



Russia's Pursuit of Danubian Access: A Historical-Geographical Study of Wars, Treaties, and Ottoman Border Records, 1700-1826

Rusya'nın Tuna'ya Açılma Arayışı: Savaşlar, Antlaşmalar ve Osmanlı Hudud Kayıtlarının Tarihsel-Coğrafi Analizi (1700-1826)

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Abstract

This article examines the Ottoman-Russian contest over the Danubian frontier between 1700 and 1826 through the prism of Ottoman documents. It treats the Danube not merely as a geographic boundary but as a political and administrative frontier whose transformation reflected wider shifts in imperial governance and diplomacy. Seeking to secure its Balkan marches and maintain suzerainty over Wallachia and Moldavia, the Ottoman Empire faced an increasingly assertive Russia that, after joining the Holy League in the years following 1683, gained European support to challenge Ottoman power. Throughout the eighteenth century, Russia repeatedly allied with Austria in wars that eroded Ottoman authority along the Lower Danube, in the north threatening key fortress-cities such as Özi, Akkerman, and İsmail. The Treaty of Karlowitz (1699) marked a turning point, initiating systematic demarcations that redefined imperial borders and institutionalised new diplomatic and cartographic practices. Successive wars and treaties - including those of 1711, 1736-1739, 1768-1774, 1787-1792, 1806-1812, and 1828-1829 - consolidated Russia's southward advance and reconfigured the balance of power in the region. Drawing on treaty protocols, Ottoman archival materials, and cartographic evidence, the study reconstructs how evolving border regimes enabled Russia's strategic entrenchment in the Danubian basin and reshaped the spatial logic of Ottoman sovereignty.

Keywords: Russia, Danube, Ottoman Empire, border records, wars.

Öz

Bu makale, 1700-1826 yılları arasındaki Osmanlı-Rusya mücadelesini Osmanlı belgeleri üzerinden incelemekte ve Tuna'yı yalnızca coğrafi bir hat değil, aynı zamanda imparatorluk yönetimi ve diplomasideki dönüşümleri yansıtan siyasî ve idarî bir sınır alanı olarak ele almaktadır. Balkan sınırlarını güvence altına almak ve Eflâk ile Boğdan üzerindeki hâkimiyetini sürdürmek isteyen Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, 1683'ü müteakip yıllarda Kutsal İttifak'a katılımının ardından Osmanlı gücüne karşı Avrupa ölçeğinde bir meşruiyet kazanıp giderek iddialı hale gelen Rusya ile karşı karşıya kalmıştır. On sekizinci yüzyıl boyunca Rusya, Avusturya ile ittifaklar kurarak Osmanlı egemenliğini

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Aşağı Tuna boyunca zayıflatmış; kuzeyde Özi, Akkerman ve İsmail gibi stratejik kale şehirlerini tehdit etmiştir. 1699 tarihli Karlofça Antlaşması, imparatorluk sınırlarının yeniden tanımlandığı ve yeni diplomatik ile kartografik uygulamaların kurumsallaştığı bir dönüm noktası olmuştur. 1711, 1736-1739, 1768-1774, 1787-1792, 1806-1812 ve 1828-1829 savaşları ve antlaşmalarıyla Rusya'nın güneye doğru ilerleyişi pekişmiş, bölgedeki güç dengesi köklü biçimde değişmiştir. Antlaşma protokolleri, Osmanlı arşiv belgeleri ve kartografik verilerden yararlanan bu çalışma, değişen sınır rejimlerinin Rusya'nın Tuna havzasındaki stratejik yerleşimini nasıl mümkün kıldığını ve Osmanlı egemenliğinin mekânsal mantığını nasıl dönüştürdüğünü ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Rusya, Tuna, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, hududnâmeler, savaşlar.

Introduction

In their effort to consolidate dominance over the Balkan region, the Ottomans pursued a strategic policy aimed at preventing the emergence of powerful political entities beyond their own authority, particularly along their western and northern frontiers. From the mid-fourteenth century onward, the Ottoman Empire gradually expanded into this region. Beginning with the reign of Sultan Süleyman I (1520-1566), Ottoman policy focused on halting the expansion of Poland and the Habsburgs, curtailing Hungarian influence in Transylvania, and establishing a protectorate-based hegemony over the principalities of Wallachia (Eflâk) and Moldavia (Boğdan). By the late seventeenth century, Russia had emerged as an increasingly formidable power in Eastern Europe and the northern reaches of the Danube (Tuna) basin. It posed a growing strategic threat to the Ottomans across this region. Toward the end of the century, Russia joined the Holy League - an alliance that included the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Holy Roman Empire and Venice - following the onset of war in 1683. As part of this broader European coalition, Russia gained a legitimate pretext to act against the Ottomans. Throughout the eighteenth century, in a series of wars against the Ottoman Empire, Russia frequently allied with the Habsburg Monarchy and became the primary adversary challenging Ottoman control along the northern bank of the Danube. Russia's rise to regional prominence increasingly threatened the Ottoman defensive system and key urban centres situated along the Dnieper (Özi), Dniester (Turla), and Danube rivers. From the early eighteenth century onward, fortress-cities such as Özi, Akkerman, İsmail, Hotin, Bender, Kili, İbrail, Yergöğü, and Kulle (Turnu) - stretching from Belgrade to Özi and Azak - served as critical nodes in the Ottoman Empire's logistical, supply, and mobilization networks. This work examines Russia's expansion to the Danube between 1700 and 1826 through the lens of Ottoman border documentation, with a particular focus on the border protocols that emerged from post-war treaties. Drawing on treaty clauses concerning territorial boundaries, contemporary narratives, relevant secondary literature, Ottoman archival sources, and cartographic and textual materials prepared by Ottoman envoys, this study aims to reconstruct and interpret the processes through which Russia established its strategic connection to the Danube.

The Danube River and the Ottomans

The region historically referred to as the Balkans or Southeast Europe has long served as a strategically vital space where numerous cultures and civilizations have flourished, and where various states have sought to establish and consolidate their rule. Political entities that succeeded in forming administrative structures in the region consistently aimed to control the Danube and its adjacent territories. In this context, the Danube emerged as a natural boundary between the northern and southern zones of the region, playing a critical role in military strategy, logistics, and transportation (Selçuk, 2013, p.27). Extending from Central Europe to the Black Sea, the Danube has functioned throughout history as a strategic corridor - indeed, a natural artery - through which political powers projected influence and asserted control. Despite the physical challenges posed by its geography - including numerous tributaries, narrow passages, rocky outcrops, sandbanks, marshlands, and shallow stretches - the river has retained its significance across eras (Ardeleanu, 2014, p.17). In this regard, the Danube may be likened to a moat protecting a fortified stronghold: its natural conditions, comprehensible only through intimate local knowledge, significantly constrained the operational capacity of invading forces (Urquhart, 2014, p.22). As

the nineteenth-century Prussian military officer Helmuth von Moltke observed, the Danube constituted the Ottomans' most formidable line of defence against Russian incursions (von Moltke, 1932, p.18).

The Ottoman Empire's activities in the northern regions of the Danube were not aimed at full territorial incorporation of the principalities of Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania, but were rather formulated around a strategy of conditional protection and suzerainty. In practice, only limited portions of these principalities were integrated into the direct administrative framework of the Empire. Nonetheless, the Ottomans did annex key settlements on the northern bank of the Danube, including Irşova, Turnu, Niğbolu, and Yergöğü, gradually extending their control eastward toward the Black Sea through the acquisition of strategic towns such as İbrail, İsmail, and Kili (Pitcher, 2013, p.198). In this context, the Ottoman advance along the Danube and its tributaries unfolded incrementally, and by the mid-sixteenth century, the Empire had effectively secured its dominance along much of the river. The Danube thus emerged as an indispensable strategic artery, essential for both economic purposes and military supply lines. The subjugation of the Danubian Principalities not only enhanced Ottoman strategic depth against the Habsburgs (Emecen, 2009a, pp.63-64) the Empire's principal rival in the sixteenth century - but also resulted in the economic decline of Wallachia and Moldavia.

The Ottoman Concept and Perception of Borders

The Ottomans conceptually equated the territorial boundaries of their empire with the frontiers of Islam. This ideological and geographical convergence was reflected in a variety of terms used to describe the empire's borders and frontier regions, including *Sugûr/Sinûr/Hudûd/Sedd-i Sugûr-ı Bilâd-ı İslâm, Sinûr/ Serhadd/Sedd-i Sugûr-ı İslâmiyye, Sugûru'l-İslâm ve'l-Müslimîn* (Altun, 2006, p.35, 43; Mehmed Paşa, 1995, p.366; Erkan, 2005, p.189; Nasuhü's-Silâhî, 1976, p.218; Toklucu, 2010, p.23). These designations were applied not only to the broader frontier zones but also to the fortresses and fortified towns situated along the empire's borders. In this context, similar terminological patterns are observed in designations such as *Serhâdd-ı Hâkânî, Sugûr-ı Memâlik, Sugûr-ı Mansûre, Serhâdât-ı Mansûre-i Hâkâniye*, and *Serhâdât-ı Şâhâne*, all of which conveyed both geopolitical and religious dimensions of frontier governance. For instance, frontier outposts such as Azak on the northern Black Sea and Mostar on the Bosnian frontier were described using expressions like *İntihâ-yı Serhadd-ı Mansûre* or *İntihâ-yı Serhadd-ı İslâmiye*, meaning "the end point of the victorious Islamic frontier." Similarly, the fortress of Bar in the Sanjak of Alexandria could be described as *Leb-i Deryâ'da İntihâ-yı Serhâdd-ı Mansûre* "the final frontier on the sea's edge." It was not uncommon for fortresses or cities located in geographically distinct regions to be referred to by the same frontier terminology. For example, both Vidin on the Danube and Kars in the Caucasus might be described as *Serhadd-ı Mansûre* (BOA, C.AS/24123;361652;22475; AE.SMHD.I/428; Ahmed Paşa, 2004, p.384; Atik, 1996, p.351). However, the choice of expression could vary depending on local strategic circumstances and military context. Certain strongholds acquired heightened symbolic and strategic significance within this nomenclature. Özi, located on the volatile northern frontier, functioned as a heavily fortified garrison and a consistent site of military engagement. Other fortresses such as Vidin, Belgrade, and Izbornik in the west, or island strongholds like those in Morea and Crete, were described using expressions like *Sedd-i Sedîd, Serhadd-ı Cesîm* (Ayvansarâyî, 1985, p.360), *Dârü'l-Cihâd* (Demirtaş, 2009, p.69; Mehmed Paşa, 1995, p.465), and *Sedd-i Sedîd-i İslâm* (BOA, C.AS/14026; AE.SABH.I/6179;3540) terms connoting strength, resilience, and religious militancy. These fortified sites were emblematic of the Ottoman military frontier and served as key defensive nodes against external threats. The Ottoman understanding of *serhad* (frontier) was thus inherently dynamic and militarized, reflecting both physical geography and ideological imperatives (Gezer, 2016, p.6).

Sınırnâmes or Hududnâmes as Legal Texts Defining Borders in the Ottoman Empire

In the Ottoman Empire, the concept of *hudud*, corresponding to the modern term "border," was employed not only to designate the frontiers with neighbouring states but also to define boundaries of

regions situated near those borders. As previously noted, *hudud* also referred to internal administrative divisions - such as provinces (*eyalet* or *sancak*), villages, *waqf* (endowed) lands, or private properties - which were delineated through official documentation. The formal documents produced to define such boundaries were known as *sınırnâme* or *hududnâme*. These boundary charters provided detailed descriptions of the demarcated land, often accompanied by illustrative maps. In cases involving international borders, these documents were drawn up as part of a collaborative process involving representatives from both parties, who delineated the line of demarcation in accordance with the terms of a treaty or agreement. This procedure was referred to in Ottoman administrative terminology as the *tahdid* or “boundary determination process.” The officials appointed to oversee and execute this task were known as *muhaddid* or “boundary determiners.” The duration of the *tahdid* process could vary significantly, depending on both natural and logistical factors. Topographical features - including elevation, gradient, curvature, and the presence of mountains, forests, swamps, or dense vegetation - could complicate and prolong the process, particularly by delaying the placement of physical boundary markers or signs.

Ottoman Borders after the Treaty of Karlowitz: The Russian Threat in the Lower Danube Basin from a Historical-Geographical Perspective (1700-1812)

From the late seventeenth century onwards, Russia emerged as a rising power in Eastern Europe and the northern Danubian region, increasingly asserting itself as a formidable geopolitical force and posing a significant threat to the Ottoman Empire. Russia’s growing influence directly challenged the Ottoman defensive network along and beyond the Danube. In response, the Ottomans sought to maintain a robust military and logistical presence in several key fortress cities within this critical security corridor, including Özi, Kili, Akkerman, İsmail, Hotin, Bender, İbrail, Tulça, Rusçuk, and Silistre. These fortified locations functioned as essential nodes for supply, mobilisation, and defence (Aksan, 2010, p.78). The Treaty of Karlowitz, signed in 1699, marked a turning point in this regard. In the implementation of the treaty, border demarcation efforts were undertaken in accordance with increasingly modernised practices. The demarcation extended from the terminus of the Sirem boundary to the confluence of the Bossut and Sava rivers and encompassed the lands surrounding the Una River. Military considerations continued to dominate the strategic outlook on both sides of these frontiers.



Map 1: The Ottoman Empire’s Borderland with Wallachia, Moldavia, Poland, and Russia in the Eighteenth Century (BOA,HRT/37)

The Treaty of Karlowitz marked a decisive moment in the reconfiguration of the Ottoman Empire's western borders. As part of the negotiations, new territorial boundaries were to be established not only with the Habsburgs but also with their allies - Venice, Poland, and Russia. In addition to delineating the frontiers in accordance with the treaty's terms, the agreement also called for the demolition of certain fortifications and the evacuation of various strategically sensitive regions (Molnar, 1999, pp.2-3). The border agreement with the Habsburgs identified the so-called *mecrâ-yı kadîm* (ancient river course) and the Sava as the principal boundary lines. However, the reliance on rivers as natural frontiers often led to disputes, particularly due to the presence of islands - both large and small - that lay within these waterways. To mitigate tensions and preserve the socioeconomic life of borderland communities, such islands were declared uninhabited but available for shared use. Both parties agreed to dismantle fortifications and remove munitions from these islands, while regulating the movement of ships and civilians from both sides (BOA,A.DVN.DVE.d/903). Furthermore, Cossack settlements established along this frontier under the suzerainty of the Crimean Khanate were also to be evacuated, and the construction of any defensive structures - such as fortresses or *palankas* - was strictly prohibited (BOA,HAT/58427. The borders established with Russia were delineated according to the provisions of the Treaty of Istanbul, signed in 1700, and by 1702 had assumed their initial form for the new century. The agreement, concluded between the *Reisülküttab* Rami Mehmed Efendi, the *Divân-ı Hümayun Tercümânı* İskerletzâde, and Russian plenipotentiaries, consisted of fourteen articles. In accordance with Article 4, Azak and its dependent fortresses were to remain under Russian control. Consequently, the surrounding territory was ceded to Russia. Article 5 stipulated that the stretch of land between the final border of the Or strait - located approximately twelve hours' journey from the fortress of Or - and Yenikale, near the Morosh River, extending from the side of Azak, was to be depopulated and left uninhabited. Moreover, it was stipulated that Ottoman frontier populations, including Kazakh, Tatar, and other groups, would not interfere in these demilitarised zones (Mehmed Paşa, 1995, pp.692-695).



Map 2: The Ottoman-Russian Borders according to the Treaty of Istanbul (BOA,HRT/187)

The principal reason behind the sustained significance of this region was, without doubt, its geostrategic and geopolitical position. Its historical geography, economic potential, demographic structure, transportation networks, military advantages, and other attributes offered the controlling power multifaceted superiority - particularly in relation to border control, access to key straits, and navigable river systems. From the eighteenth century onward, these frontier zones - especially along the Danube - emerged as key operational theatres in the recurring conflict between the Ottoman Empire and its principal rivals, with the Austrian army advancing from the west and the Russian army from the north. Strategic strongholds on the Russian frontier, particularly those under the jurisdiction of the fortress of Özi, were significantly restored. Additionally, to prevent incursions by the Russian fleet through the Azak Sea, a new fortress - Yenikale - was constructed over several years at Akıntıburnu near the Kerch strait, and was fully operational by 1706 (BOA,AE.SMST.II/12925; A.DVNSMHM.d/115/625; Mehmed Ağa, 2001, p.439). Accordingly, the Bucak (Bessarabia) region, encompassing the area from the Dnieper basin to the Danube's confluence with the Black Sea, became the most critical Ottoman stronghold for obstructing Russia's advance toward the Danube from the north (Karpát, p.342). Within this context, Russia's progression toward the Danube followed a steady trajectory throughout the eighteenth century, via the aforementioned regions. In each successive war - namely, those of 1711, 1736-1739, 1768-1774, 1787-1792, 1806-1812, and culminating in 1830 - Russia's access to the Danube proved decisive, shaping the course and outcome of hostilities.

The Prut War and Borders

Following the Treaty of Karlowitz, a decade-long period of relative peace ensued between the Ottoman and Russian Empires, reinforced by the Treaty of Istanbul, which complemented the earlier Karlowitz agreement. Through the Treaty of Istanbul, Russia secured control of the strategic fortress of Azak, a key development in Tsar Peter I's broader ambition to obtain access to the warm southern seas. Under the rule of Peter I (1689-1725), Russia pursued a calculated strategy aimed at securing military and political advantage not only in its rivalry with the Ottoman Empire but also against the Kingdom of Sweden. In 1710, following the reappointment of Baltacı Mehmed Pasha as grand vizier, the Ottoman Empire formally declared war on Russia. The conflict was precipitated by Russian forces, who launched attacks on Ottoman territory after their demands for the expulsion of Charles XII were rejected. (Kurat, 1999, p.260; Sertoğlu, 2011, pp.2390-2400; Aktepe, 1992, p.36). Peter I's initial strategic objective was to advance into Moldavian territory before the Ottoman forces could fully mobilize. From the Ottoman perspective, the most probable Russian strategy was a southward advance from the Prut River to the Danube, with the aim of asserting control over Wallachia and gaining operational superiority in the Danube delta via the strategic locations of Kalas and İbrail (Uyar and Erickson, 2009, p.107).

During the Prut Campaign, Russian forces briefly occupied the Bucak and Bessarabia regions (Karpát, p.342) and, for the first time, engaged the Ottoman Empire independently, advancing as far as the Danube frontier.¹ Despite the apparent military advantage, the Ottomans were unable to secure a decisively favourable peace. Due to uncertainty about the outcome of a long-term campaign, concerns over border fortresses, and diplomatic sensitivities regarding Poland, the Grand Vizier opted for a negotiated settlement rather than a prolonged war (Öksüz, 2009, pp.300-301; Xenopol, 1929, pp.118-119). Under the Treaty of Prut, Russia agreed to withdraw from the territories it had occupied during the campaign and to return the fortress of Azak to Ottoman control. As a result of the treaty, Russia was compelled to withdraw from the Bucak region (Karpát, p.342), and the strategic fortress of Azak was restored to Ottoman hands (BOA,C.HR/72/3587). These stipulations were formally communicated through decrees issued by the Ottoman Divan to provincial administrators along the frontier, instructing them to enforce the new border arrangements (BOA,A.DVNSMHM.d/119/3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9). The treaty also included clauses prohibiting the construction of new fortresses along the delineated borders, and the local population was informed of these provisions to ensure compliance and avoid future border violations (BOA,A.DVNSMHM.d/119/81). In

¹ During the war a Russian-Moldovan-Wallachian army attacked and occupied the fortress of İbrail for the first time on the Danube.

strategic terms, the Prut War exposed significant vulnerabilities in the Ottoman borderlands and prompted a reassessment of security along the Bucak and Bessarabia frontier.

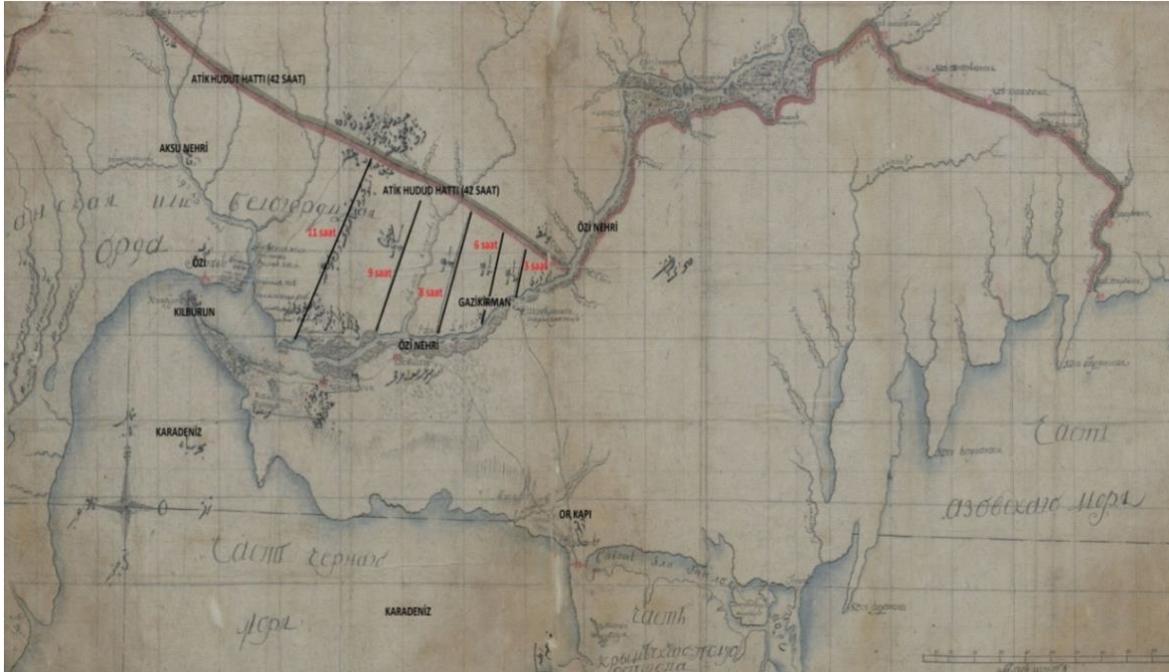
The Treaty of Belgrade and Borders as a Result of the War of 1736-1739

The strategic vulnerability of the Ottoman Empire's western and northern borderlands persisted until a decisive military victory was achieved against the combined Austrian and Russian forces during the war of 1736-1739. In the initial phase of the conflict, the Russian army captured the fortress of Azak following a protracted siege. Advancing toward Crimea, Russian forces placed increasing pressure on the Orkapı region and began assaults on the fortresses of Özi and Kılburun. Despite the resistance mounted by the Crimean Khanate and the arrival of the Ottoman fleet at the port of Kefe, the Russians succeeded in capturing key strongholds, including Orkapı, Gözleve, Karasu, Eski Bahçesaray, and Büyük Bahçesaray (Gökçek, 2019, p.60). Although Russia sustained considerable losses in the first year of the war, the strategically important fortress of Özi fell to Russian forces in July 1737 (Kurtaran, 2015, p.597). Simultaneously, Austrian forces launched offensives in Bosnia, Wallachia, Niş, and Vidin, capitalizing on the Russian capture of Özi. However, in the second year of the war, the Ottomans gained the upper hand on both the Austrian and Russian fronts. By this time, the Ottomans had consolidated their military presence along both the Dniester and Danube fronts. The culmination of these efforts came in 1739, when the Ottoman army successfully reclaimed Belgrade, which had been ceded to Austria under the Treaty of Passarowitz (1718) (Gökçek, 2019, pp.49-51). That same year, the Treaty of Belgrade was concluded, formally ending hostilities. Under the terms of the treaty, several territories and fortresses - Belgrade, Böğürdelen, Semendire, Adakale, Irşova, and the region of Little Wallachia - were restored to Ottoman sovereignty (Karagöz, 2008, pp.244-283).

The Ottoman official Ebu Sehl Numan Efendi, who played a prominent role in the post-war border demarcation process with Austria, is frequently cited in Ottoman sources. As a *sinir molla*sı serving in the capacity of a border commissioner, he collaborated with Austrian officials to define the Danubian frontier with great precision in 1741. Contemporary sources note that detailed measurements and maps were used during the negotiations, resulting in a relatively modern and clearly defined border settlement (Emecen, 2009b, pp.209-212). Notably, the Treaty of Belgrade of 1739 explicitly revised the borders established under the Treaty of Passarowitz, particularly along the Danube. The first seven articles of the earlier treaty had already focused on delineating the frontiers. According to the revised arrangements, the border regions of Wallachia and Moldavia, which adjoined Polish and Transylvanian territories, were to remain unchanged. The treaty further stipulated that all islands in the Danube were to remain under Ottoman jurisdiction (Kurtaran, 2018, p.292). Whereas the Treaty of Passarowitz had ceded the province of Tımsıvar, Belgrade and its dependencies, several fortifications along the Sava River in Bosnia, and Little Wallachia to Austria, the Treaty of Belgrade of 1739 reasserted Ottoman authority over much of this territory (Gezer, 2019, pp.171-172). Additionally, the treaty text made explicit reference to Articles 1 and 3, which designated the Danube as the principal boundary. Further demarcation efforts took place in the regions surrounding Belgrade and Tımsıvar, with particular attention given to the removal of obstructions to navigation and the resolution of disputes over river islands and narrow straits - issues that had the potential to undermine long-term stability (BOA,MHD/3/1).

During the war within the Ottoman military bureaucracy, there was growing consensus that following the Russian occupation of Hotin - a development that, along with control over the region of Boğdan (Moldavia), posed a direct threat to the Danube line through İbrail - it was imperative to concentrate forces and launch a counteroffensive against Russia. Consequently, the Ottomans implemented strict security measures in the region. The fortress of İbrail was fortified against the likelihood of a Russian assault, and significant reinforcements were dispatched to Moldavia in September 1739 (BOA,C.AS/28078). Following the conclusion of the 1736-1739 wars, the Treaty of Belgrade granted Russia the legal right to extend its reach as far as the *Özi Kır*ı basin. Article 3 of the treaty - which comprised 15 articles and a final provision - stipulated the demolition of the fortress of Azak and the removal of its territory from the jurisdiction of

both empires, in line with the terms of the earlier border agreement ratified in 1701. The area was to remain uninhabited and devoid of any fortifications. According to the agreement, all territories enclosed by these markers - as well as the region extending to the confluence of the Don River and the Azak Sea - were to be established as a neutral zone, jointly recognized and respected by both empires (Savaş, 1996, p.166).



Map 3: The Ottoman-Russian Borders and the Uninhabited Territory under the Treaty of Belgrade (1739-1743) (BOA,HRT/190)²

In the context of delineating the Ottoman-Russian frontier, the border demarcation process brought to prominence a *border council* that accompanied the officials and played a central role in facilitating negotiations. This process is notably documented in the writings of the eminent Ottoman demarcator Merâmi Ahmed Efendi, who was directly involved in the proceedings. The reports and memoranda submitted by Ahmed Efendi complements the stipulations of the Treaty of Belgrade, particularly regarding the determination and formalization of the Ottoman-Russian border. According to Article VI of the treaty, the Great and Little Kabardians were to remain autonomous, and the North Caucasus border was recognized as agreed. This was followed by the demarcation of Azak and other contested frontier zones. The area was to be depopulated and withdrawn from the jurisdiction of both empires, with a mutual prohibition on the construction of new fortifications - particularly on Cherkaski island in the Don River or anywhere near the Azak Sea (October-November 1739) (Cezar, 2011, p.2517; Karagöz, 2008, pp.287-288). As a result, the borders that emerged in the aftermath of the 1736-1739 war were shaped largely in accordance with the Treaty of Istanbul (BOA,C.HR/3587). The demolition and subsequent cession of the fortress of Azak to Russia marked a significant shift in regional power dynamics, paving the way for Russian expansion into the Black Sea basin and potentially opening routes toward Dnieper, the Dniester, and eventually the Danube - though the Caucasus remained, for the time being, beyond the immediate scope of Russian ambitions.

² See also BOA, A.DVNSNMH.d 7/629-630.

The Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca and the Ottoman-Russian Borders

Russia's growing ambition to penetrate European territories through Poland heightened the strategic vulnerability of the Ottoman position. Yet despite the increasing Russian influence in the Balkans and the Caucasus, the Ottoman Empire lacked both the capacity and the preparedness to mount an effective counterstrategy in the aftermath of the Niş Treaty. Nearly three decades later during the Polish civil war, Russian intervention fled into Ottoman territory, prompting Russian forces to pursue them and, in the process, to burn the town of Balta. This chain of events - compounded by the Ottoman Empire's policies in the Caucasus, unresolved border tensions in Crimea, and the Polish question - brought an end to nearly three decades of peace. In October 1768, the Ottomans declared war on Russia (Köse, 2006, pp.7-10). However, this declaration, made six months before the customary spring campaign season, left the Ottoman military ill-prepared for immediate action while warning the Russians beforehand (Cezar, 2011, p.2566). Russia, in contrast, seized the opportunity to plan a carefully coordinated offensive (Aksan, 1993, pp.224-225). The Russian strategy centred on advancing from Ukraine toward the Danube to seize key border fortresses, including Hotin, Özi, Akkerman, Bender, Kili, İsmail, İbrail, and Rusçuk.

The geopolitics of the Black Sea basin played a critical role in shaping Russian military priorities. The fortresses of Bender, Hotin, and Özi were considered vital defensive bulwarks against a Russian incursion from the north and northwest (LeDonne, 2006, pp.6-7). Recognizing this, the Ottoman administration undertook extensive fortification efforts along the western Black Sea coast and the Dniester and Danube lines. Convinced that Russia's primary pressure point would be the Danube corridor via the Romanian principalities, the Ottoman command, through the *seraskerlik* of Boğdan, prioritized the defence of the fortress of İbrail and the port of Kalas, regarding their defense as critical (Aksan, 2010, p.162). Since a substantial contingent of the Russian army was stationed in the Fokşani region, cutting off the Crimean Khan's transit routes - located approximately twenty-two hours away - was considered critical to preventing his forces from penetrating the borders of Boğdan and Bender. It was further recommended that the *seraskerliks* of Bucak and Boğdan coordinate with the main Ottoman army and launch a joint operation against Russian positions as far as Yaş (BOA,TSMA.e/517/51). However, soon after these deliberations, news arrived that the fortress of Hotin had fallen to the Russians (September 1769), while the fortress of Bender continued to resist Russian assaults for nearly another year (LeDonne, 2006, pp.6-7). The capture of Hotin exposed the Danube frontier to Russian incursions and secured the rear of their advancing forces (Kesbi, 2002, pp.124-125; Resmi Efendi, 2011, pp.77-78). In a dispatch to the Ottoman administration, Crimean Khan Devlet Giray reported that elements of the Russian army had crossed into the town of Yaş. Given the insufficient Ottoman troop presence in Boğdan and its environs, Serasker of Bucak, İslam Giray, was tasked with defending the region alongside his contingent. Yet it was evident that Tatar forces alone could not halt the Russian advance. Despite these measures, by late September 1770, nearly all of Wallachia and Moldavia had fallen under Russian occupation. Furthermore, the Ottoman defeat at the Battle of Kartal Ovası (Kagul) not only shattered the Ottoman field army but also paved the way for the Russian forces to advance unimpeded into key strategic regions, including Akkerman, Bender, İsmail, Kili, and İbrail. The fortress of Bender, unable to withstand sustained Russian assaults, eventually capitulated (Danişmend, 1972, p.50).

The most decisive phases of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768-1774 for the Ottomans were marked by three catastrophic setbacks: the annihilation of the land army at Kartal in the second year of the conflict, the destruction of the Ottoman navy at the Battle of Çeşme, and the loss of key strongholds along the Danube frontier (Aksan, 1993, pp.224-225). By the war's end, all Bucak fortresses - including Akkerman, Bender, Kili, and İsmail - as well as numerous Ottoman defensive positions in the Danube basin, such as İbrail, had been occupied by Russian forces. However, these territories were formally restored to Ottoman control under the terms of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774).

Article 15 of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca established a framework for addressing potential disputes arising along the Ottoman-Russian frontier. It stipulated that bilateral commissions would be formed to prevent unforeseen incidents between the subjects of the two empires in the border regions. Should such

incidents occur, they were to be resolved through on-site inspections or inquiries conducted by specially appointed officials from both sides (Savaş, 1996, pp.152-166). Article 16 provided for the restoration to the Ottoman Empire of all territories within the Bucak region, including the fortresses of Akkerman, Kili, and İsmail, along with their associated villages and towns. Similarly, all fortresses, cities, towns, and villages within the provinces of Wallachia and Moldavia were formally returned to Ottoman sovereignty by Russia (BOA,TSMA.e/482).³ Article 18, however, delineated an exception: it permanently ceded to Russia the uninhabited tract of land situated between the Bug and Dnieper rivers, extending to their point of confluence (referred to as “the corner”), thereby eliminating any future grounds for territorial dispute over this area (BOA,A.DVNSNMH.d/9/62-63). Finally, Article 19 addressed the precise demarcation of the new Ottoman-Russian boundary. The territory beyond the designated border was to remain uninhabited, with a prohibition on settlement by Tatars, Russians, or Poles (BOA,C.HR/92/4559). Under Article 3 of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, the fortress of Özi was restored to Ottoman control, while Article 18 ceded the fortress of Kılburun to Russia. The Bug River was recognized as the boundary between the two empires (Fedakâr, 2015, p.129). The left bank of the Dnieper River, along with the uninhabited lands between the Bug and Dnieper rivers, remained under Russian jurisdiction (BOA,A.DVNSNMH.d/9/67-68). These arrangements signified Russia’s significant advance into the *Özi Kırı* and Bucak territories along the northeastern European frontier, further consolidating its strategic position in the region.



Map 4: The Border Map Drawn under the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca and the Uninhabited Territory to Remain under Russian Possession (1774) (BOA,HRT/189)

The resulting Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca not only imposed significant territorial losses but also burdened the Ottoman Empire with onerous obligations. The Ottoman policy of deferring full implementation of the treaty’s clauses relating to Crimea necessitated a re-evaluation of critical issues, including Russia’s growing demands and conflicting interpretations of the agreement. Key matters - such

³ Article 16 of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca.

as the precise status of Crimea, the handover of fortresses along the Dnieper River strait, the exchange of prisoners, commercial privileges, maritime navigation rights, and the establishment of Russian consulates in Ottoman territories - remained unresolved in the immediate aftermath of the war. These disputes were eventually addressed in 1779 through the signing of the *Aynalıkavak Tenkihnâmesi*, a supplementary protocol to the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca. Under its terms, the autonomy of the Crimean Khanate was reaffirmed, and the appointment of Şahin Giray - a pro-Russian figure - as khan was ratified by the Ottoman sultan, cementing a shift in the regional balance of power (Sarıcaoğlu, 2022, p.545).

The Outcome of the War of 1787-1792: New Borders and the Bucak-Bessarabia Region

Following the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, Russia gradually consolidated power with the aim of annexing Crimea (Fisher, 2010, p.97). Concurrently, it destabilized Ottoman control in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Dagestan while forging an alliance with Austria (Bayram, 2014, pp.392-393). In 1783, Catherine II used a rebellion against Şahin Giray to appoint Potemkin and send Russian troops into Crimea, after which she sought to secure local elites' support in Crimea and Dagestan (Fedakâr, 2014, pp.40-43; Beydilli, 1999, p.68; Fisher, 2010, pp.102-103). Reports from Girayzâdes and tribal leaders to the Ottoman court highlighted Russian fortifications along the Kuban, designated as the border in the treaty. Despite rising concerns after the 1783 annexation, the Ottoman leadership at first avoided direct confrontation, though it reinforced defences at Özi, Bender, Hotin, and between Edirne and İsakçı in response to Russian military violations (BOA, C.AS/23196; A.DVNSMHHM.d/177/14; 177/27; HAT/16/727). By 1787, Russian provocations in Wallachia and Moldavia, coupled with disputes over King Erekle II of Kartli-Kakheti, pushed the empires toward war. The Ottomans summoned Ambassador Bulgakov and, under Grand Vizier Koca Yusuf Pasha's leadership, declared war in August 1787 (Bayram, 2014, pp.392-393; Cevdet Paşa, 1275, pp.407-408). Despite financial strain, the empire fortified strongholds along the Dniester and Danube, reinforced central and provincial armies, and diverted all resources to sustain the war effort, underscoring its resolve against the Russo-Austrian alliance (Sarıcaoğlu, 1997, p.133).

Özi, located at the confluence of the Bug and Dnieper, was the outermost Ottoman stronghold on the defensive line from Belgrade to the Black Sea (Aksan, 2010, p.173). Recently modernized, it resisted repeated attacks but fell after Suvorov's siege in 1789 (BOA, D.BŞM.d/5099; Yakovaki Efendi, 2010, p.181; Fedakâr, 2019, p.129). Its loss gave Russia strategic control, opening routes toward Moldavia, Bucak, and the Danube. Russian forces advanced into Yaş, Poland, and Hocabey (Odessa), threatening Ottoman supply lines, with further aims on Akkerman, Bender, İbrail, Kili, İsmail, and other key cities. Simultaneously, Austria captured Belgrade, Fethülislam, Ada-i Kebir, Vidin, Semendire, and Bucharest, worsening Ottoman prospects. The fall of Akkerman secured Russian dominance north of the Danube, while defeats at sea deprived the Ottomans of naval superiority, enabling Russian operations and the eventual capture of İsmail. Under General Potemkin, the Russian army advanced with major victories. In October 1790, they seized Kili, undermining Danube delta security (Bayram, 2014, pp.740-741). Soon after, Sünne strait, Tulça, İsakçı, and İsmail fell to coordinated land and river assaults in December (Emecen, 2002, pp.83-84; Yakovaki Efendi, 2010, pp.184-185). These gains secured a foothold on the Danube's right bank. Maçın, a vital logistical hub, was also captured despite Arslan Pasha's resistance, further threatening İbrail on the opposite bank. Though unable to secure complete control, Russian operations crippled Ottoman mobility and defence even south of the Danube. The fall of Özi heightened the strategic value of Bucak/Bessarabia. In spring 1791, Russian forces, aided by Moldavian princes, advanced across Bucak into Dobruja but soon withdrew north of the Danube due to logistics and Ottoman resistance (Fedakâr, p.343; Karpat, p.342). Amid these setbacks, peace talks opened at Kalas. That summer, Grand Vizier Koca Yusuf Pasha, through Ahmed Vâsıf Efendi, wrote to Russian commander Repnin, admitting the war's indecisiveness. Repnin proposed a truce, which the Ottomans accepted. Terms included Wallachia and Moldavia's return under Ottoman suzerainty, the Dniester as frontier, and bans on Russian crossings of the Danube and Siret. Russian troops in the upper basin - from the Danube estuary to the Siret - retained freedom

of movement, while Ottomans were barred from crossing from İbrail to the estuary (Vâsif Efendi; Koçak, 2017, p.481; Kuzucu, 2013, pp.225-227).

Despite minor tensions, the fragile truce held, and by October 1791 both parties acknowledged peace as the only viable resolution (BOA, A.DVNSMHM.d/197/87). After eight months of negotiations, the Treaty of Jassy was signed on 10 January 1792, reaffirming the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca and the Aynalıkavak Convention (1779). The Ottomans recognized Russia's annexation of Crimea and accepted the Kuban as frontier. Among the most significant outcomes was the cession of the fortress of Özi and the *Özi Kırı* region, extending between the Bug and Dniester, to Russian control. Article 3 fixed the Dniester as the imperial boundary: the northern bank under uncontested Russian sovereignty, while the southern bank - including Bucak, Bender, Akkerman, Kili, and İsmail - was restored to the Ottomans (BOA, TSMA.d/9922/1). Although Russia achieved notable territorial expansion between the Dnieper, Dniester, and Prut rivers, its maritime influence remained limited. Much like Küçük Kaynarca, the treaty provided only a temporary settlement, postponing rather than resolving imperial rivalry (Koçak, 2017, p.484).

The Ottoman Danube and Russia after the Russo-Ottoman War of 1806-1812

With the signing of the Treaty of Jassy in 1792, the Ottoman Empire lost control over its northern frontier by ceding the strategically vital fortress of Özi to Russia. This territorial loss marked a significant shift in the balance of power, as Russia consolidated its position in the region and emerged as an increasingly direct threat to Ottoman interests along the Danube. The late eighteenth century witnessed the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte and the increasing prominence of French ambitions in the Eastern Mediterranean. France's invasion of Egypt in 1798, a direct challenge to Ottoman sovereignty and British interests in India, prompted the Ottoman Empire to sign an alliance with Russia. Approximately a year later, Britain entered into a similar agreement with the Ottomans, motivated by concerns over its trade routes to India and France's expansionist policies. This coalition eventually forced the French withdrawal from Egypt (Karal, 1941, pp.128-131). Napoleon's proclamation of the French Empire disrupted the European balance of power and led to a complex web of alliances, with rival states vying for influence in the Ottoman sphere. In this context, the Ottomans sought closer ties with France, a rapprochement that alarmed Britain and Russia. As a countermeasure, the Ottoman Empire concluded an alliance with Russia in 1805 that would remain in effect for nearly a decade. Under this agreement, both empires pledged to prohibit the passage of foreign military vessels into the Black Sea and to act jointly in the event of conflict there. Moreover, Russia secured considerable influence over the administration of Wallachia and Moldavia, gaining the right to approve or veto appointments and dismissals of voivodes in these principalities. At the same time, tensions between France and Russia over the Seven Islands Republic (*Cezâyir-i Seb'a Müctemiâ*) in the Ionian Sea further complicated the geopolitical landscape (Öztunç, 2007, pp.150-153). Napoleon's decisive victory over Russian and Austrian forces at the Battle of Austerlitz in December 1805 emboldened the Ottoman Empire to strengthen its alignment with France. This rapprochement threatened to undermine Russia's strategic interests in Wallachia, Moldavia, the Seven Islands, and the wider Balkan region. Tensions soon escalated beyond diplomacy. The immediate pretext for the Russo-Ottoman War of 1806-1812 arose from the Ottoman government's decision to dismiss pro-Russian Romanian princes in Wallachia and Moldavia and replace them with pro-French voivodes. Russia viewed this as a breach of the 1805 treaty and an unacceptable threat to its influence in the principalities. In response, Russian forces under Generals Ivan I. Mikhelson and Kasimir I. von Meyendorff advanced along the Dniester River, initiating an invasion of Wallachia and Moldavia under the pretence of countering French influence (Mischevca ve Zavitsanos, 1999, p.154; Iorga, 2009, pp.139-141).

After a month of hesitation following the Russian occupation of Wallachia and Moldavia, the Ottoman Empire declared war on Russia on 27 December 1806. This decision was welcomed by Napoleon, who regarded it as consistent with his broader strategic objectives against Russia and Austria. Austria, while pursuing a policy antagonistic to France, was nonetheless uneasy about Russia's growing presence in the Black Sea and the Balkans. Russia's broader goal, however, extended beyond Bender; it sought to consolidate its forces along the Danube frontier while preventing the Ottoman main army from linking up

with regional troops (BOA,HAT/6306; Cevdet Paşa, pp.134-135). By April 1808, the Russian army, advancing steadily under the command of Prince A. A. Prozorovsky, had deployed its forces across the entire territories of Wallachia and Moldavia in preparation for a major offensive. The Russian campaign increasingly concentrated on the Danube region, with a particular focus on capturing the fortress of İsmail (Abdüllatif Efendi, 2013, p.47). According to Prozorovsky's strategic plan, all fortresses situated north of the Danube were to be taken first, after which the Russian forces would cross the river to engage and destroy the Ottoman main army (Mikhailovsky-Danilevsky, 2002, pp.103-104; Aksan, 2010, pp.281-282). By the end of April, Russian forces had secured full control over Wallachia, Moldavia, and the Dniester line, except for the fortresses at İsmail, Yergöğü, and İbrail. A large-scale offensive was then launched against İbrail. Concurrently, Russian commander Count P. I. Bagration captured Maçın and Köstence, key strategic locations at the confluence of the Danube and the Black Sea.



Map 5: The Bucak and Özi Steppe Basin (1812) (BOA,HRT/184)⁴

The six-year conflict between the Ottoman Empire and Russia concluded with Napoleon's invasion of Moscow. Faced with the necessity of concentrating its military resources against the advancing French forces, Russia sought to end hostilities with the Ottomans and signed the Treaty of Bucharest in May 1812. However, shortcomings in Ottoman diplomacy, coupled with the duplicity of Greek interpreters entrusted with the translation of negotiations, left the Ottoman Empire at a distinct disadvantage in the resulting settlement. As Ahmed Cevdet Pasha observes, the Ottomans harboured deep suspicions toward France and, convinced that Napoleon would turn his attention to Istanbul following a potential victory over Russia, hastened to accept peace when Russia abandoned its claims to Anatolian territories.

Under the terms of the Treaty of Bucharest, all territories east of the Prut River, including the Bucak region, were ceded to Russia. The Muslim population residing in these areas was granted the right to migrate to Ottoman lands with their property. However, during the Russian occupation of Bucak at the onset of the war, Muslims had already been expelled from their homes, and their lands were reclassified as Russian property. Russia then invited the Christian population south of the Danube to resettle in these

⁴ The yellow area is identified as Bucak, while the right-hand side is defined as the *Özi Kırı* basin belonging to the Tatars.

vacated areas. Consequently, significant numbers of Bulgarians and Gagauz from Bulgaria and Dobruja migrated to Bessarabia and settled in Bucak (Karpas, p.34). Article 4 of the treaty delineated the new Ottoman-Russian boundary. It extended from the point where the Prut River entered Moldavia to its confluence with the Danube, and from there along the left bank of the Danube to the Kili strait and the Black Sea. The Kili strait was to remain under joint Ottoman-Russian control. While the left bank of the Danube from İsmail to the strait fell under Russian sovereignty, the small islands along this stretch were declared neutral, to remain uninhabited and free from any fortifications or settlements by either power (BOA, MHD/20).⁵ Boundary markers were to be placed at a distance of one hour's travel from major islands near İsmail and Kili, leaving these islands vacant except for the Old Kili settlement area.⁶ All fortifications, towns, and villages on the left bank of the Prut River were ceded to Russia, with the river's midpoint serving as the formal boundary. Article 5 stipulated the return of Danube islands outside the newly defined border region to Ottoman control.⁷ However, ownership of certain islands remained contested, leading to protracted negotiations and incomplete implementation of Article 4. It was not until 1817 that the sovereignty of major islands such as Çatal (Tchatal) and Lati (Leti), situated between the Kili and Sünne branches of the Danube, was formally settled (BOA, HAT/46438-A; Düzcü, 2016, p.204). Under this agreement, the inhabitants of Old Kili - located between these river branches - were to be relocated, and their dwellings demolished. Thereafter, the coastlines of Çatal and Lati were declared permanently uninhabited, with a neutral zone extending one hour's distance along the Sünne line.

A map prepared by Colonel Bogdanovich, appointed by Russia, delineated the agreed demarcation line: from the branching point of the Danube into the Kili and Sünne branches, the boundary ran one hour's distance along the right bank of the Kili branch, then paralleled the Sünne branch for an hour, cutting across Çatal and Lati islands to the Black Sea, opposite the Sünne strait. All land enclosed between this line and the Kili branch was recognized as Ottoman territory, albeit to remain permanently uninhabited. Additionally, the small islands near the Kili strait were similarly to remain vacant. The Ottoman Empire undertook to complete the relocation of Old Kili's population within a year and to prevent its subjects from encroaching beyond the demarcated line. In return, Russia agreed to restrain its own population from crossing to the right side of the Kili strait. Nevertheless, delays in demarcation and logistical challenges in implementing these provisions led to ongoing disputes and tensions over border definition and the status of the uninhabited zones. According to a report submitted by Mustafa Nazif Efendi, one of the *Divan-ı Hümayun* hodjas (Imperial Council members) appointed to oversee the border demarcation process, the Ottoman delegation expressed, in diplomatic terms, its concern over deliberate delays by the Russian representatives. As a result, the demarcation of the designated uninhabited zone dragged on until 1817, under various pretexts. Ultimately, a provisional agreement was concluded in that year. The Treaty of Bucharest thus marked a significant turning point: for the first time, Russia secured official authority over the Danube (Düzcü, 2016, pp. 207, 183-184). For the Ottoman Empire, this represented a decisive loss of absolute sovereignty over the Danube, setting a precedent that would later escalate into broader international disputes concerning control and navigation of the river.

The Convention of Akkerman and the Danube

The claims to rights over the Danube were further articulated in the Treaty of Akkerman (1826), signed between the Ottoman Empire and Russia in 1826. This agreement effectively revived and reinforced issues first raised in the Treaty of Bucharest. The first article of the Treaty of Akkerman reaffirmed the provisions of the Treaty of Bucharest, while the second article addressed the unresolved disputes concerning certain islands and uninhabited lands along the Danube - issues which had remained contentious despite the conditional settlement reached in 1817. The second article stipulated that "a certain distance shall be maintained on both sides of the border between Russia and the Ottoman Empire along the Danube

⁵ Article 4 of the Turkish copy of the treaty between the Ottoman Empire and Russia (1812).

⁶ For previous negotiations, see BOA, MHD/19, 1.

⁷ Also see BOA, HAT/44524; 24209-C.

in order to resolve the disputed matters (Aslantaş, 2013, p.163).” This provision confirmed Ottoman sovereignty over the islands of Çatal and Lati, situated opposite the towns of İsmail and Kili, while designating these territories as vacant and uninhabited (Lûtfi Efendi, 1999, p.155). The demarcation arrangements agreed upon in 1817 were interpreted as measures to prevent disputes between the populations of both empires residing along the adjacent riverbanks (BOA,MHD/33). Thus, the Akkerman Treaty maintained the status quo of Ottoman control over these islands, while reaffirming the need to preserve a neutral, uninhabited buffer zone to minimise cross-border tensions. Furthermore, Article 2 of the Akkerman Treaty restated the principles outlined in Article 4 of the Bucharest Treaty regarding the islands near İsmail and Kili. It underscored the importance of maintaining a designated distance between the shores of the two empires to avert friction, as agreed on 21 August 1817 in Istanbul by Ottoman officials and the Russian ambassador (BOA,HAT/1097/44424). In addition, a separate clause of the Akkerman Treaty designated the islands opposite İsmail and Kili as restricted zones. It confirmed that the left bank of the Danube, from the confluence of the Prut River to its junction with the Kili branch, would constitute the Ottoman-Russian boundary. Smaller islands closer to the left bank of Kili were not to be occupied by either power, while the two larger islands on the Kili side were to be marked with boundary posts at intervals of one hour’s travel, remaining permanently uninhabited except for Old Kili. Subsequent Russian objections to these arrangements were raised repeatedly with the Ottoman authorities and debated with the Russian ambassador in Istanbul.

Ottoman sources indicate that maps drawn by Russian officials depicted the designated boundary as beginning at the bifurcation of the Danube into the Kili and Sünne branches. From there, it extended along the right bank of the Kili branch, reaching a point exactly one hour’s distance on the left bank of the Sünne branch, cutting across the Çatal and Lati islands, and continuing to the Black Sea opposite the Sünne strait, also one hour distant. Boundary markers were to be placed along this line to clearly demarcate the neutral zone. All territory between this line and the Kili branch was to remain under Ottoman sovereignty but was to remain vacant and uninhabited. The smaller islands near the Kili strait would similarly remain unoccupied, and the Ottomans retained exclusive rights to the land up to the designated boundary, free from Russian intervention or encroachment by Russian subjects (BOA,HAT/1095/44396). In effect, the Treaty of Akkerman sought to clarify and consolidate the ambiguous provisions of the Treaty of Bucharest, largely in a manner favourable to Russian interests. The status of uninhabited lands along the Danube was thus formally resolved within this framework (Aslantaş, 2013, p.165).

Conclusion

From 1711 onwards, Russia repeatedly penetrated the Danube basin during its conflicts with the Ottoman Empire and, through provisions enshrined in successive treaty texts, steadily advanced towards the Danube line. By the late eighteenth century, Russia had already consolidated its presence in the region through the occupation of the Özi and Bucak basins, thereby positioning itself advantageously near the Danube. This culminated in the Treaty of Bucharest, which granted Russia partial rights over the Danube and marked the beginning of the Ottoman Empire’s gradual loss of absolute control over the river. With the annexation of territories between the Prut and Dniester rivers, Russia secured significant economic and strategic advantages along the western Black Sea coast, notably through the establishment of the Dniester customs corridor (Tomuleţ, 2012, p.10), which remained in operation until 1829.

The unfavourable outcome of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828-1829 further exacerbated the Ottoman Empire’s territorial losses. Under the terms of the Treaty of Edirne (1829), new borders were drawn between the Ottoman and Russian empires, as well as between Ottoman-controlled territories and Wallachia and Moldavia, along the main course of the Danube. The middle of the Danube, particularly within the territories of Wallachia and Moldavia, now served as the demarcation line for the Ottoman frontier. Strategically significant fortresses, including İbrail, Yergögü, and Kulle, were permanently removed from Ottoman administration. The newly delineated Ottoman-Russian border also included the contested zone previously designated as uninhabited territory under earlier agreements. Russia’s strategic

ambitions became even more apparent in the border protocols of 1830, which formalized the gains it had accumulated through successive encroachments on Ottoman territory. These protocols addressed two key issues: the final determination of borders along the Danube and the resolution of disputes over island ownership. They established the boundary from the point where the Prut River enters Moldavian territory to its confluence with the Danube at Timârabad (Reni). This delineation consolidated the territorial arrangements made under the Treaties of Bucharest, Akkerman, and the interim agreements of 1817, definitively establishing the Ottoman-Russian border in the region until its revision under the Treaty of Paris following the Crimean War in the mid-nineteenth century. A critical clause in the 1830 border agreement specified that “the Hızırlyas (or Tulça) branch shall serve as the dividing line between the Ottoman and Russian empires (BOA,MHD/42/13-14.)” This provision not only reinforced Russian sovereignty over the territories between the Kili-Sünne and Sünne-Hızırlyas branches of the Danube but also effectively shifted Ottoman control south of the Hızırlyas branch. As a result, Article 4 of the Treaty of Bucharest and Article 2 of the Akkerman Treaty - both of which had sought to preserve Ottoman claims over certain uninhabited islands and lands (notably Çatal and Lati) in the İsmail and Kili sectors (BOA,MHD/33) - were ultimately nullified in practice. These islands were formally ceded to Russia under the border demarcation arrangements implemented in 1829 as part of the Treaty of Edirne, further consolidating Russian dominance in the region.

From the early eighteenth century through the first half of the nineteenth century, Russia’s strategic objective of reaching the Danube and expanding southward was evident in nearly every conflict it waged against the Ottoman Empire. While the broader geopolitical ambition of accessing the warm seas remained central, the Danubian hinterland emerged as a critical operational and strategic zone for Russian military planning. This region, with its numerous ports and fortified sites, functioned as a vital logistical and supply network for the Ottoman defence system. Russia’s military strategy aimed to neutralize this Ottoman advantage and gradually repurpose it for its own benefit. However, Russia’s ambitions extended beyond mere battlefield dominance. A core element of its long-term strategy was the institutionalization of territorial and strategic gains through treaty diplomacy. By systematically incorporating wartime conquests into legal agreements, Russia sought to incrementally advance its influence from the northern and western Black Sea coasts toward the Danube frontier. The Treaty of Bucharest marked a pivotal turning point in this trajectory. It was the first treaty to formally acknowledge Russia’s claims and rights along the Danube, thereby forcing the Ottoman Empire, for the first time, to share sovereignty over the river with a foreign power. This development set a precedent that would be further consolidated with the Treaty of Edirne (1829), which expanded Russia’s rights along the Danube and formalized its position vis-à-vis Ottoman-controlled territories such as Wallachia and Moldavia. The treaty delineated the border between the two empires along the middle of the Danube, from Wallachia-Moldavia to the Hızırlyas stretch, embedding Russia’s strategic gains into international legal texts. However, the geopolitical balance shifted once again with the Treaty of Paris in 1856. As part of the post-Crimean War settlement, many of Russia’s territorial and navigational privileges on the Danube were significantly curtailed. The establishment of the International Danube Commission emerged as a major institutional development, assuming a central role in regulating navigation and diminishing unilateral control over the river.

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