

# Ottoman Relations with the Danubian Principalities during the Fifteen Years War (1591-1606)

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## Context

The letter transcribed below is a letter addressed to Sultan Mehmed III (r.1595-1603) regarding the tributary states of Moldavia and Wallachia during the then ongoing Long War (1591-1606) with the Habsburg Monarchy that drew in rebels against Ottoman rule from Transylvania, Moldavia, and Wallachia.<sup>1</sup> Notably, it is in the *İbnülemin Dahiliye* fond of the archives whereas the majority of the documents related to Transylvania from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century are in the *Mühimme Defterleri* fond of the archives, indicating that this document may be an original dispatch. It dates from September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1603 (4 Rabia II 1012) and describes in some detail the movements of the Christian coalition army into the Danubian region and the relations between the tributary principalities and the Ottoman government. The text of the document is in two parts, the first being a longer communiqué followed by a second part that is a draft edict for the action recommended to the sultan. The document is but a small part of the voluminous sources on the Long War, a pivotal conflict in early modern Ottoman history that deserves greater analysis.

The details of the relatively brief letter give important context for the strategic situation of the Ottoman Empire late in the Fifteen Years War, which had been exhausting and difficult. From Moldavia, tribute was not imposed but many cavalymen and infantrymen were recorded. The Wallachians waited for their companions and then came to Transylvania, where it was thought possible that they may be found cooperating with Ottoman troops. The language of the letter also highlights the Ottoman understanding of the forces arrayed against them, as the Austrian and Hungarian parts of the enemy coalition are referred to as the “Austrian” and “Magyar” states, showing that the empire recognized the composite nature of the Habsburg Monarchy and enemy coalition.

Moldavia, Wallachia, and Transylvania had been briefly unified from May to September 1600 by Mihai Viteazul (known also as Michael the Brave), prince of Wallachia

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<sup>1</sup> İstanbul, Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı, Başbakanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, I.E.D.H.7/690.

(1591-1600) and commander against the Ottoman government during the course of the Long War. Unfortunately for the ambitions of Prince Michael and those in his army, his death in 1601 prevented a personal union of the three provinces under his rule. The late sixteenth century was a contentious period for Ottoman rule over Moldavia and Wallachia, as Ottoman officials faced opposition in trying to collect the yearly tribute from both principalities that led to cyclical revolts that persisted for decades.<sup>2</sup> The author of the letter was still concerned about the possibility of the forces of the principalities joining the Christian coalition as the letter writer explicitly invokes the rebellion of Michael. It also demonstrates that the principalities were crucial sources of manpower for the power that controlled them, evidenced by the letter-writer's suggestion of levying Moldavian troops. The tributary states like Moldavia, Wallachia, and the Crimean Khanate gave the empire additional sources of troops that were essential in the arduous, multi-front fighting of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While the numbers for the Danube principalities are not precise, the two states furnished several thousand troops each, predominantly cavalrymen. In addition to raw numbers, they also had vital regional knowledge when the Ottoman army campaigned in the west.<sup>3</sup> The document provides a small window into the Ottoman military situation and response during the 1591-1606 war, fought on a much larger scale than the campaigns of Süleyman and at a much greater cost both socially and economically to the empire. The war was also a turning point in the balance of power between the Habsburgs and Ottomans, with the Habsburgs reaching strategic parity and having the ability, as implied by the document, to force the Ottomans to fight on a wider front. Moldavia and Wallachia mobilizing against the Ottomans also threatened the flow of important trade goods and supplies from the Black Sea. The Polish-Lithuanian

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<sup>2</sup> Radu G. Păun, "Enemies Within: Networks of Influence and the Military Revolts against the Ottoman Power (Moldavia and Wallachia, Sixteenth–Seventeenth Centuries)," in *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunčević (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 220.

<sup>3</sup> Ovidiu Cristea, "The Friend of My Friend and Enemy of My Enemy: Romanian Participation in Ottoman Campaigns," in *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunčević (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 267-270.

Commonwealth also became drawn into the rule of Moldavia.<sup>4</sup> The Danubian principalities were just one of many challenges confronted during the conflict, one that had complex military and diplomatic circumstances.

## Transcription

*Sa 'ādetlü pādişahım Boğdān ve Eflāk voyvodaları kādīmü'l-eyyāmdan devlet-i 'aliyyenüñ dostına dost u düşmenine düşmendür hāliyā Nemçe ve Macār mel'ūnları Erdel ve Eflāk içine girüb Eflāk voyvodası olan Simon voyvoda muķāvemete kādır olmamağla tağallüben Eflāk içine girmişlerdür lākin Boğdan'dan bu sene hārāc teklif olunmayub atlu ve yaya vāfir 'asker yazub Eflāk'dan kendü qarındaşını bekleyüb Erdel'e varub anda olan 'askerimüz ile ittifāk u ittiḥād üzre ḥidmetde bulunsa olur idi birkaç zamāndur ki Boğdan'dan hārāc daḥı gelmeyeyor [!] hele bārī bu tarīk ile 'asker yazub göndermek küllī fā'idedür bu sene olan hārācına tuta vāfir 'asker yazub Eflāk içinde olan iḥtilālī ber-ṭarafidüb andan Erdel'e varub Erdel'de Tımişvār beglerbegisi Bektaş Paşa ve 'asker-i İslām'a mulākī olub 'asker-i İslām ile müttefik olub vilāyet-i Erdel'den Nemçe ve Macār leşkerini çıkarub uğur-ı hümāyunda ḥidmetde olmaḥ üzre bu sene hārāc taleb olunmasun ve eger bu ḥidmete müte'ahhid olmazsa zamānı ile hārācuñı gönderesin deyü ḥükm-i şerīf gönderilmek bābında emr ü fermān devletlü ve sa 'ādetlü pādişahumuñdur.*

*Sa 'ādetlü pādişahım şöyle ki bu ḥidmeti görmez ise yine hārācı taleb iderüz gerci Miḥāl 'işyānından berü ol cānibden hārāc gelmemişdür ammā biri biri ardınca emrler daḥı gönderiliyor hele şimdilik ādemleri bu vechle emr-i şerīf virilürse bu ḥidmeti edā iderüz deyü cevāb ideyorlar ol-bābda emr ü fermān devletlü pādişahumuñdur.*

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<sup>4</sup> Gábor Ágoston, *The Last Muslim Conquest: The Ottoman Empire and Its Wars in Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 252-254.

## Translation

My felicitous emperor, the voivodes of Moldavia and Wallachia have been the friends of the friends and the enemies of the enemies of the Sublime Porte from time immemorial. At this time the accursed Austrians and Hungarians have entered Transylvania and Wallachia. As the Wallachian voivode Simon was unable to resist them, they have been advancing victoriously into Wallachia. On the other hand, this year, there was no tribute imposed on Moldavia. He [the voivode of Moldavia] could conscript a large number of cavalry and infantry, then wait for his brother from Wallachia [to join him], and then proceed to Transylvania to serve in alliance with our soldiers there. For some time now, Moldavia has not been sending the tribute. At least conscripting and sending soldiers will be of great benefit, and it could count as this year's tribute.

My felicitous emperor, it is your prerogative to send your sacred edict to order [the voivode of Moldavia] that he shall conscript many soldiers and eliminate the upheaval in Wallachia. After that he shall go to Transylvania where he will join the governor-general of Timisoara Bektash Pasha and the Ottoman forces and ally himself with them. In return for expelling Austrian and Hungarian soldiers from Transylvania in the service of the sultan, he shall not be asked to pay the tribute this year. If he does not fulfill this service, he shall send the tribute in time.

My felicitous emperor, if he does not carry out this order we will ask for the tribute. It is true that, since Mihal's rebellion, we have not received any tribute from there. On the other hand, we regularly send orders, and his men reply, for now, that they will fulfill this service if they receive your sacred edict. Whereby the decision belongs to my felicitous sultan.

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