

Lela Gibson

## **Diplomacy and Cultural Exchange: Ebubekir Ratib Efendi's Mission to Vienna, 1792**

*Presented at Ottoman-European Exchanges in Commerce, Finance, and Culture,*

*Newnham College, University of Cambridge*

After a four-year war between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, an Ottoman diplomat arrived in Vienna in 1792. He was accompanied by an entourage of one hundred and twelve men, including a translator, his son-in-law, and numerous cooks and servants. The group had traveled months overland to reach Vienna. Their leader, the Ottoman envoy Ebubekir Ratib Efendi, would deliver an official message to the Habsburg Emperor Leopold II. At least, that was the official goal of his mission. But there was a second, and perhaps more important, goal: to gather information about Habsburg military and technical institutions that might be useful to Ottoman reform efforts under Selim III.

This presentation will discuss Ebubekir Efendi's information gathering in Vienna and contend that two main things were necessary to carry out this goal. **First**, he needed access to strategic institutions of the Habsburg state, such as military and technical schools. He was granted this access as the Habsburg Empire courted the Sublime Porte in a search for allies against France. **Second**, he needed local informants who could help him understand these advancements in his own language. The two main local informants he found were students from the Oriental Academy and an Armenian diplomat in Vienna named Ignatius Mouradgea d'Ohsson. I will begin by briefly outlining the historical background relating to Ebubekir Efendi's visit before discussing these two main points.

### **Historical Background**

Lela Gibson

The Habsburg Empire shared a long and contentious history with the Ottoman Empire, most notably over territory in south and central Europe. A little over one hundred years before Ebubekir Ratib Efendi's visit, the Ottoman army had attempted to capture Vienna in 1683. This was still remembered by Habsburg society over a hundred years later – the centennial of the siege in 1783 was commemorated by various operas, plays, and poems. The Habsburg orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall even described a bell in his hometown of Graz that, even up until this time, rang three times per day to remind residents of an Ottoman threat.<sup>1</sup>

The most recent Habsburg-Ottoman war lasted 1787 to 1791. It was the result of an alliance between Russia and the Habsburg state. The Habsburg foreign minister, Wenzel Anton Kaunitz, saw an alliance with Russia as a safeguard against Prussian dominance in central Europe.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, under Catherine the Great, Russia's imperial strategy was to gain access to the Mediterranean by acquiring sea ports on the Black Sea. Catherine also had a vision of an Orthodox state in place of the Ottoman Empire ("Greek project"). An alliance with Russia in this strategy would guarantee potential territorial gains in the Balkans for the Habsburg state.

However, it did not go as planned. The war began in August 1787, several years after Russia annexed the Crimea. The Habsburg Empire joined in on the side of Russia against the Ottoman state. The Ottoman and Habsburg Empires both began to lose significant amounts of troops and the price of food skyrocketed. The war became highly unpopular in the Habsburg Empire. Prussia signed an alliance treaty with the Ottoman Empire, threatening to enter the war. Just when it looked like the two rivals – Prussia and the Habsburg Empire – would come to combat, Habsburg Emperor Joseph II died. Joseph's successor Leopold II began to look for a

Lela Gibson

way out.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, trouble was brewing to the west as the French Revolution threatened the prevailing order on the Continent. The Ottoman and Habsburg Empires made peace with the Treaty of Sistova in the summer of 1791. The treaty did not greatly alter the prewar borders between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, although Habsburg forces had briefly occupied Belgrade. This would be the last war between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires.

The inability of the Janissary corps to hold back Russian advances during the war had underscored the need for Ottoman military reform. Selim III gathered a cabinet of twenty-three advisors who would submit reports of advice about reform.<sup>4</sup> One of these advisors would be the Ottoman ambassador to Vienna, Ebubekir Ratib Efendi. In his report, he described the new military technology of Europe, which he termed the *nizam-i cedit* or “new order.”<sup>5</sup> Eventually, Selim would establish a new military corps which would be come to be known by the same name. The new army was formed in 1794 and utilized Western-style uniforms, equipment, and training. The Sublime Porte also built forty five modern warships. It entered the European state system of diplomacy, establishing embassies in Europe and officially joining European coalitions.

Ebubekir Ratib Efendi was a little over ten years older than Selim III. He was born in 1750 in Kastamonu. His father was a member of the ulema. As a young man, he had worked his way up in the Ottoman bureaucracy, eventually becoming crown prince Selim's personal scribe and tutor. He even helped the crown price compose letters to Louis XVI.<sup>6</sup> Ebubekir Efendi remained one of Selim III's close advisors upon Selim's accession to the throne. Ebubekir Efendi would later be promoted to Reis ül-küttab, a position that managed Ottoman

Lela Gibson

foreign affairs, upon his return. His service would be short-lived, however, as he was executed several years later after falling out of favor in court.<sup>7</sup>

Now to his mission in Vienna. Ebubekir Efendi wrote two reports of his time in Vienna, which lasted from February to July 1792. The first was his *Sefaretname*, or ambassadorial report. Fitting into the tradition of other Ottoman ambassadorial reports, Ebubekir Ratib Efendi's *Sefaretname* recorded the journey he took to Vienna and interesting interactions with notables at balls, plays, etc. Ebubekir Efendi's second report, his *Layiha* or treatise, is much longer. It is a detailed list of information about the Habsburg military and administrative structures. The historian Carter Findley has pointed out that the *Layiha* was organized with an encyclopedic classification system.<sup>8</sup> This genre was unknown at the time in the Ottoman Empire and was likely written with the help of an interlocutor in Vienna named Ignatius Mouradgea d'Ohsson. I will talk more about him near the end.

In addition to Ebubekir Efendi's own reports, three Habsburg sources also chronicle his mission in Vienna. The first is the official Viennese newspaper of the time, the *Wiener Zeitung*. The second is a journal for the court kept by his Habsburg guide and translator, Ignaz Stürmer. Stürmer recorded the Ottoman envoy's daily – and sometimes even hourly (!) – movements. The third source which looks at Ebubekir Ratib Efendi's mission in Vienna is the autobiography of Joseph von Hammer, a famous orientalist who was a student in Vienna at the time.

By all accounts, Ebubekir Ratib Efendi raised much interest in Vienna. An Ottoman ambassador had not been to Vienna in over twenty years. The Ottoman court preferred to conduct diplomacy through European embassies in Istanbul rather than send diplomats abroad,

Lela Gibson

thus saving the expense of permanent embassies. Ottoman diplomats were sent to Europe on an as needed, or ad-hoc basis; they would deliver a message to the foreign court and return to the Ottoman Empire. After Ebubekir Ratib Efendi's mission, the Ottoman state would establish the first permanent embassies in Europe beginning in London in 1793, and later expanding to Paris, Vienna and Berlin. These embassies, however, would only last a couple years, as they proved to be too expensive to maintain. So for Ebubekir Ratib Efendi's time, an Ottoman diplomat in Vienna was a quite a rarity. And an Ottoman diplomat with an entourage of one hundred and twelve, well, that was even rarer.

And his mission was received as such. Hammer reported that the Turkish entourage was the main object of Viennese curiosity at the time.<sup>9</sup> Reports of every last detail of the Ottoman mission swirled through the entire city – even down to the way the Ottoman envoy ate his asparagus at the royal banquet!<sup>10</sup> Noble elites – who also often had fought in the war against the Ottoman Empire – vied to invite Ebubekir Efendi to balls, plays and salons. He often visited them, reporting in his *Sefaretname* of the numerous balls, plays, and social engagements he attended.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes Ebubekir Ratib Efendi would reciprocate by inviting notables to his house to listen to Ottoman saz performances.<sup>12</sup> People were so curious about Ebubekir Ratib Efendi that his residence – by his account and that of his Habsburg translator – was crowded day and night with guests.<sup>13</sup> It finally got to the point where the official Viennese newspaper, the *Wiener Zeitung*, had to publish an announcement at the beginning of Ramazan warning people not to disturb Ebubekir Efendi at his house -- presumably to not put him in the awkward position of receiving drop-in guests, and thus having to offer food, while fasting.<sup>14</sup>

Lela Gibson

But Ebubekir Ratib Efendi was not in Vienna to socialize. During the day, he visited institutions which were the products of Habsburg reform. Indeed, it was not only the Ottoman state that contemplated reform in the eighteenth century – a series of reforms had also been introduced in the Habsburg Empire in the age of “enlightened absolutism.” Maria Theresa had carried out military and economic reforms, and her son Joseph II built upon them with greater political reforms. Ebubekir Efendi visited institutions which were essentially products of these reforms.

His main interests were military institutions and factories – things which could be reproduced in the Ottoman Empire. He wanted to see for himself how these Habsburg institutions functioned and gather as much information as possible about them. And his Habsburg counterparts knew that was what he was doing. The official newspaper even reported that Ebubekir Efendi continued “to become acquainted with arts that are useful, in his opinion, and requests to see the most important public institutions of the regime. This is demonstrated by the fact that he visits every day one of the local facilities and useful private institutions...”<sup>15</sup>

### **Access**

This brings me to my first main point: the question of access. After a such a long history of conflict, why would the Habsburg state reveal its military secrets to the Ottoman Empire? The answer lies in developments in France, which brought the two former adversaries closer together. On the one hand, the Habsburg regime was looking for a new ally. Leopold's sister, Marie Antoinette, after all, was the queen of France; and it was clear by 1791 that the Revolution posed a very real threat to her security. It would only be a matter of time before the Habsburg

Lela Gibson

Empire and France would go to war. In fact, France would declare war on Austria during Ebubekir Ratib Efendi's visit. Prussia would join in on the side of Austria by the summer of 1792 – just after Ebubekir Ratib Efendi would depart Vienna – and the War of the First Coalition would begin.

On the other hand, the French Revolution would also force the Ottoman state to look for new allies. The French monarchy had long supplied advisors for the Ottoman military, such as Baron de Tott in 1770. In the beginning of the Revolution, the Sublime Porte took a “wait-and-see” approach towards France. Ebubekir Ratib Efendi reported on the situation in France from Vienna, which he described as a “rising of the rabble” caused by fiscal problems within the French government.<sup>16</sup> Using new diplomatic reforms under Selim III, the Ottoman state formally declared neutrality for the first time in the War of the First Coalition. The Ottoman government, however, would eventually be pulled into the war of the Second Coalition with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, an Ottoman province.

This shift in diplomatic alliances made it possible for the Habsburg government to show Ebubekir Ratib Efendi various institutions, as perhaps this knowledge would be needed by the future ally. One of the first places Ebubekir Ratib Efendi visited was the royal porcelain factory. Porcelain might not sound like a strategic military good, but the factory's director, Conrad von Sorgenthal, was in charge of public manufacturing for the entire Habsburg Empire. Sorgenthal showed Ebubekir Efendi and his entourage the factory and described the processes used to create goods there. He also visited the Royal Engineering Academy (*k. k. Ingenieur-Akademie*), where students were trained in the mathematics and engineering relevant to military sciences, especially

Lela Gibson

that of artillery. The Engineering Academy was one of the institutions that had benefitted Maria Theresa's reforms.<sup>17</sup> The Academy also a mathematical library and collection of scientific instruments, which Ebubekir Efendi viewed. After reporting this visit, the Vienna newspaper noted that Habsburg officials were „making an effort to show the inquisitive Muslim all places of interest.”<sup>18</sup>

Ebubekir Efendi also visited the Royal Military Academy (*k. k. Militärakademie*), on April 20 – the same day France declared war on Austria. He needed permission directly from the Habsburg Emperor to visit this academy, and he brought twenty members of his entourage with him at his own expense.<sup>19</sup> This was a very important part of his visit, since the military academy had been part of mid-eighteenth century Habsburg military reform and produced some of the top soldiers. Ebubekir Efendi was so impressed by what he saw at the Military Academy that he told his hosts he would put his own son there – or in the Engineering Academy – if he could receive the proper permission from Ottoman authorities.<sup>20</sup>

### **Local Informants**

But perhaps the institution that made the greatest impression on Ebubekir Efendi was the Royal Oriental Academy (*k.k. Orientalische Akademie*). This brings me to my second main point: Ebubekir Efendi needed local informants. The students from the Oriental Academy served as one main point of information. The Academy was also the product of Habsburg reforms – it was founded in 1753 by Maria Theresa as part of the creation of a central administrative department for Habsburg foreign policy. Its goal was to train young men as translators in languages of the Middle East.<sup>21</sup> Students also received a general education in subjects such as

Lela Gibson

philosophy and natural science. They would go on to become translators (so-called *Sprachknaben*) for the Habsburg diplomatic corps, and some of them would become diplomats themselves.

Ebubekir Efendi visited the Oriental Academy in the middle of his stay in Vienna on March 22. He arrived at around four in the afternoon. The oldest student in the Academy greeted him with a welcoming speech in Ottoman. All of the other students also gave short talks, demonstrating their language abilities. Several scientific demonstrations were then performed for Ebubekir Efendi and explained to him in Ottoman. The demonstrations were of electrical and air experiments.<sup>22</sup> The highlight of the demonstrations was the simultaneous explosion of twenty-four electric pistols which were tied to batteries by a brass wire.<sup>23</sup> This was an early type of electrical experiment.

Interestingly, this demonstration was led by Joseph von Hammer – who would later go on to become the orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall. Hammer was a student at the Oriental Academy during Ebubekir Efendi's visit. Hammer was the son of a civil servant from Graz who had been sent to the Oriental Academy in Vienna at age fifteen. By the time of Ebubekir Efendi's visit, he was in his third year of studies and eighteen years old. Hammer wrote in his autobiography that Ebubekir Efendi praised him after demonstrating the experiment, saying he "become a great man."<sup>24</sup> Hammer modestly added in his autobiography that never became true. (Although Hammer became a famous orientalist, he never made the rank of ambassador, which is what he believed Ebubekir Efendi meant).<sup>25</sup>

Lela Gibson

Of all of the places he visited in Vienna, Ebubekir Efendi's description of the Oriental Academy takes up the longest space in his *Sefaretname*.<sup>26</sup> Ebubekir Efendi described his visit, the knowledge of the students' languages and a short poem that he wrote for the Academy. Local reports also indicate his enthusiasm – he reportedly stayed there until 9 PM.<sup>27</sup> His poem praised the students' language abilities and scientific demonstrations. He gave a copy to the Academy, which had it framed and prominently displayed in their building.<sup>28</sup> A translation of the poem was later published in the orientalist journal *Fundgruben des Orients*, which was edited by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall.

The students from the Oriental Academy were used as translators and helpers during Ebubekir Ratib Efendi's visit. They became one of Ebubekir Efendi's informants in Vienna who he could rely on for information in his native language. Hammer commented that Ebubekir Ratib Efendi's visit was the first time the students met an Ottoman, despite spending many years learning the language. The Ottoman envoy bought several scientific and geometric instruments in Vienna. The students from the Oriental Academy come to his house twice a week to show him how they worked.<sup>29</sup> They were also present for Ebubekir Efendi's audience with Leopold II. Hammer also described another one of the Ottoman envoy's interlocutors, Muradgea d'Ohsson.

D'Ohsson was the son of an Armenian Catholic father who worked as a translator for the Swedish Embassy in Istanbul. He also became a translator for the Swedish mission in Istanbul and later went to Paris, where he published an encyclopedic work on the Ottoman Empire (*Tableau General de l'Empire Othoman*). Political and financial problems led him to relocate to Vienna to continue his work. In Vienna, he was one of Ebubekir Ratib Efendi's main

Lela Gibson

interlocutors. Local reports also show that d'Ohsson was often at Ebubekir Efendi's side.

Hammer reported that d'Ohsson belonged to Ebubekir Efendi's most trusted circle.<sup>30</sup> He also reported that d'Ohsson was to be found at the Ottoman envoy's house almost all day, everyday.

<sup>31</sup> And indeed he would need to be. According to an article by Carter Findley, contributed significantly to Ebubekir Efendi's encyclopedic work on the Ottoman Empire.<sup>32</sup> The length of this work required much help from a local informant. And he was rewarded for his assistance. He returned to Istanbul and was a member of Selim III's committee for Ottoman reform.<sup>33</sup>

To conclude, Ebubekir Ratib Efendi needed two things in order to complete his survey of Habsburg institutions, which would help inform Ottoman reforms. First, he needed access -- access to Habsburg military and public institutions. He was granted access due to the shifting political alliances of the time, as the Habsburg Empire looked to the Ottoman Empire for alliance in the wake of the French Revolution. Second, he needed local informants who could explain these new technologies -- especially scientific and military -- to him in his native language. The students from the Oriental Academy helped him understand recent advances in science and Mouradgea d'Ohsson helped him understand the Habsburg military system.

---

<sup>1</sup> Archiv der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Nachlass Hammer-Purgstall, Lebenserinnerungen, Band 2, 13. (Bachofen manuscript)

<sup>2</sup> Karl A. Roider, "Kaunitz, Joseph II and the Turkish War," *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 54:4 (1976), 538-556.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Hochedlinger. *Austria's Wars of Emergence: War, State and Society in the Habsburg monarchy, 1683-1797* (New York: Longman, 2003), 392.

<sup>4</sup> Shaw, Stanford Jay. *Between old and new: the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim III, 1789-1807*. Harvard University Press, 1971, 91.

<sup>5</sup> Aksan, Virginia H. "Ottoman Political Writing, 1768-1808," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 25:1 (1993), 63.

<sup>6</sup> Shaw, 90.

<sup>7</sup> Shaw, 90.

- 
- <sup>8</sup> Carter V. Findley, "A Quixotic Author and His Great Taxonomy: Mouradgea D'Ohsson and his *Tableau General de l'Empire Othoman*" Paper presented at the 19<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Historical Sciences, 1999, <<http://www.oslo2000.uio.no/program/papers/mlb/mlb-findley.pdf>>.
- <sup>9</sup> Bachofen 2, 23.
- <sup>10</sup> Bachofen 2, 23.
- <sup>11</sup> Abdullah Uçman, *Ebubekir Ratib Efendi'nin Nemçe Sefaretnamesi* (Istanbul: Kitabevi, 1999), 91-3.
- <sup>12</sup> Uçman, 86.
- <sup>13</sup> Uçman, 86.
- <sup>14</sup> Wiener Zeitung, 25 April, 1792, 1115.
- <sup>15</sup> "...fährt fort von seinem Auge nach nützlichen Künsten, und seinem Verlangen, die wichtigsten Anstalten der öffentlichen Verwaltung kennen zu lernen, Beweise abzulegen, indem er täglich einige der hiesigen Einrichtungen, und nützliche Privatanstalten, besonders Fabriken, besucht." Wiener Zeitung, 4 April 1792, 881.
- <sup>16</sup> Fatih Yeşil, "Looking at the French Revolution Through Ottoman Eyes: Ebubekir Ratib Efendi's Observations," *Bulletin of SOAS*, 70:2 (2007), 290.
- <sup>17</sup> Wright, Monte D., and Lawrence J. Paszek. *Science, Technology, and Warfare: The Proceedings of the Third Military History Symposium United States Air Force Academy 8-9 May 1969*. The Minerva Group, Inc., 2001.
- <sup>18</sup> „bemüht, dem wißbegierigem Muselmanne alles Sehenswürdigkeiten vorzuzeigen..." Wiener Zeitung, 25 April, 1792, 1114.
- <sup>19</sup> Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Türkei IV, 9. Entry for 20 April. (Stürmer)
- <sup>20</sup> Stürmer, 20 April.
- <sup>21</sup> Victor Weiss von Starkenfels, *Die kaiserlich-königliche orientalische Akademie zu Wien*, Vienna: Gerold, 1839, 5.
- <sup>22</sup> Wiener Zeitung 24 March 1792, 770
- <sup>23</sup> Bachofen, 24.
- <sup>24</sup> Bachofen, 24.
- <sup>25</sup> Bachofen 23.
- <sup>26</sup> Uçman, 91-3.
- <sup>27</sup> Wiener Zeitung, 24 March 1792, 770.
- <sup>28</sup> Ebubekir Ratib Efendi, trans. Hammer, "Gedicht des türkischen Gesandten Ebubekir Ratib Efendi," *Fundgruben des Orients* 1, no. 1 (1809): 81.
- <sup>29</sup> Bachofen 30.
- <sup>30</sup> Bachofen 23.
- <sup>31</sup> Bachofen 30.
- <sup>32</sup> Findley, 17.
- <sup>33</sup> Shaw, 93.