

11 The Tulip Period

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Damad Ibrahim Pasha was an able and energetic civil servant of humble origins. Neither *devshirme* convert nor favored youth of an influential family, he had come to Istanbul from the provinces as a young man in search of a career. His rise exemplifies the possibilities open to a man of talent. Keen of mind, Ibrahim gained a lower-level position in the central administration and ascended steadily through the ranks, eventually reaching a position high enough to come to the notice of the sultan. This brought him the rank of pasha, then marriage to the sultan's 13 year old daughter. With the royal marriage came the honorific title "damad," son-in-law. The office of grand vizier followed shortly after, which he was holding when the war against Austria occurred. The decisive defeat made him realize that the Ottoman way of doing things would either have to change, or the empire would perish. He also understood the problem to be more than a simple disparity in military strength. There was something unseen behind the West's strength.

After he had negotiated the Treaty of Passarowitz, Ibrahim prevailed upon the sultan to initiate some fundamental changes and was given authority to do what he thought had to be done. His first step was to appoint a committee of 25 scholars and scribes to make translations of books Europeans considered to be of the greatest significance in their cultural heritage. Books, not military weapons, would reveal the secret of European power. With this began the third phase in the translation cycle that would bring scientific, philosophical, technical and medical knowledge full circle into Islamic civilization. The first phase had been Greek and Syriac to Arabic, then Arabic to Latin, and now it was to be Latin and French to Arabic and Turkish. Previous translations in this third phase had been of a passive nature: books given as gifts to the sultan that laid around for decades before being translated. Damad Ibrahim's Committee of 25 was an active, purposeful effort to seek out critical books for translation. Another sign of the direction and dimension of Ibrahim's spirit of reform was his endowment of a madrasa in which he ordered mathematics to be taught, a subject rarely if ever offered in a religious school.¹ It was a small step, but it was a beginning.

In order to determine what structural changes should be undertaken that went beyond existing Ottoman institutions, and how to go about making them, Ibrahim tried to learn as much as he could about Europe from various European ambassadors at court. Consulting so many different European sources that were for

political, religious and economic reasons contradictory or hostile made for more confusion than clarity about Europe. This was Ibrahim's introductory lesson that Europe was not an integral whole representing a single outlook formed by religion and a particular set of institutions but was as divided and contentious as the world of Islam or the Ottoman court.

Concluding that little could be learned of Europe's inner sources of strength without experiencing Europe directly, he obtained the sultan's blessing and took the unprecedented step of sending small embassies to a few European countries, and a major one to France. Owing to their having a mutual enemy in the Austrian Hapsburgs, the Ottoman Empire and France had enjoyed friendly relations for two centuries. Also, the Ottomans believed France to be the most powerful country in the West and its cultural heart. Embassies had been sent to Europe before, but only to negotiate treaties, never to learn anything. Just the acceptance of the possibility that infidel countries had something worth a Muslim's effort to learn was an intellectual revolution in itself.

Damad Ibrahim's intuition that behind Europe's superior military weaponry, organization and combat ability must exist institutions and knowledge was a part of his committee of translation and his having mathematics taught in a madrasa. Reforming indigenous institutions, he concluded, had to go hand in hand with learning the sources of Europe's strength. One had to complement the other.

Ibrahim put much importance on the mission to France. Its success depended on finding the right man to lead it. This meant someone open-minded, observant, quick to penetrate and comprehend what would be totally unfamiliar, a man whose mind was not closed with pretensions of superiority but who was at the same time not easily intimidated. He would also have to be able to get along with foreigners, infidels. His knowing French would have been a great asset, but this was asking too much.² Lacking knowledge of French, Damad Ibrahim's envoy would require a translator, another veil that could obscure the reality that the ambassador was seeking.

Ibrahim found his man in a former *devshirme* officer. His name was Yirmisekiz: 28, the number of his Janissary regiment. His formal name was Mehmet Chelebi, but he became popularly known by the number. He was a military man who had transferred to civil administration, ascended the ranks, and in the same manner that his patron Damad Ibrahim had come to the attention of the sultan, Yirmisekiz came to the attention of Ibrahim. Such were the career possibilities open to any bright and able young man, whether a European convert or born into the religion. His experience in the military and government, but above all his strength of character and courage to initiate reforms, decided Ibrahim to appoint Yirmisekiz as chief of the embassy to France with the mission "to visit fortresses, factories and works of French civilization and education, and report on those which might be applicable," a mission as large as it was vague. He set sail from Istanbul to Marseilles in November, 1720, and reached Paris five months later.

Yirmisekiz and his entourage were as strange to the French as the French were to them. According to Yirmisekiz's account of the trip, when they arrived

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