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Author

Derderian, Dzovinar

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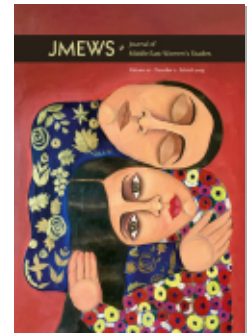
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Outcasting Armenians: Tanzimat of the Provinces by Talin Suciyan (review)

Dzovinar Derderian

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REVIEW

Outcasting Armenians: Tanzimat of the Provinces

Talin Suciyan

Syracuse University Press, 2023

280 pages. ISBN 9780815638193

Reviewed by DZOVINAR DERDERIAN

Talin Suciyan's new book works from a rich source base that includes Ottoman state documents, Armenian memoirs, newspapers, and largely unexplored documents from the Constantinople Armenian Patriarchate, which are now housed in the Nubar Library in Paris. True to its title, *Outcasting Armenians: Tanzimat of the Provinces*, the book argues that the Tanzimat era (1839–76) of reform, opposite the promises of the state, brought about insecurity, dishonor, and inequality for provincial Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Suciyan concludes that the Tanzimat laid the ground for the eventual annihilation of Armenians from Ottoman lands in 1915. While her argument about the Tanzimat stands in opposition to mainstream positive perceptions of this historical era in contemporary Turkey, it largely disregards the last two decades of Ottoman historiography that approached the Tanzimat from a bottom-up and critical lens.

The book is organized into four chapters. In the first chapter Suciyan maps out the transformation of the “Armenian Administration,” meaning the Constantinople Armenian Patriarchate and the administrative bodies attached to it. She argues that the centralization of the Armenian Administration, through the adoption of the Armenian Constitution/Nizamname in the 1860s, aimed to facilitate the centralization of the Ottoman state (29). This is an argument originally made by Richard Antaramian (2020) in *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire*. Unlike Antaramian, who connects these changes to developments in the provinces, Suciyan focuses on the administrative reforms that occurred on paper in the Ottoman capital. She describes in detail the different offices, positions, and their respective functions within the Armenian Administration, outlining the changes they underwent between the 1830s and the 1880s. This chapter will certainly be useful for anyone who wants to familiarize themselves with the organization of the Armenian bureaucracy.

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Chapter 2, subtitled “Tanzimat of the Provinces,” provides a lengthy list and description of various forms of violence and oppression committed against Armenians and their properties by either the state or their Muslim neighbors in central and eastern Anatolia from the 1840s on, with a particular focus on the 1860s and 1870s. Suciyan claims that by using these cases, the book “offers a new perspective to center-periphery relations in the field of Ottoman studies, incorporating into the debate the use of unabashed violence and the administrative changes that followed to integrate the peripheries to the center both temporally and territorially” (54–55). Throughout the book Suciyan refers to temporality and territoriality as methods of Ottoman governance connected to time and space. In this chapter she relates territoriality to military conquest, changes in the administrative boundaries that increased local state control, the policies of the 1858 Land Code, and land privatization that she argues resulted in the loss of lands by Armenians and the acquisition of lands by Muslims.

Chapter 3, “Armenian-Rum Relations,” explores episodes of interaction and conflict between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Rum (Greek) Orthodox Church, largely in the western Ottoman provinces and in Istanbul. Here Suciyan draws attention to Armenian conversion (or threats of) to Orthodoxy as a way of subverting the authority of their own church administration. It is, however, unclear how dwelling on these examples advances the chapter’s argument that the Ottoman government ruled by perpetuating conflict between Christian communities and privileged the Rums over the Armenians.

It is through the cases of conversion in the third chapter and through legal cases dealing with marriage in the last chapter that Suciyan's main goal of writing a history from below surfaces. In this last chapter, "Judicial Entitlements of the Armenian Patriarchate," Suciyan pays particular attention to legal cases dealing with marriage and highlights different strategies women use to dissolve a marriage. Adopting such an approach to highlight women's agency has been done in Ottoman studies, but rarely so in relation to Armenian women. One wonders, however, why Suciyan employs a theoretical lens to analyze power here but not when male petitioners lodged complaints about violence, violations of property rights, unjust taxation, and so forth.

The question can be answered in part by how Suciyan conceives of Ottoman state and society. Her book leaves the impression that the Ottoman state was a monolithic, omniscient, and omnipotent entity that could achieve whatever it wanted. Failure to attain the stated outcome reflects not the limits of state authority but an expression of the state's true desires. Such an approach supports the center-periphery, top-down, and absolutist notions of the Ottoman state that Ottoman historians have challenged for more than twenty years. Although Suciyan aimed to write a bottom-up narrative of the Tanzimat, the reader is rarely introduced to individual Armenians as historical actors who facilitated, resisted, or negotiated the Tanzimat reforms. The book's chapter organization, in fact, centers the Constantinople Armenian Patriarchate and the Ottoman central state. At the same time, Suciyan insists on the homogeneity of experiences of the Tanzimat, whether or not an Armenian lived in Bulgaria or Mus. Yet the fact that her second chapter largely relies

on sources from the eastern provinces, while her third and fourth chapters are based on cases from the western regions of the empire, makes one question this conviction. In line with the insistence on geographic uniformity, Suciyan presents Ottoman Armenians as a homogeneous group of people. Save gendered inequality, differences in interests and experiences based on class and occupation are disregarded. For example, Suciyan ignores that there were provincial Armenians who vehemently opposed the Tanzimat reforms and those who supported and facilitated them. Such an approach to Armenians denies them historical agency. Similarly, she does not delve into the complexity of the state and the socioeconomic and political differences that existed among Muslims. At the same time, as she refers to jihad as an instrument that the Ottoman state used during the Crimean War to mobilize and gain the support of the Kurds and other Muslims (19, 58), and as she presents this call for jihad as a reason for the deterioration of the condition of Ottoman Armenians, the reader risks adopting essentialist explanations as to why Muslims and the Ottoman state oppressed Armenians.

Despite the limitations with methodology, argumentation, and engagement with historiography, Suciyan's work may encourage more scholars to focus on Armenian archives, meaning sources written by Armenians addressed to Armenians or Armenian institutions rather than Ottoman state institutions. Such documents tend to frame Ottoman social and cultural experiences in ways far different than they are in state documents. The book can guide students as it provides direction in terms of the sources available to study Ottoman Armenians of the mid-nineteenth century. Finally, Suciyan's book can serve as a useful introduction to Armenian documents for scholars who are interested in the Tanzimat but do not know Armenian.

DZOVINAR DERDERIAN is assistant adjunct professor in the Department of History at the University of California, Berkeley, where she also serves as executive director of the Armenian Studies Program. Her research examines discursive and social practices of provincial Armenians to understand how they navigated their multiethnic and multireligious milieus and, as such, how they maintained and transformed orders of power in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. Her work has appeared in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and *Tophumsal Tarih Akademi*. Contact: derderian@berkeley.edu.

Reference

Antaramian, Richard E. 2020. *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire: Armenians and the Politics of Reform in the Ottoman Empire*. Stanford University Press.