

The Imperial *Berāt* and the Brand: Award for Feeding Wounded Ottoman Soldiers During the First Balkan War

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Context

Founded in 1868 in Vevey, Switzerland, Nestlé was one of the first multinational companies to operate in the Ottoman Empire. By the 1870s, the company was already selling its first product, *Farine lactée* (infant formula), globally – across Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Australia and the Americas. Among the 23 countries in which Nestlé operated, the Ottoman Empire ranked 15th in terms of sales of *Farine lactée*. By 1914, Nestlé’s products were available in over 95 countries. A distinctive feature of the company was its diverse marketing strategy.¹

Nestlé employed various methods to promote its products—including *Farine lactée*, condensed milk, cacao, and chocolate—and sought to create a decentralized distribution system. This strategy involved building strong relationships with local stakeholders, such as grocers, pharmacists, chemists, and doctors.

Amid the first Balkan war in 1912, Nestlé opened its own branch in Istanbul. From 1913, the Istanbul branch managed not only the “Turkish” market but also operations in the Balkans and Egypt. The branch was headed by Édouard Muller, who would later become Nestlé’s CEO (1937–1948). Muller had already travelled to Istanbul around 1909 “with a roving commission to study, and, if possible, develop business in the Balkan countries”. This trip made it clear to him that “to expand there, Nestlé would have to eschew traditional methods and break new ground by more active personal canvassing of retail outlets and by intensification of general and educative publicity and additionally closer supervision of distribution by Nestlé’s own representatives trained especially for this purpose.”²

Under Muller’s leadership, the Istanbul branch became a pioneer in marketing innovation. Several advertising and marketing concepts developed in the “Department du

¹ On Nestlé’s marketing activities in the Ottoman Empire see Yavuz Köse, *Westlicher Konsum am Bosphorus Warenhäuser, Nestlé & Co. im späten Osmanischen Reich (1855–1923)* (München: R. Oldenbourg – de Gruyter, 2010), 302–348; Yavuz Köse, *Dersaadet’te Tüketim (1855–1923)* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, 2016), 240–284 and Yavuz Köse, “Nestlé in the Ottoman Empire: Global Marketing with Local Flavor, 1870–1927”, *Enterprise & Society* 9 (2008): 724–761.

² Quotes are from the brochure “This is our own company”, see Köse, *Westlicher Konsum am Bosphorus*, 227–228.

Publicité” in Istanbul were later adopted in Western European markets and featured in Nestlé’s marketing magazine, *Bulletin Mensuel de Publicité*.

Between 1911 and 1914—and extending to 1918—wars worsened Ottoman society’s economic and social situation. During this period, the Ottoman state endured successive disasters: the Tripoli War with Italy (1911-1912), the First Balkan War (1912), and the Second Balkan War (1913). These conflicts culminated in the First World War and the subsequent War of Liberation (1919–1923). This era also saw mass expulsions, massacres, and genocide, events that ultimately led to the collapse of the Ottoman multi-ethnic and multireligious state.

There is no doubt that demand for Nestlé dairy products increased as a result of these wars, “mainly in the form of government contracts,” in the company’s own words.³ Nestlé leveraged Switzerland’s neutrality to supply milk—a scarce commodity—to armies on all sides of the aforementioned conflicts, managing operations directly from its Istanbul branch. Although no direct evidence has been found of a formal contract between Nestlé and the Ottoman government, it is highly likely such a contract existed, as it aligned with the company’s policy at the time to secure government contracts. The document presented here provides clear evidence of a connection between Nestlé, the Ottoman government, and its army.

The document in question⁴ is a *berāt*—an imperial decree issued in the Sultan’s name and bearing his royal monogram (*tughra*). As was customary with sultanic decrees, the document opens with the name of Allah (*hüve*) – in later documents often rendered as the stylised letter he (ه). Traditionally, *berāts* (also referred to as *biti* and *nişān*) conferred offices, honours, sources of income, and tax exemptions.⁵ In the later Ottoman

³ Ibid., 231-232. See also Jean Heer, *Nestlé. Hundertfünfundzwanzig Jahre. Von 1861 bis 1991* (Vevey: Nestlé AG, 1991), 118-128.

⁴ I would like to express my sincere thanks to Claudia Römer for helping me to read difficult words and to adapt the English translation of the document. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer for the useful suggestions.

⁵ On *berāts* see Mübahat S. Kütükoğlu, *Osmanlı Belgelerinin Dili (Diplomatik)* (İstanbul: Kubbealtı Akademisi Kültür ve San’at Vakfı 1998), 124-145 and Numan Yekeler et.al. (eds), *Osmanlı Ferman ve Beratları* (İstanbul: Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı, 2021).

period, these documents were primarily used to record the awarding of orders and medals.⁶ The present *berāt* is an example of such a document. It certifies the award of a silver industrial medal to the Nestlé Company (*nestle fabrikası*) for provisioning Ottoman veterans of the First Balkan War. It was issued on 15 January 1913.

Under Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876-1909) and his successor Mehmed V (r. 1909-1918), the number of *berāts* increased considerably. These were increasingly printed rather than handwritten, as in earlier periods. The *tughra* and the formulaic opening sentence – written in the highly stylized calligraphic style of *celī dīvānī* – were often printed in gold. During the First World War, as more and more medals and decorations were awarded, the standardized main text (in the calligraphic style *dīvānī*) was also printed, with blanks left for inserting the recipient's name and the reason for the award.⁷

The original document was unavailable to the author, and whether it survived is unclear. A photograph from 1919 shows the award certificate framed in the office of the director (A. Gredinger) of the Istanbul branch of Nestlé.⁸

It is impossible to tell from the (poor) photograph whether this is the original (and handwritten) document. However, the size of the document suggests that the upper half (the area between the *hüve* and the *tughra*) was cut off to fit into the frame or simply because the meaning of the *hüve* was unknown.⁹ Nevertheless, it may be assumed that this certificate, like most of those produced during this period, was printed and issued together with the medal.

The award certificate (and the medal) was first depicted in 1914 in a lavishly illustrated 24-page Nestlé supplement to the leading magazine of the time, *Şervet-i*

⁶ On the history of orders and medals see Edhem Eldem, *İftihar ve İmtiyaz. Osmanlı Nişan ve Madalyaları Tarihi* (İstanbul: Osmanlı Bankası Arşiv ve Araştırma Merkezi, 2004).

⁷ Yavuz Köse, "Orders and Bestowal Documents", in *Wunder der erschaffenen Dinge: Osmanische Manuskripte in Hamburger Sammlungen – Wonders of Creation: Ottoman Manuscripts from Hamburg Collections*, eds. Janina Karolewski and Yavuz Köse (Hamburg 2018 2nd revised ed. (= manuscript cultures 9), 180-183.

⁸ Saadet Özen, *Çukolata. Çikolatanın Yerli Tarihi* (İstanbul: Yapı ve Kredi Yayınları, 2012), 84-85.

⁹ *Berāts* from this period were usually written (printed) on paper, which was then folded crosswise into four layers. Some documents show only three-layer folds; in these cases, the top part containing the *hüve* has usually been cut off. See, for example, the illustrations of a *berāts* with *hüve* folded into four layers and one example of a *berāts* without *hüve* folded into three layers in Eldem, *İftihar ve İmtiyaz*, on pages 318 and 430 (with *hüve*) and on page 417 without *hüve*.

Fünūn. This is probably the first example of a comprehensive information brochure by a Western company introducing itself to a wider, educated and affluent Ottoman readership. The document and medal also appear in a company yearbook produced in 1915 for the Latin American market. This served to document Nestlé's global reach and success.¹⁰

According to the document, Nestlé, which donated an unspecified quantity of condensed milk, powdered milk, and other products to the hospital (*harem-i hümayūn hastaḥānesi*¹¹) to aid Ottoman soldiers wounded in the First Balkan War, was awarded the silver industrial medal by Sultan Mehmed V. This can be interpreted as part of a strategy to strengthen ties with the Ottoman state and key institutions such as the Red Crescent and hospitals, as well as their leading figures, such as Besim Ömer, the most famous Ottoman doctor of the time, who also was president of the Red Crescent. In the same Nestlé supplement, Besim Ömer also praises Nestlé products, pointing out that they are used in all Red Crescent hospitals.¹²

Nestlé's long-standing ability to maintain close relationships with influential local figures and decision-makers was one of its greatest strengths. This strategy enabled the company to navigate the decline of the Ottoman Empire and seamlessly adapt to the new conditions of the Republic of Turkey. In 1927, Nestlé opened its first chocolate factory in Istanbul, and by 1930 it had launched the first "Turkish" chocolate "*Dolca*". Under the aegis of Atatürk, the state vigorously promoted patriotic shopping, and Turkish consumers were encouraged to buy local products through the press and to exhibit them at local fairs (*yerli malı sanayi sergileri*). Nestlé likewise exhibited its products alongside those of Turkish companies at the same local fairs, using the slogan of the time: "*Yerli Malı Kullan!*" (Consume local goods).

¹⁰ Köse, *Konsum am Bosphorus*, 312-328.

¹¹ It is highly likely that the hospital, which is not mentioned by name, refers to the institution described in other contemporary documents as the "Sarayı Humayun Hastahanesi" or "Harem-i Humayun Hastahanesi", where soldiers wounded in the First Balkan War were treated. See Seçil Karal Akgün, Murat Uluğtekin, *Hilal-i Ahmer'den Kızılay'a* (Ankara: Alternatif Ajans, 2002), here 153, 412 and 414.

¹² Köse, *Konsum am Bosphorus*, 339-340. See also *Servet-i Fünūn* 1186, *ilāve kısmı* (13 Şubāt 1329/ 26 February 1914), 14.

Transcription

- (1) *Mehmed hān bin ‘Abdü’l-Mecīd el-muzaffer dā`imā (Reşād)Nişān-ı şerīf-i ‘ālī-şān-ı sāmī-mekān-ı sultānī ve tuğrā-yı garrā-yı cihān-sitān-ı hākānī hükümü oldur ki*
- (2) *Harem-i hümāyūn-i mülūkānem nāmına te’sīs edilmiş olan hastaḥāneye nestle fabrikası tarafından süt hülāşası ve sütlü un ve sâ`ire ihdā olunmak*
- (3) *şūretiyle mecrūhīn gūzāt-ı ‘askeriyyeye ibrāz olunan ḥidemāt-ı ḥasene-i insāniyyet-kārāne maḥzūziyyet-i seniyye-i şāhānemi istilzām eyledigine binā`en şeref-efzāy-ı sunūḥ*
- (4) *ve şudūr olan emr ü fermān-ı hümāyūn-ı mülūkānem mūcibince cānib-i seniyyü’l-cevānib-i tācdārānemden mezkūr fabrika nāmına bir kıṭ‘a gümüş şānāyi ‘madālyası*
- (5) *ihdā ve i`ṭā kılınmış olduğunu muzmin işbu berāt-ı ‘ālī-şānum ıṣdār olundu ḥurrire fi’l-yevmi’s-sādis min şehir-i şāferi’l ḥayr li-senet ihdā selāsūn ve selāsūmi`etin ve-elf*
- (6) *be-makām-ı Koşantiniyyeti’l-maḥrūse el-maḥmiyye*

Translation

- (1) Mehmed Khan, son of Abdülmecid, who is granted victory always (Reşad)
- (2) This is the decree of the noble, exalted, and sublime sultanic emblem and the illustrious, world-conquering imperial cipher:
- (3) The Nestlé factory (company) has donated milk extract, milk powder, and other items (products) to the hospital established in the name of my exalted and imperial harem,
- (4) therefore, the benevolent and humanitarian services rendered to the wounded military veterans have necessitated my lofty imperial satisfaction, and therefore, based on my exalted and imperial
- (5) order that has been honourably issued, on behalf of my lofty crown-bearing person, a silver industry medal
- (6) has been gifted and bestowed on the aforementioned factory (company), and this exalted *berāt* has been issued to that effect. Written on the sixth day of the month

of Safer the auspicious, in the year one thousand three hundred and thirty-one
(6 Safer 1331 / 15 January 1913)

(7) In the residence of Constantinople, the well-protected and guarded

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