

THE CAUCASUS AND TRANSCAUCASIA AS PART OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE (16TH–17TH CENTURIES)

(OSMANLI İMPARATORLUĞU'NUN BİR PARÇASI OLARAK
KAFKASYA VE TRANSKAFKASYA)

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Abstract: *This article provides a narrative of the administrative control exerted by the Ottoman Empire on the Caucasus region during the 16th and 17th centuries. It also provides a narrative on the political ties between the Ottoman Empire and its vassal states and also on the economic activities prevalent in the region. The author indicates that although the Ottoman Empire officially exerted control over Crimea and Transcaucasia, in reality these regions were poorly integrated with and carried political customs different that of the center of the empire. Since their control was taken for granted, they were in fact poorly defended from the advances of the Russian Empire and the raids carried out Cossacks that had a destabilizing effect on the region.*

Keywords: *Ottoman Empire, Caucasus, Transcaucasia, Crimea Khanate, Circassians, Black Sea Region*

Öz: *Bu makale Osmanlı İmparatorluğunun 16. ve 17. yüzyıllarda Kafkasya bölgesindeki idari denetimini ele almaktadır. Makale aynı zamanda Osmanlı İmparatorluğu ile ona tabi devletler arasındaki siyasi ilişkileri ve bölgeye hâkim olan ekonomik faaliyetleri ele almaktadır. Yazar, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Kırım ve Transkafkasya üzerinde resmi olarak hâkimiyeti olmasına rağmen, gerçekte bu bölgelerin imparatorluğun merkezine ancak zayıf bir şekilde bağlı olduğunu ve siyasi geleneklerinin merkezden farklılık göstermiş olduğunu belirtmektedir. İmparatorluğun bu bölgelerdeki hâkimiyetine kesin gözüyle bakılmasından dolayı gerekli önlemler alınmadığı için, aslında bu bölgeler Rusya İmparatorluğunun ilerlemelerine ve Kosaklar (Rus Kazaklar) tarafından gerçekleştirilen akınlara karşı yetersiz bir şekilde savunulmaktaydı. Yazara göre bu durum, bahsi geçen bölgenin dengesini bozan bir etkiye yol açmıştır.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Kafkasya, Transkafkasya, Kırım Hanlığı, Karadeniz Bölgesi*

In the late 15th century, having defeated the last remnant of Byzantium - the Empire of Trebizond in 1461, the Ottomans began to use Trebizond-Trabzon as a residence of the Sultan's sons. There, the would-be Sultans, Bayezid II and Selim I, got familiar with the administrative affairs and military activities. They were the first to set out on a march to the areas in the Caucasus and Transcaucasia, in particular, they accomplished raids on Childir and Kutaisi¹ (the center of the Georgian kingdom of Imeretia).

Any further advance of the Ottomans in that direction was hampered by the new Iranian state of the Safavids set up in 1501, which brought to heel the Turkic state formations of Kara Koyunlu and AkKoyunlu² located on the Ottoman border, but preserved many traditions of the local tribes. This made the state of the Safavids attractive to the Anatolian Bayliks of noble origin, who had been bent to submission by the Ottomans shortly before, yet had not been fully assimilated within the Ottoman Empire structure. The Ottomans and the Safavids fought a battle for the territories and their population that was complicated by the ideological differences. The Safavids were engaged in propagating Shiism. Whereas, the Ottomans were the followers of Sunni Islam. In Anatolia, some groups practiced adherence to the cult of Ali from olden times, and it drew a segment of local population closer to the Safavids. The fight for retaining Eastern Anatolia within the structure of the Ottoman Empire, and later the submission of Mamelukes in Syria and Egypt, who proved unfit to meet the challenge of being the leader of the Islamic (Sunni) world,³ diverted the attention of the Ottomans from the problems of the Caucasus and Transcaucasia.

It was only after 1555, when the Peace Treaty of Amasya on the demarcation of the territories of the Ottoman Empire and the State of the Safavids was signed, that the Ottomans began to move their troops in the direction of the Caucasus. The frontier established in 1555 was the dividing line that the two conflicting states constantly came around to, however, in the meantime, the border appeared to be moved further into the adversary's territory by one side or the other from time to time. It is known that the Ottomans spread their rule as far as the Caspian Sea region, although for a short period. Meanwhile, the territories in the Caucasus and Transcaucasia were conquered and kept constantly subdued during their rule.

1 M.F. Kirzioğlu, *Osmanlıların Kafkas-Ellelerini Fethi (1451-1590)* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1998), pp. 83-99.

2 Sh.M. Mustafayev, *Eastern Anatolia: From Akkoyunlu to the Ottoman Empire* (Moscow, 1994).

3 N.A. Ivanov, *The Ottoman Conquest of the Arab Countries (1516-1574)* (Moscow, 2001).

After 1555, the first to be subdued was Batum, it was annexed to the Trabzon Eyalet (Province). According to Evliya Çelebi⁴, Trebizond itself was often called Lower Batum in the mid-17th century. In 1578, the Eyalet of Childir (or Akhazik) was formed in the territory of Southern Georgia and was firmly incorporated into the Ottoman state structure. In the late 16th century, a number of campaigns were carried out in the North direction. The Turkish troops occupied Poti, Kutaisi, and Sukhumi (the latter fortress was visited by the Turkish Navy even earlier -back in 1454).⁵ However, these seaside fortresses did not serve as platforms for permanent deployment of the Ottoman garrisons, although the area was declared to be controlled by the Ottoman Empire and was even named the Gürcistan Eyalet. The 1590 and 1639 agreements with the Safavids also set out that it belonged to the Ottoman Empire.⁶ However, Evliya Çelebi, who visited those locations in the 1640s, wrote that the natural conditions there were such that “it was impossible to infiltrate that area even if you had troops that were as big as the ocean”. Moreover, “there were no favorable spots on the coast”. For this reason, he considered the Gonio Fortress in the Trabzon Eyalet to be the last Ottoman territory in the region, where a 1,500 men strong garrison was deployed. The men-at-arms, as the Turkish traveler noted, did not participate in any military campaigns, their mission was to safeguard the town only.⁷

The Georgian kingdoms of Guria, Imeritia, and Megrelia were located further to the North. Apart from them, especially along the Rioni banks, there was a land plot occupied by the “unsubmissive Aznaurs”. There was no Ottoman administration in those areas, the rulers remained “disloyal” Christians. However, they did not pay any kharaj, they only sent gifts, through failed to do it regularly. It is known that there were multiple manifestations of defiance there, which the central authorities had to curb with the employment of military force. One of such expeditions into the depth of Georgian territories, was described by Evliya Çelebi, who was a participant in that expedition. He maintained that the Ottoman troops had behaved there as if they had found themselves in a “country at war” (darul-harb), “the Army was simply drowned in the prisoners of war and in its trophies”.⁸

4 Evliya Çelebi, *Siyahatname*. Three volumes of materials from the first (1897–1938) printed edition of this most interesting work were translated into Russian [Evliya Çelebi, *Book of Travelling. Excerpts from the Work of a Turkish Traveller of the 17th Century, Translation and Comments, ed. 1* (Moscow, 1961); *ed. 2* (Moscow, 1979); *ed. 3* (Moscow, 1983)]. These translations are used by the author in citing the data communicated by the source. They are published in Volume Two and Volume Seven in the Turkish edition comprising Ten Volumes, overall.

5 For the description of these military activities, please refer to: Kirzioğlu, *Osmanlıların Kafkas-Ellerini Fethi*, pp. 1–21, 382–384.

6 Kirzioğlu, *Osmanlıların Kafkas-Ellerini Fethi*, pp. 89–98, 384; Çelebi, *Book of Travelling, ed. 3*, p. 32.

7 Çelebi, *Book of Travelling, ed. 3*, p. 45.

8 Çelebi, *Book of Travelling, ed. 3*, p. 47.

The Ottoman authorities built up their relations with the local rulers following the vassal pattern. At the same time, the terms underlying individual arrangements varied, while the payment of scat and presentation of gifts could be required annually or even twice or three times a year.⁹ Evliya Çelebi wrote that in the mid-17th century, the Imeretia rulers had sent their annual gifts to Istanbul, which included slaves, falcons of various types, hawks, mules, and Georgian women of exceptional beauty.¹⁰ Similar information was conveyed by foreign observers. Thus, Italian missionary A. Lamberti, who had stayed in Megrelia in the early 17th century for over 30 years, asserted that the gifts were forwarded to Istanbul to keep the Sultan with his troops from entering the kingdom.

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The gifts were sent to Viziers on an annual basis, and once in every two years they were sent to the Sultans. In this way, “Princes Dadiani maintained their friendly relations with Turkey”.¹¹ Another missionary Pietro della Valle, in his communication about Georgia to Pope VII, underscored that the rulers of Guria, Imeretia, and Megrelia, while paying the scat, did not allow the Ottoman troops to enter their kingdoms “either for exercising their sway or even for their troops to pass through”.¹² Of course, the testimony by Evliya Çelebi about the military expedition into the depth of Georgia indicated that everything had

not been so perfect, as reported by the missionaries. There were cases of incursions and burglaries, rebellions, and peaceful coexistence, nevertheless, the Ottoman rule and domination in the Western Black Sea region was unchallenged. It would have been impossible for Evliya Çelebi to travel across the entire region from Trabzon to Caffa, if it had not been so.

In Abkhazia, which was located further to the North, the Ottomans explored and cultivated only a narrow strip of land on the seashore. The tribes that resided in the mountains were called “disobedient and rebellious” by Evliya Çelebi.¹³

9 M.Kh. Svanidze, “Georgia, Countries of the Black Sea Region and Eastern Europe in the First Half of the 17th Century” [in]; *Russia, Poland and the Black Sea Region in the 15th – 18th Centuries* (Moscow, 1979), p. 237.

10 Çelebi, *Book of Travelling*, ed. 3, p. 185.

11 A. Lamberti, “Description of Kolkhida” [in]; *Compilation of Materials for the Description of Localities and Tribes in the Caucasus*. Ed. 43 (Tbilisi, 1913), pp. 27-28.

12 Svanidze, “Georgia...” [in]; *Russia, Poland and the Black Sea Region...*, p. 238.

13 Çelebi, *Book of Travelling*, ed. 3, p. 108.

The Northern areas were penetrated into by the Ottomans from the side of the Crimean Peninsula.

Back in 1454 and 1475, the Ottoman Navy accomplished two marine expeditions to the Northern Black Sea region. The first expedition was, basically, a reconnaissance mission. As a result of the second one, the Black Sea trading positions of Genoa, that was an adversary of the Ottomans during the seizure of Constantinople and a rival in the fight for the benefits from the Asian-European caravan trade, were totally eliminated.

Caffa (Feodosia), that had been earlier the chief European trading post in the Crimea, was a Muslim city,¹⁴ according to Crimean Kahn Mengli Girey, and was subordinate to the central Ottoman imperial rule. In 1568, it became the center of the Eyalet set up in the region, which encompassed the South-Western Crimean Black Sea area, the Eastern Azov area, and the adjacent Northern Caucasus areas¹⁵.

The Baylerbay of Caffa was awarded the title of the Black Sea Defender (Karadeniz muhafızı).¹⁶ The Black Sea was eventually closed for foreign vessel navigation and was turned into the inner “Turkish lake”,¹⁷ as they said. The Crimean Khanate was transformed into a vassal of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁸

Simultaneously with the conquest of the Crimea (in 1475-1479), the fortresses of Anapa and Kapa were taken under the Ottoman control in the Northern Caucasus. The Circassian (Adyghe) tribes in the North-Western Caucasus fell into dependence on the new authorities. The Pasha of Caffa ruled over the Taman and Adakhun areas (between Taman and Temryuk). The other tribes were considered to be under the aegis of the Ottoman Vassal of the Crimean Khanate.¹⁹

The relations of the North-Caucasian tribes with the Crimean Khans were built on the basis of personal vassalage of the tribal chiefs, which implied the execution of certain responsibilities. Thus, the Kabartay Circassian chiefs were

14 A.N. Kurat, *Topkapı Sarayı Müzesi Arşivindeki Altınordu, Kırım ve Türkistan Hanlarına Ait Varlık ve Bitikler* (Istanbul, 1940).

15 H. İnalçık, *The Ottoman Empire. The Classical Age (1300-1600)* (L.-N.Y., 1973), p. 106.

16 Hezarfen Hüseyin Efendi, *Telhîsü'l-Beyân Fi Kavânîn-i Âl-i Osmân*, Dr. Sevim İlgürel [ed.] (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1998), p. 123.

17 H. İnalçık, *The Question of the Closing of the Black Sea under the Ottomans*. ArxcionPontou. 33. (Athens, 1974), p. 33.

18 Kirzioğlu, *Osmanlıların Kafkas-Ellerini Fethi*; A.M. Nekrasov, *International Relations and the Western Caucasus Peoples. The Last Quarter of the 15th Century-First Quarter of the 16th Century* (Moscow, 1990).

19 V.D. Smirkov, *The Crimean Khanate under the Rule of the Ottoman Porte. Vol. 1-2* (Moscow, 2005).

obliged to send Circassian captives each year to the Khan and his heirs - the Kalga and Nureddin, this was done to prevent the raids from the Crimean Khanate on their territories, i.e. the situation was similar to the one existing in Georgia, however, it should not be forgotten that the Circassians were regarded Muslims. Therefore, they were a closer sense of affinity between them and the new authorities. They participated in the Crimean and Ottoman military expeditions, while the Crimean Khans sent their sons to be trained by the Circassian Beys. This custom that was called Atalyk and it testified to a certain tribal dependence on the Khanate. A Turkish author of the 17th century, H. Hezârfen wrote, “to acknowledge their obedience, (the Circassian Beys) accepted them (the Khan’s sons) and brought them up until they came of age.” On the other hand, it also bore evidence of the Khans’ particularly respectful attitude towards the Circassian Beys. “After reaching adulthood, the Khan-Zade (son of the Khan) paid respect to his Atalyk teacher, in the same way as he did to his father. If the Khan-Zade who had been trained in this way was endowed with power from the Great State, he tried to make his Atalyk... richer than anyone else.”²⁰ Such relations, undoubtedly, heightened hostilities among the tribes, but helped the suzerain to somehow manipulate and manage them.

As for the fellow tribesmen, the tribal chiefs were their sole masters. It was also written by H. Hezârfen that the reaya (people) of tribes were the Bey’s “Myulk”. Myulk means absolute (full) ownership. For the Ottomans, same as for all of the Muslim communities, the use of this term in relation to people was not a typical practice. Consequently, that remote periphery of the Ottoman world was characterized by social relations that were very different from those pertinent to the inner areas of the Ottoman Empire.

Evliya Çelebi, who visited the Circassian territories in 1641-1643 and then again in 1666, described the local inhabitants as “rebels with an obedient appearance”.²¹ He also wrote about the ongoing Islamization of the region. Thus, under the reign of Crimean Khan Muhammed-Giray (1641-1644, 1654-1660), according to Evliya Çelebi, the Kabarda inhabitants “were honored to be initiated into Islam”, however, after the Khan was replaced, he (Evliya Çelebi) began to doubt the successful completion of Islamization. “Who knows what will happen there afterwards, but today... the Kabarda inhabitants have become Muslims.”²²

In the North-Western areas of the Caucasus, that were subordinate to the Caffa Eyalet, i.e. directly to the Ottoman administration, the Islamization had a more

20 Hezârfen Hüseyin Efendi, *Telhîsü'l-Beyân...*, p.172.

21 Çelebi, *Book of Travelling*, ed. 2, p. 26.

22 Çelebi, *Book of Travelling*, ed. 2, p. 85.

profound impact. Qadis (Muslim judges) were summoned there from Istanbul, and there was a Qadi justice system in place there. Meanwhile, the tribes, subordinate to the Crimean Khans, remained only superficially Islamized. Such a situation persisted throughout the entire Ottoman rule in the Northern Caucasus. Even in 1778, Janikli Ali Pasha, sent on a mission into the region by the Ottoman government, reported in his official communication: “There are not too many Muslims among the Circassians, however, while all the others intrinsically feel close affinity with Islam.”²³ Consequently, there were the same hopes as in the 17th century, however, no radical internal change was carried out. Administratively, the status of tribes was different. All the territory embraced by the Caffa Eyalet was deemed to be allocated to the Anatolia region of the Empire. Meanwhile, the Crimean Khanate was included into Rumelia. The Crimean Tartars could not enter the territories that were under the Caffa control, without obtaining a special permit.²⁴

In the early second half of the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire tried to use the territories of the Black Sea region, Lower Volga river basin and the Northern Caucasus areas for the movement of its European Army troops across Transcaucasia to the Persian theatre of war. A military expedition to Astrakhan was accomplished precisely with this aim in view (1569). It was the first clash of the Ottomans with Russia, who had conquered Astrakhan in 1556. At that time, the Ottomans did not seek to continue their expansion into Eastern Europe. Their aim was merely to build a canal between the Don and Volga rivers, which would provide a waterway for them from the Crimea and the Balkan Peninsula to Iran. A considerable part of the Ottoman troops dispatched then to Astrakhan was made up of auxiliary forces, i.e., in plain terms, they were ditchers sent there for the implementation of the conceived project. A severe failure and huge human losses related not so much to Russia’s counteraction, but to harsh natural conditions - heat, lack of water,²⁵ diverted the attention of the Ottoman

23 P. Berzej, *Expulsion of the Circassians (Cause and Consequences)* (Maikop, 1998), p. 50.

24 Çelebi, *Book of Travelling*, ed. 2, p. 51. Also refer to A.N. Kurat, *Türkiye ve İdil Boyu (1569) Astarhan Seferi, Ten-İdil Kanalı ve XVI-XVII. Yüzyıl Osmanlı-Rus Münasebetleri* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1961); A. Bennigsen, “L’expédition turque contre Astrakhan en 1569 d’après les registres des ‘Affaires importantes’ des Archives ottomans” [in]; *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, V. VIII, N 3, 1967, pp. 427-446; T. Gökbilgin, “L’expédition ottoman contre Astrakhan en 1569”, V. II, N 1, 1970, pp. 118-123. For a different opinion regarding this event, please refer to; P.A. Sadikov, “Expedition of the Tatars and Turks to Astrakhan in 1569” [in]; *Historical Records*, No. 22 (Moscow, 1947), pp. 132-166; H. İnalçık, *Osmanlı-Rus Rekabetinin Menşei ve Don-Volga Kanalı Teşebbüsü (1569)*, Belleten 12/46 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1948).

25 A.N. Kurat, *Türkiye ve İdil Boyu (1569) Astarhan Seferi, Ten-İdil Kanalı ve XVI-XVII. Yüzyıl Osmanlı-Rus Münasebetleri* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1966); Bennigsen, “L’expédition turque contre Astrakhan en 1569 d’après les registres des ‘Affaires importantes’ des Archives ottomans”, pp. 427-446; T. Gökbilgin, “L’expédition ottoman contre Astrakhan en 1569”, pp. 118-123. For a different opinion regarding this event, please refer to; P.A. Sadikov, “Expedition of the Tatars and Turks to Astrakhan in 1569” [in]; *Historical Records*, No. 22 (Moscow, 1947), pp. 132-166; İnalçık, *Osmanlı-Rus Rekabetinin Menşei...*

authorities from the remote Northern periphery of the Empire. The North-East remained poorly explored in the administrative, economic and even religious and ideological sense.

Up until the late 18th century, i.e. until the loss of Crimea, the Ottomans had not deemed it necessary to reinforce that area. It had been considered their inherent property, calm and not in need of any efforts to build up its defense system because of its remote location from the major empire territories. Before, Grand Vizier Gedik Ahmed Pasha, who had led the military operations in the Crimea and in the Northern Caucasus in 1475-1476, ordered for the destruction

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of many fortresses in that area. The fortress of Anapa, for instance, was declared useless. In the mid-17th century, Evliya Çelebi wrote: “Today, it is a dilapidated fortress..., there is no one inside the fortress”, although it “is so beautiful as if it had been just finished by the consummate master of his craft”.²⁶

Taman, the place of stay for the Sanjakkbey and Qadi, was considered the main Ottoman fortress in the North-Eastern region of the Black Sea. It also accommodated a dizdar and 300 fighting men. In Tempyuk, there were 200 fighting men, and in a small fortress of Kyzyltash - 60 men.²⁷ In 1657 (in connection with

the Ukrainian events), Azov was referred to a separate Eyalet, where 1,894 fighting men were deployed.²⁸ For all intents and purposes, only Azov could represent a powerful military force. All the other fortresses, including Caffa with its 260 fighting men,²⁹ could only oversee the borderline Vassals.

In the early 16th century, a Cossack settlement oriented towards Russia emerged in the Fore-Caucasus. They built their first fortification in the delta of the Sunja River, a right-side tributary of the Terek River. This caused strong discontent with the Crimean Khanate. The Terek-based township featured prominently in the discussions with Russian Ambassador Ivan Novoseltsev, who came to Istanbul in 1570. The first round of negotiations focusing on the delineation of the zones of influences between the Ottoman Empire and Russia in the Fore-

26 Çelebi, *Book of Travelling*, ed. 2, p. 51.

27 Çelebi, *Book of Travelling*, ed. 2, pp. 42-52.

28 Hezarfen Hüseyin Efendi, *Telhisü'l-Beyân...*, p. 151.

29 Hezarfen Hüseyin Efendi, *Telhisü'l-Beyân...*, p. 151.

Caucasus ended up with Russia yielding to the Ottoman pressure. At the behest of the Ottomans, the Cossack township was resettled to the delta of the Terek River (Terki or the Tyumen fortress).³⁰

In the 1580s, after the end of the Livonian War, Russia made an attempt at reclaiming the territory of the Lower Volga River Basin. Russian fortresses sprang up again along the Terek River. This time around, there were not merely Cossack settlements, but Russian troops with permanently deployed garrisons. The Persian Shah sent his diplomatic envoys to Moscow (1587), they delivered a proposal to forge friendly relations and an alliance to fight the Ottomans. The Crimean Khan demanded that the Russian fortresses should be removed from the Terek River, as they hindered the operation of the traditional Crimea-Derbent route. However, in 1594 and 1604-1605, the Russians accomplished two campaigns against the Dagestan Shamkhal, who was considered a most loyal ally of the Ottomans in that area. Both campaigns turned out to be a failure for the Russians,³¹ and Russia cancelled any attempts to move further into the Caucasian region. Moreover, it abandoned its positions earlier secured along the Terek River. As a result of the Ottoman-Safavid standoff in the region, the control over Dagestan and the Caspian Sea in the 17th century appeared to be in the hands of the Safavid Empire, while problems related to the Caucasus and Transcaucasia began to surface in the Russian-Ottoman relations only in the 18th century.

In the 17th century, Kabarda and some other Adyghe and Dagestani rulers tried to resort to the Russian patronage on multiple occasions, while stating their wish to accept allegiance to Russia. However, this did not mean (and Russia was fully aware of it) that they were willing to reconfigure the existing spheres of influence in any serious manner. At that time, Russia adhered to the same rules underlying the maintenance of relations that were generally practiced in the Caucasus. Shirt' (friendly, allied) credentials issued by the local rulers spoke of temporary relations only, they did not carry an implication that the vassal relations with other states and rulers would be terminated. The double (or even triple) vassalage of borderline tribes was acceptable for Russia and the Ottoman Empire as well. They did not intend to make a more stringent differentiation then. H. Hezârfe wrote about the Great Nogai tribes, who resided between Perekop and Azov, for instance, that they were obedient to the Crimean Khans, had participated in military expeditions under their command, but sometimes "had become Cossacks", which meant that they had refused to obey the Khan's

30 *Travelling by the Russian Ambassadors of the 16th-17th Centuries*, Lists for Articles (Moscow-Leningrad, 1954), pp. 63-99.

31 A.S. Shmelyov, "Russian-Dagestani-Ottoman Conflict in the Early 17th Century" [in]; *The Slavs and Their Neighbors*, Ed. 4 (Moscow, 1992).

orders. “They went to ask for mercy from the Moscow King and lived in his territory for a while, but then they returned to their previous dwelling place and stayed there”.³²

The Black Sea was totally closed for foreign vessels after 1592. Since that time, there had not been a single mention of it in the capitulation documents signed by the Ottoman Empire with the European nations.³³ The trade connections and economic activities in the region were part and parcel of the business routine of the Ottoman Empire.³⁴ Various regions of the Greater Black Sea Area and Transcaucasia maintained close ties with each other. In Trabzon, according to Evliya Çelebi, the most respectful segment of the city was “the merchants who traded with Azov, Cossacks, Megrelistan, the Abaz countries (Abkhazia), Circassians, the Crimea”. On top of that, Sinop was famous for carpet making, in Samsun, they weaved and exported hemp products etc. The entire seacoast specialized in ship building, and seafaring was considered a very honorary pursuit.³⁵

The trade and customs services were treated with utmost scrutiny by the authorities, and they were strictly regulated, like all activities in the Ottoman Empire. As for Eastern Anatolia and Transcaucasia, a major role was attributed, as before, to Trabzon,³⁶ which had retained its high trading profile from the time of the Trebizond Empire. Trabzon, similar to the Samsun-Sinop region, was accorded a separate customs status, as a special area.

The ports in the South-Eastern Black Sea region served as an export channel for the products made in the deepest areas of Eastern Anatolia and Transcaucasia, including rice, iron, cotton articles, wool, carpets, shipbuilding timber, nuts etc. Many transit products were imported from Iran along the Great Silk Road as well as spices and dyestuff from the Arab countries and India along the Anatolian Route.³⁷

32 Hezarfen Hüseyin Efendi, *Telhisü'l-Beyân...*, p. 172.

33 C.M. Kortepeter, “Ottoman Imperial Policy and the Economy of the Black Sea Region in the Sixteenth Century”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 86 (No.3, 1960), pp. 86-113; H. İnalçık, *The Customs Register of Caffa. 1487 – 1490* (Cambridge/Mass., 1996); H. İnalçık, “Bursa and Commerce of the Levant”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, N 3/2. Leiden, 1960; İnalçık, *The Ottoman Empire*.

34 İnalçık, *The Customs Register of Caffa*; İnalçık, “Bursa and Commerce of the Levant”; İnalçık, *The Ottoman Empire*.

35 Çelebi, *Book of Travelling*, ed. 3, p. 40; M.T. Gökbilgin, *XVI. Yüzyıl Başlarında Trabzon ve Doğu Karadeniz Bölgesi*, Belleten 24/102 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1982).

36 Gökbilgin, *XVI. Yüzyıl Başlarında Trabzon ve Doğu Karadeniz Bölgesi*.

37 İnalçık, *The Ottoman Empire*, pp. 129-130; İnalçık, *The Customs Register of Caffa*, pp. 91-111.

In the 17th century, when trading with Iran was impeded due to the Iranian-Ottoman wars, the Ottoman vassals in the Eastern Black Sea region, who had been actively engaged in boisterous trading with the Crimea and Istanbul earlier, tried to handle the mainstream flow of transit merchandise themselves.³⁸

In the 1630-1640s, Prince Levan II Dadiani conducted diplomatic talks with a number of European nations with the aim of making the Iranian silk transportable to Europe through Georgia and the Black Sea. The plan seemed to be very attractive, as all of the silkworm breeding areas in Iran were located relatively in close proximity with the Black Sea coast. Silk could be transported through the Black Sea in 10-20 days. Further, it was supposed to be delivered to Poland and other European nations by using the traditional routes in Moldavia and the Balkans. The route through Ormuz and Aleppo was longer than that through the Black Sea, moreover, the further transportation across the Mediterranean Sea lasted for 2-3 months. A journey across the ocean lasted for 8-10 months. Prince Dadiani tried to negotiate the issue with Poland, France, Italian cities and the Persian Shah. To capture the fancy of merchants, Dadiani sold silk at lower prices.³⁹ Nevertheless, the Ottoman authorities offered

The entire territory remained unexplored and poorly cultivated, not sufficiently fortified, poorly connected with the center, economically, socially and culturally isolated, which eventually had an impact on its subsequent fate.

no support to his plans. They did not want to change the traditional cargo flows within the country or the practice of imposing inner taxes, nor did they want to allow foreign merchants to enter those borderline areas of their Empire. The pretext for refusal was, in particular, the risks associated with the Zaporozhye Cossacks who had committed plunder and robbery in the Black Sea region. Indeed, in the late 16th century and in the first half of the 17th century, the Zaporozhye Cossacks were involved in plundering the coastal cities of the Southern, South-Eastern, Western, and Crimean Black Sea region. Sometimes, they even successfully fought sea battles with the Ottoman Navy. It happened that they had joined forces with the Don Cossacks (although in the 17th century, the Don Cossacks were largely occupied with the internal Russian affairs) and the Transcaucasian Aznaurs. Such robbery and plunder was the cause that led to the demise of the Black Sea region in the 17th-early 18th century, according to H. İnalçık and a number of European authors.⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, the Cos-

38 *List of Embassies to Imeretia throughout 1650–1652 for an Article drawn by Alexander Ievlev* (Tbilisi, 1969).

39 Svanidze, “Georgia...” [in]; *Russia, Poland and the Black Sea Region...*, pp. 236-247.

40 C.M. Kortepeter, *Ottoman Imperialism during Reformation: Europe and the Caucasus* (N.Y.-Leiden, 1972); İnalçık, *The Customs Register of Caffa*.

sack raids had a destabilizing effect on the trading activities and welfare of the inhabitants of the Black Sea region and deeper areas of the Ottoman Empire that were related to it (including the Caucasian and Transcaucasian areas). However, it should be borne in mind that not only the raids or the wars with Iran were the sole factors at work, but also the social, economic and political crisis that had affected the Ottoman Empire since the late 16th century.

All the above factors exerted their combined influence and led to the weakening of the Ottoman rule in the Caucasus and Transcaucasia. The entire territory remained unexplored and poorly cultivated, not sufficiently fortified, poorly connected with the center, economically, socially and culturally isolated, which eventually had an impact on its subsequent fate.

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