

Elements of crisis

Many historians agree that in the late 16th century, the Ottoman Empire started to decline and that this decline lasted for more than three centuries, until the final demise of the Empire in the early 20th century. Others disagree, and place the beginning of the decline either in 1683, when the second Ottoman siege of Vienna failed, and the Empire began to lose wars and territories in Europe, or in the early 19th century, when the Ottoman Empire was economically and politically incorporated into a Western-dominated world-system. The theme of Ottoman decline, although largely developed in 20th century historical studies, is not an entirely new construction. The same theme frequently appears in writings of the 16th-17th century, when Ottoman scholars argued that the 'good old order' of the 'golden age' of Süleyman I (1520-1566) had been ruined by disorder and corruption. Historians have recently de-constructed this image, exposing it as an ideological tool in Ottoman elite struggles. Recent studies also demonstrate that the Ottoman Empire had succeeded in overcoming the crisis of the late 16th and early 17th century through a process of modernisation, monetisation and bureaucratisation, which were, in fact, similar to the evolutions of the most significant European and Asian monarchies of early modern times. Thus, they substantiate the argument that the 17th-18th centuries were not a period of continuous decline, but a period of complex modernisation, and in many respects, even a period of growth and development.

This vision does not exclude the presence of numerous elements of crisis. People living in the Ottoman Empire were, like their counterparts throughout the whole early modern world, submitted to various severe constraints and pressures. First of all, physical survival was often difficult. Crops were vulnerable to natural disasters. Fires destroyed both accumulated wealth and basic existential prerequisites, sudden diseases hit people lacking the knowledge and the means necessary to cure them. Taxation was a serious challenge for most households. External warfare became more expensive and debilitated the Ottoman finances. In order to boost revenues, the authorities either increased taxes or devalued the currency, yet these means did not suffice to balance the budget. Sale of offices and outright bribery were means to attract private capital in the functioning of the state, but also generated a nexus of irregular connections, which allowed small groups of officials and intermediaries to drain resources from both the state and the tax-payers.

This chapter documents both the unfolding of various crises, and the efforts to design acceptable solutions for them. Restoring the good old order was one option, seeking ways out of the Ottoman system, another. The sources outline the variety of concrete answers to the challenges of the various crises, and also the serious consequences of some of the answers to them.

Va. 'Natural' Disasters

V-1. Famine in Istanbul (1758)

In this year, people converged in Istanbul as there was famine in most areas. Therefore, famine came into existence in the capital and bread began to be in short supply. A few hundred men would swarm in front of every bakery. They would lay their hands

on half-baked bread loaves. Old people, women and the subjects [*raiyye*] would go hungry. [...] For this reason, people began to buy rice in great quantities. There appeared a scarcity in rice, too. Considering that the fasting month was approaching and that Muslims should not suffer, an order was brought about in the month of Şaban, introducing a quota

of two *okka*⁷⁰ of rice per person. However, in the last day of Şaban, a few hundred wicked women massed in the storehouse of a *zimmi*⁷¹ rice merchant. One of those women unsheathed a big knife and attacked the *zimmi*. The *zimmi* ran away and they looted the rice. The commander of the Janissaries, Nalband Mehmed Pasha, upon hearing of the incident, went to the area to prevent the looting. Let alone stopping the looting, they cursed him and dishonoured him. The commander, therefore, sent his courier Kuzucu Mehmed aga to the Grand Vizier. The aforementioned Kuzucu Mehmed reported: "When I reached him and told him everything, he was in the midst of listening to some musicians. He was not disturbed. He simply told me to take the steward of the Janissaries to the place in question. I took him to the place. The women saw him and dispersed". After this scandal, the commander of the Janissaries was dismissed and the steward of the Janissaries [...] was appointed commander of the Janissaries the following day.. Thanks to strong winds, two days later vessels laden with rice arrived, and rice was available again.

Şemdanizâde, pp.16-17.



The provisioning of a very large city like Istanbul depended on the crops of various provinces. In spite of the efforts of the Ottoman authorities, moments of death and panic could not be avoided, and led to price increases and to popular disorder, which could also become politically disruptive. Famine riots, often led by women, were common not only in the Ottoman Empire, but also in early modern Western Europe.



Describe the economic and psychological mechanisms for coping in times of scarcity in Istanbul.

Why were women the main actors of the famine riot? Would the crowd have plundered the storehouse of a Muslim rice merchant? Would the authorities have reacted more strongly?

70 Ottoman measure, weighing about 1,283 kg.

71 Non-Muslim subject.

V-2. Earthquake in Istanbul (1766)

[...] on the third day which was the 12th of Zilhicce and 14th of May, Thursday [...], half an hour after sunrise, a great earthquake suddenly occurred. Due to its force, people lost all hope and remained motionless. All the buildings, people and animals were destroyed. Those who survived repented for their sins and renewed their faith. After four minutes, the quake subsided. Istanbul was in dust and smoke. After the smoke disappeared, it was found out that the Mosque of the Conqueror had totally collapsed. The mosque of Sultan Bayezid and that of Mihrimah were heavily damaged. The Inn of the Sugar-sellers, the praying area [*Dua Meydanı*] in the covered bazaar as well as the market of hat-makers and the Bezzazistan area were damaged. The Old Palace, the walls of Istanbul, the [citadel of the] Seven Towers, the Vizier Hani, the Slave Market, other brick and stone inns and mosques and some wooden houses were damaged. Some buildings in Galata and Üsküdar were damaged. Even the ostensibly intact buildings suffered damage that only became apparent later on. The New Palace, too, suffered from damages in its structure and walls. It was found that 4,000 people died. Indeed, as Istanbul is shaped like a triangle, there will be no escaping earthquake and fire.

Şemdanizâde, pp.85-86.



Why did the mosques suffer more damage than other buildings in Istanbul?

V-3. Plague in Bucharest (1813)

In the month of October, death took the stronghold by means never seen anywhere before. The city seemed to burst, and people ran wherever their feet would take them. The place was deserted. But what was there to see? Wherever you turned, you would hear: "Away, on the side, here come the sextons with the dead", eight of them, or even ten, the dead, one on top of the other, followed by a party of people in rags and crying children. And they would carry them all through the slums, until they could not help them

in any way any more and they would lie dead on the streets until the sextons would come with their hearses and take them away. As for us, the living, we would consider ourselves already dead and would walk around in a daze. Then they started to bury one another in their gardens until these got full. There where it (the disease) spread, only one or two out of ten people would still be alive, and in some other places, not even one would survive. And, how many, one could see walking, some who had survived the disease, others from the host. Priests died in their churches. Others ran away. Holy churches would remain without anyone to officiate and it broke one's heart to see them like this. The slums went empty. And death was horribly present everywhere, from August to January. Then, from January, it slowed down. The owners of the big houses did not get away from it either, except for maybe the important boyars, who locked themselves inside their courtyards and were guarded by an army. As for here, in

Bucharest, how should I put it, there were people to bury the dead, even if sometimes the dogs ate some of the bodies in the gardens, which, out of fear, had not been buried deep enough. In the villages, but also outside them, both the inhabitants of the cities and the peasants were eaten by dogs, because nobody was there to bury them [...]. And, in hospitals, they would build up piles of 100 naked bodies, young men and women, children, old people, rich people, poor people, and these bodies would all swell up. Then they would dig ditches and throw them in, one on top of another, the Gypsy, the boyar, the Jew and the Armenian, without treating anyone differently.

Corfus, pp.340–341.



What national, religious and social differences counted in such an extreme situation? What was it like being a "living-dead" in the plagued city? In which ways did 'disasters' push aside humanity?

Vb. The political crisis in Istanbul

V-4. Solutions for the crisis of the Ottoman State in the memoir of Koçi-bey (ca. 1630)

I have penned this treatise and submitted it to the exalted, majestic Sultan, so that he should be informed of the reasons of the tribulations and changes of this world and he should, by God's grace, find cures for them. In this way, the Sultan can rectify things. Let it be known first that the basis of order in the realm and in the people is the observation of the religious rules and of the religious law, the Şeriat. Secondly, the Sultan should treat kindly and observe the rights of all the classes, the scholars who take care of the affairs of the subjects who were entrusted by God and of the warriors who offer their lives in the path of war [*gaza*]. He should, however, punish and treat the unworthy ones badly. Likewise, he should observe and uphold the laws of the late Sultans that are in circulation. It is hoped that, in this way, things will improve and be ordered and the state's prestige will be renewed. Order belongs to the Sultan.

Koçi Bey, p.19.



During the second half of the 16th and the 17th century, a large corpus of Ottoman political literature emerged which described the symptoms of political crisis and tried to suggest improvements. Most of this advice nevertheless focused on measures aimed at restoring the 'good old times', and were of little practical relevance.



Did the advice of Koçi Bey correlate with the concrete causes of the crisis, or was it more general? What advice might have been more effective?

V-5. The envoys of the Moldavian Prince Constantin Mavrocordat argue over the need to bribe numerous people in Istanbul (1741)

Your Highness, you scold us for the gifts given, but we could not have succeeded in anything without giving them. It is, in any case, not right not to give any gifts either, since times are such that both the

end of the Christian cause, the above-mentioned Archbishop sent his cousin Georgi Peyachevich with Bulgarian troops to Karansebes and Siklovar to meet General Veterani. On his way there [Peyachevich] joined the Serb army and [together] with the Wallahians they took Orshova and decapitated almost all the Turks.

But when, in 1688, the above-mentioned Georgi together with his Bulgarian troops, the four captains of Kopilovetz, the four of Chiprovetz and others, together with Chaki's [hussars] wanted to cut up the battle torch of Tyokyoli⁷³ (and destroy it), they were betrayed by a deserter, and thousands of Bulgarians were killed in the bloody battle, which started suddenly near Kulovitza and in which they were totally defeated. After the battle, the remains (of the troops) withdrew to Chiprovetz and for a while successfully defended the town against Tyokyoli, unwilling to surrender it, although he [Tyokyoli], using the fact that he was a Christian, [tried] to lure them by promising them dignity and wealth in Transylvania. Finally, the town was taken by assault and conquered by the Turkish and Tartar hordes arriving there, and everything around it was ruined and burned, and the people killed. It is rumoured that the enormous wealth, laid up over many years and increased during the long peaceful period, was carried away on more than 100 carts. But none of the Christians there could save anything apart from their lives and only a few of them were able to do so under difficult circumstances.

Spisarevska, pp.201-202.



After the Ottoman defeat before Vienna (1683), the Habsburg armies occupied Buda (1686) and Belgrade (1688), creating the impression that the collapse of the Ottoman rule in South East Europe was imminent. The Catholic community around Chiprovetz in Bulgaria tried to take advantage of the advance of the Habsburg troops, but the rebellion failed and the community was destroyed with the survivors escaping to Wallachia and Transylvania.

73 Imre Thököly, leader of the anti-Habsburg resistance to the Hungarian nobility. With his troops (*kurucz*), he fought on the side of the Ottomans in the war of 1683-1699.



Why did the Bulgarians rebel?
Why did Thököly and his Christian troops repress the Bulgarian uprising?

V-9. Serbians flee fearing Ottoman reprisals (1690) – the testimony of Atanasije Djakon (Deacon) Srbin

And Serbs boarded the ships [...]. There were over ten thousand ships and they all fled upstream on the Danube river and arrived in the city of Buda, which is under the [Habsburg] Emperor's rule. Thus, the Lord unleashed, on Serbian land, the three wounds of which David received only one in his city: first death, then again sword and death in water, slavery and severe hunger, so that the Serbian people had no other choice but to eat dog meat and the flesh of dead persons who had died of hunger. All this happened in my time and my eyes have seen the bodies of dead Serbian people all over the streets of Belgrade. Its villages and roads were littered with the dead who had not been buried. Those, still alive, had no appearance at all, nor human beauty. They were dark from hunger and their faces were like "Ethiopian" faces and so they died, and less than one tenth of them survived.

Agapova-Ilić, pp.134-135.



Like the Catholic Bulgarians from Chiprovetz, many Orthodox Serbs cooperated with the Habsburgs in 1688-1689. Yet, in 1690, the Ottomans once again gained the upper hand and re-conquered Belgrade. Under these circumstances, a large number of Orthodox Serbs fled and were settled with significant privileges in the Habsburg-controlled territories (Slavonia and Hungary).



Try to distinguish the Biblical references from the narrative of Atanasije Srbin. What remains as indubitable historical fact?

Porte of the Grand Vizier and the ones around him are extremely greedy and everybody, even the least important of them, are like beasts. When they ask for something, they first do it gently, then, they start cursing, using their power and threatening, so that one cannot do otherwise. There is no monarchy in the Empire, as there used to be during the reign of Ibrahim-Pasha⁷². After the Grand Vizier, each high official from the Outer Service is like an independent Vizier. The head of the couriers [Chausb-basha] is as powerful as the deputy of the Grand Vizier [*kethüda*] and the head clerk [*reis*] is quite the same. Those following the Great Vizier are beasts along with the ones on the outside: Haiati is, as you know him, his deputy does not encounter any difficulties in speaking directly to the aga of the Girls [*darisadet*], the former scribe [*jazegî*], Ali-efendi speaks in his place and

everything lies in his hands; Esad-molla is candidate to the office of *mufti*, Pirizade is an intimate counselor, Cara Halif Efendizade is highly esteemed, Amegi has a lot of power and is more familiar with the Grand Vizier than Chisrieli with the aga of the Girls. We now leave aside those of smaller importance like Chauszade, Sachir-bei and some others who, if not bought, sting like wasps and open mortal wounds.

Murgescu, pp.165-166.



Compare and contrast the recommendations of Koci Bey and the realities described by the Moldavian envoys?

Were the acts of bribery simple accidents or an accepted part of the system? Was not giving bribes an option? At what cost?

Vc. Wars, rebellions and human turmoil

V-6. Villagers fleeing to towns (1665)

The inhabitants of the villages Kokre and Godjakovo from the Prilep district [*kaza*] went to the shari'a court together with the voyvoda Ibrahim, voyvoda of the Prilep estate [*has*], one of the estates of my Grand Vizier [...] and announced that the villages of the mentioned estate were free and that nobody should interfere there. However, the Governor-General [*beylerbeyî*], the Governor [*sancakbeyî*] and other officials together with many people and horsemen stay there and, besides having food such as sheep, lambs, honey, oil and other products for free, they also bother them by asking money for undue taxes [*tekalif-i shaka*] even though they do not have an honest order for doing so. Because of this, the subjects [*reaya*] from the villages of Veprchani, Peshtani, Dunje and Kalen from the mentioned estate, who had settled there a long time ago, fled the villages in 1662, 1663 and 1664, and settled in the towns and villages of our district [*kaza*]. The men-

tioned voyvoda went to them and, since the runaway subjects did not want to return, he sent a report in which he asked for an honest order.

This order has therefore been written, on the condition, further on, that the subjects are not disturbed with requests for undue taxes without honest order. The subjects who ran away from the mentioned villages and are noted in the registers [*defter*] of the estate, have to move back to the old villages and resettle there again.

Odbrani, I, pp.282-283.



Why did the villagers flee their village? How did the officials react? Was their reaction adequate?

V-7. Rebellion of Mehmed aga Boyaji-oglu in Cyprus (ca.1680)

[...] a narrative of the revolt of the famous Mehmed aga Boyaji-oglu, which appears to have happened about 1680. This narrative I get directly from that

72 Ibrahim Pasha Nevshehirli, Grand Vizier in 1718-1730.

worthy gentleman, Monsieur Benoît Astier, Consul of France, who has, up to this present year 1788, presided in a highly becoming manner over the honourable guild of French merchants in Cyprus [...] his statement in his own words: 'I learnt something from popular tradition, and I also obtained excellent information from the lips of an aged Turk of 97, and from a Greek almost as old, who had both been eye-witnesses of a rebellion which occurred in this island about eighty years ago, and lasted seven whole years. Cyprus was then, like Rhodes and the islands of the [Aegean] Archipelago, under the rule of the Ottoman admiral [*Kapudan pasha*]. The yearly tax [*harac*] due to the Porte was collected by a special collector [*haracci*]; the *ma'ishet* was collected on behalf the admiral; and the tax in kind [*nuzul*] was assigned for the maintenance of the governor sent by that officer [the admiral] [...]

The agas of Levkosia who farmed these imposts, sometimes one sometimes another of them, fell to rivalry and quarrelling; then they took up arms and attacked one another, until Mehmed aga Boyaji-oglu got the mastery over them all, was proclaimed leader, and stood out as a rebel for seven years. He paid every year to the collector sent by the Porte the appointed tax, which the collectors had hitherto to beg for, and used to keep for their own ends. He appointed in all the districts [*kazilik*] men devoted to himself, who were the administrators. The Porte, learning that this Boyaji-oglu had thrown off all pretence of subjection, sent to Cyprus, Cholak Mehmed Pasha with a force to restore order. They received them at Levkosia, but after a few months' space, when he tried to assert his authority over the said Boyaji-oglu, the rebel compelled him to leave Levkosia, and to retire to the estate [*chiftlik*] of Qubat-oglu, where he lived as a neat-herd, every care being taken to prevent news of his present condition reaching the ministry. Yet not long after news did reach them, and forthwith Chifut-oglu Ahmed Pasha was ordered to cross from Caramania to Cyprus, with an armed force to release Cholak Mehmed Pasha, and to wipe out the rebel chief.

Ahmed Pasha crossed accordingly, landed at Acanthou, and marched straight to Kythraia, to seize

at once on the mills, so that no corn might be ground, and he could stop the supplies of Levkosia, the rebels' stronghold. There he stayed for two months, and Cholak Mehmed came to meet him. [...]

The city then found itself without bread, and the pasha, knowing that he had help at hand, though no one dared to declare himself on account of the rebel, proposed to Boyaji-oglu to allow him to withdraw, sending him a passport as a safe-conduct. The rebel, seeing that the pasha had the stronger party with the city, left it by night with one company of trusty guards, and marched first to Levkara, and then to Levka, where the deputy [*kehaya*] of the pasha surprised him, killed twenty-eight of his en, and took thirty-two others prisoners. [...] Pursued on all sides by the pasha's troops, he made for Ammochostos in all secrecy, hoping to fortify himself there, but before he arrived they had shut the gates, and the pasha's force routed the few soldiers left to him. He fled with six men only to Pyla, then to Larnaca, intending to go to Lemesos, but he was caught in the district of Koilanon and carried to Levkosia, where the pasha hanged him by night, and on the morrow he was exposed with his followers, who were hung up alive, on hooks through their chins. And thus, after a lapse of seven years, ended this rebellion. All his followers and several rebel leaders were caught and put to death.

Luke, pp.32-35.



What options did people have when they rebelled in the Ottoman Empire? What would you have done in their place?

Compare the fate of the different rebels in the Ottoman Empire? How feasible was it to negotiate with the authorities?

V-8. Report to the Pope about the Chiprovtsi rebellion (1688)

The following is said about the [Catholic] Archbishop of Bulgaria, Joan Stefan Knezhevich and Georgi Peyachevich:

After being persuaded and encouraged in a personal letter by Emperor Leopold to help the happy

V-10. Moldavian uprising against the Ottomans (1711)

And then Prince Dumitrașco [*Dumitrașco-vodă*] called his boyars, as many as had remained with him, that is: Nicolai Costin the Chancellor [*logofăt*], Ioan Sturdza, the magistrate [*vornic*], Lordachi Ruset, the magistrate, and Ilie Catargiu, the treasurer [*vistiernic*], and told them that he had called the Russians, and that they were already crossing the river Prut at Zagarance.

And then all the boyars, on hearing this, rejoiced and answered joyfully to the Prince [*vodă*] saying: "It was a good thing to do, your Highness, because we were afraid you would go to the Turks, and we were planning, if you went to the Turks, to leave you and bow in front of the Russians". And they were glad. Only Lordachi Ruset, the magistrate, said: "You've acted in a hurry, your Highness, by calling the Russians. You should have waited, your Highness, to see how their power really fares".

Prince Dumitrașco answered with these words: "There was no more time left for me to wait, I was afraid the Turks would get me. Also, many of you have deserted me already and you don't share the same thoughts and faith as me".

And then, Prince Dumitrașco mounted his horse and went to meet the Russians at the river Prut [...].

Then the Moldavians, as soon as they saw the Russians, being accustomed to plunder, started, some with, and some without order, to do so, when seeing that the situation was heating up, to slay the Turks and take others as prisoners, some to lași, and others to some other boroughs, wherever they would find them, all over the country. And they would strip them of their money, of their treasures, of their horses, clothes, oxen, sheep, of the honey and the wax and of everything else they would find. And the groceries were emptied into the streets, so that even children could take their fill. And all the old women had enough raisins, figs and peanuts. And the Turks, whom they did not slay, were taken naked, as slaves, to the Prince. Some of them happened to be hidden by their friends, if they could get to their friends. And afterwards, the Turks hidden

by their friends were of great use to those who had given them shelter.

Neculce, pp.540-542.



The Ottoman-Russian war of 1710-1711 generated hopes among the Orthodox in South East Europe that Peter the Great (1682-1725), who had defeated Sweden in 1709, would be able to free them from Ottoman rule. The Moldavian Prince, Dimitrie Cantemir (1693; 1710-1711), joined the Russians but could not prevent their ultimate defeat in the battle of Stănilești (1711).



Were the boyars totally obedient towards the Prince, or did they have their own political agenda? Compare this source with source II-21.

What were the reasons for the anti-Turkish violence at the peak of the uprising? Did all Christian Moldavians approve of the violence? What may have been the motives of the helpers?

V-11. Diary of a Habsburg officer describing the siege of Dubica (1788)

The extension of the battle for Dubica on the 22nd of August was even harder. Loudon⁷⁴ was surprised by the tough resistance of Dubica's defenders, so he ordered the city to be burned down. At 11 o'clock, murderous cannon fire started implying conflagration in the city. Already, after the extinguishing of the fire by the defenders, 24 people sneaked up to ramparts of the city with the mission of throwing an inflammable mass on wooden beams over the ramparts, but the defenders noticed and drove them away. The throwing of inflammable objects continued on the 23rd of August. To disturb the defenders in their attempts to extinguish the fires, strong cannon fire was set. Dubica's fortress burned all night long between the 23rd and the 24th of August and the cannon fire was unstoppable. And then, on the 25th of August, two batteries, with three cannons each, were placed near the city walls. Fire was concentrated on the city's en-

74 The Commander of the Habsburg army.

trance and the cannonade resulted in the demolition of Dubica's fortress. But even then, the besieged did not give up the fight. The siege continued on the 26th of August but, from the remains of the fortress, defenders responded with gun and cannon-fire. The attackers opened full barrage fire. And then, at around eight o'clock in the morning, the fire from the fortress was silenced. At around nine o'clock, one man from the fortress came to the Austrian headquarters to talk. He asked for a cease-fire, which the Austrian side agreed to. In the name of the garrison's crew, he proposed to give up the fortress in return for the permission for the defenders to go free. The Austrian side did not agree, they asked for an unconditional surrender. Then he begged for a three-hour period to discuss the situation with the crew, and permission for this was granted. After three hours of discussion the Ottoman commander [*bey*] arrived with eight companions, and the official surrender of the fortress was complete.

Dubica's fortress or, better said, 'Dubica's pile of rocks' was finally overcome and fell into the hands of the Austrian army.

Sljivo, pp.91-92.



Did the Ottomans fight well at Dubica? Why did they still surrender?

V-12. Insecurity when travelling in Albania (ca. 1900)

There was a moment of excitement. We were on a patch of level country, when suddenly round the back of a wood wheeled half a dozen Albanians armed to the teeth. The advance guard pulled rein, swung round their horses, unslung their rifles, and stood in their stirrups ready for eventualities. I confess that, as these hills men came dashing along, my hand wandered to my hip pocket where my revolver was carried. The soldiers spread as though to be ready to open fire. But the Albanians, warlike though they appeared, had no warlike intentions.

They rather enjoyed the fright of the Turks, of whom, however, they took no notice, although they gave me a smile and a salute as they rode by.

Fraser, pp.237-38.



Was the widespread possession of arms beneficial for the development of South-East Europe at the beginning of the 20th century? Argue both in favour and against this idea.

V-13. Raid of Topal Ibrahim in Kazanlik (1809)

There was a raid on the outlaws [*daglii*] in the town of Kazanlik⁷⁵ in April 1809, under the leadership of Topal [=limp] Ibrahim who, on his entering the town [...], summoned the district notable [*ayan*] and the mayor [*muhtar*] of the subjects [*reaya*] to tell him how many taxes the town pays and to whom. [...]. Then Topal Ibrahim told them that he would not destroy the town or set it on fire if they collected the same amount of taxes for him and sent an express messenger to Istanbul to intercede for a ferman with Sultan Mahmud, so that he, Topal Ibrahim, would collect the taxes for the following ten years.

[...] But, after taking the money, Topal Ibrahim told the mayor Stoyan Nikolov: "I give you this letter (it was open) to Mustafa Bairaktar, who is now Vizier in Istanbul and if, in 40 days, you don't bring me the ferman, I will burn the town to ashes. Until then, I will be staying here with my people and will be waiting for the deadline; meanwhile you must order your people to feed us pies and chicken. I hope you've understood".

[...] On the day the term given was over, Topal Ibrahim, furious that the mayor had lied to him, went out alone and speared Hristo Tomov in the street. This was taken as a sign to start killing the Christians, who had locked themselves inside their houses.

Stambolski, pp.28-30.

75 Town in the Balkan Mountains, in Central Bulgaria.



During the first decades of the 19th century, several military leaders, some of them who acted as tax-collectors as well, brought the Ottoman provinces under their control, taking advantage of the fact that the central power, weakened by the war with Russia and by the Janissary rebellions in Istanbul, was unable to assert its prominence. It is ironic that Mustafa Bairaktar, who had started as such an *ayan* in northern Bulgaria and had become Grand Vizier (1808), had already been killed in Istanbul in November 1808, i.e. five months before Topal Ibrahim sent the mayor of Kazanlik to him.



Explain the quasi-legal method of robbing used by Topal Ibrahim? Why didn't he simply attack and rob the town? Was he an ordinary bandit or a man with political ambitions? What were the distinctions between local strongmen and outlaws?

V-14. Combination of catastrophes in the narrative of the Bulgarian teacher Todor from Pirdop, near Sofia (1815-1826)

Let everybody reading this or listening to this, be aware of and wonder about what God showed with His rage in our times - something that has never happened since the creation of this world. In 1814, God sent a punishment or plague from east to west and half the people died. There had been plague epidemics before, but they had never taken so many lives. From then on, until 1820, during the reign of the damned Sultan Mahmud⁷⁶, God gave us peace [...]. And in March 1821, there came a devil from Yalina called Ali Pasha, who rebelled against the Sultan. The Sultan recruited an army of about 500,000

to fight him, but they could not defeat him as his fortress was very strong. The Sultan's army stayed there for a long time and burned many villages and towns, captured and killed many Christians, which resulted in an increase in the price of flour to 60 *gurush a kile*⁷⁷. This resulted in a disastrous famine among the poor people. After that, on 25 March, there came another devil to Wallachia – Vlah Bey⁷⁸, who summoned an army and went rioting and looting the villages. Then, from all parts of European Turkey [Rumelia], armies came to fight him and they fought a lot. They burned many villages along the Danube, captured and killed the people.

Then the damned Sultan gave an order and Patriarch Grigoriy Nepitash was dragged out of the church during the service and hanged on the second day of Easter. Many people died on this day, some were hanged, others were slain: 21 bishops, coadjutors, monks, priests and deacons. Then they started killing the Christians. Only God knows how many Christians were killed. A few Bulgarians, many Greeks and Albanians [*Arnauts*] were all killed in Istanbul. Women and children were drowned in the sea.

Then an army left Istanbul and went to Morea, where they killed many people from the villages. The citizens of Morea ran to the sea and barricaded themselves on an island, but many of them [...] were killed there.

Georgieva, Tzanev, pp.356-357.



Assess the explanation provided by Todor from Pirdop for the various disasters in the early 19th century. Do you agree with it?

⁷⁷ Ottoman unit of capacity, varying locally in the range of 25-400 l.

⁷⁸ Literally "Wallachian prince"; it is unclear whether it relates to Alexander Ypsilanti, son of a former Wallachian prince, who led the Greek uprising against the Turks, or to Tudor Vladimirescu (1780-1821), leader of the Wallachian revolution in 1821.

⁷⁶ Mahmud II (1808-1839).