

## THE OTTOMAN TRADE IN THE BLACK SEA IN THE LATE 18TH CENTURY

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### *Abstract*

*For centuries the Strait of Canakkale (Dardanelles) and the Strait of Istanbul (Bosphorus) was the economic lifeline for the hinterland of the Black Sea region and a food supplier of the city of Istanbul. From the point of view of history it is well known that the Empire who controls the Straits controls the economy of the Black Sea Area. This fact includes the Byzantine and Ottoman empires. The main goal of the Ottoman Empire was to take control of the Strait of Istanbul (Bosphorus) and the Strait of Canakkale (Dardanelles) and the routes leading to the Black Sea. The Ottomans used very specific stipulations in trade agreements with the European countries with the purpose of controlling the passage of foreign vessels through the Straits and the whole trade in the hinterland of the Black Sea region. This article presents a document that shows the permission given to the English merchant vessels and merchants to do trade in the Black Sea Area after the Küçük Kaynarca Treaty (1774), in 1799.*

**Keywords:** The Strait of Canakkale (Dardanelles), the Strait of Istanbul (Bosphorus), the Black Sea, the Ottoman Empire, English merchant vessels, the Küçük Kaynarca Treaty

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### *Introduction*

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At the end of the 16th century the main purpose of the Ottoman Empire was to control the sea routes leading to the Black Sea and to use a system of ship control for vessels that had to pass through the Straits. After the conquest of Constantinople (under Mehmet the Conqueror, 1543), the Ottomans' attention was drawn towards the Black Sea and their purpose was to control the right of passage through the Straits. When the Ottomans succeeded in subjecting the Black Sea under their control (1484 during the reign of Beyazid II), the Ottoman Empire prohibited the passage of all foreign vessels into the Black Sea. Totally isolated from international trade at the end of the 16th century, the Black Sea became an inland sea from the economic and administrative point of view and maintained this status until the signing of the Küçük Kaynarca Treaty in 1774 (Bostan, 2006: 350).

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At the beginning of the 18th century the Ottoman Empire had under its control the sea routes leading to the Black Sea, and the Ottomans refused to give the right to pass the Straits and to enter the Black Sea to all foreign vessels. All foreign flagged vessels including merchant vessels were not allowed to enter the Black Sea and do trade in its harbours. The unshakable purpose of the Ottomans could be explained in the letter that was written on behalf of Sultan Mustafa II, and sent by his successor Ahmed III when he was enthroned, to Tsar Peter the Great: “As the Black Sea is totally in my control and authority and no other country than myself and my Imperial pact are allowed to be authorized for every vessel to enter the Black Sea – Karadeniz bi l-kulliye kabaz-i tasaruf husrevânemizde olup kimsenin alâkası Karadenize çıkmasına mesâî olmayup” (Bostan, 2006: 353)

The period when the Straits were under the control of the Ottoman Empire, from the point of view of the Imperial pact regarding the permission for the merchant vessels to enter the Black Sea, can be divided in four different periods.

The first period starts with the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans, when the Straits were completely under the control of the Ottomans and the foreign flagged vessels were not allowed to enter the Black Sea. The Ottomans built the Anatolian Fortification (Anadolu Hisarı) during the reign of Beyazid Yildirim and during Mehmet the Conqueror the Ottomans built the Rumeli Fortification (Rumeli Hisarı) in order to conquer the city of Constantinople. During the first period as the colonies of Venice and Genoa still existed, only vessels flying their flags were allowed to pass through the Straits and enter the Black Sea.

The second period starts at the end of the 16th century, when the Ottomans kept the status of the Black Sea as an inland sea, and it ends at the end of the 18th century.

The third period starts with the permission given by the Ottomans to Russian merchant vessels to enter the Black Sea, after the signing of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774), and it ends at the beginning of the 1800's, when the other European countries got the permission to pass through the Straits, navigate in the Black Sea and do trade in its quays and harbours.

The fourth period began at the end of the Crimean War (1853-1856), when the Ottomans gave permission to military vessels to pass through the Straits too.

All the commercial agreements for these periods, between the Ottomans and the other European countries, had specific stipulations regarding the passage through the Straits, the right to enter and navigate the Black Sea and do trade in the Ottoman harbours and quays. It is well known that the Straits were under the Ottomans' control for a long period, for more than two centuries.

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*The Ottoman maritime trade in the Black Sea in the late 18th century*

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Trade in the Black Sea was regional and international but also one of the most important domains of the Ottoman economy (Inalcık, 1996: 233). Trade in the Black Sea had no foreign rivals for a long period of time, as the Straits were under the control of the Ottomans. The Ottomans eliminated the Genovese and Venetians from the Black Sea's trade and developed a specific economy in this region, an economy that was a part of the Ottoman state's economy.

From the ancient time merchants engaged in trade in the Black Sea region traded goods such as grains, dried fish, salt and sulphur that reached the western shore of the Mediterranean Sea and the Aegean islands. The very specific geographical conditions of the north shores and south shores of the Black Sea region offered the climate conditions that allowed the development of a specific economy that was integrated in the economy of the Ottoman state. The economic area of the Black Sea hinterland included on the one side the north of the Black Sea region with its hinterland including Moldavia, Crimea, with a rare population, but a good climate condition for agriculture that offered the possibility to be the supplier of grains, dried meat, dried fish and other goods, and on the other side, the south shore of the Black Sea, including here the area between Asia Minor and the Aegean Sea, with its export of wine, olive oil, fruits, raw cotton, rice and manufactured products. The economy of these regions was well integrated in the Ottoman economy. Trade in this hinterland represented a balance for the whole Ottoman economy in this region, also in the period when the international trade between Central Asia and the Western countries passed the difficulties of many wars. A very important role in the exchange of goods, in the maritime trade in the Black Sea region, between the Ottoman state and the Western countries was played by the capitulations and trade agreements that the Ottoman state accepted. The Ottomans used to give authorization and permission to their Western partners and to their vessels to enter and navigate in the Black Sea and do trade in its quays and ports. In giving permission to foreign merchants to do trade in the Black Sea ports the Ottoman gave an utmost attention and importance to the export of banned goods as: olive oil, soap, coffee, sulphur and to the prevention of the non-Muslim subjects from remaining in Russian ports.

The Ottomans used very specific stipulations in the capitulations and in trade agreements with the European countries with the purpose to control the passage of foreign vessels through the Straits and the whole trade in the hinterland of the Black Sea region.

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*Ottoman trade vs. European trade*

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The international exchange of goods among the minorities living in the Ottoman territories and the European merchants brought for the Muslim merchants new methods of payment, the possibility to change the ways of negotiating and loyalty from their customers. Commerce offered the opportunity for alternative investments in the guild's activities. The commerce of the Ottoman state could be studied from the perspective of its activities, such as maritime trade and land trade.

The Ottoman industrial system was still at the level of crafts and the economy did not offer the possibility of an international trade with vast activities or a common market to display the products, but it offered respect to its merchants and the possibility to do trade by land and by sea. The vast territories of the Ottoman Empire were not a barrier for trade and the many provinces with various climate and raw materials provided good circumstances to develop commercial activities that were well integrated in the European economic system; even so there was a high cost for the transport, as the Ottomans practiced commerce at long distance and very long distance, but the cost of land trade was good compared to the cost of land transport (McGowan, 1994: 703).

The increasing demand of the European countries for the raw materials coming through the Ottoman land offered the possibility to Ottoman merchants and foreign merchants living and doing trade in the Ottoman domains to be involved in the international commerce. As the political and economic situation in the Western countries of Europe influenced the interest for the establishment of commercial companies, there was a rise in the number of Western merchants involved in the international trade with the Ottoman state at the end of the 18th century. The newly established companies were supported by their Embassies and Consulates settled in the capital city – Istanbul and in the main Ottoman ports and towns. Foreign merchants needed authorization and permission to do trade in the Ottomans' lands and ports and in this respect their demands were increasing and the Ottoman power was declining.

One of the main characteristics of the Ottoman economy was food supply and one of the most important cities to be supplied was the city of Istanbul, with its 1 million inhabitants. The specific economy developed in the Black Sea area was important for the economy of the state as it offered the possibility to supply the capital city – Istanbul, and the area around Istanbul. The area around the capital city – Istanbul – was linked to trade, guilds and factories with many activities and food suppliers for the capital city (McGowan, 1994: 701).

The capital city – Istanbul – was the most important commercial city of the Ottoman Empire, but it was more a consumer city than a centre for craftsmen and their activities. There were many traditional crafts, guilds, factories, driven by machines using inanimate power and demanding an important investment in

capital, with representatives in the council of the city and many of them were from guilds that supplied raw materials for the economy of the Ottoman state (Faroqhi, 1995: 193).

The capital city Istanbul included practically four other towns: Istanbul, the main area, Pera (Galata), Üsküdar and Eyüb – surrounded on three parts by sea. This situation was an advantage for the existence of many guilds – but only the rowers and porters were the organizations that had a role in the economy of the area, they influenced the Levantine trade in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea and the trade in the basin of the Black Sea. Istanbul was the capital city where the amount of credit letters transferred the great deal of trade. The existence of credit letters stands for the surplus of goods that went to export compared with the amount of goods that were delivered from the capital city to other ports as Smyrna (Izmir), and all these excesses of goods were covered by credit letters (Mc Gown, 1994: 703).

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### ***New documents that stand for the English trade in the Black Sea in 1799***

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This letter was written in September 1799 in Belgrade and it stipulated the right and permission that was given by the Ottomans to the Habsburgs to navigate in the Black Sea and do trade in its ports and quays. They were allowed to do trade in the Russian ports also:

*....partie de ses propriétés... à la Russie et des causes acordé.... ont aggégés la Cour Autrichienne quoique pas possessionée comme la Russie sur ses rives au même privilège entrée et de sortie. (BOA, HAT241 /13 496 03 02)(See encl. 2)*

As it was stipulated in the commercial agreement concluded between the Ottoman Empire and England, in the body of the letter mentioned below is stipulated the right and permission given by the Ottomans to English merchant vessels to enter the Black Sea and the permission offered by the Ottomans to English merchants to do trade in the Ottoman ports and Russian ports on the Black Sea:

*....Il désire donc aussi acherment de la teneur de ces que les Anglaise sont jour d'une liberté authentiquement accordé par les Capitulation et qu'ils ne se voyent actuellement dans le cas de réclamer que par une désuetude [...] des résolutionne ordinaires des terms mais que n est pas peur cela une rénonciation. Lorsque La Mër Noire ne formait qu'un lac enclavé dans les territoire Ottoman des circonstances qu'il est inconvenable de retraces ici ont transféré une partie pouracent offerire des bases plus se daplés au moment. Le Ministere de Angléterre ne crois pas avoir besoin de s étendre sur les sentimisis naturels que [...] la Maison Anglaise encore la perdonnée le Gouvernement de Sa Majesté Impériale: Il se buins donc [...]de son respentren dénouement dans les Sublime Porte a reçu trop de tremeignagéé pour en pourvoir douter. Belgrad; septembre 1799 (BOA, HAT241/13496-03-01(1214,R,29,Ha/30.09.1799.AD)(See encl.1)*

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### ***Conclusions regarding the Ottoman trade in the late 18th century***

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In the late 18th century, as we can notice, the Ottoman economic system was very different from the European economic system. The international economic system shows that the development of the economy brings an alternative for new technology and it stands for the development of the international trade.

The evolution of the international trade during the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century followed the directions that fit the characteristics of the international trade among countries with a lower rate of technology, and it had the aspects of a pre-industrial economy with similar manufactures and products (Krugman, 1990: 38). The rules of international trade did not change but the goods and products changed and there were new rules brought by the new technology.

During the 18th century the Ottoman trade changed many of its aspects, as at the end of the 18's the Ottoman state gave permission to Western European merchants to do trade inside its lands and they also got the authorization to enter the Black Sea and do trade in its ports.

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