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ISTANBUL IN 19th CENTURY RUSSIAN TRAVELOGUES: RELIGIOUS SITES AND SUFI NARRATIVES

19. YÜZYIL RUS SEYAHATNAMELERİNDE İSTANBUL: DİNİ MEKÂNLAR VE TASAVVUFİ ANLATILAR

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Sorumlu Yazar

Öz

19. yüzyıl boyunca Osmanlı toprakları, yalnızca Avrupalı entelektüellerin değil, aynı zamanda Rus diplomatlar ve aydınların da ilgisini çeken önemli bir seyahat rotası olmuştur. Özellikle İstanbul ve onun dini mekânları, Rus seyyahlar için büyük bir merak konusu hâline gelmiştir. Bu dönemde Osmanlı-Rus ilişkileri, kısa süreli ittifaklar haricinde çoğunlukla gerginlik ve çatışma ekseninde şekillenmiş, ancak Rus seyyahlar, Osmanlı toplumuna dair yaptıkları gözlemlerle kendi kamuoylarında “Türk” ve “İstanbul” imajlarının oluşumuna katkıda bulunmuşlardır.

Bu çalışmada, Rus seyyahların genel Osmanlı ve İstanbul gözlemlerinden ziyade, şehrin dini yapıları ve dini çevrelerine dair algıları, yorumları ve bakış açıları ele alınmaktadır. Rus-Ortodoks düşünce dünyasında Ayasofya'nın merkezi konumu, seyyahların anlatılarında belirgin bir şekilde öne çıkmaktadır. İstanbul’u ziyaret eden Rusların en çok görmek istedikleri mekânların başında Ayasofya yer almaktadır. Bir fetih sembolü olarak camiye dönüştürülmesi, Ortodoksluğun hamiliğini üstlenmiş olan Rus Çarlığı için telafi edilmesi gereken bir kayıp olarak değerlendirilmiştir.

Ayasofya’nın yanı sıra, Rus gezginler İstanbul’un tasavvuf hayatını da egzotik ve mistik bir unsur olarak gözlemlemişlerdir. Özellikle Mevlevihaneler, sema ve zikir ayinleri ile Osmanlı toplumunda önemli bir yere sahip olan dini ritüeller, Rus seyyahların ilgisini çekmiş ve seyahatnamelerinde detaylı bir şekilde ele alınmıştır. Ancak bu tür dini ritüelleri çoğunlukla görsel bir gösteri niteliğinde değerlendirmişler, onların dini ve manevi boyutuna dair sınırlı yorumlarda bulunmuşlardır. Bununla birlikte, bu mekânların İstanbul’daki sosyal hayat üzerindeki etkilerine dair gözlemler yaparak, Osmanlı toplumunun dini ve kültürel yapısına ilişkin önemli bilgiler sunmuşlardır.

Bu çalışma, 19. yüzyılda Rus seyyahlar tarafından kaleme alınan seyahatnameler aracılığıyla, İstanbul’a yönelik zihinsel dünyalarını ve kullandıkları imgeleri analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Özellikle Ayasofya’nın Ortodoks dünyasındaki sembolik önemi, tasavvufi mekânların Osmanlı toplumundaki yeri ve Rus seyyahların İstanbul’a dair oluşturdukları imgeler, bu bağlamda incelenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Seyahatname, Osmanlı Devleti, İstanbul, Ayasofya, Tekkeler ve Dervişler, Rus seyyahlar.

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Abstract

Throughout the 19th century, Ottoman territories attracted not only European intellectuals but also Russian diplomats and intellectuals, who showed a particular interest in Istanbul and its religious sites. During this period, Ottoman-Russian relations were predominantly shaped by tension and conflict, with only occasional short-term alliances. However, Russian travelers contributed to the formation of the images of "Turk" and "Istanbul" images in their own public discourse through their observations of the Ottoman Empire.

This study focuses not on the general observations of Russian travelers regarding Istanbul and the Ottoman Empire but rather on their perceptions, interpretations, and viewpoints concerning the city's religious structures and religious circles. The central position of Hagia Sophia in Russian Orthodox thought is clearly reflected in travelers' narratives. One of the first places Russian visitors sought to see in Istanbul was Hagia Sophia. Its conversion into a mosque as a symbol of conquest was perceived by the Russian Empire—which positioned itself as the protector of Orthodoxy—as a loss that needed to be redressed.

In addition to Hagia Sophia, Russian travelers also viewed Istanbul's Sufi traditions as an exotic and mystical element. Particularly, Mevlevi lodges, whirling dervish ceremonies, dhikr rituals, and other significant religious practices within Ottoman society caught their attention and were extensively documented in their travel writings. However, they primarily regarded these rituals as visual spectacles rather than engaging with their religious and spiritual dimensions. Nonetheless, they also made observations regarding the influence of these places on Istanbul's social life, offering valuable insights into the religious and cultural structure of Ottoman society.

This study aims to analyze the intellectual perspectives of Russian travelers towards Istanbul through their travel narratives from the 19th century, examining the symbolic importance of Hagia Sophia in the Orthodox world, the role of Sufi sites in Ottoman society, and the images that Russian travelers constructed about Istanbul.

Key Words: Russian Travelers, Ottoman State, Istanbul, Sufi lodges and Dervishes, Hagia Sophia.

Introduction

Travelogues are considered an important source in the context of social history, cultural history, and historical geography. Unlike the limited and uniform structure of official documents, travelogues provide narratives enriched with vivid and personal observations. However, the use of these works as historical sources requires careful consideration of various factors such as the author's cultural background, biases, level of knowledge, and the exaggerations employed to make the text more engaging (Nalçacı, 2020: 15-27). Travelers assume the role of information transmitters by attributing value to local details that may seem insignificant in their own geographical context but gain significance in a different cultural framework. In this sense, travelogues serve as a means of rendering what is ordinary for the local population valuable to the external world. Although the function of such works as carriers of information may appear to have diminished with the development of modern communication tools, travelogues still hold a critical role in understanding how the "other" is perceived from an external perspective. The 19th century marks a period when the genre of travel writing particularly flourished in the West. While extensive studies have been conducted on the works of Western travelers who introduced the East—often from an orientalist perspective—the writings of Russian travelers who visited Ottoman territories during the same period have largely been neglected. Yet, Russian historiography contains more detailed accounts of Istanbul and its

surroundings compared to Western eyewitnesses[1].

The origins of Istanbul's image in Russian historical sources trace back to the Tale of Bygone Years (Povest Vremennykh Let), a Russian chronicle written in the 11th century (Lavrentiy, 2024). This work demonstrates the deep-rooted significance of Istanbul in Russian history and culture. For Russians, Istanbul has always been more than a mere geographical or political center; it has also served as an ideological and cultural focal point. Indeed, the fact that Russians referred to Istanbul as "Tsargrad," meaning "City of the Emperors," until the 18th century, can be regarded as a reflection of this historical memory (İnanır, 2013: 19). Particularly through the diplomatic and cultural ties established with the Eastern Roman Empire, the adoption of Christianity by the Russians elevated the importance of Istanbul beyond a political framework to encompass a religious dimension. In this context, Istanbul is not merely a city in Russian history and identity but also a sacred symbol of Orthodox Christianity and Byzantine heritage (Shepard, 2006: 65).

Since the adoption of Christianity by the Rus under the leadership of Prince Vladimir in 988, Russian pilgrims began visiting Jerusalem (*Ierusalim*), which houses the sacred sites of the three major religions. However, these pilgrimages to the Holy Land were not only financially burdensome but also involved long, arduous, and perilous journeys. As a result, the number of Russian pilgrims undertaking such journeys in the medieval and early modern periods remained limited. The majority of these pilgrims were either wealthy individuals or members of the clergy. During this time, inadequate transportation technologies and restricted travel opportunities made access to distant regions exceedingly difficult. In this context, curiosity and interest in Istanbul were largely satisfied through the records kept by travelers and explorers who visited the city in person. Notably, the 19th century saw a significant increase in visits by Russian travelers to Istanbul, coinciding with the intensification of Ottoman-Russian relations and the development of more affordable and accessible transportation technologies (Savru, Weisensel, 1985: XLIII). The diaries and notes maintained by these travelers not only conveyed personal observations but also provided vivid depictions of Istanbul's social, cultural, and architectural fabric from a Russian perspective. These written accounts became a critical source of information, shaping the image of Istanbul within Russian society and playing an essential role in satisfying the public's curiosity about the city.

This study examines the notes taken by travelers representing different segments of society during their journeys to Istanbul in the 19th century, aiming to understand the perspectives of the Russian public toward Istanbul and the Turks during that period. While these notes primarily aim to outline the observations and approaches of the travelers, the study focuses on the sacred sites and religious circles of Istanbul. The travel notes are analyzed not merely as reflections of individual experiences but also as projections of the religious and cultural perceptions of Russian society. In

1 With its historical ties, belief system, and cultural values, Russia is often considered a part of the Christian-Western world. Through the reforms of the 18th and 19th centuries, Russia encountered the contemporary scientific, artistic, and cultural heritage of Western Europe. In this context, the travel notes penned by Russian travelers, particularly regarding the East and notably Istanbul, often reflect an Orientalist perspective similar to the "self" and "other" dichotomy found in the accounts of European travelers. Therefore, these Russian travel notes should be evaluated within the literature of Eastern Travelogues, given their perspectives and descriptive techniques. These works provide a significant framework that links Russia's perception of the East to both its connections with Western culture and its unique historical and ideological positioning. Bkz., Arzu Etensel İldem, "Bir Yazın Türü Olarak Doğu Seyahatnameleri", *Littera Edebiyat Yazıları*, c. 21, 2007, s. 1-11.

this context, the descriptions of Istanbul's religious structures, Orthodox Christian communities, and sacred sites by these travelers are considered significant elements shaping the Russian public's perception of the city. By analyzing these observations, this study seeks to reinterpret the 19th-century Russian view of Istanbul within a historical and cultural framework

Travelers, Places, and Religious Circles

During both the pre-Ottoman and Ottoman periods, Istanbul served as a stopover and an integral part of pilgrimage rituals for Russian pilgrims traveling to and from the Holy Lands. Religious sites such as Hagia Sophia, the Monastery of Studios (*Imrahor Mosque*), the Church of the Pantokrator Monastery (*Zeyrek Mosque*), the Church of Blachernae (*Blahernai*), the Balıklı Greek Orthodox Church, and the Monastery of Chora (*Kariye Mosque*) were frequently visited by Russian Orthodox pilgrims. These structures, with their sacred relics and holy springs (*ayazma*), rendered Istanbul a religious center for Russians. Following the conquest of Istanbul by the Ottomans in 1453 and the disappearance of Byzantium from the historical stage, the city gained not only religious and cultural significance but also a political dimension for the Russians. Claiming to be the heirs of the Byzantine legacy, Russian rulers developed the doctrine of Moscow as the "Third Rome." From the reign of Ivan III onward, Muscovite tsars considered themselves the successors of Byzantine emperors and the protectors of Orthodoxy, further deepening the Russian interest in Istanbul (Kurat, 2010: 139-140). During the Ottoman Empire's rise, Russians in Istanbul were typically diplomats sent for political purposes, merchants engaging in trade, or individuals undertaking pilgrimages. Pilgrims would often visit Istanbul's sacred Christian sites before continuing their journey to Mount Athos and Jerusalem to complete their religious duties. Pilgrimage guides written following these visits were primarily religious in theme but also contributed to the accumulation of knowledge about Istanbul and Ottoman territories in Russian public discourse. Moreover, the growing body of knowledge about Istanbul within the Russian public was significantly shaped by local Russian publications and translations of historical, socio-cultural, and ethnographic works from Western languages into Russian. These translations and writings played a crucial role in understanding Istanbul's historical, cultural, and religious identity from a Russian perspective, solidifying the city's place in the Russian imagination (Sibgatullina, 2009: 3073-3078).

Hagia Sophia

In Istanbul, a city home to numerous sacred sites of both Christianity and Islam, Hagia Sophia stands out as one of the foremost destinations visited by Russian travelers. Its conversion into a mosque under Ottoman rule symbolized, for Russians, the transfer of the Eastern Roman legacy to the Turks. Consequently, Hagia Sophia became the focal point of visits to the sacred city where their ancestors were baptized (Trubetskov, 1915: 4).

With its grandeur, sanctity, and elegance, Hagia Sophia occupies an unparalleled place not only in Istanbul but also among the world's sacred sites, becoming almost a "Red Apple" for Russians. Russian pilgrims regarded Hagia Sophia as a "captive sanctuary" and considered worshipping there according to their own faith one of their greatest aspirations. During their visits, they would sometimes secretly pray without drawing attention, or express their religious devotion by making the sign of the cross

from a vantage point overlooking Hagia Sophia. The belief that Hagia Sophia would one day be restored as a Christian sanctuary was deeply ingrained in Russian public consciousness. This transformation was embraced as a religious mission that could only be realized under Russia's leadership. The conviction that the crescent atop Hagia Sophia would eventually be replaced by the cross and that the structure would be purged of all Islamic elements to return to its "original state" held a significant place in the religious imagination of Russians. Furthermore, the perception that Hagia Sophia's capture by Muslims was a divine punishment upon the Russian people led to internal religious reflection and a questioning of the moral responsibilities of Russian society. The historical and emotional approach of Russians toward Istanbul and Hagia Sophia carried not only religious but also political dimensions. Hagia Sophia became a symbol of the struggle to preserve Orthodoxy and the East-West dichotomy in Russian culture and faith. It represented both a spiritual aspiration and a geopolitical ambition, reflecting the broader ideological narratives of Russian identity (Ünal, Karakulak, Özkan, 2022: 173-176).

Vladimir Petrovich Davidov was a prominent figure among the Russian travelers who visited Istanbul in the 19th century, offering evaluations of Ottoman territories from both socio-cultural and religious perspectives. In his travel notes (Davidov, 1840), he not only observed the religious circles of Istanbul but also interpreted these observations through the ideological and political inclinations of the Russian Orthodox world. In this context, his descriptions and evaluations of Hagia Sophia provide a valuable source for understanding Russian perspectives on Ottoman Istanbul. While critiquing its function during the Ottoman period, he emphasized the central position of Hagia Sophia in the history of Christianity. For Davidov and other Russian travelers of his time, Hagia Sophia was not merely an architectural masterpiece but also a symbol of Byzantine heritage and an element reinforcing the historical claims of Russian Orthodoxy. Davidov's remarks underscore this symbolic meaning: *"This sacred place, where Christians once worshiped, is now polluted with rituals dictated by the descendants of the cruel Muhammad"* (Davidov, 1840: 30-31). The fanaticism-laden rhetoric of the Russian traveler demonstrates that his observations are not merely a travelogue but rather an ideological narrative. His ideological biases against Islamic beliefs and rituals are clearly reflected in his discourse. In particular, the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a mosque under Ottoman rule is depicted not as a religious transformation but as a symbolic transfer of power. In this sense, the Russian perception of Hagia Sophia as a "lost heritage" aligns with Davidov's perspective.[2].

In reality, Davidov's viewpoint is a direct projection of a typical orientalist mindset. In his narrative, the Ottoman Empire and Istanbul represent the fate of a civilization in decline and backwardness. According to him, there is no trace left of the grandeur of Istanbul from the Byzantine era. As a result, Istanbul is portrayed as the capital of the "sick man" of Europe. In Davidov's worldview, there is no architectural beauty attributed to the Ottomans in Istanbul. On the contrary, Roman-era structures are portrayed as neglected and on the brink of destruction due to Turkish rule. This rhetoric was, in fact, employed to reinforce the perceived superiority of Orthodox identity over the Ottomans. A pivotal aspect of Davidov's observations is shaped around the Third Rome theory. In this context, Hagia Sophia must be restored as a

2 Viewing Hagia Sophia as a lost heritage, Davidov envisions the dream of this monument returning to Russian hands, stating, "Perhaps one day the mosaics will emerge in all their splendor.". Bkz., Davıdov, s. 31-37.

Christian sanctuary and aligned with Russia's ideological and political objectives. For this ideal, Hagia Sophia is regarded as the Red Apple. Davidov frequently emphasizes this notion in his narratives, stating, "God will once again grant this sanctuary to the Christians." In a way, his observations provide significant clues for understanding Russian foreign policy rhetoric. The city, whose streets are described as "dirty" and "chaotic" and whose former Roman glory has vanished, must undoubtedly be taken from the Ottomans—the "sick man" of Europe (Davidov, 1840: 29-30).

Another Russian traveler, critic, and writer, Aleksandr Petrovich Milyukov, described Hagia Sophia during his 1857 visit with great admiration for its magnificent architecture and historical significance. He compared it to other European churches, considering it a masterpiece that could rival, and even surpass, structures such as Rome's Pantheon. However, this admiration was overshadowed by his criticism of the elements added to Hagia Sophia by Ottoman Islamic culture. According to Milyukov, Ottoman control over Hagia Sophia was "temporary," and the restoration of its original Christian identity was merely a matter of time: *"The Turks, as with everything else, have never fully dominated Hagia Sophia. The Islamic traces on the structure can be removed in a single day."* These remarks reflect the tendency among Russian travelers to view the Ottoman legacy as a transient phase and embody the dream of reclaiming Hagia Sophia as a "Christian sanctuary" (Milyukov, 1859: 145).

Milyukov harshly criticized Ottoman society and the attitudes of religious officials during his visit to Hagia Sophia. The difficulties he experienced during his journey, particularly in relation to bribery and negotiation processes, provided him with a basis to critique the inefficiency and corruption of the Ottoman administration. He described his negotiations with the imams as follows: *"In Istanbul, it is now possible to see everything with money. However, to enter Hagia Sophia, we had to negotiate with the imams, and in the end, we found no peace until we paid the demanded price."* These criticisms were used by Milyukov to reinforce the perception that Ottoman reforms had failed to bring about meaningful change in society and religious institutions. Moreover, his portrayal of the imams as corrupt and intolerant reflects his biased perspective toward the Ottoman religious establishment (Milyukov, 1859: 146-147).

Milyukov regarded Hagia Sophia not merely as an architectural masterpiece but as the ultimate symbol of Russia's Orthodox mission. In his view, the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a Christian sanctuary was inevitable, and, unlike Western travelers, he believed this transformation could only be achieved under Russia's leadership: *"The restoration of Hagia Sophia's Christian identity will only be possible through Russia's efforts."* Of course, this perspective is not exclusive to Milyukov. It represents a concrete manifestation of the Russian Empire's broader ideological expansionist policy. According to this view, the Ottomans are merely the reckless guardians of this sacred city, and even the declining empire itself is aware of this reality. Islam, in its entirety, is perceived as a force that harms both the city and its former grandeur (Milyukov, 1859: 140-141). For the Russians visiting Hagia Sophia, this sanctuary was not merely an architectural monument. Rather, it had maintained its significance for centuries as both a political and religious symbol. The Russian clergyman Koptev, who visited Istanbul in 1887, observed the city from precisely this perspective and regarded Hagia Sophia as a symbol of Ottoman rule (Koptev, 1888). In Koptev's accounts, Hagia Sophia is depicted as a transitional center between two worlds. Particularly for the Orthodox world, thousands of works have been written about Hagia Sophia. To reinforce this argument, he states: "Hagia Sophia is the first place that every Orthodox Russian wishes to visit upon arriving in Istanbul. The sanctity of

the sanctuary and its Byzantine heritage make it an eternal symbol for us." Koptev's words reveal that Hagia Sophia was not merely a religious site for Russians but also a sacred legacy inherited from Byzantium. The transformation of this sanctuary into a mosque under Ottoman rule and its detachment from its Christian identity was a profound source of disappointment for Koptev and his contemporaries (Koptev, 1888: 14).

Koptev provided a detailed description of Hagia Sophia's architectural features, paying particular attention to the modifications made during the Ottoman period. While exploring the mosque's interior, he noted the impressive arrangement created by Islamic additions, such as the calligraphy on the walls and the valuable carpets covering the floors. However, in Koptev's view, these modifications were elements that overshadowed the Christian identity of the sanctuary: *"In Hagia Sophia, now converted into a mosque, everything is orderly and clean. Yet, the writings on the walls and the carpets are there to cover the magnificent Byzantine mosaics."* Koptev also addressed the restorations carried out during the modernization efforts of the Ottoman Empire, particularly those during Sultan Abdülmecid's reign. He criticized the practice of painting over the mosaics, though he referenced Sultan Abdülmecid's directive that the mosaics should not be completely erased. Koptev interpreted this as a sign of respect for art and history but criticized contemporary Russian travelers who misinterpreted this approach as a reflection of Ottoman sultans' sympathy toward Christianity (Koptev, 1888: 14).

In Koptev's observations, the dream of Hagia Sophia's reconversion into a Christian sanctuary is strongly evident. Within the context of Russia's political and religious ascendancy in the 19th century, the desire to restore a cross atop Hagia Sophia is highlighted in Koptev's narratives as a symbolic goal: *"Russia is now a powerful state. One day, a cross will once again rise above the dome of this sacred sanctuary."* These statements indicate that Koptev's writings were driven not merely by the purpose of serving as a religious travel guide but were imbued with an ideological mission (Koptev, 1888: 14).

In 1888, Russian Archbishop Nikifor Timofeyevich Kamenskiy visited Hagia Sophia, a site he had long desired to see, and provided detailed observations in his notes, offering his perspective on the structure's architectural grandeur, religious symbols, and its state under Ottoman rule (*Kamenskiy, 1893*). From the moment he entered Hagia Sophia, Kamenskiy expressed his admiration for its vastness, symmetry, and architectural splendor: *"Not only in antiquity but in no area of modern architecture has a sanctuary equal to Hagia Sophia been constructed."* Kamenskiy noted the destruction of some mosaics and the partial covering of others with a yellow coating, interpreting this as a detriment to the Byzantine heritage. He was particularly struck by the continued visibility of the figure of Justinian, which he found deeply moving. For Kamenskiy, Hagia Sophia was a masterpiece that embodied the religious and cultural richness of Byzantium (Kamenskiy, 1893: 18-19).

Kamenskiy's general impressions of Istanbul are filled with harsh criticisms directed at the city's layout and social conditions. Describing the narrow streets, filthy roads, and disorganized structures he encountered on his way to Hagia Sophia, Kamenskiy characterized the city as a "difficult place to live": *"Here, one can encounter every kind of filth and disorder. The city is a complete disappointment."* (Kamenskiy, 1893: 17).

Kamenskiy's criticisms clearly reflect his Westernized perspective on Ottoman Istanbul and his negative biases toward urban life in the city. For Kamenskiy, the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque under Ottoman rule was not merely a religious issue but also an ideological trauma. During his visit, he expressed his hope that the sanctuary would one day serve as a church again, exclaiming: *"Oh Lord! What sins of ours led You to take such a sanctuary away from us?"* These words can be interpreted as a powerful expression of the religious and ideological significance that the Russian Orthodox world attributed to Hagia Sophia (Kamenskiy, 1893: 19-20).

Nikolay Nikolaevich Lender, during his 1890 visit to Istanbul, focused extensively on Hagia Sophia, analyzing this unique structure from religious, architectural, and ideological perspectives (*Lender, 1892*). Lender's initial observations of Hagia Sophia reflect his deep admiration for its architectural grandeur and Byzantine heritage. Rising above the chaos of Istanbul, Hagia Sophia appeared to him as a monument that carried the splendor of the past into the present: *"Hagia Sophia is a miracle of Justinian, representing all the ancient treasures of Byzantium. It has managed to preserve its magnificence for 1,300 years."* (Lender, 1892: 16).

The use of Hagia Sophia as a mosque was one of Lender's primary points of criticism. He described Muslim rituals as monotonous and devoid of spirit, claiming that they disrupted the mystical atmosphere of the sanctuary: *"The monotonous prayers of the Muslims seem to have lulled these walls into a deep slumber."* Lender compared the voices of children reciting the Quran and the sermons of the imams to Christian church choirs, describing the experience not as a "symphony" but as "disorder." These criticisms clearly reveal Lender's biases toward Ottoman religious practices and his preference for Christian liturgical traditions (Lender, 1892: 18).

The Christian frescoes and mosaics in Hagia Sophia were another significant aspect that caught Lender's attention. He noted that the Turks had failed to completely erase these traces, emphasizing that the depiction of a guardian angel could still be seen: *"When viewed through binoculars, Christian motifs still bless you from the wall."* Lender interpreted the visibility of certain details, despite the covering of Byzantine mosaics, as a sign of the incomplete efforts by the Turks to transform the site. These observations reflect an ideological perspective that openly criticizes the use of Hagia Sophia as a mosque during the Ottoman period (Lender, 1892: 19).

Sufi Lodges and Dervishes

Sufi lodges (*tekkes*) and dervishes, which were among the essential elements of religious life in Ottoman Istanbul, were particularly notable social and cultural structures that attracted the attention of Western and Russian travelers in the 19th century. Tekkes were not merely places of worship but also multifunctional institutions where social, cultural, and educational activities were carried out, playing a significant role in the structure of Ottoman society. When examining the religious circles of Istanbul through the eyes of Russian travelers, the roles of tekkes and dervishes in this context can be interpreted not only as a religious experience but also as a sphere of cultural interaction and confrontation.

Russian travelers often observed the Sufi lodges (*tekkes*) and dervishes in Istanbul with an exotic and mystical curiosity, yet their accounts frequently exhibited a prejudiced perspective. In travelogues, dervishes were often depicted as "overly mystical" and "irrational" individuals, while tekkes were portrayed as symbols of

the traditional and "backward" aspects of Ottoman society. For instance, in Vladimir Davidov's narratives, tekkes were described as centers of both religious rituals and social solidarity. However, his depictions exaggerated the religious practices of the dervishes, offering a critical portrayal. Davidov's accounts reflect this bias, as he characterized dervish ceremonies not as sacred worship but rather as spectacles meant for entertainment. This perspective clearly reflects the orientalist lens through which Western travelers often perceived the religious rituals of dervishes, reducing them to mere performances (Davidov, 1840: 129-131).

A similar viewpoint is found in the writings of another Russian traveler, Vsevolojski[3]. During his visits to Istanbul, he observed and detailed the rituals performed in Sufi institutions, particularly Mevlevihanes. In his view, tekkes represented the "mystical side" of Ottoman society, yet he offered sharp critiques of the functionality and meaning of these rituals. He described the *sema* ceremonies in the Mevlevihane as follows: *"The dervishes' constant spinning, through which they attempt to attain divine tranquility, resembles a physical performance more than a genuine act of worship. Their efforts appear more like a theatrical stage designed to captivate the imagination of the audience, rather than a spiritual depth."* (Vsevolojski, 1839: 260-262). These statements clearly reveal Vsevolojski's distance from Sufi practices and his orientalist perspective. While he found the rituals exaggerated and meaningless, he failed to grasp the profound spiritual dimension underlying these practices. This approach is significant in illustrating how Ottoman Sufi traditions were perceived from an external viewpoint.

Parallel to the development of transportation technologies, Istanbul hosted numerous visitors in the 19th century. In particular, the city's religious circles attracted significant interest from these travelers. Tekkes and Mevlevihanes, reflecting the mystical atmosphere of the East, became some of the most frequently visited sites. For example, the Russian general and traveler Nikolay Sergeyevich Vsevolojski visited the Galata Mevlevihane during his journey to Istanbul and provided striking observations on the sema ritual performed there. Vsevolojski's accounts reflect a dual perspective that approaches the Ottoman Sufi tradition with both admiration and orientalist detachment. During his visit to the Galata Mevlevihane, he offers a detailed description of the architectural arrangement of the space and the aesthetic dimensions of the ritual. In his observations, the simplicity of the tekke's decoration, its walls adorned with religious symbols, and the area specifically designated for sema stand out. During the sema ceremony, the dervishes' "fantastic garments" and their "spins resembling a divine trance" catch his attention. He describes the experience vividly: "The rhythm of the music and the cries of the choir merged with the dervishes' whirling, turning into a wild and deafening hum. Yet, at an invisible signal, all this chaos suddenly gave way to a deep order." (Vsevolojski, 1839: 260-262).

3 Nikolay Sergeyevich Vsevolojski, a Russian general who traveled to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, particularly focused on military reforms, social structures, and religious circles in Istanbul. In his travel notes, Vsevolozhsky dedicates significant attention to Sufi lodges (*tekkes*) and dervishes while reflecting on the social and religious fabric of Ottoman society. His accounts provide critical insights into the role of Sufism within Ottoman society and the social functions of dervishes, as observed from the perspective of a soldier and statesman. However, it is evident that these observations are not entirely detached from the prevailing Russian Orthodox ideology of the time or the political rivalry with the Ottoman Empire. S. Vsevolojski, *Puteşestvie Çrez Yujnuyu Rossiyu, Krım i Odessu, v Konstantinopol, Maluyu Aziyu, Severnuyu Afriku, Maltu, Sitsiliyu, İtaliyu, Yujnuyu Frantsiyu i Parij v 1836 i 1837 Godah*, Moskva 1839.

This description illustrates that, for an external observer, the ritual possessed both aesthetic and mystical charm. However, Vsevolojski tended to interpret the ritual as a "performance" rather than grasp its deeper spiritual significance. Vsevolojski's observations of the Mevlevihane reflect a widespread orientalist perspective on Ottoman Sufi traditions. While he admired the harmonious movements and "devotion" of the dervishes, he also found the ritual irrational and excessively mystical. This approach reveals the tendency of Western and Russian travelers to focus more on the exoticism of Sufism than on its profound meaning. Although Vsevolojski acknowledged that Mevlevi dervishes commanded more respect than those of other Sufi orders, he described Sufi practice as a form of "mysticism unique to the East." From a Slavist perspective, Vsevolojski avoided praising Islam explicitly, instead implying that these religious rituals were symbolic representations unique to the East.

Vsevolojski offers significant observations on the spatial and historical context of the Galata Mevlevihane. While discussing Halet Efendi, the individual responsible for reconstructing the lodge, he also reflects on Halet Efendi's role in Ottoman bureaucracy and his tragic end. Vsevolojski highlights both Halet Efendi's financial contributions to the Mevlevihane and his influence in Ottoman political history: *"Halet Efendi not only rebuilt this Mevlevihane but also left behind a rich library and substantial resources."* Vsevolojski, whether consciously or unconsciously, provides insights into the intellectual dimension of the Ottoman Sufi world (Vsevolojski, 1839: 260). In the Ottoman realm, religious and spiritual circles functioned not only as centers of worship but also as institutions of social solidarity and education. Some Mevlevihanes and tekkes provided assistance to those in need, while others offered accommodation to travelers. However, the scope of these institutions' activities, which were rooted in public welfare, was hardly perceptible to Russian and Western observers. What travelers typically encountered was an exotic showcase. Indeed, travelers who observed these activities and were influenced by the aesthetic and religious atmosphere hesitated to openly acknowledge their impressions. For instance, when Davidov visited the famous Mevlevihane in Galata, he described the worship performed there as "meaningless" and "excessive." He expressed his views on the ceremony as follows: "These people believe that by moving themselves ceaselessly like a spinning wheel, they can attain a divine being. However, this seems more like an illusion than an act of worship." A comprehensive review of Davidov's observations reveals that he was, in fact, affected by the ceremony. However, in the analytical sections of his journal, he exhibits a prejudiced and sweeping approach toward Ottoman society and its religious circles. At times, Davidov compares Ottoman Sufi beliefs with Russian Orthodox faith. Yet, as someone unfamiliar with the depth of Sufism, his evaluations fail to grasp the spiritual profundity of Ottoman Islamic culture. Consequently, he perceives these rituals—deemed "incomprehensible," "exotic," and examples of "religious excess"—as symbols of backwardness through the lens of Russian Orthodox belief (Davidov, 1840: 129-131).

During his visit to the Mevlevihane in Pera, Milyukov likened the *sema* ritual not to a religious practice but to a stage performance or a Western-style ballet. The traveler provided a detailed account of the Mevlevihane's architectural structure, furnishings, and the participation of both local and foreign spectators who observed the ritual. From the dervishes' attire to the arrangement of the ritual, Milyukov compared every element to Western artistic conventions: *"The Mevlevi rituals resembled a stage performance prepared for a European audience rather than a state of religious ecstasy."* (Milyukov, 1859:162). This description reflects the perception of Sufi practices prevalent among

European travelers of the time. Rather than understanding the spiritual depth of the ritual, Milyukov interpreted it as an exotic "Eastern spectacle." The fact that the Mevlevihane was open to foreigners and that the dervishes welcomed such visits with tolerance caught Milyukov's attention. However, this openness reinforced his view of the *sema* ritual as a "performance" devoid of mystical significance, highlighting the orientalist lens through which he interpreted Ottoman Sufi traditions

Milyukov described the rituals he witnessed at the Rufai Tekke in Üsküdar as a dramatic and even frightening experience. The rituals of this tekke were centered on physical acts performed by the dervishes to achieve a state of spiritual ecstasy, including practices involving sharp objects. He characterized these rituals as "irrational" and "inhuman," stating: *"There was an incomprehensible madness and allure in this hellish music: the dervishes' eyes sparkled with intensity."* (*Milyukov, 1859:166*).

The dervishes' self-stabbing with daggers, producing howling-like sounds during *zikr* (ritual chanting), and the practice of the sheikh "stepping on" children for healing purposes were depicted in Milyukov's notes with a mixture of horror and fascination. He compared these rituals to Western theatrical or circus performances, stating: *"The prayer hall of the Rufais could be likened to an inquisition. The weapons hanging on the walls and the savage rituals represent a madness that unsettles the nerves."* (Milyukov, 1859:165-167). These interpretations framed the practices of the Rufai Tekke not as integral components of Ottoman mysticism but as a "scene of barbarity" designed to satisfy the exotic curiosity of a Western audience. Milyukov's descriptions reduced the rituals to a spectacle of violence and chaos, ignoring their symbolic and spiritual significance within Ottoman Sufi traditions.

Like other Russian travelers who visited Ottoman lands in the 19th century, Milyukov's views reflect the orientalist perspective of his time. Presenting the rituals of Rufāʾī tekkes as "fanaticism," Milyukov made no effort to understand Ottoman religious practices. In fact, he interpreted these rituals symbolically within the framework of the Ottoman Empire's decline. "These rituals are not merely mystical performances; they are a symbol of the decay and disorder within Ottoman society." Russian travelers, much like their Western counterparts, shared a tendency to define the "other" through preconceived notions (Milyukov, 1859: 168). Another Russian traveler, Lender, could not conceal his admiration for the Ottoman Sufi world after observing its rituals. The grandeur, splendor, and mystical aura of these ceremonies deeply fascinated him. However, as a traveler eager to emphasize the superiority of his own culture to his readers, he experienced an internal conflict. He expressed this dilemma as follows: "The whirling of the dervishes intensifies to such an extent that it is advisable to keep a certain distance while watching." In reality, his words reflect his own complex emotions. The rituals, which many travelers found unsettling, captivated Lender so profoundly that he noted in his journal that prolonged exposure to this atmosphere might be overwhelming (Lender, 1892: 26-27). After freeing himself from the influence of the rituals he witnessed at tekkes and Mevlevihanes, Lender attempted to analyze the atmosphere in greater detail. He described the rituals as mechanical actions, since the dervishes moved in a synchronized and orderly manner. In his view, such perfection could only result from mechanical repetition. Like many other travelers, Lender failed to grasp the depth of Sufism. As a result, he portrayed the dervishes as "mechanical puppets," stating, "The whirling of the dervishes begins in a dazzling manner. They seem less like humans and more like mechanical puppets." Undoubtedly, this perspective is also a product of an orientalist mindset. Unable to

comprehend the magnificence of Eastern mysticism, the traveler failed to perceive the aesthetics and devotion underlying these rituals (Lender, 1892: 26-27). One of the most prominent travelers to visit Istanbul was Berezin, whose observations of the Galata Mevlevihane are particularly significant. Berezin examined the Mevlevi dervishes' rituals with both aesthetic and cultural curiosity. While he provided a detailed description of the ceremony he witnessed at the Galata Mevlevihane, he characterized its intensity and impact as "mild." Having previously observed the "howling dervishes" in Egypt, whose rituals he found striking due to their mystical fervor and dramatic effect, Berezin considered the Mevlevi sema a more measured and aesthetically refined experience. He wrote: "It is possible to describe the ceremony as a dance or a folkloric performance. Compared to the rituals of other dervishes, it does not carry an astonishing depth." These statements reveal Berezin's distanced admiration and critical approach toward Mevlevi rituals. His perception of sema as an artistic or folkloric display rather than a dramatic religious experience may have stemmed from his unmet expectations regarding Eastern mysticism (Berezin, 1854: 62).

In the 19th century, Istanbul emerged as a cultural center that captivated Western travelers with its mystical rituals and religious sites. The ceremonies performed by the Mevlevi dervishes at the Galata Mevlevihane were among the primary attractions for such visitors. Russian traveler Markov provided a detailed account of the Mevlevi rituals, reflecting on both the spatial arrangement of the venue and the impressions left on him by the ceremonies. His observations serve as a valuable source for understanding the architectural and cultural context of Mevlevi lodges and how these rituals were perceived by Western observers. Markov associated the location and architectural design of the Galata Mevlevihane with a Western and universal order. In his view, the Mevlevihane, rather than resembling a traditional Islamic mosque, carried a modern and European aesthetic: *"The hall is entirely universal, in no way Eastern. The walls and ceiling are adorned with plaster decorations, unusually clean and radiant."* Markov describes the Mevlevihane he observed not through the depth of Islam but rather through a universal aesthetic perspective. The presence of sacred Islamic elements such as the mihrab, Quranic verses, and the minbar within the space leads him to make such an evaluation. As a result, he perceives the area where these rituals take place as separate from religion. He even takes this notion further by presenting it as a space for folkloric performance rather than a spiritual or religious setting. He vividly described the musical and dance elements of the ritual, particularly emphasizing the effect of the plaintive Turkish reed flute (*ney*) and the loud drums: *"The ceaseless, mournful wailing of the flute filled the hall. The frenzied folkloric dance reached its peak, accompanied by the loud drums and flute."* These descriptions highlight how the ritual presented an exotic spectacle and an emotional experience for Western observers. However, Markov did not limit his interpretation to an aesthetic experience but also characterized it as a state of fanatical, otherworldly ecstasy: *"This was not a worldly entertainment that brought happiness. It was a game belonging to the otherworldly, a fanatical vision, a hysterical ecstasy linked to the heavens."* Markov's commentary reveals his distant approach to the spiritual dimension of the Mevlevi rituals, perceiving them as an incomprehensible mystical experience (Markov, 1890: 111-113).

One of the most notable Russian visitors to the *tekkes* of 19th-century Istanbul was Russian Prince Konstantin Nikolayevich. This visit was particularly significant, as it marked the first time a member of the Russian royal family visited the city after

its conquest by the Ottomans. During his 1845 visit, Prince Konstantin went to Pera, where he visited the renowned Mevlevi lodge, famously known as the "tekke of whirling dervishes" or "dancing dervishes," and observed their rituals. This tekke was a popular destination for European travelers and tourists residing in Galata and Pera due to its accessibility and reputation. Many visitors attended these ceremonies with great curiosity, interpreting the *sema* rituals of the dervishes as theatrical performances and likening the dervishes to stage actors. The ceremonies were often described as exotic, mysterious, strange, and fascinating. Some Russian travelers, including Davidov, detailed these ceremonies in their travelogues (Davidov, 1840: 260-262).

Special ceremonies were held at the Mevlevihane on Tuesdays and Fridays, and Prince Konstantin took the opportunity to visit on Tuesday, June 12/24, during his stay. While little is recorded about his impressions beyond a mention of a "rather unpleasant impression" (Voronin, 2019, p. 128), Berezin, who followed Prince Konstantin's journey, provides details about the Mevlevis in his work. Berezin describes the architectural structure and decoration of the tekke as well as the rituals and practices performed there. He also comments on the cosmopolitan nature of Pera, which was predominantly inhabited by non-Muslims and foreigners, noting: *"It is not surprising that a Muslim tekke has been placed among infidels, as though there were no empty spaces in the city or Üsküdar."* (Berezin, 1854: 62). After visiting the tekke, Prince Konstantin returned to the Russian embassy in Pera. Later that evening, he took a boat along the Golden Horn to unwind, enjoying the breathtaking views of Istanbul from the water, bringing his eventful day to a serene close (Berezin, 1854: 66).

Conclusion

In the 19th century, Ottoman Istanbul emerged as a religious, cultural, and historical center that captivated Russian travelers. In their accounts, travelers expressed their deep admiration for the city while simultaneously offering orientalist critiques. The descriptions of Istanbul by Russian travelers reflected the city's enchanting atmosphere and the aesthetic qualities of its religious sites, while also revealing prejudices against the social structure and religious practices of Ottoman society. These narratives often contained cultural reflections of Russian Orthodox ideology and political ambitions. During these visits, which took place within the framework of the Third Rome ideology, Russian travelers who observed the world of Ottoman Sufism could not conceal their admiration for the aesthetic and visual splendor of religious rituals. Particularly, these narratives, written with a critical perspective, depicted the spiritual world of Mevlevihanes and tekkes through an orientalist lens. Travelers who constructed a perception of the religious communities of the Ottoman Empire found the rituals mystical, excessive, and exotic. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the observations of Russian travelers were shaped by biases that served Russian ideology and political goals, these accounts remain important sources for their time. In particular, their vivid descriptions and diverse perspectives are valuable, especially compared to the official and plain narratives of state authorities. Ultimately, the subtext of Russian travelers' journals reveals the longing for Hagia Sophia—considered the "Red Apple" of the Russians—and for Istanbul, which hosted it, to be restored to its original status under the rule of the Third Rome. The ultimate goal was to keep this sacred dream alive in the minds of the Russian people.

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