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# The Crimean Khan Şahin Giray (1777–1783): The First Modernizer of the Islamic World and his Image in Imperial and Minority Perspectives

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Şahin Giray  
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## Abstract

The last Tatar khan in the Crimean Peninsula, Şahin Giray, lived during the period that saw the annexation of this Ottoman suzerainty by the Russian Empire. He is the first recorded Muslim ruler in history who tried to introduce a program of modernization based on contemporary European models, and his reforms concerned all spheres of Tatar society. In spite of his collaboration with the Russian Empire, Russian historiography is generally critical toward this khan and skeptical regarding his reforms. The Ottoman historians saw Şahin as a traitor, therefore his achievements were ignored in their writings. A completely different approach regarding Şahin Giray and his innovations can be found in a little-known Jewish-Karaite chronicle, presenting an additional cultural-historical dimension from the perspective of minorities. The purpose of the present article is to analyze political and socio-cultural factors of these distinctions between the imperial standpoint and minority perspective.

## Keywords

Şahin Giray khan – the Crimean khanate – the Ottoman Empire – the Russian Empire – historical perspectives – historiography – modernization – religious minorities

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## Introduction

The last Tatar khan, Şahin Giray II (1745–1787), was an outstanding and ultimately tragic figure in the political and cultural history of the Crimea.<sup>1</sup> His modernizing reforms were ahead of his time, touching all spheres of life in Tatar society almost a hundred years before the *Tanzimat* reforms in the Ottoman Empire. In addition to his main steps to reorganize the military establishment, the state structure and the taxation system, Şahin Giray tried to implement a new, more tolerant policy towards the Jewish and Christian minorities. However, his reforms were not well received both by Tatar nobility, who saw them as threatening their privileges, and by the common people as contradicting the laws of Islam. His citizens revolted against the khan, turmoil that turned into full civil war. This led to the khan's dethronement by Catherine II, the Russian empress who had formerly enthroned him as the ruler of an independent Crimea before the Russian annexation. His ensuing peregrinations through the Russian and Ottoman empires ended with his execution on the order of Ottoman Sultan, Abdülhamid I.

The existing historiography on the period of Şahin Giray's reign, most of which was composed by Russian historians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reveals a critical tendency towards Şahin's image and reforms. The Ottoman imperial historiography is also critical of this khan, although for completely different reasons. The present article aims at examining these perceptions of Şahin's image and of his reforms (especially in the Russian historiography), through a comparison of parallel themes appearing in a little known Jewish-Karaite Hebrew chronicle from the Crimea, which presents a different cultural-historical dimension, reflecting the perspective of minorities. Our purpose is to analyze the political and socio-cultural factors behind the difference between the official imperial perspective and the one of the ethno-cultural minorities regarding Şahin Giray's image and activity.

### 1 The Figure of Şahin Giray and His Epoch

Şahin Giray's reign<sup>2</sup> saw some of the most turbulent times in the history of the Crimea, coinciding as it did with the Russian conquest of the peninsula.<sup>3</sup> In

<sup>1</sup> See the exhaustive survey of studies about the Crimea published by N. Królikowska-Jedlińska, *Law and Division of Power in the Crimean Khanate with Special Reference to the Reign of Murad Giray (1678–1683)*, Seria: Ottoman Empire and its Heritage (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2019): 3–16.

<sup>2</sup> He reigned from 1777 to 1783, with a brief interregnum in 1782.

<sup>3</sup> A. Fisher, *The Russian Annexation of the Crimea 1772–1783* (Cambridge: University Press 1970).