

Napoléon's Oath: A Declaration of Amity with Selīm

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Context

The rapid expansion of Napoléon Bonaparte's territorial conquests caused widespread concern, which extended to the Ottoman Empire under the rule of Sultan Selim III. However, the threat of Napoléon was not new to the Ottomans. In July 1798, Napoléon embarked on a campaign to Egypt. He successfully defeated the Mamluk army. Through his reforms, Bonaparte sought to establish an Arab nation and undermine the Ottoman Empire. In February 1799, he invaded Syria, where he defeated the Ottoman garrison at Jaffa and the French army executed 4,000 prisoners.¹ By 11 September that year, the Ottomans, in alliance with Russia and Britain, were at war with their long-time allies.

Initially, Selim explored diplomatic avenues with Russian and British ambassadors to forge an alliance against this emerging threat. Faced with Napoléon's continued belligerence, the Ottoman Empire adopted a careful attitude towards France. However, after the victory at the Battle of Austerlitz, the Ottoman Empire considered it necessary to undertake a major revision of its policy towards France.² When Napoléon evacuated the French army from Egypt following the signing of a treaty with Russia and Britain in 1801, the Ottomans, seeing Napoléon's rapid expansion and growing strength, decided to join forces with the French. As a result, they signed the Treaty of Paris in 1802.³

Selim's views were also influenced by Pierre Ruffin (d.1824), the French *chargé d'affaires*⁴ (chief of mission) in Istanbul, and Ahmed Vāşif Efendi (d.1806), who served as *Re'īs ül-Kuttāb* (Head of chancery of the Imperial Council). Ruffin engaged in a discussion with Selim, explaining Napoléon's alleged benevolent sentiments towards the

¹ Virginia H. Aksan, *The Ottoman Wars 1700 - 1870: An Empire Besieged*, Modern Wars in Perspective (London New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 229.

² Karaer Nihat, "Abdurrahim Muhib Efendi'nin Paris Büyükelçiliği (1806-1811) ve döneminde Osmanlı-Fransız diplomasi ilişkileri," *OTAM(Ankara)* 0, no. 30 (2011): 2, doi:10.1501/OTAM_0000000577.

³ Kahraman Sakul, "An Ottoman Global Moment: War Of Second Coalition In The Levant" (Ph.D., Georgetown University, 2009), 430.

⁴ The Chargé d'Affaires is a diplomat who acts as the head of an embassy when the Ambassador fails to appear.

Ottoman Empire.⁵ Ruffin claimed that Napoléon wanted the Ottoman Empire to stand alongside France as a trusted ally and friendly partner.⁶ Their influence culminated in the achievement of the long-sought formal Ottoman recognition of Napoléon's full imperial title in 1806.⁷ Following the self-proclamation of Napoléon as Emperor of France, Selīm sent an extraordinary ambassador to formally acknowledge Napoléon's accession. Abdurrahīm Muḥib Efendi (fl.1806-1811)⁸ embarked on this diplomatic mission to Paris on 30 March 1806.⁹

Muḥib Efendi arrived in Paris bearing presents from Sultan Selīm to the newly crowned Emperor, accompanied by two letters. The first letter was the formal recognition of Napoléon Bonaparte as the reigning monarch of France, while the second letter conveyed Sultan Selīm's praises and compliments to Napoléon for his victory at the Battle of Austerlitz.¹⁰ Muḥib Efendi read both letters in public in front of the emperor and confirmed his official capacity as the envoy of Selīm to the court of Napoléon, addressed as the Emperor of France and the King of Italy.¹¹ He emphasized

⁵ Napoleon's strategic aim of aligning the Ottomans with his cause, and thereby deterring their allegiance to Russia and Britain, is evident in his letter, where he attempts to secure Ottoman support through rhetoric.

⁶ The explanation of Napoleon's behavior towards the Ottoman ambassador will be further elucidated by examining the transcription and translation of the focal document under discussion in this study. This claim will be substantiated by the document itself, which will reveal Napoleon's conspicuously friendly behavior towards the Ottoman ambassador. Napoleon's strategic aim of aligning the Ottomans with his cause, and thereby deterring their allegiance to Russia and Britain, is evident in his letter as he seeks to gain Ottoman support through his words.

⁷ Stanford J. Shaw, *Between Old and New, The Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim III, 1789-1807* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), 254.

⁸ Born in Istanbul, Muḥib Efendi was raised and educated within the confines of the city. He took on various administrative roles. During his six-year tenure as the Ottoman ambassador to Paris, Muḥib Efendi meticulously produced a comprehensive document known as the *Sefāretnāme* (the book of embassy). The manuscript consists mainly of coded communications between Muḥib Efendi and the Grand Vizier, as well as incoming correspondence. It also includes documentation of Muḥib Efendi's meetings with foreign ambassadors, perspectives on negotiations with the French cabinet, and meticulous first-hand observations of Paris. Aḥmed 'Aşım's extensive use of Muḥib Efendi's *Sefāretnāme* in his historical works is testimony to Muḥib Efendi's keen powers of observation and his diplomatic skills.

⁹ Shaw, *Between Old and New*, 335.

¹⁰ Bekir Günay, "Seyyid Abdurrahim Muḥib Efendi'ni Paris Sefirliği ve Büyük Sefaretnamesi" (Ph.D., İstanbul University, 1998), 34.

¹¹ Aşım, *Aşım Efendi tarihi: Osmanlı tarihi 1218-1224/1804-1809*: (inceleme - metin. 1. Cilt, ed. Ziya Yılmaz, 1. baskı, Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı yayınları tarih ve toplum bilimleri serisi, 58 5 (İstanbul: Türkiye Yazma Eserler Kurumu Başkanlığı, 2015), 165.

the honor that was given to France by the triumphs and conquests of Napoléon and expressed his hope for the strengthening of the sincere relations between the Ottoman Empire and France.¹² The following account is the transcription of Napoléon's reply to the speech delivered by Muhib Efendi. The relevant document is archived in the Türkische Urkunden collections of the Austrian State Archives in Vienna (*Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv*).¹³

Transcription

Devlet-i 'aliyyeniñ İlçisiniñ

Nuḡkuna Cevāb

İlçi Beg seniñ me'muriyyetiñden ḡazḡ itdim, veli-ni 'metiñ olan Sulṡān Selim ḡazretleriniñ ḡulūṡ-ı niyyetleri ḡalbime te'sir ider ḡadim dost u müttefikim olan devlet-i 'aliyyeye istizhāri fütūḡātımızıñ a'zam şemeresidir saña 'alenen taṡdik itmekden maḡzūzum her ne devlet-i 'aliyyeye ḡayr u şerr vāki ' olursa Frānçe milletine rāci 'dir bu kelāmları Sulṡān Selim ḡazretlerine ifāde eyleye her ne vaḡt ki benim düşmenlerim ki anıñ daḡı olmak gerekdir naṡḡat-i fāsīd virmek üzre ise bu kelāmlarım ḡāḡırlarına gele ḡarafımdan hiç bir vechle iḡtirāz itmeye ikimiz birlikde iken düşmenleriniñ kuvvetinden hiç bir ḡavf itmeye mīm

Translation

Reply to the speech of the ambassador of the Sublime State.

¹² Günay, "Seyyid Abdurrahim Muhib Efendi'ni Paris Sefirliḡi ve Büyük Sefaretnamesi," 259–60.

¹³ The above-mentioned document is part of the collection of "*Türkische Urkunden*" in the *Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv*. However, it is noticeable that the document has been archived without any accompanying details or contextual information; the box is part of the unsorted documents, having been discovered by chance in the course of my research into other materials within the same collection. It is also worth noting that the document exists in both French and German within the aforementioned box.

Mister Ambassador, I was delighted with your appointment. The sincere intentions of your benefactor, His Majesty Sultan Selim, have touched my heart. Supporting our old friend and ally, the Sublime State, is the greatest fruit of our conquests. I am pleased to publicly confirm this to you. Whatever befalls the Sublime State, whether good or bad, concerns the French nation. Convey these words to His Majesty Sultan Selim, that he may recall them whenever my enemies, who must be his enemies too, offer malicious advice. Do not abstain in any way from my side. When both of us are together, do not fear the strength of our enemies.

Finished.

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Facsimile

