Governors, Authors and the Porte: 
Ottoman Perceptions and Policies during the Period 
Preceding the War of 1736-1739

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Abstract

Starting from the late seventeenth century, the Ottoman Empire experienced major military setbacks in Europe. The establishment of Habsburg rule in Hungary and parts of Bosnia, Serbia and Wallachia was a serious blow for Ottoman domination in Eastern Europe, despite the subsequent recovery of Azov and Morea from Russia and Venice. The defeats had a visible influence on Ottoman policies towards its European neighbors and also on the idea of waging war against them. The literature of the 1720s and 1730s reflects the Sublime Porte’s growing fear of a possible war in the west while the policies pursued during the development of the Russo & Austro-Ottoman Wars (1736-1739) into their full blown forms obviously embody these reservations.

Keywords: Austro-Ottoman War 1737-1739, Russo-Ottoman War 1736-1739, Treaty of Karlowitz, Nahifi Süleyman, İbrahim Müteferrika, Subhi Mehmed Efendi, Şemdanizade Findikli Süleyman.

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1. Introduction

After it became clear that the Ottomans were no longer the sole imposers on the battlefield and at the negotiation table, Ottoman perceptions concerning how the empire compared itself with its European neighbors went through major changes. Successive Ottoman armies had realized an almost uninterrupted advance in Europe for about three centuries, and ultimately installed themselves as far as Hungary. This gradual takeover of the Balkans, which had also begun to extend towards Central Europe, was halted in the seventeenth century and then reversed with the Great Turkish War (1683-1699). With the resulting Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699, the Ottomans permanently withdrew from the territories they held at the margins of Central Europe, namely Hungary and Slavonia, while some Eastern European domains such as Morea and Azov were also lost. For the first time, a major and permanent loss was sealed with a peace treaty, and this came to be reflected far beyond the battlefield and the territorial handover.
A more defensive approach towards Austria and Russia was adopted, and consecutive grand viziers of the early eighteenth century tended to focus on internal affairs. The 1710s witnessed developments that further complicated the picture. Azov was recovered from Russia in 1711 and Morea from Venice in 1715. However, the following Austrian offensive brought about further losses in parts of Serbia, Bosnia and Wallachia, including the major fortress of Belgrade. These concessions were formulated with the Treaty of Passarowitz (1718). After Passarowitz, the Habsburgs started to infiltrate the Balkans, which increased the threat sensed by the Ottoman Empire. This defeat triggered a transformation of the workings of Ottoman political assessments in a comparative context. The notion of reform, which after 1699 had still meant a search in the past, now seemed to become more like experimentation with western "ways."

This study deals with the political perceptions, or self-perceptions, of the Ottoman Empire around the outbreak of the 1736-1739 war and with the policies pursued during 1730s. This war, with its prelude and aftermath, has been the subject of several valuable studies, but their penetration into the
Ottomans’ state of mind is not as thorough as for the Habsburgs because of a lack of Turkish sources. Another study, although making extensive use of different sources, touches only lightly upon perceptions, and instead deals with what actually and exactly happened. In this essay, I want to present the prelude to this war, taking both the findings of academic studies and the Turkish sources into consideration, with a focus on Ottoman perceptions, expectations and policies. To this end, I will also make use of some primary sources which have generally been employed within the domain of Ottoman political thought.

2. Ottoman Self-Perceptions in the early 1730s

One contemporary policy which showed clear signs of a new fear of Europe was the reform of the corps of bombardiers after 1733. This military body, once well established and effective, had fallen into oblivion after the last decade of the seventeenth century. It was felt necessary to revive the institution with reformed specifications, and the French renegade Comte de Bonneval (Humbaracı Ahmed Pasha) was given the task by the Grand Vizier Hekimoğlu Ali Pasha. The document which includes the principles of the reformed corps contains some remarkable points. It begins with the confession that “as a result of the late ease and negligence, the art of bombardiers is [now] in ruins” and it orders that the corps be re-established from first principles. As the document proceeds, it deals with what to do when head-bombardiers have to be appointed to the frontier fortresses: “When the need arises to appoint head-bombardiers to the fortresses of Vidin, Nish, Khotin, Azov, Bosnia and others of the borders.” The editor of the document could have listed the major frontier fortresses of all imperial borders, or escaped this burden by just referring to “border fortresses.” Yet what we see here is indeed an Ottoman sense of a specific threat. No more seeing a weakened Venice as a real source of danger, the fortresses of Greece, although possibly the most vulnerable because of their naval accessibility, are not mentioned by name. Also, the Empire was still fighting with the Persians in the east, and the war was nowhere near its end, but the eastern defenses are also absent, while only five names made their way into the document. The reason is obvious; Vidin, Nish and Bosnia formed the Ottoman defense line against Austria while Azov and Khotin indicated the two major highways through which a possible Russian offensive was expected to pass. We can conclude that, as of 1733, the Empire dreaded an armed confrontation with Russia and Austria most of all. Events to follow further contributed to this outcome.

Two works written in this period help the contemporary reader better understand the Ottoman state's preoccupations and sense of the main challenges before it during the 1720s and 1730s; Nasihatü'l-Vüzera by Nahifi
Süleyman (d. 1738) and Usulü'l-Hikem fi Nizamü'l-Ümem by İbrahim Müteferrika (d. 1745). Nasihatü'l-Vüzera is a book of counsel for ministers of state. Its suggestions on border defense are noteworthy. Nahifi Süleyman says that “through spies and the informing of trusted ones, knowing the current situation of the enemy is of great importance. Without information about the enemy and as a result of negligence, many states have disappeared.” As he elaborates on this, it is suggested that:

Special agents should be sent to each border fortress and conduct an inquiry as to whether the required amount of ammunition is present, and whether all the fortress' soldiers are on duty. The lacking parts shall be completed, and repairs and enhancements [of the castles] shall be undertaken. When there is no possibility of enemy attack, the issues of border fortresses shall be carried out in this manner: As much attention is required, be it for the ammunition, provisions or repairs, as if the enemy forces were on their way. They shall be completed without any flaw, and work should be done in such a way that no defect remains.\(^{11}\)

Such precautions are clearly products of a mind with defensive priorities. The previous quotation does not initially stand out; such advice may be given under any circumstances, and intelligence is an important aspect of power for any state. But in the next section, Nahifi Süleyman indirectly explains why the intelligence in question is required. The provisioning of fortresses is out of defensive concerns, not in preparation for an offensive into enemy territory, and the soldiers required to be on duty are fortress guards, rather than auxiliary forces for the main army. His last two sentences clearly underline his defensive motive. It is also advised that “If the possibility arises, the hostile enemy shall be treated with forgiveness, favor and cover.”\(^{12}\) If this article was a general piece of advice for the army, it would also contain at least some information on how to make raids or lay siege to a fortress. However, the political atmosphere of the Empire around that time\(^{13}\) seems to have influenced the author so that he considers a war with Russia or Austria as likely to take place on Ottoman soil, and the Ottoman forces as possibly only having time to think about their defenses, and he leaves aside the question of any chance of a counter attack. The part on forgiving the hostile enemy can be explained as follows: if the aggressor approaches for peace, and even though the terms are advantageous for the aggressor, the proposal should be accepted and a peace treaty “granted.” Both of these mentalities, especially the one regarding peace-making, are in line with those observed
during the outbreak of the 1736-1739 war, up to the termination of the Nemirov peace talks.

The defensive and reactive tendency in foreign and military policy in the early 1730s produced another work, and this one attracted more contemporary and later scholarly attention compared to the Nasihat discussed above. İbrahim Muteferrika’s Usulü'l-Hikem fi Nizamü'l-Ümem shares the mentality that also gave birth to Süleyman’s Nasihat, but it is ultimately a more revolutionary and questioning work when their proposed methods and reforms are considered.

In Nasihat, war and the condition of the army is the primary concern, and it is also valid for Muteferrika since they share the uneasy condition of a possible Russian or Austrian offensive. Muteferrika states the condition of Ottoman army as follows: “It has been ... required ... to observe that for some time languor in their zeal and lack in the bulk of their existence is seen and [the army] has been suffering from various causes and disorders.” Following this statement, he reminds his readers of the classical Ottoman army structure with its right, left and the central bodies and also of their manner of open offensive and consequent encirclement and destruction of the enemy. Had Muteferrika been thinking the way Nahifi Süleyman did, he would be expected to give advice on how to restore this system and whatever sub-branches it had. But Muteferrika instead tells us about the contemporary structure of European armies, such as the musketeer lines, a working chain of command, the overall regularity and nonexistence of separate attacks. For him, the presence of this order in the armies of the European foes of the Empire, and its lack in the Ottoman army, is the underlying reason for the late military disasters. This idea of imitating European military formations was a revolutionary one for the Ottomans of the early eighteenth century, even more so when we remember that it had been only about two years since the first “unconventional” statesmen of the empire had met their violent end in the wake of the 1730 revolution against the Tulip Era policies. But still, Muteferrika has the courage and the will to propose these ideas since, in his mind, such reforms are the only way to help revitalize the decaying power of the Ottoman army. In other words, fear of Austria and Russia both drove him to write in an unconventional manner and enabled him to keep his position, which he would not otherwise have easily been able to do.

Muteferrika goes on to make other suggestions for the improvement of the capabilities of the army, though not as major and well defined as above. The use of the science of geography, the true-false assessment of military intelligence and cooperating with other Islamic states against the unbelievers may be counted among them. The phrase of “other Islamic states” is not used for no reason. The Ottoman Empire, with its self-defined responsibilities such as the upholder of holy war, ruler of the traditional lands of the caliphate as well as the holy cities, was “the Islamic State” in its own
perception; Iran was ruled by Shiites while the remaining major Sunni states of Morocco and the Mughals were too distant to be dealt with. In the Ottoman's own eyes, the Ottoman state was theoretically the unequaled and unrivaled Islamic state. Yet the recent military setbacks have led Müteferrika to suggest seeking the assistance of “other” Islamic states, though he doesn't force the issue further by mentioning which ones they might be.

Indeed one does not need to elaborate much to find the mentality that drove the author to write such a treatise in such a manner. At one point in his work, Müteferrika touches upon his own condition, from which we shall understand that by doing so he explains his motives in writing:

[I have been] thinking on the reasons for the sedition that has been taking place gradually in this Sublime State, yet my weak mind, twisting about and in pain, has been unequal to the task and remains mystified as to the methods of relief from these hidden causes and how to grasp their real meaning. The ministers of the state and the prominent ones in the Court have committed mistakes in the law of politics, languor in dealing with important affairs, laziness and dawdling in settling the obscure [affairs] of the country, when premonition and caution was what the situation required. [I have] regretted their forbearance and carelessness. Either as a result of divine intervention or the nature of existence or the civilization of humanity, instability has arisen in the world-order and darkness has fallen over the regularity of human affairs. [I have] been in a fog of doubt and concern that it might be the signs of the causes of infirmity that afflict the disposition of this Sublime State and [I have been] sorrowful since this transformation in the situation of all creatures and the inclination to sedition among the people have seemed to be in the ascendent...16

Focusing on this self reflection, one must admit that Müteferrika is mainly interested in the internal decay of the empire. He counts the government in general, statesmen, prominent politicians, law enforcement, events of utmost importance, the overall transformation and the inclination to unlawfulness among the subjects as the main topics of decay. In this passage, there is no mention of disorder in the army, pressure from the western and the northern frontiers or any connection between them, not to mention the recent losses of Hungary and parts of Serbia, Bosnia and Wallachia. As he proceeds, however, one observes that throughout his work everything he suggests in order to reverse this process of internal decline is related to the military.17
Viewing internal change in a wholly negative manner, the restoration of the army as an effective weapon against external enemies is perceived to be sufficient to restore the empire to its position about a century previously. It is clear that Müteferrika was well aware of the speedy changes taking place in Europe and the Ottomans’ relative weakness resulting from that evolution. Yet he refrains from admitting that this late development proves the superiority of European ways, and instead contents himself with connecting it to Ottoman internal affairs. No matter how he chose to do so, there is throughout the work an absolute focus on military affairs and proposed reforms in line with European formations, which indicates that it was the perceived danger presented by Austria and Russia and a desire to evade it that made him produce this work.

3. The First Overtures and the Allies in the Eyes of the Ottomans

One of the official rationalizations of Russia on declaring war against the Ottoman Empire in 1736 was a minor border issue. To assist the central troops, the Crimean army was ordered to march east and the Caucasus was used as a passage. Russia, however, declared it a violation of its territorial integrity and later used this among its main pretexts for war. Nevertheless, the Ottomans were not deliberately seeking to offend Russia with the Crimean army; on the contrary, they were even concerned about the safety of the peninsula after moving the troops out of it. Since Crimea was left without a proper force, the governor of Ochakov, Şahin Pasha, was assigned to watch over the security issues in the area. These “security issues” were not in any way offensive in nature, and did not aim to prevent the Crimean cavalry from raiding deep into the Russian Ukraine. Just the opposite: Şahin Pasha was to deal with any possible incursion into the peninsula and communicate with Constantinople in case a conflict broke out, just as he was ordered in the imperial edict. The Porte seems to have even been over-concerned with a minor border issue, which would under normal circumstances have been dealt with by the relevant provincial administrations, let alone considering any provocative behavior versus Russia. It would only be understood later what this confrontation had lead to when St. Petersburg wrote a detailed explanation for the declaration of hostilities.

The Ottoman government chose not to counteract Russia’s formal note. Russia’s protest at the passage of the Crimean army was received with silence and the least possible attention by the Grand Vizier. The Porte neither wanted to provoke St. Petersburg, nor sensed any danger of conflict that might arise as the final outcome of this communication. Yet no matter how their letter was received in Constantinople, “the court of Petersburg was overjoyed to find that the Turks afforded so plausible a pretense for the hostilities they were preparing against them.”

19
Following the arrival of the protest at Constantinople, Russian army conducted a raid against the Crimean Tartars. This raid was carried out without a formal declaration of war and remained unchallenged by the Ottoman government, which did not organize a military response or dispatch an official protest. It is important to note that Crimea was a semi-autonomous province of the empire, and its vassalage ties were more than nominal. Thus, the Ottoman silence in the face of the Russian raids is noteworthy since the zone in question was under Ottoman sovereignty, not under that of an allied state. Russia was probably encouraged by the Porte's unaltered stance, and, following the initial phase of its raids, Azov was besieged, and this time the place in question was under direct Ottoman administration. The fortress fell earlier than expected.

The unpreparedness of the diplomatic response in Constantinople to a Russian offensive was also reflected on the front. As their troops were gathering near Azov, Russian officials assured the Ottomans that they were loyal to the peace treaty and all their measures were being taken against Tartar aggression. Hearing this, the Ottoman guards in the fort were relieved from undertaking solid defensive preparations, only to see the true side of the story when the two towers near the fort were ambushed. Later, as the siege continued, the news of Russian raids into the Crimean Peninsula were also spread within Azov. The official Ottoman chronicler assessed these happenings as follows: “[Russia] violated and broke the peace treaty; and unmasked its secret malignancy.” The events clearly surprised Ottoman officials, since the unexpectedness of these developments is visible both in the written sources and contemporary policies. The lack of firm defensive measures in Azov must not have been prompted only by the non-hostile messages of the Russian commanders; it seems highly possible that instructions received from the center prompted the fort defenders not to take harsh or provocative defensive actions. But whether these orders were dispatched or not, the Porte's silence over the Russian attacks on Crimea, an area of Ottoman sovereignty, indicates the level of reluctance to fight a war with Russia.

Despite the unilateral military actions of Russia, the Ottomans resisted declaring war for quite a long time when the nature of those actions is taken into consideration. The formal declaration took place at the beginning of May 1736, but this should not be understood as the point at which the patience of the Porte had been pressed to a point beyond bearing—just the opposite: the Ottomans made their declaration when they saw that there was nothing else to do. Prior to taking this decision, the Russian resident of Constantinople was questioned on his country's late military operations on Ottoman soil. His answer that the Cossack-Tartar rivalry was the cause and Russia was friendly to the Ottomans was not found persuasive, yet it was taken into consideration. After Russia besieged Azov, the
Ottomans were sure of the meaning of what was taking place. They communicated with English and Dutch residents, requesting the mediation of their governments. In reply, both of them expressed their astonishment at the recent developments and found it “suitable” for the Porte to answer with a formal declaration of war. Only at this point “it has reached the level of certainty that [Russia] clearly violated the treaty and the agreement.”

It was previously known that Russia had attacked the Ottoman vassals of Crimea, a vassal with more than nominal ties, then laid siege to Azov and eventually captured it. Azov was not within the borders of the special province of Crimea; it was directly held and administered by the central government. But even these two open violations were not enough to make Constantinople declare a breach of peace in its assessments, seemingly holding these thoughts as the untold truth within in the expectation of coming to terms with Russia. It was only after the dissembling of the Russian resident and the astonishment of British and Dutch residents that the official chronicler Subhi Mehmed Efendi (d. 1769) stated that events had achieved the level of clarity. He restrained himself from declaring that while the Ottomans were looking for mediators, Russia was already fighting a war without a formal declaration. For this reason, the Ottoman declaration of war on 2nd May 1736 should be considered taking these preceding attempts at conciliation into consideration, not with a limited understanding that cites public pressure and an “Ottoman awakening” as the main motivations.

The assessment that the Ottoman administration was entirely unprepared for the Russian aggression must be approached with caution. The line between total surprise and evasion is narrow and thus requires the utmost attention. The examples given above show that despite the unexpectedness of the events in the initial phase, the Ottomans were well aware of what was going on after the siege of Azov and employed every method available to escape the foreseen outcome, while throughout this process acting as if they had no expectation of a war in order not to cause further provocation.

Towards the declaration of war, the Ottoman court was communicating with St. Petersburg through its resident at Constantinople, suspecting but still not sure that Russia had already decided and prepared for an open confrontation and was now executing its long-planned campaigns. A letter from the Empress to the Ottoman Empire demanded that the Porte should either send representatives to the border if it wished for peace or the Russian resident and all his effects and property back to Russia if it was war. In reply, the Grand Vizier said that the Ottoman Empire would act accordingly whichever of the two cases Russia chose to abide by. It is difficult to find a clearer example of Constantinople's demonstrating its unwillingness and reluctance to enter into a war with Russia after a period throughout which its action, or inaction, gave the impression that a war was not expected at all. It was foreseen and extremely unwanted in such a way
that even the official response of the Grand Vizier could not escape expressing the lack of political will and the Porte's hesitation to act.

4. The Nemirov Peace Talks

The Ottoman international policy shift in 1736 reflects a reaction to the sense of Russian threat, while the fear of the Habsburg threat remained, only to surface in the year to come. But as the Porte realized that its own methods of evasion were not effective enough to prevent a war with Russia, the Dutch and English governments were asked to mediate. However, they were not as favored by the Ottoman government as they had been in 1699 and 1718, as a result of the Ottomans' recent rapprochement with France. Although for too long it was evident that the war was about to break out, Constantinople could not make the necessary preparations for a campaign, and this reality formed the main motive for the request for mediation. Without a prepared army, and with Russia actively campaigning in the Crimean Peninsula and in possession of the Ottoman fortress of Azov, Grand Vizier Silahdar Mehmed Pasha felt obliged to look for mediation from these two powers and letters to their governments were dispatched. Still, the Empire did not wish to express its current insufficiency, and the letter stated that the expectation from the two mediator candidates was “the fulfillment of an approved service worthy of the glory of the Sublime State.”

However, due to Russian resistance, England and the Netherlands could not be accepted as the sole mediators. For its part, Russia did not want to leave Vienna out of the picture since Russia eventually wanted to pull the Habsburgs into the war. Informed of the earlier Austrian-Russian alliance and Vienna’s relative influence on St. Petersburg compared to the former states, the Deputy of the Grand Vizier Osman Effendi requested Austrian mediation in order to avoid the breakout of an all-out war. As a reaction against this choice, contemporary negative comments concerning Osman Effendi and his policy appeared in many works. Yet these statements should not be taken as too harsh or one-sided. At the time of the mediation request to the Habsburg Empire, the Porte was well aware of the active Austrian-Russian alliance and also understood that Russia's recent military activities in the Crimean Peninsula and Azov were encouraged by its trust in the alliance. The Ottoman government estimated that Russia would expect military aid from Austria when the time was right. This was even made clear in a letter to Vienna asking questions about these concerns. The Porte knowingly and deliberately asked for mediation between itself and Russia from Russia's most trusted ally; an alliance which had been embodied and carried out with mutual benefit and success only three years earlier in Poland. The Ottoman Empire had finally been drawn into the war from which it had made every
effort to escape, at the cost of acting in a way that shook its prestige very much. With no other available option, it sought a helping hand which was then by definition obliged to fight against the Porte, let alone be of any assistance.

Following the successive requests by the Ottomans in order to employ England, the Netherlands and then Austria as mediators between itself and Russia, it was agreed that a peace conference should be held at which the issues that had given rise to the hostilities and any possible actions for the restoration of peace could be discussed.

At the same time, the fact that the Ottoman Empire and Russia were formally at war necessitated the materialization of some preparations, even if of a minimal nature. The Russian army was already in the field, having raided Crimea and captured Azov. The Ottomans, although trusting in the efficacy of the future peace congress, still had to mobilize an army until peace was formally signed with Russia. This was the minimum action to be taken after the formal declaration of war. Preparations were made for the army and the negotiating delegates to march northwards from the Balkans. However, the army was mobilized in a very reluctant way and only to propitiate public opinion, the people being relatively more inclined to fight against Russia than the government. A near-contemporary European source points out that if the Ottoman government had no hesitations about the public reaction, it would immediately have accepted the first peace offers, even to the point of ceding some territory. Today we are not sure about the validity of this statement, but when we consider it in the light of the previous actions and the policy followed en route and during the subsequent negotiations, one cannot help but give credit to it.

The risk of employing Austria in the role of mediator between Russia and itself was no secret to Constantinople. But whatever the Ottoman reservations were about Vienna, it was clear that establishment of peace with Russia would also remove the risk of war in the west with the Habsburgs. To this end, the Porte rushed into renewed negotiations with St. Petersburg.

During a conversation regarding the issue of mediation of Austria between the Grand Vizier Silahdar Mehmed Pasha and Talman, the Habsburg Emperor’s representative in Constantinople, Mehmed Pasha said that “the Sublime State will not relinquish its traditional borders or even one stone of the fortress of Azov. If the mediation takes place, it shall be on this principle.” If this determined message is considered in isolation, one cannot see a point of weakness in the Ottoman will to negotiate tough or even fight in case this request was not realized. But events to follow refute its content as an applicable principle. When Talman’s credentials for mediation arrived, they were ratified by the Ottoman government without asking anything about the preconditions of his assignment. If the Grand Vizier's request had been a real reflection of the Ottoman state of mind, the credentials would have been
thoroughly investigated and the presence of clauses which satisfied the Ottoman point of view regarding the peace talks would have been inserted, or at least some effort would have been made to this end. But the speech given by Silahdar Mehmed Pasha turned out to be nothing more than a communication through words chosen in a careful and diplomatic manner. When the issue of mediation became a reality, Talman was not reminded of that conversation.

Nearly all the contemporary Ottoman sources make extremely negative statements about the Deputy Osman Effendi. Most of them were written after the Treaty of Belgrade (1739), and were thus in a position to judge the pre-war policies of the deputy after the end of the war. Nevertheless, their assessments are valuable since they reflect the political mood of their time, and one can still not altogether dismiss the negative views of Osman Effendi just because they were authored after the completion of a relatively successful war. They deserve to be mentioned since the policies pursued under his authority stand as the high water mark of the actions and efforts of the Ottoman government to appease Russia and Austria and avoid all-out war that now find their way into this article as examples of an institutional fear of Russian and Austrian supremacy.

According to Şemdanizade Fındıklı Süleyman, it was obvious for a sane person, from their acts and statements, that the Habsburgs were deceiving the Porte under the guise of mediation. But Osman Effendi, in a state of “donnishness,” perceived the peace to be certain and proved to be deficient in campaign preparations.\(^{31}\) This was not a general assessment that took place as the overall flow of events was observed by the author; the Deputy, in the strong belief that Talman had persuaded the Russians not to proceed further, prevented the Ottoman army from crossing the Danube towards the Russian front.\(^{32}\)

Şemdanizade’s observations thus seem to have a truth to them. Remaining on the south banks of the Danube meant that the army remained far away from the main action. In another words, the Porte did not wish to meet the Russian army in force, possibly thinking that such a confrontation would make an all-out war inevitable. The risk of war with Austria may also have been considered among the factors, but the later orders of Osman Effendi prove the opposite. The only remaining option for the modern reader is to concede that the negative comments about the Deputy have some truth to them. Most of these works also supply us with quotations from his speeches. Accurate or distorted, these quotations also seem to correlate with contemporary policies. They should be treated in the same manner with the comments on Osman Effendi, since they do not contradict what was taking place in reality, and there is still no conflicting information that would make one suspicious of these quotations’ validity, at least in terms of their content.
Osman Effendi is quoted as saying in a meeting with Talman at the Ottoman army camp at Babadağ, after his formal appointment as the mediator:

We have wintered here. Next year we shall winter in Bender, if necessary in Ochakov and if we can make it, on Russian soil and [we shall] … employ all our potential effort to teach them their place. This shall be realized, if it is meant to be... If you help the Russians, we cannot oppose that, since you have been in an alliance, we do not urge you not to. But if you also insist on breaking the peace with us, we request the completion [of the peace treaty deadline] and we shall send an extraordinary ambassador if necessary. And even if your soldiers cross into our borders again we shall not retaliate. If these acts do not prove to be fruitful and you attack us … we will undertake the armed clash.  

This speech is almost self-insulting when one connects it to a high official, but nevertheless it is more or less what took place in reality. The Porte promised to remain silent in the face of future Austrian aid for the Russian war effort. Had it been realized, Austria would have been at war with the Ottoman Empire, and the Empire would still have guaranteed its non-hostile attitude. Probably the administrators knew that Austria, one way or another, would be involved in this war and wanted to keep its contribution to Russia to a minimum by offering them an option where they would fulfill their responsibility as an ally and still not practically be at war with the Ottomans. But, despite this possibility, the speech still evinces much less self-respect than one would expect from one of the major powers in the first half of the eighteenth century. Up to that point, Ottoman fears had been reflected in their actions and the measures taken, but dignity had been maintained publicly in formal speeches. If this address is authentic, and it seems to be because of what was to take place in the months to follow, the Ottoman government feared the coming war to such an extent that it did not omit apparently appeasing or placatory language from its communications when stating the situation that it was in.

The peace congress delegates were convened at the Polish town of Nemirov under the shadow of such atmosphere. The first draft given by the Ottoman delegation to the Russians recounts the reasons for the conflict and proposes a negotiation solely on these chapters. In the document, what was going on between Russia and the Ottoman Empire was defined as “coldness.” The same is true when the Ottoman delegation was conversing with the official Polish host. In this conversation, the present time period was
described as that in which “[the Ottoman Empire] is still in a state of coldness towards the others [Russia and Austria].”

The official delegation of the Ottoman Empire refrained from admitting that there was a “war” between their state and Russia and that this war had started much earlier, when the Russian operations in Crimea and Azov had begun. The Porte for long ignored this de facto situation and waited to see if Russia would stop. When the opposite turned out to be the case, the Ottomans were forced to declare war, against their own will. Yet even as the Ottoman delegation was defining this period as a state of coldness, the real situation was that Russia was marching south and west into Ottoman soil. The Ottomans were wrong, and had been all along; it had been a hot war from the start. The delegates also knew well what was going on around them, but probably the instructions they received from the Grand Vizier’s camp compelled them to start the negotiations in this manner. Yet this play on words did not work out; the Ottomans’ adversaries were more inclined to carrying out the struggle in the field than coming to terms under the spell of the words of the Ottoman delegates.

Russian troops had not withdrawn from the field throughout the negotiation process at Nemirov, and yet the Grand Vizier persisted on camping at Babadağ, a location relatively farther from the Ottoman border fortresses than the Russian army itself. Muhsinzade Abdullah Paşa, the commander of Bender, asked for urgent reinforcements for the fortress defenses, especially cannon, ammunition and food supplies in order to endure the expected siege. Otherwise, he warned, it would be impossible to resist the enemy forces. Osman Effendi, in reply to Abdullah Paşa’s request, wondered ironically whether Pasha was campaigning somewhere, and continued “if he is afraid of the enemy, we will bring him cannon a hundred times his request in the near future.” This reply was intended to evade the request; the reinforcements never arrived at the fortress. The Ottoman government supposed it to be more probable that the peace would be reestablished than that the current situation would dissolve into an all-out war. Though the Ottoman army was prepared and wintering in the Balkans, the grand vizier refrained from putting it into the field, even in the form of an intimidating force to make the Russians behave in a cautious manner.

The commander of Ochakov, Yahya Pasha, already in communication with Muhsinzade, informed the Ottoman main camp that his agents had discovered a Russian plan. According to this intelligence, they were using the negotiation process as a disguise and marching with their main army towards the siege of Ochakov. For these reasons, Yahya Pasha requested more soldiers for the defense of Ochakov and warned the Ottoman camp: “It has also been witnessed that negotiations are followed by conflicts.” Probably, he was already aware of the Grand Vizier’s and the Deputy's confidence in the workings of the current negotiations and wanted
to warn them since he foresaw a war to be more likely, and Ochakov about to suffer the first blow. However, Osman Effendi replied as follows:

We are about to arrive. If his fear is too much, he shall build up some courage. ... The Pasha has been dreaming. We also did not stay idle and have sent our eyes and ears in all directions... He shall not trouble himself with believing the lies of the Tartars. The issue is nearing the final stage; with the conclusion of negotiations, our return in a short time [to Constantinople] is decided upon. 37

Yahya Pasha was right to think that the first Russian siege would be laid to his fortress and the presence of their army in nearby regions further urged him to work towards strengthening his defenses, but his requests fell on deaf ears at Babadağ. From the Deputy's reply, one sees that he was not only in optimistic expectations about the negotiations; he was convinced that it was about to end the way the Ottomans wanted and the armies would soon retire to their respective homelands. The Ottoman government had fallen into this mistake before the siege of Azov, and when the real situation was understood war was inevitably declared, even though it was too late to act. Now, even after experiencing such a transformation the previous year, the government again had optimistic expectations of the negotiations at Nemirov, to a degree that made the officials ridicule its key commanders in the border fortresses.

The Ottoman camp was receiving requests for reinforcements from various fortresses, and not all were regarding the perceived Russian threat. Vidin, an important fortress on the Ottoman Danubian defense system and particularly the southern key of Wallachia, was also disturbed. İvaz Mehmed Pasha, the commander of the fortress, sent similar notes to Babadağ and reminded them that the Habsburg mediation was a disguise for the offensive to come; the garrisons of Vidin and Nish were lacking sufficient troops. He requested the appointment of an authoritative vizier to command at Nish and extra soldiers for the defense of both fortresses. In the face of these demands, the nature of Osman Effendi’s reply was not altered: “I, myself, guarantee that Austria will not break the peace. May the Pasha enjoy the tranquility and prevent the resources of the state from being devastated.” 38

The Ottoman high command was optimistic about the realization of a peace settlement with Russia which would remove the possibility of war with Austria. Considering the reply dispatched to the commander of Ochakov, the one received by İvaz Pasha is a natural extension of such thinking, and he was not even located in the most urgent place on the map against any Habsburg offensive. Bosnia and Nish were at greater risk, as was the case for Bender and Ochakov. İvaz Mehmed Pasha was aware of this threat and not
only asked for his own garrison, but also requested that Nish be reinforced by soldiers and a capable administrator.

Hekimoğlu Ali Pasha, governor of Bosnia, also sent reports about the mass of soldiers across the border and their ultimate aim of attacking Bosnia, and he received a response similar in attitude to İvaz Mehmed Pasha’s. The Grand Vizier Silahdar Mehmed Pasha wrote to the Bosnian governor that “if Austria crosses the border, it is for the successful conclusion of the peace talks. Do not retaliate under any circumstances.”39 This address is very similar in tone and meaning to the previous speech of Osman Effendi in his conversation with the Austrian representative Talman at Babadağ. The Porte had allowed Russia to raid and devastate the Crimean peninsula without protecting its soil or aiding its vassals, but the outcome later turned out to be opposite of the Ottoman expectations. But just as the trust in Russia was renewed, or the fear grew bigger, it was also the case for Austria. Any retaliation from the Ottoman side would guarantee that an armed clash would result, and the Porte was even prepared to tolerate the march of a foreign army onto its own soil if in the end they could be sent back with minor concessions. What the officials failed to understand was that the amassing was not for the celebration of a festival; even the troops’ routes to their prescribed sieges had been prepared.

When Russia realized that its demands were not met by the Ottoman delegation, the army was ordered to march. In Ochakov, the march of Russians was heard and Yahya Pasha again asked for soldiers and workers to repair the fortress walls. The reply he received shows the interpretation of this march from the Porte’s perspective:

It is obvious that the Muscovite infidels’ dispatch of troops is only for the defense of their own borders. If they attack to that side [Ochakov], he [Yahya Pasha] may be sure that the whole imperial army would be ready before the fortress. It is requested that he not trouble himself with such considerations of low possibility and remain at ease. Let them come.40

As one would expect from this reply, no help or reinforcements were dispatched to the defense of Ochakov until the siege started. It seems that the Grand Vizier and his Deputy still wanted to believe in the Russian pretext for the initial outbreak of the hostilities that its military operations were meant to take measures against the Tartar raids. In line with this understanding, they still considered the Russian military movements to be against the Crimean peninsula. The Ottoman delegation and the army camp must have been in constant communication and the dispatches reporting the deadlock in negotiations must have been no secret to the government heads of the
Ottoman Empire. But this seems not to have affected their attitude towards Russia and their own border commanders. In any case, soon the news reporting the siege of Ochakov and the Austrian forces’ entry into Bosnia and Serbia arrived.

Osman Effendi, considering this attack was never meant to take place, had to consult with the other high Ottoman officials, to whom he did not pay any attention until the siege of Ochakov. Again, the Ottoman Empire decided to go to war, but only when it was inevitable; the negotiations were in deadlock, the Habsburg army has already crossed the border into Bosnia and Serbia, while the Russians had besieged Ochakov. Despite the by now explicit gravity into which the diplomatic and military situation had deteriorated, the Ottoman government did not leave the negotiation conference for quite a long time even after receiving the news of the attacks.

The Porte seemed to rely on the sincerity of Austria's mediation for a long while. It had earlier suspected that Austria might join forces with Russia against the Ottomans but did not reveal its second thoughts as long as Austria was the acting mediator. The Ottoman's suspicions and their policy of displaying trust are understandable and consistent. However, it is difficult to assess the communications between the Ottoman army and the high command in the borders in the same manner, especially when the Austrian military mobilization is taken into consideration. A government which had previous calculations about a possible manifestation of the Austrian-Russian alliance in the battlefield could not be expected to turn a willfully blind eye to the Austrian military activity, but this is what we observe in the Ottoman internal communications with those who were to be responsible for the defenses if an offensive was undertaken. On the other hand, proceeding with the negotiations even after the entry of Austrian forces into Ottoman territory with no peaceful aims must be seen as the highest peak that this policy of compulsory tolerance had ever reached.

5. Conclusion

The non-material influence of the Karlowitz and Passarowitz Treaties is observed in the early 1730s through political, counsel and military instructional writings. The authors were thoroughly concerned with the recent military withdrawals and put forward suggestions in order to avoid further setbacks. These concerns surfaced in the form of fear when the issue of war with Russia and then with Austria was no longer a distant possibility. The policy of feigned ignorance pursued by the Grand Vizier and the Deputy before and throughout the negotiations did not work out as they had expected. Russia, and after a certain point Austria, carried out military preparations and
with the opening of the campaigning season in 1737 the war erupted into its full scale form, even before the Nemirov Congress came to an end. The first officials to bear responsibility for this failure were the top two; Silahdar Mehemmed Pasha and Osman Effendi. Following reports of the offensive actions towards Ochakov, Bosnia and Serbia, news of Ockakov's fall, Nish's surrender with minimum resistance and Austrian military engagements in Bosnia were received in Constantinople. In response, orders were issued for the execution of Osman Effendi and the appointment of Muhsinzade Abdullah Pasha, the commander of Bender, as the new grand vizier.\footnote{The execution of Osman Effendi further supports the argument that the quotations from his speeches in the works of the contemporary historians may be accurate to some extent. The greater sentence suffered by him compared to his master Silahdar Mehemmed Pasha can only be explained by his comparatively greater influence on Ottoman politics, and the quotations underline his power in holding the helm during the decision making process about the most critical matters. On the other hand, Silahdar Mehemmed Pasha also paid for his mistake in denying the advice and requests of his border commanders, and witnessed his office being filled by one of them.}

Notes

1 This paper is a very condensed version of the author's MA thesis, supervised by Derin Terzioğlu, Boğaziçi University, Department of History. The thesis is due to be finished in May, 2011.


3 Ibid., 89.

4 Bruce Mc Gowan, “The Age of The Âyâns, 1699-1812” in An Economic And Social History of The Ottoman Empire 1600-1914 eds. Suraiya Faroqhi, Bruce Mc Gowan, Halil İnalcık, Donald Quataert, Şevket Pamuk (Cambridge, 1994) vol:2, 637-758.


7 Ahmet Halaçoğlu, ”Humbaracı,” in Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1988).

8 Subhi Mehmed Efendi, Subhi Tarihi, Sami ve Şakir Tarihleri ile Birlikte (İnceleme ve Karşılaştırmalı Metin) 1730–1744, ed. Mesut Aydiner (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 2007), 218.

9 Ibid., 219.

10 Maybe the only institutional contradiction to this generalization throughout the 1720s and 1730s may be found in the naval operations. In 1721, the Ottoman navy was before Malta with seventy vessels. Although no clash occurred, it was a daring move when the recent Treaty of Passarowitz is taken into consideration (See Parvev, 194.) Again in 1731, Admiral Canım Hoca prepared ships without imperial orders and raided certain European coasts, committing acts with a high risk of triggering a new war. These raids came at a time when the need for men and money for the Persian campaigns was pressuring the imperial resources, and unrest was on the rise in Constantinople. Therefore, a government which was clearly fearful of European reprisals could not afford to tolerate such provocative acts; Canım Hoca was discharged of his office and appointed as the governor of Rethymno in Crete by way of exile. See Subhi Mehmed Efendi, Subhi Tarihi, 85.

11 Nahifi Süleyman b. Abdurrahman b. Salih el-İstanbuli, Nasihatü'l-Vüzera, Süleymaniye Yazma Eserler Kütüphanesi, Hamidiye 252. There is no page or folio numbers in the copy supplied by the library. Since the manuscript consists of only several folios within a larger volume and clearly distinguished from others by its heading, I content with giving references without page numbers.

12 Ibid.

13 The author Nahifi Süleyman died in 1738 over the age of 90 when he was already retired. It is most probable that this work was written between 1718 and 1735.


15 Ibid., 156-157.

16 Ibid., 124-125.

17 Apart from solely military affairs, Müteferrika also touches upon the knowledge of geography as a useful instrument if learnt well, but again he mentions the usefulness of this only in the military domain. Apart from this...
chapter, the remaining two chapters concern themselves entirely with military formations, military history, military order and military reform. In this respect, the work, apart from being a political treatise written in response to the Patrona Halil rebellion of 1730, is a military reform proposal resulting from the losses of 1716–1718, which were then still influential in the thinking of Ottoman subjects. The concentrated focus on the army may be regarded as an indicator of the level of self-perceived inferiority and of the expectation of further losses in any possible war with the Europeans, though chiefly with Austria and Russia.

20 Subhi Mehmed Efendi, *Subhi Tarihi*, 293.
21 Ibid., 295.
22 Ibid., 298.
26 Subhi Mehmed Efendi, *Subhi Tarihi*, 297. It is underlined in the text that the Russians were doubtless encouraged in their breach of the existing peace by their previous alliance with Austria. The Grand Vizier wrote a letter to his colleague in Vienna in order to reiterate the peace and inform him about the peace-breaking acts of the Russians.
30 Ibid., 8a.
32 İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, 262.
34 The events of the peace negotiations will not be elaborated here. For details, see Mehmet Emni Cassels, 127-137 and Roider, 94-117.
35 Mehmet Emni, 24b, 25a, 30b.
37 For both the warnings of Yahya Pasha and the replies of Osman Effendi, see İsmail Hakki Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, 260 and Subhi Mehmed Efendi, *Subhi Tarihi*, 360. Ochakov, being a giant fortress in a key position, required 30,000 defenders to be on duty during a siege, while there were less than 3,000 within the gates according to peacetime allocations. When the army sent no reinforcements, Muhsinzade Abdullah Pasha sent another 3,000 men to the defence of Ochakov, İsmail Hakki Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, 264. He had already requested reinforcements from Babadağı but received none. He must have seen that Ochakov was in a more urgent and strategic position in the face of the Russian troops.
38 For Mehmed Pasha’s requests, see İsmail Hakki Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, 261 and for the reply, see ibid., 261 and Şem’dani-zade Tarihi, 67.
39 1736-1739 Türk-Rus Savaşı, (192-?), 30, 34. The book is undated and the author’s name is not mentioned. The copy I worked on is located at the library of Boğaziçi University, Istanbul.
41 Ibid., 369.
42 Ibid., 374 and Şem’dani-zade Tarihi, 69.

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*1736-1739 Türk-Rus Savaşı*. 192-?.


Illustration Sources


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