

Centralization in the byzantine empire history essay

[History](#), [Empires](#)



In his article *Osmanlı Padişahı* published in 1958 Halil İnalcık wrote “ It was obligatory to comply to caliph-sultan who had been designed by God to direct Muslims with sharia...Subjects had to show absolute obedience to the sultan and this relationship was similar with relationship between father and son... The idea of absolute and indivisible authority and the regulations in the organization of state to materialize this idea was important.”[1]Georg Ostrogorsky writes the lines below for Byzantine emperors in his book *History of the Byzantine State*: “ The state was completely identified with the Emperor and with his military and bureaucratic machine. The Emperor is chosen of God, and under the protection of Divine Providence. He is entire master of the government of the Empire, commander-in-chief of the army, supreme judge and sole law-giver, protector of the Church and guardian of the true faith... his judicial sentence is final and irrevocable...As master of the State the Emperor has in practice unrestricted power.”[2]

To read merely these two observations on the Ottoman and Eastern Roman empires together gives a considerable idea already on the permanent link between the two empires. Yet, it is necessary to pay attention to the claims of “ former orientalism”, with the expression of Halil Berktaş, which suggests that the single source of the Ottoman institutions was Byzantine`s socio-political organization.[3]However, an attempt in instantiating this claim should be cautious regarding the ultra-nationalistic tendencies which completely refuse the similarities between the two empires.

In this essay I seek to analyze the centralization, which was one of the major common aspects between the Ottoman and the Byzantine empires, in the

reign of Justinian. The centralization policies of Justinian, who was in the throne between 527 and 565, seemed to be simultaneously emerged through the political fragmentation and decentralization processes in Europe. Therefore, an investigation on the centralization of the reign of Justinian can create opportunities for comparisons between the West and the Byzantium

The Mainlines of Justinian Period and the Political Centralization

To understand centralization policies throughout the period of Justinian, it will be useful to see mainlines of his era briefly. Justinian ruled the empire two centuries later Constantine who had founded the capital Constantinople[4] and was the first emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire. Throughout two centuries the Empire tried to get over the crisis that had destroyed Europe with a minimum damage. However, this crisis had affected its political and social life and it reached to the capacity to regain the western lands after the fifth century. According to Ostrogorsky, even though the estranged administrations of the western and eastern sides of the Roman Empire, the ideas of unity and universality of the empire continued during the Germanic invasions. Within the sixth century when the Byzantine Empire reached the capacity to adopt an active policy, instead of a “ passive actor”, an emperor came to the throne to get this idea into happening: Justinian.

It is possible to summarize the goal of Justinian as reconstructing the heritage of Roman Empire, and establishing an empire within its former borders as a Christian and Roman empire. For this aim, the North Africa, Italy

and South Spain were conquered and the Mediterranean became a Byzantine lake. However, those wars in the west decreased the defensive power of the Empire against Persia and throughout the Danube borders. Therefore, it can be said that while Byzantine armies were celebrating their victories in the distant west, the center of the Empire had been ravaging. [5] However, these conquests which were held in order to restore the Roman Empire caused to a dramatic increase in the taxes and the discontentedness of people caused the Nika Revolt in 532. The Greens and the Blues got united to overthrow the emperor and the revolt was widely disseminated and gained strength within a short time. In so much that a nephew of the former emperor Anastasios was announced as the new emperor. However, the revolt stifled with the efforts of Theodora, Belisarios and Narses. [6] It is necessary to mention that to see the financial outcomes of the conquest policy as the only reasons for revolt would be inaccurate. Obviously, an increase in taxes was a significant factor for the revolt. However, the other reason which lied behind the revolt summarized the characteristic of the period of Justinian.

It had been mentioned that the main goal of Justinian was to revive the Roman Empire and his conquest policy was an important component of this aim. Another significant part of this aim was to strengthen the central authority. It is possible to say that the main determinant of all of the internal affairs of his period was centralization and strengthening the central authority. Nika Revolt occurred in the fifth year of his reign when he was strengthening the central power. It can be said that this revolt aroused from

the conflict between the autocratic central power and the political organizations of the people. " During Justin I's reign, Justinian had opposed the Greens, who had been favoured by Anastasius, and had declared for the Blues, who supported his political and ecclesiastical policies. But once he came to the throne, he tried to make himself entirely independent of the demes and took strong measures against these unruly popular factions. His punitive measures, inflicted on both parties alike, turned the blues as well as the Greens against him, and this general hostility was aggravated by the heavy burdens imposed on the people by his expensive policy." [7] Defeating this particular revolt, the central authority of Byzantium defeated the groups whose benefits were not determined in accordance with the centralization. Procopius highlights the political results of this defeat:

However, up to the time when the insurrection named Nika took place, they seized rich men's properties one at a time; but when that happened, as I have told elsewhere they sequestered at one swoop the estates of nearly all the members of the Senate. On everything movable and on the fairest of the lands they laid their hands and kept what they wanted; but whatever was unproductive of more than the bitter and heavy taxes, they gave back to the previous owners with a philanthropic gesture. Consequently these unfortunates, oppressed by the tax collectors and eaten up by the never-ceasing interest on their debts, found life a burden compared to which death were preferable. [8]

As it is seen, another significant policy of Justinian to strengthen the central power was the struggle against big land holders who could have possibly

threatened the central authority. According to Vasiliev, struggle against the big land holders was one of the main aspects of the Justinian's reign and this struggle accelerated especially after the Nika Revolt.[9]

Another important component of the centralization policies of Justinian was judicial codification. This text was called as Codex Justinianus and it was based on the former judicial texts Codex Gregorianus, Codex Hermogenianus and Codex Theodosianus. However, the new text was more integrated and improved than the former ones. With the codification, a judicial basis for the central power had been provided.[10]The judicial work of Justinian provided a basis for the judicial development for the Empire. Furthermore, this codification had an influence in Europe in the twelfth century when the trade and city life were reactivated, commercial bourgeoisie emerged as a new social class and parallel to this circumstance to rebirth of the " secular power" opinion in thought. The Corpus Juris Civilis Justiniani gave legal support to monarchial authority, and it had a permanent influence on the development of political thought in the West, as well as in Byzantium. In the Byzantine Empire, Roman law remained as the basis of legal development throughout its history, and Justinian's Corpus was the starting point for all prospective work in this field. It was not until the twelfth century that it returned to the West. Here, through the medium of the Corpus, the Reception was to play a great part in shaping legal and political thought, and Roman law as presented by Justinian's jurists was, until recently, one of the main elements among codes of all European countries." [11]

Relations with the Church and Caesaropapizm

It is possible to say that the centralization during the age of Justinian mostly effected the relations to the spiritual authority. According to Ostrogorsky, in the history of Church and State, the age of Justinian is a high-watermark of imperial influence in religious matters, and no other Emperor either before or after had such unlimited authority over the Church.[12] This fact was a significant part of Justinian's policy of strengthening the central power. The absolute hegemony of the state over the Church in the reign of Justinian had occurred simultaneously with the period in Europe when the thesis of superiority of spiritual power over secular power had been formulated. Therefore, analyzing the religious policy of Justinian would be useful for to see the differences between the Byzantine and the Western political thoughts.

"... Justinian considered it his duty to restore the Roman Empire, and at the same time he wished to establish within the Empire one law and one faith. 'One state, one law, and one church' - such was the brief formula of Justinian's entire political career. Basing his conceptions on the principle of absolute power, he assumed that in a well-ordered state everything is subject to the authority of the emperor. Fully aware of the fact that the church might serve as a powerful weapon in the hands of the government, he used every effort to bring it into subjection." [13]

G. Leopold Seidler mentions that the official doctrine of Byzantine reached the most advanced level attained so far in the reign of Justinian. According to Seidler, this doctrine composed of three aspects as the Christianity, the

Roman law and the idea that the power sources from the God.[14]It is necessary to emphasize that in the Western political thought the main argument of the groups, who claimed for the superiority of spiritual power over secular power, was God is the source of every kind of power. According to this claim, the agent of God in the world for the usage of every kind of power was the Church. The Church used the spiritual power in itself and delegated the usage of the secular power to the earthly powers. In the Byzantine case, similarly God was seen as the source of the power and to emphasize the sacred origins of the power all of the external signs had been used both in the public and private spheres. However, differently from the West, the idea that emperor had the right of usage of power was dominant in the Byzantine Empire. In other words, the Byzantine emperors had the opinion that the God appointed them to the thrones and they took their power directly from the God; not with the intermediacy of the Church, so much so that the emperors used the title of deios to underline the holiness of their duties.[15]As distinct from the West, the idea that the Byzantine emperors took their power directly from God carries us to the doctrine which is called as caesaropapism. According to this doctrine, there could only be a single agent of God in the world and this agent is directly the emperor. The emperor, who was the unique agent of God, had both the secular and spiritual powers. Therefore, secular and spiritual powers become integrated in his character.[16]According to Levtchenko, this doctrine appeared in the reign of Justinian.[17]

From this point of view Justinian was a side of theological debates in his period. Moreover, he hindered all sorts of religious streams which could damage his central authority, or with a better expression the sanctity that he based his power on.[18]According to Seidler, neither of the Byzantine emperors struggled with Hellenism and paganism for Christianity as Justinian. “ According to Justinian, every doctrine that was inconsistent with the Christianity was craziness of the faithless Greeks and these doctrines should have been annihilated. Most of the laws were gravitated against the neo-Platonists and they had been bereaved of the right of teaching.”[19]Procopius also underlines this point as “ for in his zeal to gather all men into one Christian doctrine, he recklessly killed all who dissented.”[20]

One of the most significant example of the cases that Justinian’s interference on theological discussions was his attitude at the conflict between the monophysitism and the dyophysitism.[21]However, the then-existing doctrine discussions could not prevent the Christianity to be the formal doctrine of the empire. Contrarily, the conflicts between the Byzantine churches created an opportunity for the emperors to regulate their relations with the Papacy according to conjuncture by following policies which changed one of these parties.[22]For instance, Justinian supported monophysites to establish amity with the Papacy since he followed an invasion policy towards the west.

Conclusion

In some sources Justinian is described as the second founder of the Byzantine Empire. The same title is used for Mehmed II in the Ottoman case. Both of these emperors tried to strengthen the central authority in their empires. However, a comparison between these two processes is out of the limits of this essay. As it is seen, the reign of Justinian was a period when the authority of central power was increased. To reach his goal Justinian used both of the secular and spiritual tools. On the other hand, as it is underlined, the centralization policies of Justinian were not limited with a few fields. Those policies applied in a wide range of fields. Decrease in the power of central authority and the re-establishment of central authority during the period following Justinian`s era is a matter of another paper.