



The treatment of the Tanzimat in Albanian historiography from the 20th to the 21st century

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Abstract

The rule of the Ottoman Empire over Albanian territories, from the late fifteenth to the early twentieth century, represents a fundamental dimension of Albanian history. Within this broader context, the Tanzimat period (1839–1876) holds particular significance. Although Albanian historiography has addressed this period, studies on the Tanzimat reforms remain partial and often insufficient. This era was marked by a series of political, economic, and military reforms aimed at strengthening central Ottoman authority and reorganizing administrative relations. However, these reforms frequently restricted local autonomy and increased the fiscal burden on the Albanian population. In response, Albanians organized uprisings known as the “Tanzimat Revolts,” which reflected not only social and economic discontent but also a rising national consciousness and aspirations to defend local interests. From a historiographical perspective, an important dimension relates to the Bektashi Order, which became a center of cultural and spiritual resistance, contributing to social mobilization and the preservation of identity in the face of Ottoman centralization. This study examines the treatment of the Tanzimat in Albanian historiography, highlighting methodological approaches, interpretative frameworks, and the contributions of Albanian scholars in understanding the reforms’ impact on the population. It also analyzes the role of the Bektashi Order in shaping a unified cultural and spiritual resistance. Through this focus, the study explores how popular reactions and uprisings influenced the affirmation of national identity and the development of political and cultural processes during the nineteenth century.

20.-21. yüzyıl Arnavut tarihyazımında Tanzimat’ın incelenmesi

Özet

Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nun XV. yüzyılın sonlarından XX. yüzyılın başlarına kadar Arnavut toprakları üzerindeki egemenliği, Arnavut tarihinin temel dönemlerinden birini teşkil etmektedir. Bu çerçevede Tanzimat dönemi (1839–1876) özel bir önem taşımaktadır. Arnavut tarihyazımı her ne kadar bu dönemi ele almış olsa da, Tanzimat reformlarına ilişkin çalışmaların bütüncül olmadığı ve çoğu durumda sınırlı kaldığı görülmektedir. Tanzimat süreci, merkezi otoriteyi güçlendirmeyi ve idari yapıyı yeniden düzenlemeyi amaçlayan siyasi, ekonomik ve askeri reformlar dizisiyle şekillenmiş; ancak söz konusu reformlar sıklıkla yerel özerkliğin daralmasına ve Arnavut nüfus üzerindeki mali yükün artmasına yol açmıştır. Bu bağlamda ortaya çıkan ve literatürde “Tanzimat Ayaklanmaları” olarak anılan isyanlar, toplumsal ve ekonomik hoşnutsuzluğun yanı sıra gelişmekte olan ulusal bilinci ve yerel çıkarların korunmasına yönelik talepleri yansıtmaktadır. Tarihyazımı açısından dikkat çeken bir diğer unsur Bektaşî Tarikatı’dır. Tarikat, söz konusu dönemde kültürel ve manevi bir direnç odağına dönüşerek toplumsal mobilizasyonu etkilemiş ve Osmanlı merkezîyetçi politikaları karşısında kimliğin korunmasına katkı sağlamıştır. Bu çalışma, Arnavut tarihyazımında Tanzimat’ın ele alınışını inceleyerek kullanılan metodolojik yaklaşımları, tarihsel yorumları ve Arnavut araştırmacıların reformların toplumsal yaşama etkisinin anlaşılmasına yönelik katkılarını ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca Bektaşî Tarikatı’nın kültürel ve manevi bir direnç alanı olarak oynadığı rol değerlendirilmektedir. Bu doğrultuda, makale Tanzimat’a yönelik toplumsal tepkilerin ve ayaklanmaların ulusal kimliğin oluşumu ile XIX. yüzyıl boyunca siyasi ve kültürel süreçlerin gelişimine olan etkilerini analiz etmektedir.

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Article History

Received
2025-09-26
Accepted
2025-11-24

Keywords

Ottoman Empire,
Tanzimat,
Albanians,
Uprisings,
Bektashi Order,
Historiography.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Osmanlı
İmparatorluğu,
Tanzimat,
Arnavutlar,
İsyanlar,
Bektaşî Tarikatı,
Tarihyazımı.

Introduction

Historical Context of the Tanzimat Reforms

The rule of the Ottoman Empire over the Albanian territories (from the late 15th century to the early 20th century) represents one of the most complex themes in Albanian history. The Tanzimat era (1839–1876) marked a turning point in the political, social, economic, and cultural transformations of the Ottoman Empire, including those within the Albanian lands. The main objective of the Tanzimat reforms was the modernization of the Ottoman Empire, the consolidation of central authority, and the restoration of its state capacities following the weakening caused by economic and administrative crises.

According to many scholars, both Albanian and international, the political, social, and economic developments during the first half of the 19th century influenced changes in political balances and territorial systems in Europe as well as in the Ottoman Empire (Biagini, 1998; Gashi, 2021). These developments deepened the multifaceted crisis in which the Ottoman Empire found itself, forcing it to undertake a series of reforms to avoid total collapse.

The beginnings of the reform movement can be traced to the reigns of Sultan Selim III (1789–1807), Sultan Mahmud II (1808–1839), and especially that of Sultan Abdülmecid (1839–1861) (Bajraktari, 1998, pp. 23, 26; Gashi, 2021, pp. 56–64). The abolition of the timar system and the recognition of private landownership marked an important shift in the empire's economic and social relations. Mustafa Reşid Pasha played a key role as the architect of the reforms, drawing upon his diplomatic experience in France and the United Kingdom (Osmani, 2022, pp. 54–55; Bozbora, 2002, pp. 113–114, 119–140; Bajraktari, 1998, pp. 23–24).

The proclamation of the Tanzimat Edict on 3 November 1839 in Gülhane, known as the *Hatt-ı Şerif of Gülhane*, represented a historic milestone. The document guaranteed fundamental rights such as the right to life, property, and honor, the equal collection of taxes, and the regulation of military service. It represented an effort to integrate constitutional principles into the Ottoman state and to affirm the idea that the Ottoman state exists for the people, not the people for the Ottoman state (İnalçık & Seyitdanlıoğlu, 2012, p. ix; İnalçık & Renda, 2018, p. 377).

For many scholars, the Tanzimat Edict is considered the foundation and starting point of the modernization of the Ottoman Empire. Among them, Prof. Dr. Halil İnalçık and Mehmet Seyitdanlıoğlu, in their study *Tanzimat: Değişim Sürecinde Osmanlı İmparatorluğu*, emphasize:

"The Tanzimat Edict has been one of the most important historical turning points we have experienced since its publication on 3 November 1839, and it has been the foundation and starting point of our modernization efforts. As a semi-constitutional document in its nature, the edict holds a prominent place in our constitutional law as it marks the beginning of our constitutional history." (İnalçık & Seyitdanlıoğlu, 2012, p. ix).

In the Albanian context, these reforms posed a challenge to local structures and traditions of autonomous administration. Although they guaranteed certain fundamental rights for citizens, they also imposed a new bureaucratic administration and increased taxes, burdening daily life (Biagini, 2000, pp. 342–353; Bozbora, 2002, pp. 119–140). This contradiction triggered numerous reactions, including scattered uprisings and local resistance (Gashi, 2021, pp. 97, 112; Zavalani, 1998, p. 171). Albanians perceived the consolidation of central administration as a threat to local autonomy and their culture, fueling the development of an early national consciousness and local mobilization (Shabani, 2014/2015, p. 364; Pollo, 1978, p. 68). During this period, the Bektashi Order, as a branch of Sufism, played an important role in the preservation of Albanian national identity by offering spiritual and cultural support to those who opposed the spread of direct Ottoman administrative influence. Closely tied to local and indigenous traditions, the Bektashi Order became a focal point of resistance against Ottoman authoritarianism and helped strengthen national identity at a time when this identity was at risk (Pollo, 1975, pp. 217–225; Izeti, 2001, p. 73; Izeti, 2004, pp. 184–185; Doja, 2008, pp. 66–70).

1. Content and Nature of the Tanzimat Reforms

The Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876) aimed to restore stability to the Ottoman Empire in the face of economic, administrative, and military crises by modernizing the Ottoman state and increasing central control. They affected various sectors, including administration, economy, the military, and civil rights, and were designed to harmonize Ottoman structures with European standards.

In the administrative field, the reforms sought to strengthen central authority and abolish feudal privileges that hindered state control. The establishment of a unified administration across all provinces aimed to standardize bureaucratic procedures and limit the influence of regional rulers (Egro, 2022, pp. 17–90). For Albanians, this process meant the removal of certain traditional rights and the reduction of autonomy for local structures, including pashas, clan leaders (*bajraktars*), and regional authorities.

In the economic sphere, Ottoman reformers aimed to increase the efficiency of tax collection and organize state finances. The implementation of the new fiscal system was often accompanied by heavy burdens on the local population, provoking tensions and resistance (Bozbora, 2002, pp. 119–140; Gashi, 2021, pp. 97–112). For Albanians, this increase in taxes was regarded not only as an economic burden but also as a threat to local autonomy and social traditions.

In the military sphere, the reforms involved compulsory conscription and the modernization of the armed forces, which caused deep dissatisfaction among Albanians. The modernization of the army, inspired by European models, was often perceived as a foreign imposition on local structures and Albanian society (Bozbora, 2002, pp. 128–132).

In the field of civil rights, the Tanzimat Edict guaranteed equality between Muslims and non-Muslims, fundamental rights such as property, life, and honor, as well as principles of equality in tax collection and administration (İnalçık & Seyitdanlıoğlu, 2012, p. ix; İnalçık & Renda, 2018, p. 377). In practice, however, its implementation often favored the central administration and the bureaucratic elite, provoking tensions and local resistance.

The Tanzimat reforms aimed at the overall modernization of the Ottoman Empire, but for Albanians they translated into limitations on local autonomy, increased fiscal burdens, and compulsory military service. Efforts toward centralization and harmonization with European standards were perceived as threats to traditional structures and national identity (Shabani, 2014/2015, p. 364; Pollo, 1968, p. 68). This contradiction between the progressive principles of the reforms and their practical reality created tensions that often culminated in uprisings and resistance by the Albanian population.

At a time when the Ottoman Empire was implementing the Tanzimat reforms, an important part of Albanian society felt threatened by the centralization of power, which endangered local autonomy. The *teqes* of the Bektashi Order, which served not only as spiritual centers but also as educational and cultural institutions, played a significant role in preserving national traditions and religious identity. This contributed to creating a supportive base for resisting Ottoman reforms, reflecting the tension between the modernization imposed by the central government and the preservation of Albanian identity and local structures (Pollo, 1975; Izeti, 2001; Izeti, 2004; Dobruna, 2017).

2. Albanian Opposition and Long-Term Consequences of the Tanzimat Reforms

The Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876), designed to modernize the Ottoman administration and guarantee civil rights, were met with widespread resistance in the Albanian-inhabited territories. For Albanians, these measures were often accompanied by increased taxation, compulsory military service, and administrative restrictions that undermined local traditions and regional autonomy (Bozbora, 2002, p. 132; Gashi, 2021, pp. 97–112).

Beginning in April 1844, several Albanian regions became involved in spontaneous and scattered uprisings known as the “Tanzimat Uprisings” (Thëngjilli & Buda, 2002, pp. 76–120; Pollo, 1968, p. 98; Egro, 2022, pp. 17–90; Zavalani, 1998, p. 171; Shabani, 2014/2015, p. 364). Although these uprisings did not achieve lasting victories, they played a decisive role in strengthening social awareness and consolidating elements of Albanian nationalism (Pollo, 1968, p. 68; Bozbora, 2002, p. 128).

The causes of the uprisings were manifold: lack of freedoms and rights, economic and social oppression, the influence of the Great Powers on Albanian interests, and aspirations for local autonomy (Nushi, 1978, p. 7; Gashi, 2021, pp. 57–60). Faced with this deteriorating situation, Albanians organized a series of uprisings across all their territories, expressing not only dissatisfaction with Ottoman policies but also efforts toward political and military organization (Thëngjilli & Buda, 2002, pp. 76–120).

The Albanian uprisings, such as that of Dervish Cara (1843–1844), also known as the Kosovo Uprising, which extended across much of the Albanian-inhabited lands from Gostivar, Tetovo, Skopje, Kumanovo, and Pristina to Vranje and Shkodër, as well as the Gjakova Uprising (1845), which spread across Gjakova, Peja, and Tropoja and was led by Binak Alia and Sokol Rama, represent important reactions to the Tanzimat reforms (Dobruna, 2020, pp. 28–41). Both uprisings were motivated primarily by the imposition of new taxes, centralization efforts, and the removal of Albanian pashas from their positions (Gashi, 2021, pp. 122–129).

Furthermore, as a result of dissatisfaction with the violent implementation of Tanzimat reforms, uprisings erupted in nearly the entire southern part of Albania in 1847. The uprisings in this region were more coordinated; representatives of the area, through the Assembly of Vlora in June 1847, decided that the Albanian population, without exception, should rise in arms against Ottoman rule. During the organizational phase, the “Albanian National League” was formed, establishing its governing bodies, including a Steering Committee led by Zenel Aga Gjoleka, demonstrating the growth of national consciousness and cooperation among Albanian tribes. These efforts at organization and resistance, along with later initiatives, laid the foundation for the creation of the League of Prizren and for the national mobilization that would follow at the end of the 19th century (Thëngjilli & Buda, 2002, pp. 76–120; Shabani, 2007, p. 222; Gashi, 2021, pp. 97–134).

In parallel, Albanian intellectuals, motivated by the changes brought by the Tanzimat reforms, during the 1860s began to systematically promote ideas concerning the importance of learning and cultivating the Albanian language, culture, literature, and folklore. This intellectual activity became an important factor in the development of the national movement, which opposed the centralist bureaucratic regime established by the Sublime Porte in the Albanian territories (Prifti, 2014, pp. 88–92; Bozborra, 2002, pp. 128–132; Egro, 2002, pp. 17–90). Likewise, the Albanian diaspora in Western countries played a crucial role in consolidating national identity and in political mobilization against Ottoman centralizing policies.

The uprisings and movements against the Tanzimat reforms demonstrate the organizational capacity and resilience of the Albanian people. They showed that attempts at centralization and the imposition of a unified administration in the Balkans could not succeed without taking into account local social structures and traditions (Shabani, 2007, p. 222). Albanian opposition to the Tanzimat should not be interpreted solely as resistance to reforms, but as an early step toward the affirmation of self-governance, national identity, and local autonomy within the Ottoman Empire (Pollo, 1968, p. 6; Lito, 2002, p. 25).

Beyond their political and cultural dimensions, these uprisings contributed to the consolidation of national consciousness, which would strengthen in the following decades, preparing the ground for independence movements and social changes (Lito, 2002, pp. 25–32; Gashi, 2021, pp. 112–120). This period demonstrates that even a reform of modernizing character can produce unintended consequences when it comes into conflict with traditional structures and local identities.

An important aspect of the Albanian movements during the Tanzimat period is the role played by the Bektashi Order and other Sufi currents as forms of cultural and spiritual resistance to Ottoman centralization (Buda, 2002). The Bektashi *teqes* in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia functioned as religious, educational, and cultural centers, promoting the use of the Albanian language, the preservation of national identity, and local organization (Pollo, 1975; Izeti, 2001; Izeti, 2004; Dobruna, 2017; Dobruna, 2020). Their anti-authoritarian nature and openness to new ideas transformed this network of institutions into spaces of dialogue and mobilization where spiritual traditions intertwined with reactions to Ottoman centralizing policies. Many figures of the national movement were shaped

within this environment, while the *teqes* served as logistical centers of resistance (Doja, 2010; Shabani, 2014/2015).

3. Approaches of Albanian Historiography to the Tanzimat Reforms (20th–21st centuries)

Albanian historiography of the 20th and 21st centuries has treated the period of the Ottoman Tanzimat Reforms (1839–1876) with considerable interest, examining it within the broader context of the political, economic, social, and cultural developments of the Ottoman Empire and their impact on the Albanian territories. Although significant works have been published, this period has not yet been studied in a fully comprehensive and systematic manner, leaving space for more specialized and comparative analyses (Buda, 2002, pp. 12–15).

Albanian historiography has produced projects, monographs, and scholarly studies that analyze the Tanzimat reforms as part of broader Ottoman developments, highlighting their influence on the economic, social, cultural, and political evolution of the Albanians. These studies employ a critical approach to historical sources and structured methodologies, offering a detailed overview of the events, processes, and popular reactions during the Tanzimat period.

Some of the main documentary projects that serve as important sources for the study of Tanzimat reforms include: *Popular Uprisings in the 1830s – Ottoman Documents*, *History of the Albanian People II – National Renaissance, 1830s–1912*, *History of Albanians in the 20th Century I*, and the *Albanian Encyclopedic Dictionary*, among others. These publications have provided a rich corpus of primary sources for analyzing the impact of Tanzimat reforms on Albanian developments.

In this context, monographs hold an important place in Albanian historiography, offering broad and structured interpretations of the Tanzimat. Monographs published before the 1990s, such as those by Shkodra (1959), Pllana (1985), and Piraku (2012), provided wide-ranging overviews of the reforms and their effects, emphasizing economic, political, and cultural aspects. After the 1990s, scholarly approaches became more critical and analytical (Egro, 2007, pp. 9–16), marking a shift from general description to deeper analysis of political, ideological, and cultural contexts (Pollo, 1995; Bajraktari, 1998; Zavalani, 1998; Izeti, 2001; Lito, 2002; Izeti, 2004; Egro, 2007; Prifti, 2014; Dobruna, 2017; Dobruna, 2020; Gashi, 2021; Osmani, 2022; Çeku & Panchev, 2025).

Scholarly articles published in academic journals have also contributed to the analysis of uprisings and the impact of reforms on the social and cultural life of Albanians (Pollo, 1968; Pollo, 1975; Buda, 2002; Kokollari, 1974; Nushi, 1991; Gashi, 2021; Shabani, 2007; Shabani, 2015; Çeku & Panchev, 2025).

Within Albanian historiography, beyond analyses of the political, economic, and social aspects of Ottoman reforms, an important segment of the literature has emphasized the role of cultural and religious actors in the responses to the Tanzimat. Within these approaches, several scholars have highlighted the significance of Sufi currents, particularly the Bektashi Order, as alternative forms of cultural and spiritual resistance (Pollo, 1995; Izeti, 2001; Izeti, 2004; Dobruna, 2017). Bektashi *teqes*, in addition to their religious functions, served as educational and cultural centers where national identity was preserved and the Albanian language was promoted, becoming an important dimension of informal resistance to Ottoman standardization (Dobruna, 2017, p. 47).

Nevertheless, Albanian historiographical approaches have not limited their analyses solely to the Albanian geographical context. Studies on the Tanzimat also pay special attention to how the Ottoman reforms affected issues of local autonomy. When these developments are compared with other Balkan regions, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece, distinct dynamics emerge (İnalçık, 1992, pp. 58–64; Osmani, 2022, pp. 179–185). The incorporation of contributions from international scholars deepens this analysis, showing that differences among regions are closely linked to the particular ways in which the Ottoman reforms interfered with local social and religious structures, producing varying patterns of adaptation and resistance (Pinson, 1975; İnalçık, 1992; Vakalis, 2019; Çeku & Panchev; Osmani, 2022).

According to Albanian historiography, the Tanzimat reforms were perceived largely as attempts by the Ottoman Empire to strengthen its control over Albanian territories rather than as measures to ensure effective governance and welfare (Buda, 2002, pp. 12–15). Efforts toward centralization often came into conflict with local structures and traditions, creating clear tensions between imperial authority and aspirations for local autonomy (Bozbora, 2002, pp. 119–140; Meta & Egro, 2022, pp. 17–90). In practice, these reforms did not bring tangible improvements for the Albanian population. Economically, they failed to provide a fairer distribution of resources, while the imposition of new taxes and a centralized bureaucratic administration often burdened daily life. Administratively, the standardization of governance structures disregarded local traditions, reducing the competencies of local authorities and creating a sense of detachment between the population and the state (Gashi, 2021, pp. 97, 112). Similarly, in the educational and cultural sphere, the reforms aimed at uniformity and centralization of schools and cultural institutions, often restricting local initiatives and traditions. This directly affected the development of cultural identity and the transmission of national traditions (Pollo, 1968, p. 68; Shabani, 2014/2015, p. 364).

Overall, Albanian historiography of the 20th–21st centuries has largely perceived the Tanzimat reforms as attempts to reinforce imperial control, while the reactions of the Albanian population, including armed uprisings and the activities of Bektashi *teqes*, reflect the complex ways in which Ottoman structures interacted with local self-organization. In this framework, the Bektashi Order is viewed not only as a religious phenomenon but as an active socio-cultural structure that served as a bridge between spiritual tradition and early national movements, playing a decisive role in preserving and developing national identity during the 19th century (Zavalani, 1998, p. 171; Gashi, 2021, pp. 97, 112; Egro, 2022, pp. 17–90). Albanian historiography of the 20th–21st centuries evaluates these institutions as influential actors in maintaining local autonomy and fostering national consciousness during the Tanzimat reforms (Pollo, 1975; Izeti, 2001; Izeti, 2004; Menduhi, 2005).

Conclusion

The analysis of the Tanzimat reforms within Albanian historiography demonstrates the continuous efforts of scholars to understand this key period in the history of the Ottoman Empire and its impact on the Albanian population. Researchers have employed archival investigations, international comparisons, and interdisciplinary approaches to highlight the political, economic, administrative, and cultural character of the reforms, as well as the reactions and resistance of the Albanian people.

Historically, the Tanzimat reforms aimed at modernizing and consolidating Ottoman authority. For Albanians, however, these reforms were often accompanied by increased fiscal burdens, military obligations, and restrictions on local autonomy. The uprisings and popular movements were not merely reactions to economic pressure but also expressions of national consciousness and aspirations for self-governance. These events laid the foundations for the Albanian League of Prizren and the broader national mobilization of the 19th century, enriching Albanian political and cultural identity.

During the 20th century, the historiographical approach to the Tanzimat reforms shifted according to political and ideological contexts. In the period of the one-party system, Albanian historiography portrayed popular uprisings and resistance as expressions of national heroism and the struggle against Ottoman oppression. After 1990, historiography experienced a revitalization, integrating critical methodologies, international comparisons, and the use of primary Ottoman and other archival sources. This transition from an ideological to a critical and comparative approach represents a defining feature of contemporary scholarship on the Tanzimat.

Scholars have emphasized the importance of the reforms for education, culture, and local administration, highlighting tensions between imperial standardization and the preservation of national identity. Findings indicate that, although the reforms formalized certain progressive principles, they effectively served to strengthen Ottoman centralization and bureaucracy, often at the expense of the Albanian population.

Albanian historiography has provided a comprehensive interpretation of this period, underscoring not only the reactions of the population but also the role of intellectual movements and the Albanian diaspora in preserving and fostering national identity. The use of archival sources, comparative analyses, and interdisciplinary approaches has enabled the construction of a more complete and methodologically refined understanding of the Tanzimat reforms and their effects on Albanian society.

Nevertheless, considerable room remains for further research. Comparative studies among different Albanian regions and more detailed analyses of how the reforms shaped social, economic, and cultural developments in each *vilayet* and *sanjak* are still needed. Such studies would enrich the understanding of Albanian history and its relationship with the Ottoman Empire, providing a solid foundation for future research.

A distinctive dimension emerging from historiographical studies is the role of the Bektashi Order during the Tanzimat. Albanian scholars have interpreted this tradition not only as a religious current but also as a cultural and social structure that contributed to resistance against Ottoman centralization. Various authors view the Bektashi Order as a factor that helped preserve the Albanian language, regional ties, and identity consciousness, thus becoming part of the mechanisms of cultural and organizational resistance. Beyond their religious function, Bektashi *teqes* contributed to shaping an articulated stance toward the reforms and fostered conditions for new political and cultural awareness.

In summary, the Tanzimat reforms represent a fundamental period in Albanian history, where the modernization of the Ottoman Empire confronted national aspirations and local interests. Albanian historiography of the 20th and 21st centuries has enriched the understanding of this era, offering a detailed perspective on events, popular reactions, and intellectual developments, and demonstrating that any in-depth historical analysis requires the combination of sound methodology with the critical use of sources.

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