

# Ottoman Documents on the Greek Revolution in the *Sancak* of Thessaloniki: The Ottomans' Perception

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study is to reveal the reaction of the Ottomans upon hearing the outburst of the revolution in the Sancak of Thessaloniki. Furthermore, the aim of this study is to shed light on the course of action taken by the Ottoman State and the Ottomans' measures for the defence of the area and the preparation of the Ottoman troops in order to face adequately a possible uprising of the reayas in the province, as well as their activities in crushing the revolution which eventually evolved. Additionally this paper discusses the Ottomans' conception, beliefs and understanding of the revolution, the orders' given by the Sultan and the proposed punishments of the rebellious population. All the aforementioned evidence derive through the study of primary sources, mainly firmans which had been translated into Greek and published in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

**Keywords:** Greek Revolution, *Sancak* of Thessaloniki, Ottoman Documents, Ottoman Empire, Ottoman Provincial Officers.

## 1. Introduction

The Greek Revolution was an event of major importance for the Greeks, because after the Struggle for the Greek Independence they established an independent state to house their nation. It was also an important event for the Ottomans because it was the first time they suffered a military defeat and loss of a territory in the Balkan Peninsula, where the oldest conquered lands of the Empire in Europe existed. Furthermore, the Revolution was important for the European Powers because it was the first time after the Congress of Vienna in 1815 that a revolutionary movement took place in Europe, forcing the Great Powers to get involved in the events as the Eastern Question arose. Finally, the Greek Revolution was an important event for many enslaved people in the Balkans because the Greek case became a source of inspiration and a model for other nations to claim their independence and create alike nation-states.

The revolution of 1821 was not a geographically isolated event in the Peloponnese, Central Greece and the Aegean islands. On the contrary, it was a universal political and military event that shook the entire Balkan Peninsula. Significant revolutionary movements evolved in Crete, as well as Thessaly, Macedonia and Thrace.

However, the contribution of the Chalkidiki uprising to the Greek Revolution of 1821 very significant. The Macedonian revolutionaries and the more than a thousand monks of Mount Athos took up arms for about six months keeping thus a large number of Ottoman forces occupied in the *Sancak* (province) of Thessaloniki. Consequently the uprisings in Macedonia gave enough time to the rebellious Greeks in the Peloponnese to consolidate the Revolution in the area. All the efforts in the area of Chalkidiki failed and many revolutionaries were exterminated. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of the area had revolted alongside with the rest of the Greeks in 1821.

The following documents are of importance, because, as a primary source of evidence, include significant information and present us in detail the events of the Revolution in the *Sancak* of Thessaloniki during the early summer of 1821,

and furthermore we are able to comprehend the Ottoman perception and actions about these events.

## 2. Documents

### Document no 7<sup>1</sup> “*Firman*<sup>2</sup> addressed to Yusuf Bey regarding the necessity of oppressing the Greek's uprising”<sup>3</sup>

The document is a *firman* addressed to the *mütesselim*<sup>4</sup> of the *sancak*<sup>5</sup> of Thessaloniki Yusuf Bey, by the *Seyhulislam*<sup>6</sup> ordering him to suppress any manifested revolutionary movement of the Greeks in his region. In the *firman* it is stated that the treason and malice planned and committed against the Muslim State by the criminal race of the Greeks has become known to all. It is also added that this betrayal was getting more conspicuous each passing day. Nevertheless he emphasizes that all the necessary measures were taken aiming at strengthening the defense of the *sancak* of Thessaloniki and the neighboring villages in the peninsulas of Kassandra and Mount Athos as well as the villages of the *Mademochoria*<sup>7</sup> where a great number of

<sup>1</sup>According to the numbering of the book where the documents are published, namely Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., *Οι Μακεδόνες εις τους υπέρ της Ανεξαρτησίας Αγώνας, 1796-1832*, έκδοσις δευτέρα, επαυξημένη και βελτιωμένη, Εταιρεία Μακεδονικών Σπουδών, Θεσσαλονίκη 1950.

<sup>2</sup>Firman: a royal decree issued by a sovereign in an Islamic State.

<sup>3</sup>Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., *Οι Μακεδόνες εις τους υπέρ της Ανεξαρτησίας Αγώνας, 1796-1832*, έκδοσις δευτέρα, επαυξημένη και βελτιωμένη, Εταιρεία Μακεδονικών Σπουδών, Θεσσαλονίκη 1950, έγγραφο 7, σελ. 196-197. See also: Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., (επιμ.), *Ιστορικά Αρχεία Μακεδονίας*, τ. Α', *Αρχείον Θεσσαλονίκης 1695-1912*, Εταιρεία Μακεδονικών Σπουδών, Θεσσαλονίκη 1952, εισαγωγή εγγράφου 315 «Επιστολή του Σείχουλισλάμη δια την Ελληνικήν Επανάσταση».

<sup>4</sup>Mütesselim: Administrative officer, lieutenant - governor of an administrative district and tax collector.

<sup>5</sup>Sanjak: an administrative and territorial division.

<sup>6</sup>Seyhulislam: the mufti of Istanbul, ranked as Islam's foremost legal authority and powerful in the religious realm. The two most important men in the Ottoman Empire after the Sultan were the Grand Vizier and the *Seyhulislam*.

<sup>7</sup>In Ottoman Turkish *Siderokausia*. The area is located in north-eastern Chalkidiki, consisted of twelve mining villages, or

*reayas*<sup>8</sup> were living. It is also stated that although this area was being guarded by 1000 soldiers, it was impossible for them to efficiently protect it, due to the extensive area as opposed to the numerically limited army. Therefore an army had to be formed, the salaries and expenses of which had to be paid by the inhabitants of the area. However since the inhabitants of both the peninsulas and the villages of the *Mademochoria* were exempted from paying taxes, any possible expenses had to be paid by the rest of the inhabitants of the *kaza*<sup>9</sup>, even though they were destitute and did not have the financial means.

The *firman* goes on saying that because the *reayas* demonstrated great ingratitude against the true religion and the eternal state of Islam, the trust in them had been lifted and furthermore the necessary defensive measures against them had to be taken aiming at striking and exterminating those who had revolted, enslaving their women and children, pillaging their property and possessions, but also burning down their homes.

It is interesting to note that it was emphasized in the *firman* that the Ottoman officials should be fully vigilant and committed to the Religion and the State. Therefore, it had been reiterated that they must immediately recruit enough and capable troops to defend properly the province and suppress the *reayas*' uprising. Once again instructions were given to them in order to collect the necessary sums for the soldiers' salaries and expenses. It was emphasized that in the slightest *reayas*' attempt at insurrection, the Ottomans should strike them immediately whilst he also reiterates the punishment he had previously suggested. Namely it was repeated that the Ottomans should suppress the revolt, enslave the *reayas*' women and children, pillage their properties and goods and burn their dwellings. Threats were also launched on the Ottoman officials, stating that in case they demonstrated inaction, negligence and indolence thus provoking the Sultan's wrath, they would suffer harsh consequences. Therefore, everyone should comply with the orders of the High Porte and offer his services for the benefit of the Religion and the State avoiding any contrary action (date: 16 June 1821).

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*Mademochoria*. According to Sevet Pamuk, *A Monetary History of the Ottoman Empire*, Cambridge, 2000, p. 37, the mine was very large, "...by far the most productive of the Balkan mines during the first half of the sixteenth century...employing as many as 6,000 miners... Its total output has been estimated at about six tons per year...". By 1705, the Ottoman sultans had granted them extensive autonomy and privileges but lost their privileged status due to their participation in the Greek War of Independence in 1821.

<sup>8</sup>Reaya: was a member of the tax-paying lower class of the Ottoman society. In the Ottoman Empire, the *reaya* was literally *subject* of a government or sovereign and refers to non-Muslim subjects.

<sup>9</sup>Kaza: a smaller administrative division.

### Document no 8<sup>10</sup> "Buyuruldi<sup>10</sup> to Yusuf Bey, regarding the defence of Chalkidiki and the prevention of the Greek uprising"<sup>11</sup>

This document is yet again addressed to the *mütesselim* of Thessaloniki Yusuf Bey and to the *kadi*<sup>12</sup> of Thessaloniki, who had previously dispatched a joint report to the High Porte stating that they would recruit an adequate number of soldiers under the command of an appropriate officer, having also secured the expenses of the soldiers' salary, as they had been previously instructed by the *Seyhulislam*. They had also stated in their report that these troops would be heading to the peninsula of Kassandra and the Peninsula of the Mount Athos for the defence of the area.

However, the necessity of properly guarding and defending the area by the Ottoman troops was once more underlined. It is interesting to note that the Ottoman government did not express any concern on the poor *reayas*' of the neighboring areas financial burden, as long as the defense of the two peninsulas would be ensured, the rebels suppressed, and if necessary killed. Finally, the way of dealing with the *reayas* in case the Ottoman officers noticed the slightest attempt at insurrection, was being repeated in the *firman*. Specifically: "strike them immediately, enslave their women and children, pillage their properties and goods, burn their dwellings on the ground" (Date: 23 June 1821).

### Document 09<sup>13</sup> "Firman regarding the dispatch of ammunition to Thessaloniki"<sup>14</sup>

The document provide us the information that previously the *mutesselim* of Thessaloniki having noticed the manifestation of suspicious movements by the *reayas*, asked from the High Porte the dispatch of ammunition, specifically cartridges (firearms), to Thessaloniki. In response to this inquire Mehmet Sadik, the person in charge of the imperial ammunition, informed the Sultan that there were 10,000 available cartridges in the Ammunition Depot. The Sultan approved the dispatch of this firearms to the soldiers in Thessaloniki and Mehmet Sadik was ordered to deliver them himself and following to immediately return to Istanbul (Date: 25 June 2021).

### Document 10<sup>15</sup> "Firman regarding the dispatch of rapid-fire cannon to Thessaloniki"<sup>16</sup>

The document is a *firman* addressed to the *Kadi* of Thessaloniki and the *mutesselim* of Thessaloniki who had previously requested extra ammunition for the fortification of the area. Subsequently, the request was approved by

<sup>10</sup>Buyuruldi: written order of a high ranking Ottoman officer.

<sup>11</sup>Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., *Οι Μακεδόνες εις τους υπέρ της Ανεξαρτησίας Αγώνας*, έγγραφο 8, σ. 198.

See also: Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., (επιμ.), *Ιστορικά Αρχεία Μακεδονίας*, τ. Α', Documentno. 316.

<sup>12</sup>Kadi: a judge of the Ottoman course of justice who was learned in Islamic Law.

<sup>13</sup>Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., *Οι Μακεδόνες εις τους υπέρ της Ανεξαρτησίας Αγώνας*, έγγραφο 9, σελ. 198-199.

<sup>14</sup>Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., (επιμ.), *Ιστορικά Αρχεία Μακεδονίας*, τ. Α', Documentno. 317.

<sup>15</sup>Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., *Οι Μακεδόνες εις τους υπέρ της Ανεξαρτησίας Αγώνας*, έγγραφο 10, σελ. 200.

<sup>16</sup>Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., *Ιστορικά Αρχεία Μακεδονίας*, τ. Α', Documentno. 318.

Hatzis Mustafa, the commander of the Artillery and a rapid-fire cannon together with twelve cavalry artillery and other military equipment were dispatched to Thessaloniki in order for the fortress to be guarded. All the aforementioned ammunition had previously been recorded in an official governmental list. (Date: 9/06/2022).

**Document 11<sup>17</sup> “Firman addressed to the mutesselim of the sancak of Thessaloniki, Yusuf Bey”<sup>18</sup>**

In the *firman* it is noted that the information regarding the Greek uprising in the area of Thessaloniki arrived at the High Porte and the betrayal dared by the vile nation of the Greeks against the Muslim State was spread in all places of the Empire. It also became known that the *reyas* of the *hass* of Lagkadas<sup>19</sup> and the village of Polygyros (both areas of the *sancak* of Thessaloniki) also revolted. In Polygyros village, the *voivode*<sup>20</sup> of the district was martyred along with 14 of his men, while another 3 were injured, after falling into an ambush. The news again were spread to the neighboring villages resulting at the uprising of five or ten more villages of the Mademochoria (the exact number is not noted), as well as in the broader area of Kassandra.

Following these developments, and although before the outburst of the revolution, a *firman* addressed to the *mutesselim* of Thessaloniki had been issued ordering him to crush the infidels at the very first beginning, two more separate *firman*s were issued, addressed to the *mutessarif*<sup>21</sup> of Aidin and Sarohan alike including the same orders, whilst a third *firman* was also issued addressed to the Grand Vizier Hatzi Mehmet Behram Pasha ordering him to strike fearfully the rebel *reyas* in the region of Thessaloniki in such an exemplary way that those *reaya* who intended to revolt would "come immediately to their senses". Furthermore, additional *firman*s were sent to the administrator of Pravio Arif to recruit enough troops from the areas of Pravio and Kavala and join the large army of Vizier Hatzi Mehmet Behram Pasha. Another *firman* was also sent to the Nazir<sup>22</sup> of Drama to gather as many soldiers as he could from the *kaza* of Drama and rush all together to the region of Thessaloniki where the Revolution broke out aiming at suppressing the "bandits".

Furthermore, a *firman* was also sent to the *Emin*<sup>23</sup> of the Mademochoria ordering him to recruit soldiers as well and next join the rest Ottoman officials in order to watch vigilantly all together the area and in case they noticed the slightest attempt on the part of the *reyas* at uprising in the broader district of Thessaloniki to unanimously make every

possible effort in accordance to the Sultan's orders to suppress and exterminate the revolutionaries, enslave their women and children, plunder their properties, divide amongst the soldiers the *reyas*' belongings, aiming at making them realize their position and recall them to their senses.

It is important to note however that the Sultan instructed his officers to take every possible measure and provision and ensure the proper means so that "those who lived in honor and were not deprived from the duties of the *reyas* and submission" not to be harmed.

At the same time, the Sultan draws everyone's attention saying that it was a sin for those who were faithful Muslims to remain inactive and indolent. He writes them emphatically that his imperial order was final and unequivocal. Therefore, they had to make an extra effort and show diligence to achieve their goal and all together to find the means to "turn their sword" against the Revolutionaries. Furthermore, as soon as the Ottoman officers noticed the slightest attempt of the infidels to revolt in the region of Thessaloniki, they had to be crushed in an exemplary manner. He went further emphasizing that the issue was relevant to the religion of Islam and any negligence or carelessness on this very important issue would bring about serious consequences for the Ottoman officials themselves. Therefore the Sultan ordered them to pay the greatest attention and act according to his will, demonstrating determination, courage and loyalty avoiding any action contrary to his orders. Finally he repeated once again that the ottoman officers had to comply with his orders and the content of the *firman* refraining from any opposite activity (Date: 1/07/1821).

**Document 12<sup>24</sup>, “Firman addressed to the mutesselim of the sancak of Thessaloniki, Yusuf Bey regarding the Revolution in Chalkidiki”**

The document is addressed to the *mutesselim* of the *sancak* of Thessaloniki and various provincial functionaries informing them that the Grand Vizier Hatzi Behram Pasha managed to put most of the rebels of the *sancak* of Thessaloniki to the sword. Some malicious Greeks managed to escape and fled to the areas of the Mount Athos and the Kassandra peninsula. It is noted that Behram Pasha having dealt with the insurgents and therefore there was no reason for concern in the area. Consequently, there was no reason for the Vizier to remain in these places. Furthermore, due to the great turmoil in the Morea where the treason perpetrated by the infidels and had been intensified, Behram Pasha had been assigned to the Morea in charge of suppressing the bandits and crash the rebellious Greeks. Addressing the Ottoman officers in the province of Thessaloniki, the Sultan authorized them to act altogether and quickly recruit enough troops and furthermore to appoint capable leaders to deal with the fugitives that fled to the regions of Mount Athos and Kassandra. The document emphasizes that Ottoman officials were expected to strike immediately the fugitives who had rebelled and selflessly serve the Sultan in the name of the Islamic Religion and the Sublime State. Furthermore

<sup>17</sup>Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., Οι Μακεδόνες εις τους υπέρ της Ανεξαρτησίας Αγώνας, έγγραφο 11, σελ. 200-202

<sup>18</sup>Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., Ιστορικά Αρχεία Μακεδονίας, τ. Α, Documentno. 319.

<sup>19</sup> Hass: in the ottoman administrative-military classification of land, a *hass* was an estate with revenue.

<sup>20</sup> Voivode: in some provinces and vassal states of the Ottoman Empire, the title of voivode (or voyvoda) was employed by senior administrators and local rulers

<sup>21</sup>Mutassarif or mutessarif: the governor of an administrative district.

<sup>22</sup>Nazir: an inspector of a religious endowment.

<sup>23</sup>Emin: a salaried officer in the Ottoman Empire, usually an ottoman tax-collector.

<sup>24</sup>Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., Οι Μακεδόνες εις τους υπέρ της Ανεξαρτησίας Αγώνας, έγγραφο 12, σελ. 202-204.

they were being instructed to act upon the orders of the *firman* without any delay and strive to carry them out immediately. The document emphasizes that Ottoman officials were expected to strike straightaway the fugitives who had rebelled. Finally it is underlined that in case the officers demonstrated any kind of negligence or sluggishness, they would be severely punished. Therefore they ought to respect and fully comply with the Sultan's orders (Date: 2/07/1821).

**Document 13<sup>25</sup>, “*Firman* addressed to the *Kadi*, the *Mufti*<sup>26</sup> and the *Mutesselim* of the *Sancak* of Thessaloniki in relation to the Greek revolutionaries”**

The *firman* is addressed to the *Kadi*, the *Mufti* and the *Mutesselim* of the province of Thessaloniki in order to authorize them to take action against the infidels on the one hand, and on the other to reproach them because of their subordinates' inappropriate behaviour. Specifically it is noted that a *firman* was issued -the content of which was absolute and unequivocal- aiming at punishing the *reayas* of the treacherous Greek nation because they had been ungrateful betraying the Sublime State as they imagined that they could stand up against the State and its Religion. This *firman* authorized the massacre through the sword of the rebellious infidels of the Lagkada and the Mademochoria district, as it was the Ottomans' religious and state utter obligation to suppress the *reayas* who revolted. The *firman* gave to the Ottoman provincial officers the authorization and the complete independence to face the events and crush the sinful infidels. However, they had to follow and fully comply with the written orders of the Sultan. At the same time, the officers were urged to demonstrate self-denial, willingness, patriotism and loyalty.

As far as the reproach of the provincial functionaries, the following incident should be noted: Under the pretext of defence against the Greek enemies, troops led by commanders from the neighbouring *kazas* (areas) had been looting and plundering the rebellious *reayas*, and pillaged their belongings and animals. It is underlined that the aim of both the Ottoman soldiers and their commanders was not to suppress the uprising but to loot and plunder the *reayas*. Therefore attention had been drawn to the officers, because such kind of acts and behaviour were completely inappropriate for the devout Muslims and contradicted the Islamic religion. Thus, it is underlined in the *firman* that from then onwards the commanders of the troops that would be appointed ought to fully comply with their orders (ie *Kadi*, *Mufti* and *Mutesselim*), would not act on their own accord and would not commit the slightest without permission. The officers were warned that the Sultan would not allow any violation of his orders or any kind of negligence on their part. Although at the end of the *firman* there are recommendations on the Ottoman officer's way of action at the same time they were authorized to perform their duties independently but in any case to abstain from any action contrary to the orders of the Sultan (Date: 7/07/1821).

### 3. Conclusion

Studying the documents it becomes apparent that it was not easy for the Ottomans to comprehend the “betrayal” of their subjects whom they had guarded and protected for many centuries in the past, according to the Holy Law. They could not comprehend the emerging national idea and the consequent establishment of an independent state. It also becomes apparent that the Ottoman officers and the Sultan himself explained the Revolution within a broader theological context, calling at the same time all Ottomans to protect their religion. It is interesting to realize that the Ottomans tried to explain the events merely within this religious context ignoring completely the developments and facts of the era, for example that the Greek Revolution was boosted by the ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution<sup>27</sup>. The Greek War of Independence brought about a new reality which the Ottomans were not able to conceive. They believed that the revolt was just an inconceivable action of ungrateful *millet* (religious community) which led them to the apostasy. They also believed that the Greek were malicious and traitors, therefore they deserved an exemplary punishment. Hence the waves of violence which they launched against them, as it becomes apparent in the documents, were – according to their beliefs- legitimate in order to reincorporate their rebellious subjects in the State and bring them back to order. Following they authorized the recruitment of troops to initially prevent a possible uprising and next to crush and suppress it. There had been clear and strict orders to the provincial officers to pay great attention and act according to the Sultan's commands, especially when realizing that the Revolt was becoming more conspicuous day by day.

Furthermore, apart from the punishment of their subjects and the revenge they were looking for - because of the apostasy- the Ottomans' goal was to discourage other subjects of the Empire from following the Greeks' example and cause greater turmoil in the State. The Sultan called upon his subordinate officers, both at the center and the periphery to selflessly serve him in the name of their Religion and the Sublime State, and enslave once again the rebellious *reaya* of the *Sancak* of Thessaloniki. His orders were punctual and repetitive: “to strike the infidels, crush them, repress the bandits, divide their properties, enslave their women and children ...etc.”. The Sultan- as mentioned above- called his inferior functionaries to exert utmost efforts in the performance of their duty, demonstrate their vigor, zeal, determination, courage, loyalty and devoutness, and finally suppress the collective treason and malice of the Greek infidels

<sup>25</sup> Βασδραβέλη, Ι. Κ., Οι Μακεδόνες εις τους υπέρ της Ανεξαρτησίας Αγώνας, έγγραφο 13, σελ. 204-205.

<sup>26</sup> Mufti: local juris consultant and expert of the Islamic law.

<sup>27</sup> Psarrou, E., “The effect of the Greek Enlightenment on the Greek Revolution and the position of the Eastern Orthodox Church”, *International Journal of Social Science And Human Research*, Volume 04 Issue 09 September 2021, pp. 2537-2540.

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