

Voicing the local interests: Expectations from the Trabzon-Erzurum Road and local demands in the Late Ottoman Gümüşhane

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Received: November 2024 • Final Acceptance: November 2025

Abstract

The late Ottoman Empire witnessed a period of intense centralization and infrastructural development as the state sought to consolidate its authority and modernize its provinces. Roads, administrative buildings and regional restructuring became the tools of this transformation, but they were also the focal points of tension between imperial priorities and local expectations. The case of Gümüşhane, a small town in northeastern Anatolia, illustrates how local communities attempted to negotiate with the state in the face of diminishing economic prospects and changing infrastructure routes. When the Trabzon-Erzurum Road was built without passing through the town center of Gümüşhane in 1872, locals used petitions, economic arguments, and social alliances to voice their needs. This study relies on extensive primary sources such as official correspondence in the Ottoman Archives (BOA), provincial yearbooks, and petitions submitted by locals. It examines how in the late 19th century the residents of Gümüşhane actively challenged and negotiated on the decisions of the Ottoman government regarding infrastructure, in particular road construction and administrative planning, and the state's indifferent or strategic responses to this pressure.

Keywords

Economic struggle, Gümüşhane, Local interests, Petitions, The Trabzon-Erzurum Road.

1. Introduction

In the late Ottoman Empire, transportation networks played a significant role in shaping the political, economic, and administrative fabric of the state. The expansion and reconstruction of roads were a part of the broader imperial efforts to consolidate central authority, facilitate military mobilization, stimulate trade, and integrate peripheral regions into the imperial core. As the empire confronted internal fragmentation and external threats in the 19th century, the strategic management of mobility and infrastructure became central to both governance and modernization. These projects were not merely technical undertakings but were deeply embedded in questions of power, local agency, and regional development. The placement of a road or administrative center could determine the prosperity or the decline of a town, influencing migration patterns, commercial viability, and the visibility of state authority. Consequently, transportation infrastructure became a site of negotiation between the central government and provincial populations, revealing the contested and often uneven nature of Ottoman modernization.

In the 19th century, one of these major transportation networks and infrastructure projects was the Trabzon-Erzurum Road. The importance of this route can be traced back to the Ottoman conquest of Crimea in 1475. Following the conquest, the Black Sea was effectively closed to foreign trade and maritime access was restricted to Ottoman ships only. This monopoly continued for almost three centuries, shaping regional trade and limiting the participation of foreign powers in the Black Sea trade. By the late 18th century, the Ottoman Empire reopened the Black Sea to foreign commercial shipping, redefining regional trade dynamics and enabling new land routes. This act allowed the Black Sea port cities to emerge as key gateways between the Ottoman inlands and global markets. In this context, the construction and maintenance of reliable inland routes, like the Trabzon-Erzurum Road, were seen as essential tools to facilitate the flow of agricultural products, raw ma-

terials, and manufactured goods from the eastern provinces to the coast. Due to the Ottoman-Russian rivalry and strained relations between Russia and Various European states, the strategic importance of the Trabzon-Erzurum Road increased further. As a result, with European powers supporting the expansion of this road network, the Ottoman government saw it as a vital passage that could bypass Russian-controlled territories and connect the empire to wider global markets. The reconstruction of the road started in 1850 and was completed in 1871.

The route from Trabzon to Erzurum passes through one of the toughest regions of northeastern Anatolia. In particular, the section in the Trabzon Province (vilayet), is characterized by steep mountains, rocky terrain, and deep valleys. The road must navigate through high altitudes, narrow passes, and areas prone to natural hazards such as erosion and heavy snowfall. These physical features make road construction and maintenance significantly challenging. Consequently, when determining the precise alignment of the route, both the physical geography and natural conditions, including climate and seasonal weather patterns, were carefully considered to select the most practical and stable path through this mountainous landscape (Tozlu, 1997). The final route was planned to start at the Trabzon Port, pass through Gümüşhane and Bayburt, and finally reach Erzurum, which is connected to trade roads extending toward Tabriz and India (Figure 1). [1].

Every town on this significant route had different expectations and agenda regarding the Trabzon-Erzurum Road. As the principal port city on the eastern Black Sea coast, Trabzon played a critical role in regional and international trade networks. By improving access to inland regions, Trabzon aimed to increase the volume of trade passing through its harbor, thereby reinforcing its economic prominence and securing a greater share of the customs revenues and commercial benefits associated with transit trade (BOA, İ.DH 400/26466).

Located near the eastern frontier of the Ottoman Empire, Erzurum had become a key military hub especially after the 1828–29 Russo-Ottoman War,

which exposed its vulnerability to Russian advances. By the late 19th century, Erzurum had been designated as the center of the Ottoman Fourth Army, making it a critical site for defense and military logistics. In this context, the Trabzon-Erzurum Road served as a vital supply and mobilization route, enabling the rapid movement of troops, weapons, and provisions from the coastal port to the eastern frontiers. The province's focus, therefore, was less on facilitating commerce and more on ensuring that the road could support the demands of military preparedness and regional security (BOA, DH.İD 25/11).

While the expectations of Trabzon and Erzurum were heavily intertwined with economic growth and military logistics, the small towns on the route, Gümüşhane and Bayburt, were motivated by more basic, survival-oriented concerns. For Gümüşhane, once a prosperous mining town, the road represented a potential means of revitalization, a chance to reconnect with larger economic systems after a long period of decline. Bayburt, despite its location on historic trade routes, had never grown into a major urban center.

For this city, the road was less about expansion and more about maintaining relevance and securing its place along an increasingly important corridor. In this sense, while the larger towns aimed for growth and influence, the smaller ones were simply striving not to be left behind.

1.1. The scope and the purpose of the study

While the roads were significant tools to meet economic and military expectations, they were also emerged as arenas of negotiation between local communities and the Ottoman State, where questions of economy, urban development and authority were debated. There are two important studies explore the significance of the Trabzon-Erzurum Road in the context of 19th-century Ottoman period. Tozlu's research (1997) focuses on the road as a key component of the Ottoman Empire's administrative and economic reforms, highlighting infrastructure developments and the state's efforts to assert control over provincial areas through investments like ports, inns, and quarantine stations. In contrast, Özkan's study

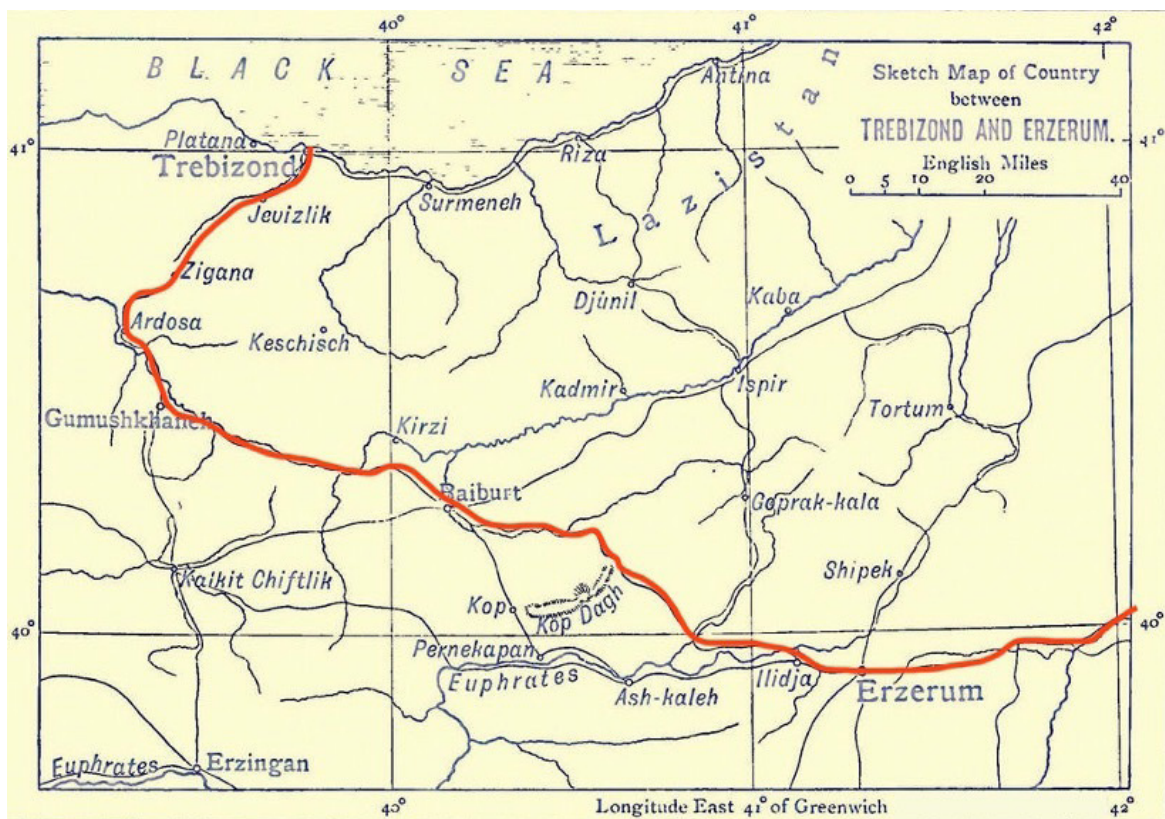


Figure 1. Trabzon-Erzurum Road, 1877 (Ryan, 1897).

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(2012) adopts a critical, bottom-up perspective, arguing that the road was not only a tool for logistical and economic integration but also a space where local actors influenced and reshaped local policies.

Building on this background, this article focuses on the town of Gümüşhane and examines how shifting transportation infrastructure impacted its urban and economic trajectory in the Late Ottoman Period. Historically founded as a mining town, the urban and economic development of Gümüşhane was deeply intertwined with both mining and its location along the regional trade routes. As mining activity declined by the late 18th century, the economy of the town grew increasingly dependent on trade, rendering its connection to the Trabzon-Erzurum Road crucial for survival.

The primary aim of this study is to investigate how the inhabitants of Gümüşhane responded to the infrastructural and administrative developments initiated by the Ottoman government during the second half of the 19th century, with particular focus on the routing of the Trabzon-Erzurum Road, the proposal to relocate the town center, and the administrative rivalry with Bayburt. By tracing the petitions, correspondence, and resistance the study examines how a relatively small town positioned itself against changing economic networks and state-led development initiatives. Focusing on the locals, it reveals how local communities actively participated in shaping imperial policy and urban planning. Rather than being passive recipients of top-down decisions, even if they mostly did not get the desired outcomes, the residents of Gümüşhane mobilized across religious and professional lines to advocate for their interests.

1.2 .The materials and method

This research is based on a detailed examination of Ottoman archival sources, including over a dozen official petitions (*arzuhal*), provincial yearbooks (*salname*), and imperial correspondence between local administrators and the central government. The primary materials were accessed through the Ottoman Archives of the Directorate of State Archives (BOA) and span the

period from 1871 to 1914, a timeframe that captures the official opening of the Trabzon-Erzurum Road, the immediate aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78 and the expansion of state infrastructural efforts under Abdulhamid II. While yearbooks (Trabzon Provincial Yearbooks, TPY) provide detailed information on the administrative, political, economic, military, and social aspects of the provinces; the petitions reviewed include documents signed by Muslim, Greek, and Armenian communities, offering insight into multi-religious civic collaboration.

Petitions were a part of the Ottoman Justice System since 1649 (Faroghi, 1992, p. 5). With this system, the Ottoman subjects, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, age, status, or education level, could voice their concerns, make personal requests, report grievances, seek justice, complain about the authorities, request tax reductions, ask for appointments or exemptions, or report local problems. Petitions functioned not only as mechanisms for justice but also as instruments of political participation. Since its political system based upon the undivided sovereignty and rule of the Sultan, the Ottoman Empire lacked modern democratic institutions for much of its existence. As a result, its subjects were excluded from politics but they could still participate by striking, protesting, and most commonly, petitioning (Gara et al., 2011, pp. 1-21). Petitioning (*arzuhal*) was the most significant and accessible tool available for Ottoman subjects for political expression and participation. It offered ordinary people an opportunity to articulate their demands, express their complaints, and at times resist state policies. This enabled the individuals and communities to engage directly with the local and imperial authorities (Ginio, 2011).

An archive-based methodological approach has been adopted in this study to explore the socio-political implications of infrastructural development in the northeastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. The analysis begins with a historical contextualization of the period following the official opening of the Trabzon-Erzurum Road. Then the ma-

materials have been categorized thematically and organized around four inter-related areas: road construction and urban accessibility, debates over town relocation and administrative centrality, shifts in provincial boundaries, and modes of civic resistance or cooperation. By synthesizing geographical data with political and archival analysis, this methodology enables a nuanced understanding of how infrastructural projects shaped local-state relations, altered urban hierarchies, and generated new forms of both solidarity and tension within the imperial periphery.

2. Local expectations and infrastructure politics: The route in Gümüşhane

The urban history of Gümüşhane has always been deeply intertwined with its mining history. Originally founded as a mining town, the development of Gümüşhane over the centuries, was shaped by mines and the town's geographical location near the trade routes. For almost three hundred years, the town benefited from the silver mines and grew rapidly. Even the name of the town is derived from its rich silver deposits: Gümüşhane, the silvercity. By the 1790s the mines in Gümüşhane closed due to inefficiency. Without advanced tools, drainage systems, or metallurgical processes, the silver deposits deeper underground

became economically and physically unreachable, leading to the mines' eventual closure (TPY, 1877). As mining activities started to decline in the late 18th century, the economic activities of the town shifted towards trade.

In 1871, however, when the reconstruction of Trabzon-Erzurum Road had just begun in Gümüşhane region, the planned route did not pass through the town center of Gümüşhane but through Bahçeler (The Gardens), which is 3 kilometers away (Figure 2). This created a crisis for Gümüşhane, and the inhabitants wanted immediate action. They stated that Gümüşhane had lost its income from the silver mines in the late 18th century, and the economy of the town depended only on trade. They demanded a re-route, emphasizing that the new route would contribute to the local economy. However, their request was rejected. According to the authorities, since the town center was located in a high-altitude valley, the slope reaching the downtown would increase the construction costs and make transportation with loaded animals and canons difficult. Furthermore, this suggested road would require the expropriation of some gardens in the town center, which would cost even more money and another delay in the construction [2] (BOA, ŞD 1826/24).

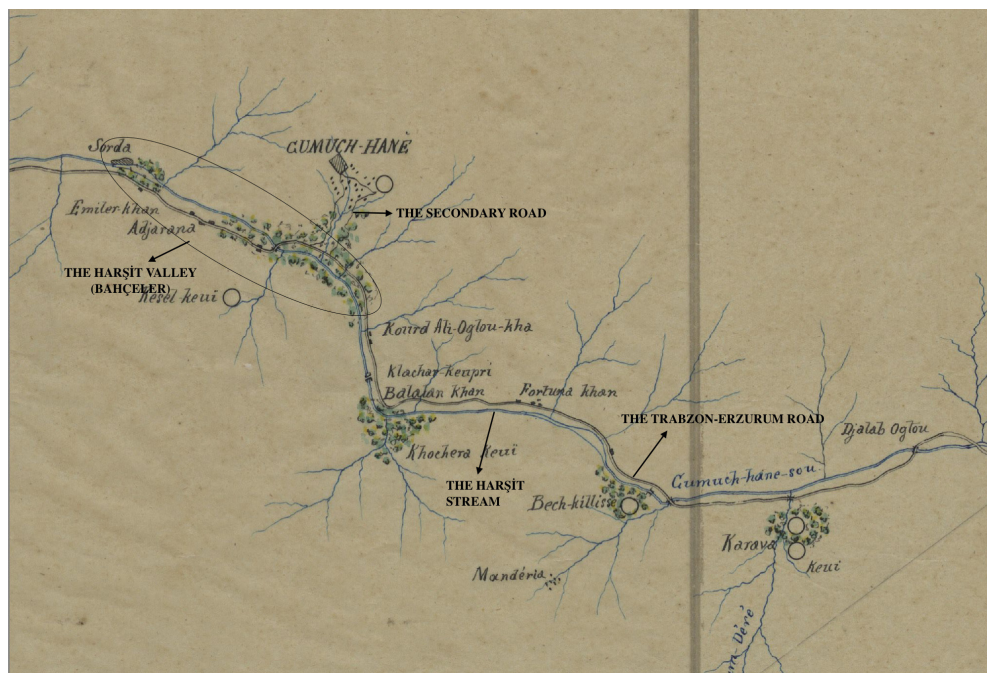


Figure 2. Town Center of Gümüşhane and Trabzon-Erzurum Road, 19th Century (BOA, HRT.h 1602).

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This petition was not the only one sent by the inhabitants of Gümüşhane. In the following years, of 1873, 1884 and 1889, the inhabitants signed other petitions stating their demands regarding the road in question (BOA, ŞD 1827/49; İ.MMS 78/3421; BEOAYN.d 1224). In 1892, they raised their voice once more. In this petition signed by 134 locals, including the leaders of the three religious communities (Muslims, Greeks, and Armenians), merchants, craftsmen, artisans, tradesmen, and others, the reasons for the route change were explained again, and reconsideration was requested. They stated that the lack of cultivable land in Gümüşhane, a mountainous region, made the economy entirely dependent on trade. The inability to operate the mines increased the significance of trade and causing the Greek people engaged in mining to migrate to Russia. They tried to bring in convincing arguments by stating that if the government agreed on the route change, the repair work that had to be conducted every year on the secondary road would be terminated. This would reduce the costs and contribute to the local economy (BOA, BEO 11/803; ŞD 1844/11). When the petition was signed in 1892, the town's inhabitants were facing severe economic conditions. They stated that unless effective measures such as a change of route were taken, the current economic and demographic changes could not be reversed. They claimed it was unfair that they could not benefit from the trade road they had been forced to repair for the previous 25 years (BOA, ŞD 1844/11).

They pointed out that the trade road, which currently passed through the Bahçeler region, was frequently flooded due to the overflow of the Harşit River and needed constant repair, concluding that with this shift in the road, the government could both prevent these adverse conditions and avoid the repair costs (BOA, ŞD 1844/11). Despite repeated requests, the government rejected all proposals to alter the route, asserting that a change was unnecessary and that extending the road to the town center would be disadvantageous. Without detailing these disadvantages, the authorities maintained that even if

the route was altered, the expected benefits to the town would not materialize, as merchants favored the road through Bahçeler over the more arduous climb to the town center (BOA, DH.MKT, 1346/111). Ultimately, the government refused to allow the Trabzon-Erzurum Road to pass through the town center, prompting the inhabitants to seek alternative solutions to address the economic crisis facing the city.

3. Urban adaptation and relocation debates

When the government rejected their request in 1871, the inhabitants of Gümüşhane began to move to Bahçeler, where the Trabzon-Erzurum Road passed through. According to the 1877 provincial yearbooks (salname), there were already 253 households in the five neighborhoods settled in Bahçeler (TPY, 1877) [3]. This relocation can be interpreted as a practical solution to their growing economic struggles. In time, the residents even proposed that the entire town be relocated to Bahçeler as a way to cope with the ongoing economic difficulties. They built their case around the planned construction of a new government house in Gümüşhane, arguing that it would be more beneficial and cost-effective to build it in Bahçeler, where economic activity was increasingly concentrated.

By the last quarter of the 19th century, the existing government house in Gümüşhane (Figure 3) had become entirely unusable. In his report, the engineer of the sancak (sub-province) of Gümüşhane, Bekir Sıtkı Bey, asserted that repairing the building was no longer viable and would be a waste of resources. He argued that constructing a new building was the only reasonable course of action and recommended that it be built in Bahçeler. He believed it to be an essential step for the urban development of the town. He further noted that the residents of Bahçeler were willing to make a financial contribution, with half of the construction costs being covered by public donations (BOA, DH.MKT, 942/49).

The governor of the sancak of Gümüşhane, Mustafa Zihni Pasha, also supported the idea. In his petition, he

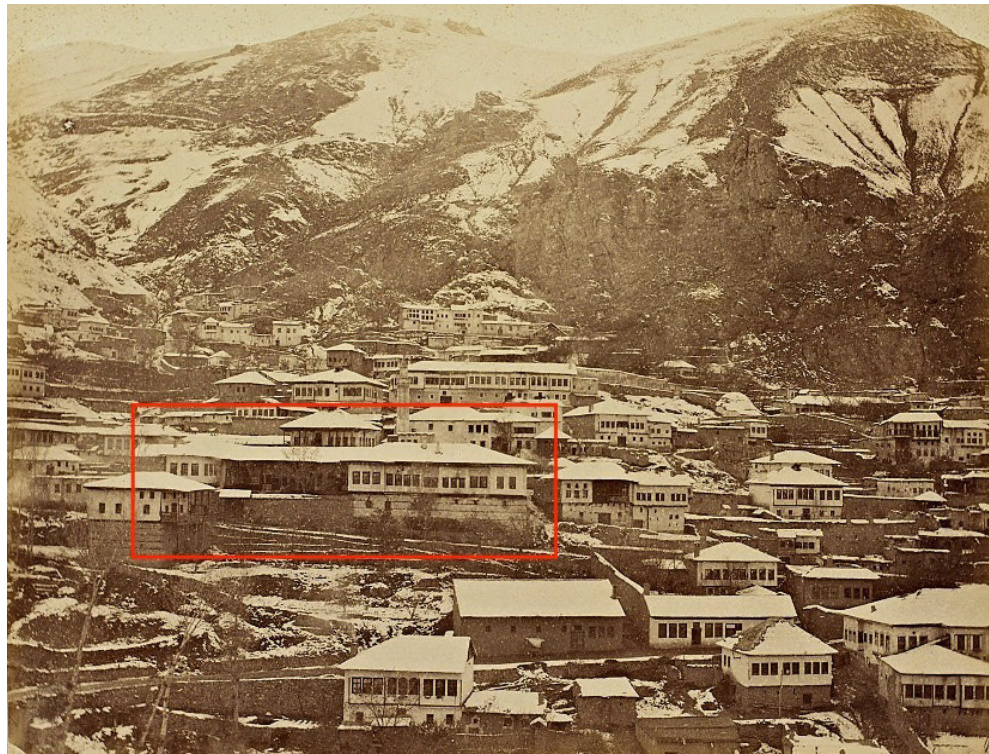


Figure 3. Former Government House of Gümüşhane in the Abdülhamid II Collection (Istanbul University)

highlighted that the main trade route between Trabzon and Erzurum passed far from the town center, prompting some inhabitants to relocate closer to the road. He argued that building the new government house in Bahçeler would promote development and help curb depopulation. Refizade Hacı Mustafa Efendi, a member of a prominent local merchant family, also expressed his support. Living in the Saadettin Neighborhood of Bahçeler, he offered a plot of land for the new building and pledged 50 liras in donations. He emphasized that constructing the government house in Bahçeler was vital for the town's future prosperity (BOA, DH.MKT, 942/49). These appeals eventually escalated into calls for the entire town's relocation. Petitioners argued that the existing downtown location was no longer viable as an administrative or economic center. They proposed moving the administrative center including the police station, telegraph office, and town hall to Bahçeler (BOA, BEO 2242/168091).

It is evident that influential families in the Bahçeler region, such as the Kadirbeyzâde, Refizade, Değirmencizâde, and Hacımustafazâde, supported the move. Since the government

buildings were located in the old town center, Bahçeler residents had to travel there to conduct their official affairs. Schools were also concentrated in the town center, and children from Bahçeler struggled to attend their courses, i.e. being deprived of access to education. Residents repeatedly submitted petitions requesting at least an elementary school in Bahçeler. By 1908, these petitions emphasized the imbalance: while the town center had elementary and middle schools for 500–600 households, Bahçeler, with its 500 households and five neighborhoods had no school at all (BOA, MF.MKT 1052/18).

However, not all residents supported the relocation. Many Muslim and Greek merchants in Gümüşhane, still hoping for the Trabzon-Erzurum Road to be rerouted through the town, strongly opposed the proposal. They contended that relocating the government center would hinder and not help the town's development. They stated that the current location of Gümüşhane was architecturally developed while the Bahçeler region was underdeveloped. Although there was a need for the underdeveloped areas to be civilized, it was wrong to abandon the places that had been developed for

centuries and had reached an admirable level. They argued that Gümüşhane was architecturally developed, with an established urban fabric—including mosques, churches, schools, markets, and around 700 households—while Bahçeler lacked infrastructure and was underdeveloped, aside from housing a military barracks. One petition pointedly criticized the proposed move, describing Bahçeler as “a desolate place with bad air” with only “30 households.” The petitioners further warned that relocating administrative buildings to remote, undeveloped areas could lead to social and security problems [4]:

“...The majority and perhaps the entire sophisticated and civilized people of the Ottoman Empire are mainly living in the places where the government houses are located, namely in the town centers. Since some of the murders are committed in the places that are far away from the government houses, have no schools and, have a lower level of development, that cannot serve the civilization of the people, transferring the new government house to such a desolate place would pave the way for various crimes and disasters. There had not even been a single case of murder in Gümüşhane for years. For this reason, it was unjust to demote the town of Gümüşhane from such a civilized state...” (BOA, ŞD, 1861/13; BEO 2943/220673).

This petition offers insights into contemporary ideas about what constituted a “civilized” city. According to their statement, a civilized city, for example, must be architecturally developed and have an urban fabric comprising religious and administrative buildings, schools, commercial buildings, and houses [5]. They cannot think of a city center without these buildings and the history behind them. Moreover, people who live in such a city are considered “civilized”. They wanted to live in a developed city and stated that moving the town to an underdeveloped area would be unjust. Despite their differing perspectives, both sides were concerned with the same overarching issue: the future development of the town (*kasabanın ümranı*). Both sides, those advocating for relocation and those resist-

ing it, claimed that their goal was only to secure a promising future for their town. This debate illustrates that even in a small provincial town, there was a vibrant and engaged public opinion regarding urban planning and development.

Finally the government intervened, stating that the continuous petitions were in violation of legal procedures (BOA, DH.MKT 1130/22) and the relocation of the government house to Bahçeler was firmly rejected (BOA, DH.MKT 1130/74). The government had never wanted to relocate either the inhabitants or the new government house of Gümüşhane and ordered the provincial government of Trabzon to stop this relocation attempt without any further explanations, since it would risk the urban development of Gümüşhane (BOA, DH.MKT, 1130/74). Thus, the building and city administration remained in their current location.

While the Ottoman government did not provide a clear explanation for its refusal to move Gümüşhane’s administrative center to Bahçeler, strategic concerns likely played an important role in this decision. The Harşit Valley, through which the Trabzon-Erzurum Road passed, may have been perceived as a sensitive military passageway, an unofficial buffer zone, especially at a time of deteriorating Ottoman-Russian relations. Following the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78 and the territorial losses in the east, the empire became increasingly concerned with fortifying border areas and maintaining control over critical transportation routes. Relocating administrative institutions close to a militarily exposed valley could be seen as a security risk, especially given the frequency of floods, the vulnerability of the road, and the strategic importance of the region in a future conflict. Thus, even without an official explanation, the state’s decision can be interpreted as part of a broader pattern of precaution shaped by military priorities and imperial concerns.

In the early 20th century, settlement in Bahçeler continued to rise. By 1907, there were approximately 500 households in Bahçeler and 600 in the town center. Gümüşhane and Bahçeler func-

tioned side by side as two interconnected parts of the same town. Residents of Bahçeler regularly traveled to the town center for work, school, and daily affairs, returning home in the evenings. Likewise, those living in the town center frequently went to Bahçeler to engage in trade. Despite this dual structure, the town ultimately remained in its original location, as the government never approved a full relocation. Nevertheless, the economic and demographic challenges that had prompted calls for relocation remained unresolved.

The debate over the relocation of Gümüşhane's government buildings was not only about administrative convenience or economic necessity—it reflected a deeper contestation over urban form and spatial hierarchy. In the late Ottoman context, the presence of official institutions such as government houses, schools, and telegraph offices was seen as central to the establishment of urban order and the projection of state power. The built environment thus played a critical role in defining what constituted a “civilized” space. Those who opposed a relocation invoked this framework, describing the old town center, with its mosques, churches, shops, and schools, as architecturally developed and symbolically complete, in contrast to Bahçeler's relative spatial emptiness. This view echoes broader trends in Ottoman urban modernization, where planned space, infrastructural visibility, and civic buildings were associated with progress and legitimacy. The petitions reveal that architecture was not simply a backdrop to social life, but a marker of identity and urban value, used both to justify permanence and to argue for transformation.

4. Administrative competition between Gümüşhane and Bayburt

The Ottoman Empire was defeated at the 1877-78 Russo-Ottoman War, losing lands to Russia. Before the war, the Vilayet (province) of Trabzon was formed by Sancaks (sub-province) of Trabzon, Gümüşhane and Lazistan, which includes the kaza (sub-sancak) of Batum (TPY, 1877). In 1879, however, the provincial year books indicate that

certain changes have been made in order to maintain economic vitality of the Vilayet of Trabzon and the sancak of Canik was placed in it (TPY, 1879). Erzurum, on the other hand, lost sancaks of Çıldır and Kars, known for their rich forests and salt mines, to the Russia (Çetin, 2021: 506). Thus, the income of the Vilayet of Erzurum has been reduced.

While pointing out the territory loss to Russia, Ismail Pasha, the Governor of Erzurum, suggested some changes in the administrative organization of the provinces. According to his proposal, a sancak of Bayburt had to be formed with the kaza of Bayburt as the administrative center, and the kazas of Kelkit and Şiran, which then belonged to the sancak of Gümüşhane, had to be placed in the newly formed sancak of Bayburt (Özger, 2007, pp. 79-80). With this proposal the governor aimed to maintain economic revenues of the Vilayet of Erzurum. In December 1878, the central government approved his proposal, and the sancak of Bayburt was formed. The kazas of Kelkit and Şiran belonged in it together with kazas of Tortum and Ispir (BOA, İ.ŞD 42/2224) [6].

Despite its long and rich history, Bayburt remained under the shadow of Erzurum especially during the Ottoman Regime. Although it was on the important trade routes such as Trabzon-Erzurum-Tabriz, Van, and Bitlis Roads, the town did not grow bigger. Therefore, with this change in the administration, Bayburt was finally able to fulfill its long-awaited wishes and had a chance to escape from a state of relative isolation. However, this new arrangement provoked a strong reaction from the Gümüşhane residents and they immediately petitioned the government. The document, dating January 1879, was signed by 115 people from Muslim, Armenian, and Greek communities of Gümüşhane. They stated that they received the news from the newspaper “Ceride-i Havadis” that the kazas of Kelkit and Şiran had been transferred to the newly formed sancak of Bayburt. They described the potential negative consequences if the news were correct, underlining that the trade would come to a halt, the poor

people would migrate “barefoot and bare-headed (yalın ayak baş kabak),” and the rest of the population would be forced to migrate “since they could not stay here for their rickety houses, which were worth five or ten kuruş”. The residents of Gümüşhane emphasized that if Kelkit and Şiran remained lost, the town would turn into ruins in a short time (BOA, ŞD 1830/37).

The towns of Kelkit and Şiran also responded negatively to this situation. In the petition from Şiran, signed by 118 local people from all three religious communities, the following was stated: “When we went to Gümüşhane to conduct official affairs, both the officials and the residents of Gümüşhane offered all kinds of assistance, hosted us in their homes; we were unable to establish these kinds of relations with Bayburt.” Moreover, they explained that being forced to go to Bayburt, which was twice as far away as Gümüşhane (Figure 4), was not acceptable in return for the years of service the people of Şiran had provided to the state. The inhabitants of Kelkit, 107 Muslims, also emphasized that being part of the sancak of Gümüşhane was highly important in terms of good relations established over time and that

it was unjust to be part of the newly-formed Bayburt. Moreover, both Kelkit and Şiran inhabitants stated that if they were not placed in Gümüşhane again, many of them would be forced to migrate. However, they had a strong belief that the Sultan would protect the wellbeing of his subjects and spare them from such dire consequences (herbirimiz memalik-i şâhânenin bir tarafına nakl ve hicrete kıyam olunacağı emr-i tabii bulunmuş ve buna ise rahm-ı şefkat-ı aliyyeleri kâil olamayacağından) (BOA, ŞD 1830/37). In the end, the request of Kelkit and Şiran was rejected. After some investigations, the government believed that this action of residents might derive from the personal benefits of some individuals from the Gümüşhane and therefore, these two kazas remained under the sancak of Bayburt (Özger, 2007, p. 103).

In 1882, four years after the change, the inhabitants of Gümüşhane sent a second petition to the government signed by 146 people. According to this petition, with the loss of Kelkit and Şiran in 1878, Gümüşhane had slowly fallen into ruin. In the last four years, some non-Muslim residents who had difficulty making a living had migrated

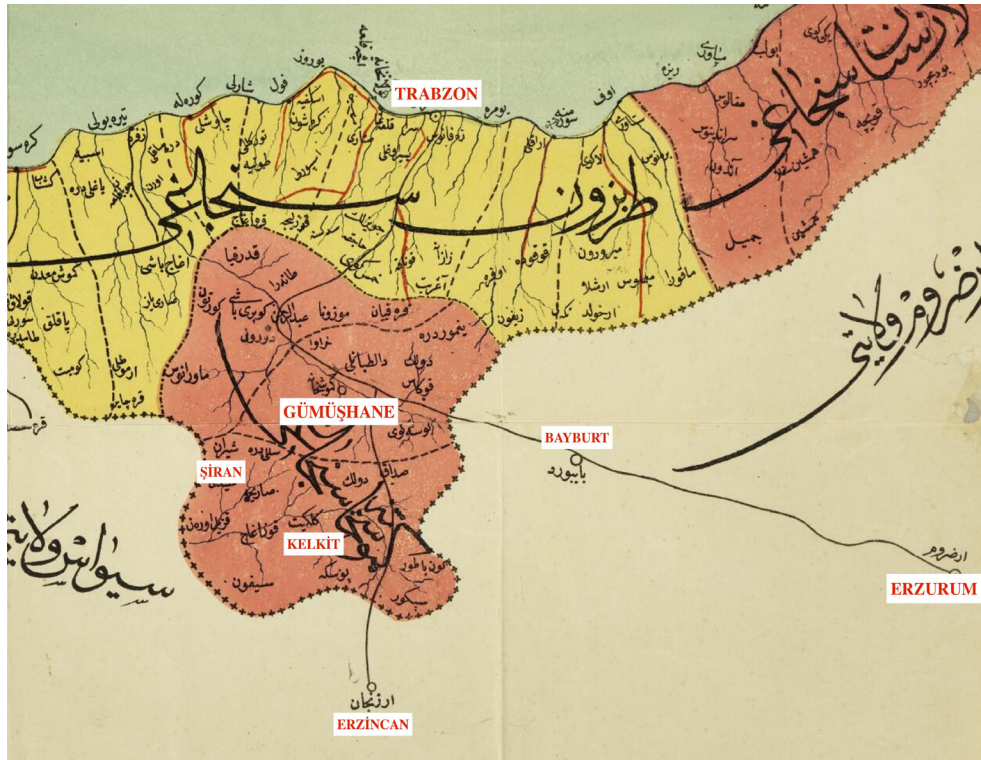


Figure 4. The Locations of sancak Gümüşhane and Kazas of Bayburt, Kelkit and Şiran, 19th Century (BOA, HRT.h 0622).

to Kars or Russia, and it was estimated that if migration continued, some settlements in the sancak of Gümüşhane would be abandoned entirely. In this petition, the Gümüşhane Provincial Council described the current economic conditions of the town, mentioned the decrease in commercial income due to the Trabzon-Erzurum Road passing far from the center, and painted a picture of the negative situation caused by the loss of Kelkit and Şiran above all. Under these circumstances, transferring Kelkit and Şiran back to the sancak of Gümüşhane, as they were in the previous years, would have solved all these problems to some extent. The provincial council also reported that the people had great difficulty in traveling to and from Bayburt and were attacked by highway robbers due to the lack of proper roads and security. They argued that the shorter distance of Kelkit and Şiran to Gümüşhane would make a re-transfer also economically much more advantageous (BOA, ŞD 1834/20).

This matter, which remained unsolved for a long time, was re-submitted to the Ministry of Internal Affairs by the Trabzon Provincial Administrative Council in May 1887. Accordingly, ever since the sancak of Bayburt was formed in 1878, the inhabitants of Kelkit, Şiran, and Gümüşhane were dissatisfied with this change, which was not very logical in terms of both location and administrative order, and it was understood that this change was made only because of the Governor of Erzurum's request. In the end, the Ottoman government demoted Bayburt back to the status of a kaza, and retransferred Kelkit and Şiran to Gümüşhane with a ferman dated December 5, 1887, after seven years (BOA, İ.MMS 94/4000). In the yearbooks, the Ottoman Government stated the following:

"The residents of the kazas of Kelkit and Şiran, which are situated closer to Gümüşhane, have long been going to Gümüşhane to deal with their affairs and other needs; but now they were forced to go to Bayburt, which was further away from them and had no connection with the city. This situation was not in their best interests. Therefore, upon the demands and requests

made to the Sublime Porte, it was decided to abolish the sancak of Bayburt and return kazas of Kelkit and Şiran to the sancak of Gümüşhane as of the year 1304 (1887)." (Trabzon Provincial Yearbooks, 1888).

Even though Gümüşhane's residents were pleased with this change, the inhabitants of Bayburt were not. On January 12, 1889, a petition signed by 140 Bayburt locals was sent to Istanbul. They objected to the decision, stating that it was unreasonable to demote the status of Bayburt, which was located on the Trabzon-Erzurum, Van, and Bitlis Roads. As a distinguished settlement with 2500 households, Iranian merchants frequently used Bayburt, and the gendarmerie was permanently stationed there; therefore, there was no security gap. "If the importance of Bayburt had been understood in the slightest, it would have been unthinkable to take this decision, which is entirely incompatible with justice. It was inappropriate that Gümüşhane, which had no importance compared to Bayburt and consisted of only 400 households and some rocks, had the status of a sancak." Therefore, Bayburt demanded that the decision be re-evaluated by considering the mentioned circumstances (BOA, ŞD 1507/22).

The official response of the government remains undocumented, but the yearbooks state that Gümüşhane maintained its sancak status while Bayburt was registered as a kaza (EPY, 1892; TPY, 1890). As mentioned earlier, Bayburt was, in fact, not really safe and had security concerns regarding the Trabzon-Erzurum Road. In addition to the highway robbers and gangs on the road, the section reaching Erzurum through Mount Kop was physically quite dangerous. It needed frequent repairs and caused many people to die (Özkan, 2012, p. 456). The winter months particularly dangerous. Heavy snowfall restricted the transportation of caravans and military supplies, and wagons frequently got stuck in the snow (Özkan, 2012, p. 217). The residents of Bayburt, who had to travel to Erzurum through Mount Kop to conduct official affairs, demanded that their status be upgraded and transformed into a sancak. According to the petition, the refusal to

upgrade Bayburt to the level of a sancak prevented the development of Bayburt and caused many people to lose their lives on this road (Özkan, 2012, p. 456).

In 1914, one more time, the notables of Bayburt sent a telegraph to the Ministry of Interior, asking for an upgrade of the status of Bayburt. According to them, Bayburt was now an economically, geographically, and militarily crucial political center; however, it still depended on Erzurum to conduct some particular official affairs. The government's response is unknown, but kaza's status was never upgraded again.

In the end, one can quickly realize that this disagreement derives from the lack of proper roads in the region. Residents of Bayburt were forced to use the route, which was in bad shape, and passed through Kop Mountain to reach Erzurum. The same case applies to Gümüşhane as well. The road in the Gümüşhane region needed constant repair since the Harşit River caused floods at least once a year and continued for two months. Lastly, a speech given by the mayor of Erzurum shows that in 1910, the region still lacked proper roads (BOA, DH.İD, 77/11).

5. Conclusion

One of the key findings of this study is the tension between local needs and imperial priorities. The decision not to reroute the Trabzon-Erzurum Road through Gümüşhane's town center, despite persistent petitions, reveals how logistical efficiency, topographical considerations, and imperial military concerns often outweighed local socio-economic needs. The rejection of the local demands by the Ottoman State, citing issues such as steep terrain and construction costs, suggests a pragmatic yet centralized approach to infrastructure planning.

At the same time, the agency of local actors is a major theme. The repeated petitions from Gümüşhane residents, with Muslims, Armenians, and Greeks acting together, demonstrate a shared civic consciousness and a willingness to engage with imperial governance mechanisms. These petitions of locals reflect the community's desire for

economic growth, the importance of trade, and a sense of inequity and accessibility. They also indicate that locals were not passive recipients of state policy, but active participants in shaping their environment. The 1892 petition, in particular, stands out as a case of multi-communal cooperation based on shared economic interests.

The attempted relocation of the administrative center from Gümüşhane to Bahçeler introduces a second layer of contestation, this time within the local community itself. This debate reflects two different visions of urban civility and development: One rooted in the historic, architecturally developed center, and the other seeking opportunity near the trade route. This divergence illustrates how material infrastructure and spatial hierarchy were central to how communities understood modernity, legitimacy, and survival. Moreover, the case reveals the urban space's intimate ties to identity. For the defenders of the oldtown, "civilization" meant permanence, schools, and religious institutions, while for Bahçeler's proponents, it meant growth, infrastructure, and opportunity. The debate was not merely about geography but about urban legitimacy, with architecture and institutions used as proxies for progress.

This case also demonstrates how economic strains can reshape urban pattern and function. The circumstances forced the city to adapt, resulting in a fragmented urban structure. Over the years, the town had effectively existed in two parts: One physically far from economic opportunities, the other far from administrative facilities. Yet despite this spatial separation, Gümüşhane and Bahçeler remained socially and economically connected. The daily commute of Bahçeler residents to the city center for school, work, and official business demonstrates how economic imperatives reshaped everyday life and urban space without completely breaking traditional civic ties. This duality even influenced the urban planning of Gümüşhane in 1930s. The new government of the Republic of Turkey invested in the Bahçeler area due to its advantageous location near the main road, leading it to become

the new center of the town, while the old town center gradually transformed into a residential neighborhood.

Lastly, the rivalry between Gümüşhane and Bayburt over administrative status further reinforces the local understanding of legitimacy and survival. When Bayburt was briefly upgraded to a sancak and Gümüşhane lost control over Kelkit and Şiran, the reaction was immediate and intense. These administrative decisions, though framed by the state as practical rearrangements, were interpreted locally as existential threats. Both towns engaged in territorial lobbying, emphasizing their importance through population size, trade routes, communal harmony, and strategic location. The eventual reversal of the decision in 1887, the returning Kelkit and Şiran to Gümüşhane, highlights that persistence and collective petitioning could yield tangible results, even in the face of centralized authority [7].

This study contributes to a growing understanding of how local communities in the late Ottoman Empire engaged with state-led modernization and administrative centralization. The case of Gümüşhane, its contest with Bayburt, and the infrastructural politics surrounding the Trabzon-Erzurum Road provide valuable insights into the negotiation between imperial policies and local agency. It demonstrates that infrastructure decisions had lasting socio-economic consequences for regional centers, and that petitioning was a widespread and effective means by which even small towns could voice concerns and propose alternatives. Urban identity and legitimacy were closely tied to architecture, institutional presence, and historical continuity, shaping local claims to administrative importance. The Ottoman state's reluctance to relocate centers or alter infrastructure plans stemmed not only from economic considerations but also from strategic and security concerns, especially in contested border areas like the Harşit Valley. Overall, Gümüşhane's experience illustrates that while the central state exerted significant control, local actors were not passive recipients of imperial policy. Through collective action and strategic negotiation, they

engaged in the politics of space, infrastructure, and identity, asserting their agency in the shaping of their urban and regional futures, and also their way of engaging with politics implies the local belief that state has obligations to the public [8].

Acknowledgment

This study is based on the doctoral dissertation of the first author, conducted under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Zeynep Kuban Tokgöz at the Architectural History Doctor of Philosophy Program of ITU Graduate School.

Endnotes

[1] The route from Trabzon to Erzurum had already existed, its first appearance was in a written document in 370 BCE by Xenophon in his famous work, *Anabasis*. In the 1850s this route wanted to be transformed for modern transportation methods. For a detailed reading: Tozlu, S. (1997). *Trabzon-Erzurum-Bayezid Yolu (1850-1900)*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) Atatürk University, Erzurum.

[2] While the road charters do not explicitly follow a cost/benefit approach, the Ottoman government often appears to have acted accordingly. In practice, infrastructure projects were often focused in economically or strategically important areas, indicating a concern to maximize the return on investment, whether in the form of trade facilitation, administrative control or military mobility. This tendency can be observed in the prioritization of roads connecting key provinces to port cities or central hubs, even if official documents do not directly reflect this logic. Such a mismatch between official discourse and administrative practice reveals the pragmatic dimensions of Ottoman statecraft in the late imperial period.

[3] At this point, we should consider that the inhabitants who moved to Bahçeler cannot have been struggling economically and that they could construct a second house. Thus, their reaction cannot be seen as a necessity but as a choice. For example, the Kadirbeyzâde Family, mentioned in the following chapter, had more than two houses in the Bahçeler. Most known

members of this family were the Zeki Kadirbeyoğlu and Hasan Fehmi Ataç, two members of the parliament from Gümüşhane. For more information see: Elveren, A.S. (2019). *Altı Yüzyılın İzinde: Kadirbeyoğlu-Ataç Ailesi*, Librum Kitap. Also, the Refizade Family, who had the biggest mansion in the town center, moved their house to Bahçeler. Refizade (Yüce) Family, was and still is one of the most prominent families from Gümüşhane. Their mansion in town center was even bigger than the government house itself. For more information: San, S.Ö. (2014). *Vadideki Gümüşhane*. T.C. Gümüşhane Valiliği Yayınları.

[4] “memâlik-i mahrûse-i şâhânenin ekserîsinin ve belki de umûmîsinin terakkî-i hâzırararı (gelişmiş ve medeni insanları) başlıca hükûmet konaklarının bulundukları mahallerde görülmekte bulunduğu gibi cinâyât-ı muhtelifenin bir kısmı hükûmet konaklarının uzak bulundukları mahallerde zuhûr ve diğer kısmı mekâtibsiz kalan veyâhud dún (gelişmemiş) bir derecede bulunup da ahâlinin bi-hakkın temeddün etmesine (medenileşmesine) hizmeti olamayan mekâtib mahallerinde görüldüğü cihetle sâye-i âsâyiş-vâye-i hazret-i pâdişâhîde kemâl-i emn ü istirahatle ve beş senede bir cinayet îkâ’ edilmeyen (işlenmeyen) Gümüşhane kasabasının şu meziyyetinden düşürülmesi dahi muvâfık-ı nisfet olamaz.(hakkaniyetle bağdaşmaz)” (BOA, ŞD, 1861/13; BEO 2943/220673).

[5] The government buildings were not just a top-down imposition of authority but also a reflection of local aspirations. For local elites and residents, having a government house (hükümet konağı) in their town elevated their social and political standing. It suggested that their town was significant enough to deserve direct administrative attention from the central government. Thus, the construction of a hükümet konağı was both a state-led initiative and a local project, where the desire to appear modern, connected, and important was shared by both sides.

[6] This decision must have been put into action in 1880. According to the Trabzon Provincial Yearbooks (Trabzon Vilayet Salnameleri) in 1879, the sancak of Gümüşhane was still formed

by the kazas of Torul, Kelkit, Şiran and nahiyes (kanton) of Yağmurdere, Kürtün and Kovans (TPY, 1879). The following yearbook was published in 1881, and only the kaza of Torul was recorded as part of the sancak of Gümüşhane (TPY, 1881).

[7] It may be inferred that Gümüşhane, or the Province of Trabzon to which it belonged, enjoyed comparatively stronger representation at the central level, which in turn allowed it to exert a more pronounced influence over the government.

[8] The petitions clearly imply that the state is not only a sovereign authority but also a responsible guardian of its citizens’ welfare and rights; especially regarding information, education, and expression. For a detailed reading, see: Karagoz-Kizilca, G. (2011). Voicing the interests of the public? Contestation, negotiation, and the emergence of Ottoman language newspapers during the financial crises of the Ottoman Empire, 1862–1875. State University of New York at Binghamton.

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