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Spanish Records of Istanbul at the End of the 18th Century

The history of the Ottoman Empire is built mainly on the Empire's documentation and the information coming from large European countries which maintained close contacts with the Ottomans, such as Austria, Russia, France, etc. The accounts of countries whose political and economic interests did not require intensive relationships are used to a much lesser degree. Spain is one of these countries. Different Spanish archives keep various accounts of the situation and the actions taken by the large Islamic state, including the situation in the Balkans. The information collected by the Spanish imperial administration is a valuable but rarely used source in the historic narrative of the East.

In Bulgaria the interest towards the manuscripts, books and documents kept in Spain concerning the region of Southeastern Europe originated in the early 20th century. Following the five centuries of Ottoman rule, the creation of a national narrative in the newly restored state required searching still more historical accounts of the past. Acad. J. Ivanov was the first Bulgarian researcher who worked in Madrid in the 1920s, getting acquainted with the remarkable richness of Spanish libraries and archives¹. Nearly fifty years later, under changed political circumstances, historians such as Acad. Vasil Gjuzeev, Prof. Bistra Tzvetkova, Prof. Dragomir Draganov, Ventzeslav Nikolov, a specialist in Spanish Studies, and others study interesting documents concerning the Bulgarian and Balkan history in the archives of the National Library in Madrid, El Escorial monastery, the Spanish Foreign Ministry, in the Barcelona archives, as well as in Salamanca, Valladolid, etc.

Thanks to their work, the Central State Archives of Bulgaria located in Sofia preserves copies of the Spanish diplomatic correspondence concerning the relations between Spain and the Ottoman Empire. Though not very rich, this collection reveals significant issues of the past of both countries. The main part of it has not been translated into Bulgarian and has not been used in our historical studies. This article aims at drawing attention to some interesting documents that characterize, from the point of view of a Spanish observer, the situation with the Ottoman Empire, the foreign trade in Istanbul and the most developed trade centers of the late 18th century. The documents date from 1785 and 1786, shortly before life in the Empire was overtaken by great anarchy and decentralization.² Therefore, they “register” for the researchers a rough picture of the established standards, relationships and rules which would be very soon swept away or at least changed by the events following the French Revolution.

On the eve of the New Age, Spain and the Ottoman Empire experienced profound changes. In the Age of Enlightenment, under complicated dynastic relations and warfare, the Bourbons reformed the Spanish administration and army. Following the strengthening of royal absolutism, government became more efficient and centralized. The coastal regions and seaport towns marked the most distinct demographic growth and economic gains. Reformers,

¹ Nadya Manolova-Nikolova, *J. Ivanov v Ispania (J. Ivanov in Spain)*, Kjustendil Readings Collection, in the press.

² Vera Mutafchieva, *Kurdjaliysko Vreme (The Time of Kurdjalis)*, Selected Works, v. 2 S. 2008.

especially under the reign of King Charles III, pursued a policy on liberalization of economy. One of the main objectives was to overcome the negative trade balance. In its foreign policy, Spain aimed at defending mostly its economic interests in the colonies, opposing to Great Britain, as well as at expanding its trade network, if possible.³

Attempts at reforms were also made in the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century but they had a considerably smaller effect. They were undertaken by Sultan Ahmed III at the beginning of the century when it became clear that the Empire would no longer play a dominant role in Europe and the Orient. Here, as well as in Spain, foreign, mostly French specialists were involved to reform the army and administration, to revive the spiritual life. The conservative reaction of the Janissaries and the ulema put an end to these initiatives but the curiosity about and interest towards the Western world remained. Attempts at revival continued but met with temporary success; they were abandoned at times and even terminated. The eighteenth century witnessed an intensified Western presence in the foreign trade of the Ottoman Empire as a result of the progress made by the mercantile capitalism supported by the government. The well-known Capitulations applied mainly in favour of the Western traders.⁴ Irrespective of the different interests of the European countries, they all united in their aim to keep the capitulations unilateral arrangements, not to signify a reciprocal engagement between them and the Porte.⁵

Under these circumstances and trends in the development of both countries, the first peace and trade treaty between Spain and the Ottoman Empire was signed on 14.09.1782. It happened during the reigns of King Charles III of Spain and Sultan Abdul Hamid I, each of them being aware of the need of crucial changes in the state. The treaty was ratified in December 1782 on the part of Spain, and in April 1783 on the part of the Sublime Porte.⁶ In the Spanish historiography which studies mainly the great state politics in the Western world and America, the treaty is only mentioned but not commented.⁷ The same thing happens in the Ottoman historiography which shows a little interest in this type of documents since it has enough own sources to build its own historical narrative.

The documents, copies of which we have, date mainly from the time after the treaty signature. They prove that at the end of the 18th c., the Spanish diplomacy became better acquainted with the specifics of the Levant world where traders from France, the Netherlands, Great Britain, etc. had already won economic positions. The information intended for the Spanish Foreign Ministry was collected by the Minister Plenipotentiary, Juan Ventura de Bouligny.⁸

Bouligny lived in the Ottoman capital from 1780 on. His Secretary was Joseph Eliodoro de Bouligny, which implies that they were relatives. As the documents show, they gained much experience in trading in the East and knowledge about the political relations in the country. I do not have any direct records but I assume that they came from the area of the Spanish Mediterranean lands and were of Catalonia origin. The name of Joseph is typical of Catalonia and they both had a good command of the French and Italian languages. It is obvious that they were well educated and well versed, regardless of the difficulties mentioned by them: 'caused by the numerous underhand dealings and inconsistency of the Ottoman

³ Julio Valdeón, Joseph Pérez, Santos Juliá, *Historia de España*, Madrid, 2006, p. 279-312.

⁴ *Istoria na Osmanskata Imperia (History of the Ottoman Empire)*, edited by R. Mantran, Riva Publishers, Sofia, 1999, p. 285 – 297.

⁵ Snezka Panova, *Zapadnata Diplomacia v Konstantinopol /18 v./ (Western Diplomacy in Constantinople /18th c./)*. Istorichesko Budeshte, 2002, № 1 – 2, p. 102 – 106.

⁶ Recueil des traites de la Porte Ottoman, avec les puissances etrangeres. Depuis le premier traite conclu, en 1536 entre Suleyman I et Francois I jusqua nos jurs, Paris, vol. I, 1864, 408.

⁷ Julio Valdeón, Joseph Pérez, Santos Juliá, *Historia de España*, p. 586.

⁸ Kalendarario manual, Madrid, Imprenta Real, 1790, p. 61- 62, Universidad de Barcelona, Biblioteca de Reserva, sig. RR 137.

government that makes everything possible to conceal its actions, including its successes', 'for lack of public registers at the customs and the habit of traders of hiding, because of competition, their ways of making money in the Levant.'⁹

Similar to other European diplomats, the ambition of Spanish ones was to present detailed information about the political system of the Ottoman Empire, its relationships with the other countries and the potentials for trading. They thought the latter to be closely connected with the whole state system of the Ottomans. In an original political treatise by Joseph Bouligny, 'Observations on the Political System of the Ottoman Porte...' of 15.05.1786, it is pointed out that 'if there is government subject to the dicta of inconsistency and unusual political ideas and solutions, then it is, without doubt, the government of Ottomans.'¹⁰ Four basic, though contradictory, characteristics of the Ottoman Empire can be deduced: it is **despotic** because the Sultan, though subject to laws, was their interpreter and governor; **monarchial** because the Sultan was made equal to the laws in view of political and private ends; **aristocratic** because the clergy, politicians and the military were summoned to take important decisions, and **democratic** because almost everybody /meaning the Muslims/ was militarized and sometimes people prevailed over the Sultan who would be forced to submit to their will or abdicate the throne and lay down his life. Bayezid II, Mustafa I, etc. are given as indicative examples of this.¹¹

The document contains a very precise analysis of the special features of the Ottoman central and local administration. The explanations are based on the past and the conquest of these territories by the Ottomans; it highlights the role of religion in the organization of state and in the attitude towards Christian outlanders in spite of the treaties signed with them, the qualities necessary for a diplomat to enter into the complexity of the imperial political life and the Sultan's court. Using brief or more detailed descriptions, Joseph Bouligny dwells on the specifics of the treaties signed with France, on the first place, with Great Britain, the Netherlands, Russia, Sweden, Prussia, as well as with Venice, Naples, Dubrovnik, with the African provinces, Persia, Uzbekia, Dagetstan, Kuban, etc.¹²

Spanish diplomacy was well aware of the complicated relations between the different confession groups and of the problems of Catholics in the Ottoman Empire. Several letters in the collection provide relevant information. According to one of them, since September 1786 Monseigneur Frachia, a vicar apostolic of the Roman Church in Istanbul, had been asking that a post office be organized in „*Philipopoli de la Bulgaria*” and recommended that it should be assigned to the local Catholic bishop. The city mentioned is Plovdiv where the vicar apostolic of the Catholic diocese of Sofia and Plovdiv lived. The latter, according to the Spanish account, was ready to start organizing the post office. In return, he asked for the protection of Spain before Ottoman authorities against the prosecutions of Greek 'schismatics', against no payment for his work.¹³ The vicar apostolic insisted that he should be appointed an agent or vice-consul of Juan Bouligny, whereby he would be given the requested protection. The vicar's request was supported by the papal legate and the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith which talked with King Charles III of Spain about the issuance of an order along these lines. According to the available information, the King yielded to the Congregation's insistence. He issued an order to the Spanish Minister Plenipotentiary in Istanbul to obtain the relevant permission firman, though difficulties were expected. In the last document of 16 October 1786, which we have concerning the issue, it is said the following:

⁹ CSA, k.m.fund 15, inventory 917, file 93, folio

¹⁰ CSA, k.m.fund 15, inventory 917, file 94, folio 2.

¹¹ Ibid, folio 3.

¹² Ibid, folio 12 – 23.

¹³ CSA, k.m.fund 15, inventory 917, file 94, folio 29; folio 31 - 32.

„Don Juan de Bouligny. Acusa el recibo de la orden para que se nombre por uno Viceconsul en Philipopoli al recomiendo del Vicario Apostólico de Constantinopoli y que ha pedido el Firman, aunque puede haber embarazo.”¹⁴

The name of the vicar apostolic of Sofia and Plovdiv is not mentioned but he is most likely to be Nicola Zilvi who was a bishop of this diocese from 1784 to 1802.¹⁵ We do not have the continuation of the correspondence; we do not know whether the firman was obtained and whether Nicola Zilvi was also a Spanish vice-consul besides a bishop. We are also unclear about the particular circumstances that had caused the fears of ‘Greek schismatics’ and made N. Zilvi ask for such protection. It is reasonable to assume that he received it because he administered the diocese for a comparatively long period of time – for nearly 20 years.¹⁶ Anyhow, this example gives rise to the question as to whether or not the Spanish diplomacy played a part in the support for and propagation of Catholicism in the Balkans and whether or not it was part of its strategy towards the Ottoman Empire and the Orient at all? The answer requires new researches in the Spanish archives.

Another 18th century document included in the Spanish collection attracts the attention. Demonstrating skill and wide knowledge, Juan Bouligny prepared the interesting ‘Description of Constantinople Trade as Indicative of the Entire Levant Made in 1785’.¹⁷ It contains detailed information about the number of foreign firms in Istanbul, the mechanisms of foreign trade, the customs rules, the local products of interest to the European trade; the exchange rate of coins; the specifics of measures and scales; the current prices of foreign commodities sold in the capital; the terms and conditions under which France gave permission to set up a business there; description of consular departments in the Levant.

NUMBER OF FOREIGN FIRMS IN ISTANBUL IN 1785

Foreign firms	Number
France	10
England	4
The Netherlands	3
Germans	3
Venice	3
Russia	2
Naples	1

French firms received directly from Marseille large quantities of fine and coarse fabrics. They were manufactured in the interior of the country and were the basis of their trade. In addition, they received sugar of different quality, indigo from Santo Domingo and from Guatemala; spices from the East, volumes of hats of white and coloured fabrics from Tunisia, the wool used being produced in Spain, transported to Marseille and thence hats were made in Tunisia; cochineal, an insect, from which the crimson-coloured dye carmine was derived; gold and silver braid imported from León; a highly profitable business was their

¹⁴ Ibid., folio 30.

¹⁵ Ivan Elenkov, *Katolicheskata Tzurkva ot Iztochen Obriad v Bulgaria (The Catholic Church of Eastern Rite in Bulgaria)*, S. 2000, p. 18-19.

¹⁶ Ivan Elenkov, *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁷ CSA, k.m.fund 15, inventory 917, file 93, folio 1.

trading in coins, mostly the Spanish pesos, 'fuertes'. They received them directly from Marseille and sold one peso for 95 'pari' to the Mint in cash, thus making a great profit.¹⁸

English firms sold fabrics of different quality but not much because their consumption was not so high as the French fabrics. They also traded in golden and silver watches, in black English shawls which were much in demand, in sugar, different kinds of muslin, etc.¹⁹

Dutch traders delivered their goods to Smyrna and did not reach Istanbul because there was no commodity to take back. They preferred to trade in spices, nutmeg, cinnamon; much muslin, etc.²⁰ Diamonds, pearls, unpolished emeralds, etc. were much in demand at the market-place in Istanbul. They were delivered by post from Vienna twice a week and Juan Bouligny pointed out that there were no words to describe how much they were used in the Sultan's seraglios and by the local nobility.²¹

It would be interesting to know that the Germans traded in huge quantities of fabrics that closely resembled the French ones and were well received. The demand for muslins from Saxony was great because they imitated the Indian ones very well; the same thing happened with fabrics that imitated Chinese ones. In addition, different kinds of metals, crystals, mercury, gold and silver braid, were sold. The commodities were delivered via Trieste and in the summer – down the Danube and the Black Sea.²²

The Venetians had a low turnover of fabrics, glass and crystal but it was not enough to cover the expenses, so they carried the goods of other firms. The Neapolitans did the same thing. Russian traders supplied the Ottoman capital with large amounts of grain and their shipments spread even across the Mediterranean. They also offered furs, iron, timber, hemp and other important commodities.²³

Bouligny pays special attention to the operations of Armenian and Greek firms. They were doing a brisk trade with India and Persia, running rich caravans via Aleppo and in the interior of the Empire, but their traffic had an insignificant effect on the established European firms. When describing the process of sale of foreign commodities, it is also emphasized the role of the local traders – Armenians, Greeks and Jews who were commission agents, without whom, especially 'without the Jews, nothing could be done.' Middlemen made the direct negotiations with the Turks next to impossible. It was very difficult and time wasting to get money from them.²⁴

For a period of one year, the Istanbul port was visited by 10 to 15 French ships, 5 or 6 Venetian ships, 3 or 4 ships from London, 5 to 6 Ottoman imperial ships, while the Russian ships were countless because of the connections between the two countries. Ships from Amsterdam, Naples and Sweden did not land in spite of the established official relations between the countries. A large caravan of French, Dalmatian, Venetian ships would set off eastwards for Mecca each year in May and June. It carried Muslim pilgrims but also goods because 'the Turks are not experts in navigation and are afraid of Maltese pirates'.²⁵

¹⁸ Ibid., folio 1. There is considerable amount of literature on the French trade in the Levant, of Bulgarian authors see: Plamen Mitev, *Francia I Iznosat na Vulna ot Bulgarskite Zemi prez 18 v. (France and the Export of Wool from Bulgarian Lands in the 18th Century)*, SU Year-book, Faculty of History, v. 79, 1988, p. 60-80; , *Frenskata Levantiyska Turgovia I Bulgarskite Zemi (The Levant Trade of France and Bulgarian Lands in the 18th Century)*, IN: Second International Congress of Bulgarian Studies, Sofia, 1984, Reports 7, S. 1989, 209 – 214.

¹⁹ CSA, k.m.fund 15, inventory 917, file 93, folio 2

²⁰ Ibid., folio 2. See also: Plamen Mitev, *Targoviata na Holandia s Osmanskata Imperia prez 17-18 v. I Bulgarskite Zemi (Trade between the Netherlands and the Ottoman Empire and the Bulgarian Lands in the 17th and 18th Centuries)*, Vekove, 1988, № 4, c. 49 – 55.

²¹ CSA, k.m. fund 15, inventory 917, file 93, folio 2.

²² Ibid., folio 2.

²³ Ibid., folio 2.

²⁴ Ibid., folio 2-3.

²⁵ Ibid., folio 4

The exchange of coins was a barometer of the conditions in the state and according to Bouligny, if you needed 100 piastres for 100 French escudos some time ago, now you need up to 120-125 piastres. His conclusion was that the Empire was at a constant loss but foreign traders did not lose money. As a result of the trade in Spanish pesos, 'duros', the French made such big profits that in 1784 they offered the government, if possible, to invest 1,260,00 piastres on land, to give the Sultan one battle-ship with seventy guns as a present. The offer had a strong effect.²⁶ Comparing the positions of all participants in the Levant trade, Bouligny highlights the achievements of the French who, according to him, were the leaders and an example of how to win economic and political positions in the East and in the world. The important thing in his observations is this very comparison between the different European traders and the goods offered by them, as well as the Spaniards' chances of delivering competitive goods from the American colonies to the Levant markets. The document contains information about their prices, as well as the prices of commodities coming from the Ottoman Empire but they will be systemized and summarized in another study.

When describing the foreign trade in Istanbul, the Spanish diplomat made the remarkable prediction that the French would organize the carriage of goods via Suez. According to him, thus they would compensate for the losses resulting from the trade with the East via the Cape of Good Hope. Juan Bouligny expected political turmoil in Egypt as a result of the French intentions because the Egyptian Pashas were far from loyal vassals of the Sultan. He expected that the opening of the connection between Europe and the East via Suez would be the most interesting and important event for the region and the world.

At the end of the century, Bouligny believed that Smyrna would be the most developed commercial city in the Levant in the future. The ship traffic was 6 times heavier than that in Istanbul. The prices were much more acceptable for the Spanish traders, especially those of silk and cotton, which were needed by the textile mills that were increasingly opened in Spain. Smyrna was considered an important center, from which to carry on trade with Southeastern Europe as well. In this connection, the Russian consul in Smyrna was sent a list of Spanish goods which could be offered in Russia and Poland. The routes and opportunities of such exchange were studied. This was logically connected with the expected, according to Bouligny, vast opening of trade across the Black Sea. The Spanish observer believed that Russia would be the decisive factor that would play this important role not only in its own favour but also in favour of other European traders.²⁷

Summary

The briefly analyzed Spanish documents from the Bulgarian collection in Sofia add to our knowledge about the life in Istanbul and the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 18th century. The opening of the Spanish diplomatic delegation in the Ottoman capital made it possible to study the opportunities for trade in the Levant and Southeastern Europe. It is most likely that their intentions were to use the capacity of American colonies for supplying goods, whereby the Spaniards would compete with the other European traders in the Near East. The study of Spanish documents on the Ottoman Empire will continue and I hope that it will lend variety to the approach to their study.

²⁶ Ibid., folio 6-7.

²⁷ CSA, k.m.fund 15, inventory 917, file 94, folio 58 – 61.