sold imported goods and provided valuable feedback to European traders about local consumer preferences.

Many of these intermediaries, who initially acted as market guides, later established their own trading houses. They began to import European goods independently and even export Ottoman goods directly to Europe. Some opened branches or representatives not only in Istanbul and Izmir, but also in various European commercial centers. In particular, Greek and Armenian trading houses became widespread in England (Baskıcı, 2009, pp. 43–44).

The 1838 Treaty of Balta Liman reorganized customs tariffs between the two countries. Before the treaty, export and import duties were set at 3%, and internal transport taxes were around 8%. Following the treaty, export duties were raised to 12%, while import duties were reduced to 5%.

In reality, the agreement exposed the economic asymmetry between England and the Ottoman Empire. While England exported high-profit items to the empire, including cotton and woolen textiles, hardware goods, fine clocks, sugar, tin, iron, and coal, the Ottomans mainly exported processed wool and silk, grains, and opium. Despite this trade imbalance, and although most European countries—including England—maintained high tariff walls and state monopolies on products such as tobacco, salt, and snuff, the Ottoman Empire was forced to unilaterally lower its own tariffs without demanding reciprocal concessions. This disproportionately benefited Greek merchants, who quickly began to purchase capitulations and *berat*s (official protections) from foreign embassies. As a result, the non-Muslim subjects of the empire rapidly accumulated wealth and strengthened their economic position within the Ottoman realm (Basan, 2009, pp. 49, 61).

Russia

From the 15th century onwards, Russian merchants were observed operating within the Ottoman Empire. The Treaty of Belgrade (1739) granted Russian traders the right to conduct commercial activities throughout Ottoman waters and territories—excluding the Black Sea. However, the treaty explicitly prohibited Russian military and commercial ships in the Sea of Azov and Black Sea. Utilizing these commercial privileges, Russia began to secure important opportunities to achieve its longstanding objective of accessing warm-water ports in the second half of the 18th century.

The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774) marked a significant turning point in Ottoman–Russian relations. One of its crucial outcomes was Russia’s official designation as the protector of Orthodox Christians within the empire. To exercise this protectorate role effectively, Russia required a legal framework to operate within Ottoman territories. Therefore, Russian consulates were established and extensively utilized under the pretext of supporting commerce and commercial activity (Erdönmez, 2019, pp. 140–141).

The Treaty of Aynalıkavak, signed on 21 March 1799, included a key article (Article 6) outlining commercial regulations between the two states. Upon the implementation of this and related treaties, Russia established consulates not only in the Balkans, but also in Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean port cities and islands, including Cyprus.

In Cyprus, in addition to the dominant powers of Britain, Russia, and France, consular representatives from Greece, Sweden, and Denmark also intervened in local internal affairs. Although the primary function of these consuls was to oversee the commercial activities of their nationals, the issues they caused often extended beyond commerce into legal affairs. The broad interpretation of legal privileges provided the technical justification for such interventions, while the actual motivation stemmed from the Ottoman Empire’s vulnerable international and domestic political circumstances.

In practice, Russian consuls in Cyprus regularly interfered in internal affairs under the pretense of supporting their merchants. These interventions included attempts to influence customs tariffs and taxation, creating conflict among local tax farmers, establishing close ties with local

officials, filing complaints to Istanbul, and even challenging the basic principles of Islamic law. The issues arising from the Russian consulates' activities in mid-19th-century Cyprus were, in fact, a direct consequence of Russia's wider commercial ambitions on the island (Erdönmez, 2019, pp. 141, 144).

Between 1830 and 1902, exports from the Ottoman Empire to England and France showed a steady increase, while Austria and Russia's shares in Ottoman exports generally declined, except for a few years. As highly industrialized nations, England and France had a greater demand for Ottoman raw materials, and as such, benefited from trade agreements and global economic conditions.

Looking at total exports, the average annual figure rose from £3.8 million (1830–1832) to £20.3 million (1900–1902)—a 5.3-fold increase over 72 years. Notably, Britain's share of Ottoman exports grew considerably after the trade agreement in 1840, while Austria's share consistently declined. In general, industrialized countries obtained increasing and variable proportions of Ottoman exports (Avdar & Avdar, 2020, p. 117).

Following the establishment of the Ministry of Trade in 1839, matters concerning European merchants began to be handled by this institution. Previously managed by the *beylikçi* (imperial secretary), these responsibilities were now assumed by the Minister of Trade. Thus, becoming a registered merchant (*defterli tüccar*) was only possible through a formal submission (*arz*) made by the Minister upon the recommendation of other merchants. A Trade Council affiliated with the Ministry was established shortly thereafter, and by 1850, a Commercial Court (*Ticaret Mahkemesi*) had been formed. From then on, legal disputes involving European merchants pertaining to commerce were adjudicated within this new institutional framework. Following the foundation of the Commercial Court, imperial decrees clarified jurisdictional boundaries to prevent administrative inconsistencies. Accordingly, commercial cases were to be heard in the Commercial Court, religious matters were to be referred to Sharia courts, and issues concerning established laws and state regulations were to be handled by the Imperial Council (*Âlî Meclis*). (TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi, n.d.)

2. Legal Framework

In the Ottoman Empire, *dhimmis* (non-Muslim subjects) were taxed in accordance with Islamic law. Additionally, they were also subject to a number of customary taxes. As is well known, *dhimmis* were liable for two specific taxes—*jizya* and *kharaj*—which were not collected from Muslim subjects and which defined their legal and social status. Beyond these, *dhimmis* were also subject to the general fiscal system of the Islamic state, and thus were obligated to pay the same taxes as Muslim *reaya* (subjects) under the empire's tax law (Cin & Akyılmaz, 2009, p. 174).

For example, a *musta'min*—a foreigner (typically a merchant) who was granted permission to reside in Ottoman territory with guaranteed security—was required to pay the *jizya* if he remained in Ottoman lands for longer than one year, and was not allowed to leave the country. Records from the Bursa Şer'iyye Registers indicate that as early as the 15th century, some foreign merchants found ways to reside in major commercial centers like Bursa without paying the *jizya*. With the later development of capitulations, a more lenient approach was adopted in this matter. For instance, Iranian-Armenian merchants who typically came to Ottoman lands for trade were classified as *jizya-payers* (TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi, n.d.).

There were no restrictions placed on *dhimmis* in terms of contract law or commercial law. They held property rights within the empire and enjoyed full freedom to engage in trade and enter into contracts.

By the mid-18th century, certain foreign states had acquired commercial privileges through capitulation treaties with the Ottoman Empire. These states issued *berats* (patents or warrants) to their nationals, enabling them to engage in commerce freely after paying certain taxes. Similarly, foreign governments began extending their protection to non-Muslim Ottoman subjects who served as translators, granting them merchant *berats* that also allowed them to trade freely. As a result of this practice, by the mid-18th century, the number of non-Muslim Ottoman subjects holding foreign *berats* surpassed the number of actual foreign nationals.

A firman issued in 1722 by Sultan Ahmed III noted that some Jewish and Christian Ottoman subjects were acquiring interpreter berats in order to exempt their relatives and associates from the jizya, thereby enabling them to conduct trade. Another firman from 1758 stated that certain Ottoman subjects had acquired patents from Christian states to avoid paying taxes and to reduce customs duties. The document further emphasized that such protection should not be extended to additional subjects, and that existing patents or certificates issued under these pretenses should be revoked (Keleş, 2015, p. 200).

2.1. Dispute Resolution and Legal Reforms in Commercial Law for Dhimmis

Disputes among dhimmis regarding obligations and commercial transactions were generally resolved according to their own legal traditions, just as in other areas of private law. However, in cases involving Muslims, dhimmis were required to appear before the sharʿī (Islamic) courts. It should be noted that religious communities were not always favorable to their members bringing legal matters before the Islamic courts. For instance, it is recorded that among Jews, seeking resolution in a sharʿī court could even lead to excommunication—a severe penalty within their religious framework.

Despite this, during proceedings, no formal distinction was made between Muslims and non-Muslims. A clear provision in the legal code of Sultan Selim II permitted dhimmis to bring their cases comfortably before the Islamic courts. In an article cited by Konan, legal historian Ronald Jennings concluded—based on his 17th-century research—that the widespread use of Islamic courts by dhimmis for civil matters significantly limited the judiciary authority of communal (religious) courts (Konan, 2015, pp. 178–179).

In the 19th century, modern institutional reforms took shape: in 1840, the Commercial Council was established under the Ministry of Commerce, which was transformed into a Mixed Commercial Court by 1847–1848. Following this, the 1860 Supplement to the Imperial Commercial Code (Ticaret Kanunname-i Hümayununa Zeyl) led to the establishment of commercial courts in both Istanbul and the provinces to handle all types of trade disputes.

With the onset of the Tanzimat era, civil courts (nizamiye) dealing with legal and especially commercial matters were in urgent need of a codified civil law. At that time, all members of commercial and nizamiye courts—except the presiding judge—were non-jurists, typically appointed bureaucrats. Nonetheless, a commercial code (Kanunname-i Ticaret) was drafted in 1850 based largely on the French Commercial Code (İnalçık et al., 1989, pp. 35–36).

The 1856 Islahat Edict (Reform Decree) brought further institutional changes: commercial and criminal cases involving Muslims and dhimmis—or dhimmis of different sects—were henceforth openly tried in mixed courts. The edict also granted dhimmis the right to own real estate, participate in banking and commercial ventures, and access European capital (sermaye-i Avrupa)—thus paving the way for deeper economic integration and financial opportunity (Cin & Akyılmaz, 2009, p. 182).

To streamline legal conflicts in commercial affairs, the Code of Procedure for Commercial Trials (Usul-i Muhakeme-i Ticaret Nizamnamesi) was promulgated in 1861, based on French legal models. It remained in effect until the promulgation of the Code of Civil Procedure (Hukuk Mahkemeleri Usulü Kanunu) in 1879.

As for maritime commerce, the Commercial Maritime Code (Ticaret-i Bahriye Kanunnamesi), which came into force in 1863, was not solely based on French law but also took into account maritime codes from other seafaring nations such as the Netherlands, Sardinia, and Prussia (Üçok et al., 2010, p. 357).

2.2. Commercial Education and Constitutional Guarantees for Economic Participation

The Kanun-i Esasi of 1876, the first constitution in the history of Turkish law, laid down general principles for all Ottoman citizens, including provisions applicable to non-Muslim subjects alongside Islam, which was recognized as the official state religion. Article 12 of the constitution clearly stated that all Ottoman citizens had the right to engage in trade, industry, and agriculture, and to establish any kind of commercial company, as long as their activities complied with the laws and regulations (Kenanoğlu, 2008, p. 10).

Although liberal economic thought had some influence after the Tanzimat reforms, the ideology of economic nationalism became increasingly dominant, particularly during the Second Constitutional Era. Consequently, economic and commercial education was shaped by these broader ideological and political shifts.

During the later phase of the Second Constitutional Era—coinciding with World War I—a period of intense economic alertness emerged under wartime pressure. This economic awakening was soon reflected in the field of education. The Faculty of Law was reinforced with foreign scholars, while special attention was given to the Ticaret Mekteb-i Alisi (Higher School of Commerce). In fact, this institution even began publishing a journal in 1917, aiming to disseminate its teachings beyond the classroom.

Research on commercial education indicates that the goal of the Ticaret Mektebi was to train individuals equipped with contemporary commercial knowledge who could contribute to the nation's development through commerce. Originally established in 1883 under the name Hamidiye Ticaret Mekteb-i Âlisi, the school underwent changes in curriculum, name, and location over time. In 1909, it was renamed Ticaret Mekteb-i Âlisi, and its curriculum was revised in several key years, including 1915.

According to Osman Ergin, to understand the historical reluctance of Turkish-Muslim citizens to engage in commerce, one must examine the broader socio-economic history of the Ottoman Empire. This disinterest in trade can be traced to the prevailing perceptions of commerce and craftsmanship within Ottoman society and among its governing elite. Following the Tanzimat reforms, the liberalization of trade enabled individuals to open shops freely without strict regulation. This newfound freedom benefited non-Muslims the most. They already had established commercial ties with Europe, were familiar with European languages, customs, and commercial ethics, and raised their children to follow similar paths. Consequently, non-Muslims came to dominate the Ottoman trade sector after Tanzimat.

The capitulations further complicated this picture by preventing the state from adequately protecting local industries and traders. As European merchants enjoyed tax exemptions, Muslim traders—who lacked familiarity with European languages and commerce—began to withdraw from the economic sphere. While non-Muslim children were raised with commerce in mind, Muslim children increasingly enrolled in civil and military schools, eventually pursuing careers in government service or the military.

In response to this imbalance, the Ottoman state established the Ticaret Mektebi to promote commercial literacy among its Muslim population and to encourage participation in the business world (Özkul, 2006, pp. 326–327).

CONCLUSION

Since the Classical Period, the Ottoman Empire had control over key trade routes as a result of its conquests in the Balkans and the Middle East. Due to its vast geographical extent, the empire became home to a wide range of ethnic and religious communities. While the majority of the Ottoman population consisted of Muslims, the state itself was a multiethnic and multicultural entity. However, since Muslims were predominantly employed in government services and the military, non-Muslims were more inclined to engage in trade. The non-Muslim population—particularly Armenians, Greeks, and Jews—held significant linguistic and cultural advantages, which placed them in dominant positions within the commercial sphere. As long-established communities in these regions, they were also granted certain legal privileges.

Armenians were typically engaged in trades such as goldsmithing, moneychanging, timber commerce, peddling, and coffeehouse businesses. Greeks established dominance across a wide spectrum of commerce—from small-scale retail to wholesale—particularly in textiles, dried figs, raisins, olive oil, and liqueurs. Jews, who often lived in advanced commercial hubs like Bursa, pursued diverse occupations including law, custodianship, cloth trading, tax farming, jewelry, and mining. They were also involved in the trade of leather, rice, fish, dye, wool, silk, wine, marble, and various

agricultural goods. By the second quarter of the 19th century, the proportion of non-Muslims engaged in commerce far exceeded that of the Muslim-Turkish population.

In the realm of foreign trade, Britain and Russia were the Ottoman Empire's principal economic partners. However, as the Empire's power waned in the 19th century, it began offering significant concessions to these countries, particularly in the fields of taxation and commerce. The most notable example of this is the 1838 Treaty of Balta Limanı. Prior to the treaty, customs duties with Britain stood at 3% for both imports and exports. After the agreement, export taxes increased to 12%, while internal transport and import duties were reduced to 5%.

Commercial relations with Russia, which dated back to the 15th century, entered a new phase with the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca. Under the pretext of protecting Orthodox Christians, Russia began interfering in the Empire's internal affairs. The 6th article of the 1799 Treaty of Aynalıkavak further redefined trade relations between the two states. Following these agreements, Russia opened consulates not only across the Balkans but also in Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean port cities and islands, including Cyprus. These activities were also part of Russia's competitive response to Britain's expanding trade interests in the region.

Despite these disadvantages, the Ottoman Empire experienced substantial growth in foreign trade during the 19th century, establishing extensive trade networks with almost all major European powers.

From a legal perspective, the taxation of non-Muslims was originally rooted in Islamic law, particularly through the collection of the *jizya* tax. However, in the modern period, significant legal reforms emerged in response to evolving socio-political and economic realities. Beginning in the 18th century, the trend toward Westernization led to the expansion of capitulations and trade privileges granted to foreign states. Simultaneously, legal reforms were enacted to regulate both foreign and domestic trade, as well as to accommodate the commercial rights of non-Muslims. Among the most important developments were the establishment of the Trade Council (*Ticaret Meclisi*) under the Ministry of Trade in 1840, followed by the expansion of this institution into the Mixed Commercial Court (*Karma Ticaret Mahkemesi*) in 1847–48.

Although these reforms were not the result of grassroots demand, they nonetheless marked a significant step forward in the commercial legal rights of *dhimmis*. One final institution worth mentioning is the *Ticaret Mekteb-i Âlîsi*, or Imperial School of Commerce. Originally established in 1883 as the *Hamidiye Ticaret Mekteb-i Âlîsi*, it underwent changes in name and curriculum, adopting its final form by 1917. Unsurprisingly, it was non-Muslim students who benefited most from this institution, continuing their dominance in commercial education and practice.

The legal classification of *dhimmi* communities in the Ottoman Empire played a central role in determining their position within the economic and social order. This research demonstrates that non-Muslims were not passive minorities but active participants in commercial life, whose legal recognition often translated into tangible economic engagement.

Legal reforms introduced during the Tanzimat period—including the establishment of Mixed Commercial Courts and the reaffirmation of capitulations—enhanced the institutional protections afforded to non-Muslim merchants and landowners. These reforms helped formalize their status as legitimate economic agents, expanding their influence within the imperial economy.

The broader implication of these findings is that Ottoman legal pluralism should be studied not solely through Islamic jurisprudence, but also in terms of how it enabled minority inclusion and structured commercial interaction.

In contemporary debates on legal integration in multi-confessional societies, the Ottoman experience offers a valuable historical model. Future research may benefit from a comparative regional analysis of court records (*şer'iyye sicilleri*) to understand how legal practices concerning *dhimmis* varied across different Ottoman provinces.

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