

British-Ottoman Relations, 1713-1779: Commerce, Diplomacy, and Violence

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Introduction

The records of the British embassy in Istanbul in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, now held at The National Archives in Kew, provide one of the most comprehensive collections of a resident embassy in Istanbul in the early modern period. This is in no small part due to the fact that during this period, the British embassy was financed by the Levant Company, a commercial monopoly established at the end of the sixteenth century. With British interests in the realms of the Ottoman Empire largely commercial, a system was established whereby the Levant Company had the right to collect dues and customs from British merchants trading in Ottoman ports and emporia, but in return had to use that income to support the ambassador in his efforts to protect mercantile interests. This system would last until the British crown assumed full control of the embassy in 1804.

The history of British-Ottoman relations between 1713 and 1779 is therefore one of commerce and diplomacy intertwined, with foreign policy aims beginning to edge out commercial interest by the end of the period. The British ambassadors, who had acted largely as commercial agents, slowly became more distinctly political figures, driven by an ever more strident and aggressive foreign policy in the Mediterranean. This change is reflected in this collection of diplomatic correspondence, and also shows some of the features of daily diplomacy between the British and the Ottomans, and with other European ambassadors resident in Istanbul. In the following essay, I will give an introduction to the historical setting and the background of British-Ottoman relations, followed by a discussion of some of the key events of the period, and

finished off with a summary of some of the key themes that emerge from the archival record.

The historical setting

The Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century was a major world power. Although the days of territorial expansion had ended by the second half of the seventeenth century, and although some provinces were more tenuously tied to Istanbul than others, with good cause could the head of the House of Osman claim the title 'sultan of the two lands [Europe and Asia] and ruler of the two seas [the Mediterranean and the Black Sea]'. Yet military setbacks had tarnished the Sublime State's reputation and power, especially after a major defeat by a Holy League comprised of the Austrian Habsburgs, Russia, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and Venice following the unsuccessful Ottoman siege of Vienna in 1683. This led to the first negotiated peace treaty between the Ottomans and their neighbours at Carlowitz in 1699, a treaty successfully mediated by the British. A large part of British diplomacy in the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century centred on the British monarch living up to their reputation as, to quote one letter from 1770, 'Mediator of the Treaty of Carlowitz'.^[1]

The British were by no means the oldest or closest allies of the Ottomans, and this successful mediation marked a change in the relationship between the two states. The Ottomans had had diplomatic and commercial relations with Italian city states, notably Genoa and Venice, from the mid-fifteenth century. Venice, being a neighbouring and often inimical power, also had separate peace treaties with the Ottoman Empire, as did the Sublime State's other major rivals, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Holy Roman

Empire, and Russia. The French became the first Western European state to establish a permanent resident ambassador in Istanbul in 1535, and originally the English traded in the Ottoman realms under French protection. This changed in the later sixteenth century, when demand for Ottoman goods in England increased, and a potential English-Ottoman alliance against Spain was proposed. The political alliance never came to fruition, but between 1579 and 1580, Elizabeth I's ambassador, William Harborne, secured a treaty in the form of commercial rights, known as Capitulations (*ahdname-i hümayun* in Ottoman Turkish), from Sultan Murad III.

The Capitulations were a grant from the Ottoman Empire to foreign powers giving them the right to trade, and permitting the ambassadors and consuls certain legal privileges over their merchants. The embassy's purpose, above all, was to encourage and protect English, and later British commerce with the Ottoman Empire, gateway to so much of the world's commerce and itself a producer of many desirable goods. This was still the case in the eighteenth century. After all, thanks to the unique funding system of the embassy, the better commerce did the fuller the salary of the ambassador. The main commercial rival of the British was the French, and the story of the mid-eighteenth century is that of a French victory in that contest. Although British commercial success, especially in cloth and other textiles, had been the headline of the later seventeenth century, by the 1730s the French had taken the lead, and would be miles ahead in terms of volume and profit by the 1780s. However, as British commerce declined, its political influence increased.

The British and French were not alone in Istanbul. The English embassy was followed soon after by the arrival

of the Dutch, who secured their own Capitulations in 1612. It was not until the eighteenth century that further European states gained their Capitulations and established permanent embassies, specifically Sweden (1737), the Two Sicilies (1740), Denmark (1756), Prussia (1761), and Spain (1782). The Holy Roman Empire, Russia, Venice, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, also sent ambassadors to reside in the Ottoman capital, although they would be imprisoned in the Yedikule (Seven Towers) Castle if their monarch went to war with the sultan. All of these ambassadors lived in the neighbourhoods of Galata and Pera (Beyoglu), an area the Ottomans called *Frenistan*, the abode of the Franks (Europeans). This became a hub of European diplomacy and rivalry, in which the British participated fully. Many of the letters in this collection detail the endless rounds of visits and ceremonies between these various ambassadors, and the inevitable disputes over rank and honour.^[2] They also provide valuable insights into the sorts of ceremonies ambassadors would undergo at Topkapi Palace, the sultan's primary residence in the city, especially on a new ambassador's arrival where he would have a formal audience with the sultan and the grand vizier.^[3]

Through the diplomacy of daily interactions with Ottoman officials, the British ambassadors would seek to protect and promote the interests of British merchants. However, political concerns began to play a larger role in the eighteenth century. When diplomatic ties between the two crowns were renewed following the British Civil Wars with the arrival of Heneage Finch, 3rd Earl of Winchelsea, in Istanbul in 1661, the young earl arrived full of confidence, claiming to Charles II that 'I shall endeavour to increase Your Majesty's interest here all that I can, and I doubt not but to make

[the Ottomans] so sensible of Your Majesty's greatness, as to make them very cautious and jealous to do anything which may disgust Your Majesty.^[4] Indeed, this period of the late seventeenth century was marked by British violence in the Mediterranean following the establishment of the colony at Tangiers in 1661, with naval wars against the Ottoman autonomous regencies of Tripoli (1674-6) and Algiers (1677-83). There would be no direct conflict between Britain and the Ottomans until the first Ottoman-British War of 1807-09, and in many respects the documents in the State Papers tell the story of Istanbul as a centre of international diplomacy through the transformation of commercial interest into the aggressive pursuit of foreign policy.

The ambassadors and British-Ottoman relations

The hefty tomes of SP97 contain letters, translations, memorials, and financial accounts, primarily in English, but with a significant number in Italian - the diplomatic lingua franca in the Ottoman Empire until the nineteenth century - and a number of documents in Ottoman Turkish and Latin. The volumes covering the Georgian period up to 1782, SP97/23 up to SP97/60, take us from the final years of the embassy of Sir Robert Sutton (1701-1716) up to the first years of the tenure of Sir Robert Ainslie (1776-1793). SP97/23 to SP97/55 follow in a largely chronological pattern, with SP97/56 to SP97/60 providing supplementary documents gathered in a more haphazard fashion. A thorough investigation of these State Paper records reveals the extent of the difference in the nature of British-Ottoman relations as it developed in the sixty or so years between the embassies of the two Sir Roberts, Sutton and Ainslie.

Starting this survey in 1713, we join Sir Robert Sutton at the end of his rather long embassy, having arrived in Istanbul in 1702. His embassy (see SP97/23 ended in 1717 when he was chosen to act as British mediator at the negotiations for the Treaty of Passarowitz. He was succeeded by Edward Wortley Montagu (see SP97/23), husband of Mary Wortley Montagu, famous for her *Turkish Letters*. His tenure was brief and (from his perspective) frustrating,^[5] and he was succeeded by the ebullient Abraham Stanyan (see SP97/24-26) that same year. Stanyan was a political favourite back in London, and had significant diplomatic experience. He served in Istanbul for almost thirteen years, and in 1729 was replaced by the Earl of Kinnoull (see SP97/25-28). Kinnoull was quite the opposite of Stanyan. From Jacobite stock and with a very different approach to politics, he was less than impressed with his predecessor's joie de vivre, reporting that Stanyan's time in Istanbul 'has been upon a sofa with the women'.^[6] His Catholic links and friendship with the French ambassador, the Marquis de Villeneuve, aroused intense suspicion in both Istanbul and London,^[7] and he was recalled in some disgrace in 1735, hanging on in Istanbul until he was definitively summoned back home a year later.^[8]

If the appointments of Sutton, Wortley Montagu, Stanyan, and Kinnoull had been influenced by the political scene back in London, then the next set of ambassadors were dispatched with commercial interests in mind. During Kinnoull's ambassadorship the British merchants in the Ottoman Empire, and consequently the embassy financed by them, began to suffer severe financial hardships. This was in part due to the Ottoman-Persian War of 1730-5 that disrupted trade, and in part due to the strengthening of French

trade from the 1720s that would see them overtake the British by the mid-1730s.^[9] In 1735, Sir Everard Fawkenner (SP97/27-31), who had significant experience as a merchant in Aleppo, arrived in Istanbul. His instructions reveal the extent to which he was expected to protect the merchants' interests,^[10] although at the same time his additional instructions show an increasingly political direction for the British ambassadors to the Ottoman Empire.^[11]

At the same moment that British trade in the Eastern Mediterranean was losing out to the French, British politics was making significant headway. Having successfully secured the role of mediator at the pivotal Treaty of Carlowitz in 1699, the British would attempt to build on their position as impartial friend throughout the eighteenth century. They pushed for and gained mediation in the Treaty of Passarowitz (1718) between the Ottomans and the Austrians^[12] and went for the mediation at the Treaty of Belgrade (1739) under Fawkenner's embassy, but were beaten to it by the French.^[13]

This period marked a major turning point in British-Ottoman relations. Fawkenner, who of course was still paid by the Levant Company, was suffering financial hardships as a result of the expenses of his embassy^[14] and solicited permission to return to Britain on leave.^[15] This was granted,^[16] but Fawkenner's short leave turned into a permanent absence. The ambassador's departure could not have come at a worse time. The War of the Austrian Succession (1740-8) brought conflict between Britain and France to the waters of the Ottoman Mediterranean. This had happened in earlier wars, notably the Nine Years' War (1688-97) and the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), but the scale of the violence in the 1740s was

something new. Many Ottoman merchants freighted their goods on board French ships, and so found themselves targeted by British privateers. This caused outrage, and the Ottoman government instituted a number of legal measures to attempt to stop these British attacks in Ottoman waters.^[17] Things got so bad that the British chargé d'affaires, Stanhope Aspinwall (SP9731-32), wrote to London that the Ottoman court was beginning to conclude 'that the English are no longer their friends'.^[18]

Finally, in 1747, a new ambassador arrived. James Porter (see SP97/33-41) was another ambassador with a mercantile background, which, after Fawkenner's desertion of his post, caused some consternation with the Ottoman government.^[19] Porter's tenure as ambassador was largely spent trying to improve the economic situation for British merchants, but he also found himself involved in promoting the granting of Capitulations for Prussia following the signing of a treaty between Britain and that state.^[20] He also had to deal with the renewed threat of the privateering wars in the Mediterranean during the Seven Years' War (1756-63),^[21] and although there was still a significant risk to British-Ottoman relations through this maritime violence, Porters letters show that hurting the French was more important than placating the Sublime State.^[22]

Porter solicited his return to Britain and was replaced in 1762 by Henry Grenville (see SP97/41-42), whose brief time in Istanbul was dominated by the continued fallout of British privateering, as well as an increasingly loud clamour from the British merchants complaining about the decline of their trade in the Levant.^[23] It was no coincidence, therefore, that Grenville was replaced by the experienced merchant and former Resident in Venice, John Murray (SP97/43-51), who arrived in 1766.

Murray was an able ambassador who was able to navigate disputes over customs levied on British goods,^[24] and the overall level of trade began to increase, although the Levant Company itself was in increasing financial trouble and required regular Parliamentary bail-outs. However, much of his good work was undone by the development of a closer relationship with the Ottoman arch-rival Russia, which further discredited Britain's role as impartial broker and friend, especially when direct military assistance was given to the Russian fleet in the disastrous (from the Ottoman perspective) war of 1768-74. The Ottoman government initially wrote to London explaining that they were going to war in reaction to Russian provocations.^[25] However, they became well aware that the British had provided provisions and munitions for the Russian fleet en route to the Mediterranean, and when the Ottoman fleet was destroyed by the Russians at the Battle of çesme in 1770, there were riots targeting British interests.^[26] Murray himself was worried that he would be imprisoned in Yedikule when rumours arrived that the British were sending warships to help the Russians.^[27]

After all this turmoil, and some final efforts to improve British trade,^[28] Murray secured permission to go on temporary leave back to Britain in 1775, but died of an illness en route. The appointment of his successor marks the final development in the British embassy in Istanbul in the eighteenth century. Sir Robert Ainslie (SP97/52-55) arrived in Istanbul in 1776, and would remain there as ambassador until 1793. A seasoned diplomat with a background in espionage, Ainslie's embassy saw a shift from mercantile ambassadors to professional diplomats. Meticulous in his correspondence, which continues into the F078 series

(F078/1-15), Ainslie's first years, those covered by the last stretch of the State Papers, were dominated by commercial and political turmoil. The beginnings of a British commercial push in the Red Sea and Egypt led to major disputes with the Ottoman government over commerce and sovereignty,^[29] and the War of American Independence (1775-83) saw a renewed privateering conflict between the British and French in the Mediterranean that again witnessed Ottoman shipping assaulted by British warships. The British merchants complained to their government about the damage this policy caused their trade^[30] and Ainslie warned about the difficulties and dangers these actions would produce,^[31] but to no avail, and high levels of violence forced the Ottoman government once again to introduce legal restrictions on the movement of warships in Ottoman waters.^[32]

Ainslie would do much to try to repair British-Ottoman relations, particularly pushing the idea of the British as an impartial mediator,^[33] in which role he would act at the Treaty of Sistova in 1791. However, those early years of his embassy saw commercial and political low-points in relations between London and Istanbul. Trade was reduced to an almost non-existent level, and the violence of British privateers against Ottoman shipping further tarnished Britain's image as a friend and mediator.

Key themes

Several key themes emerge from this brief exploration of British-Ottoman relations in the eighteenth century through the records of the State Papers. On a general level, the correspondence held in this series paints a rich picture of how diplomacy was conducted in Istanbul in this period, with insights into British-

Ottoman diplomatic practices, the intrigues and arguments of the various European ambassadors in Istanbul, and the daily mechanics of managing an embassy. These volumes also tell an important story about the changing nature of British-Ottoman relations in this period. The declining nature of British commerce in the Ottoman realms made life difficult for the ambassadors, not just because they were financed by the profits of that trade, but because they were surpassed by their main rival, France. It is no coincidence that as British commercial fortunes plummeted, the pursuit of political aims became a greater feature of the ambassador's job. This was combined with a more strident and aggressive foreign policy that saw treaty making and mediation accompanied by maritime violence. As such, this period in the middle of the eighteenth century marks the transformation of Britain's relationship with the Ottoman Empire, a changing relationship that would lead to the first conflict between the two powers at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the subsequent beginnings of British imperialism in the region.

NOTES

- ^[1] SP97/46, 3, Viscount Weymouth to John Murray, 16 February 1770, no.3.
- ^[2] SP97/31, 198, Sir Everard Fawkener to Duke of Newcastle, 23 March 1740/1.
- ^[3] SP97/26, 74, Account of His Excellency..., 29 June 1730 OS.
- ^[4] SP97/17, Earl of Winchelsea to Charles II, 3/13 March 1660/1.
- ^[5] SP97/24(2), 149, Edward Wortley Montagu to Joseph Addison, 23 December 1717.
- ^[6] SP97/26, 119, Earl of Kinnoull to Charles Delafaye, 19 August 1730.
- ^[7] SP97/27, 260, Duke of Newcastle to the Earl of Kinnoull, 16 May 1735.
- ^[8] SP97/28, 141, Newcastle to Kinnoull, 16 July 1736.
- ^[9] SP97/24(4), 399, Abraham Stanyan to Lord Carteret, 16 September 1721.
- ^[10] SP97/27, 384, Instructions to Fawkener, 21 August 1735.
- ^[11] SP97/27, 388, Additional Instructions, 21 August 1735.
- ^[12] SP97/24(2), 223, Sutton to James Craggs, 6 May 1718.
- ^[13] SP97/29, 555, Fawkener to Newcastle, 14 November 1738; SP97/30, 219, Newcastle to Fawkener, 23 March 1738/9.
- ^[14] SP97/31, 352, Fawkener to Newcastle, 29 March 1742 Separate & Private.
- ^[15] SP97/31, 360, Fawkener to Newcastle, 2 April 1742.
- ^[16] SP97/31, 439, Newcastle to Fawkener, 17 July 1742.
- ^[17] SP97/32, 78, Stanhope Aspinwall to Newcastle, 12 May 1744.
- ^[18] SP97/32, 302, Aspinwall to Newcastle, 9 February 1745/6.
- ^[19] SP97/32, 376, Aspinwall to Newcastle, 26 January 1746/7.
- ^[20] SP97/39, 236, James Porter to William Pitt, 16 March 1757, Most Secret; SP97/40, 3, Pitt to Porter, 2 March 1758, Most Secret.
- ^[21] SP97/40, 36, Porter to Pitt, 4 April 1758; SP97/41, 214, Porter to Pitt, 17 September 1761.
- ^[22] SP97/40, 38, Porter to Pitt, 17 April 1758.
- ^[23] SP97/42, 277, Anthony Hayes to Halifax, 10 June 1765; SP97/42, 289, Factory of Constantinople to Halifax, 24 August 1765.
- ^[24] SP97/43, 74, Murray to Shelburne, 1 October 1766.

^[25] SP97/44, 139, Devlet-i ?Aliye-?i Da?imü'l-?arar ile olan mu?ala?ayi Rusiya devleti fes? ve na?z-i ?ahd eyledigini müs?ir beyan-namedir, n.d. (November/December 1768). A full transcription, translation, and analysis can be found at: Michael Talbot, 'A legal and diplomatic justification of the Ottoman declaration of war against Russia, 1768', *ShariaSource* [2017], <https://beta.shariasource.com/documents/2924>

^[24] SP97/46, 154, Murray to Weymouth, 3 August 1770.

^[27] SP97/45, 73, Murray to Weymouth, 3 March 1769.

^[28] SP97/51, 35, Murray to Rochford, 3 April 1775.

^[29] SP97/53, 52, Ainslie to Weymouth, 4 March 1777; SP97/53, 105, Translation of a Representation from the Ottoman Porte, 5 May 1777.

^[30] SP97/55, 252, Petition of the Levant Company, 17 November 1779.

^[31] SP97/55, 177, Ainslie to Weymouth, 3 September 1779.

^[32] SP97/55, 261, Traduzione dal Turco, 20 November 1779.

^[33] SP97/55, 101, Ainslie to Weymouth, 4 June 1779.

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