

CHAPTER TEN

A CONVERT IN THE EMPIRE OF THE PASHAS: ÖMER PASHA LATAS

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE in the 19th century was a different empire from the one that saw Mehmed pasha Sokollu and other *devşirme* boys climb to the top: it was, as in the 16th century a *Muslim* empire, but there was no influx of converts into the administration, either civil or military. There were exceptions, of course, but they were (more or less) on an individual basis. What this means is that if a man wanted to join this closed club he had to *convert* to Islam, and many foreigners, like Polish military officers, did and were given new names and careers. As far as Bosnia is concerned, the most spectacular case is that of Mihailo Latas, born in the Military Frontier (*Vojna Krajina*) of the Habsburg Empire at the beginning of the 19th century. His biography will be given below but, first, we have to sketch the empire that he so successfully joined and then made a spectacular career in: the empire of the pashas.

By the time he converted and was living in the Ottoman Empire the latter was beginning a process of Westernization and modernization known as the Reform or *Tanzimat* movement (1839-1876). It starts with the Edict of Gülhane of 1839 and ends with the coming to power of Abdul Hamid in 1876. The *Tanzimat* was brought about by two simultaneous factors: the increasing pressure on the Ottoman Empire by Western powers and Russia; and the inability of the Ottoman Porte to defend its territories against more Westernized areas, like Egypt, formally still parts of the empire, but increasingly slipping out of the Porte's control. The *Tanzimat* Movement aimed at strengthening and centralizing the empire by giving certain limited rights to the non-Muslim population and making the latter equal in law to the Muslim majority.

Given its previous territorial losses in Southeastern Europe (most of Hungary, Transylvania, Slavonia, Banat, parts of Lika, and the Adriatic Littoral between 1699 and 1739) and in the Balkans (central Greece and some of the Aegean Islands in 1830; Serbia autonomous after 1839), the Christian population of the empire was even less than in previous centuries. Here is the estimated population of the Ottoman Empire according to *Allgemeine Zeitung* of March 20, 1851:

407-420

Ömer Lutfi Paşa

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