



European post offices abroad: the UPU between Ottoman complaints and power politics

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At the beginning of the 19th century, a new organization for postal services was formed in Europe, with a network of offices, services and methods that were finally modern, although structured international collaboration between the various postal administrations was yet to be established.

However, there was still a serious lack of communication with the Ottoman world, where there were European communities dedicated to trade and in need of regular and secure communications with the West and its markets. The turning point for the creation of postal infrastructure capable of linking the economy of such European communities to the Western economy came as a result of a technological development, i.e. steam navigation, and a new political and military situation.

Between 1837 and 1914, thanks to these conditions and the capitulations regime, which granted certain European powers the application of personal rather than territorial law in the Ottoman Empire and, therefore, special rights, France, Austria, Russia, Great Britain, Italy and Germany, as well as Greece, Egypt and Romania, set up their own postal offices, open to all, in the main Ottoman cities, which operated under their own metropolitan rules.

These offices were an active instrument for the economic expansion of the European communities and, above all, for their commercial links with the European economy. They were also an important instrument for the territorial and financial expansion of European and local banks.

At first, the Empire showed little interest in the matter and accepted these openings. An Ottoman postal service, albeit fairly unreliable, was not introduced until 1841, during the period of the reforms which had begun in 1839. Over time, however, the Ottoman service developed to such an extent that the Empire joined the UPU when it was founded (1875). With the Empire's entry into the UPU, there was no longer any reason for the European offices to exist, and the Empire tried on several occasions to have these offices closed: it presented a note to this effect at the opening session of the first Congress (1875), but the Congress decided that “the question was not within its jurisdiction, that it had no authority to deal with it and that its decisions, if any, would have no effect; that, consequently, the matter should be settled directly between Turkey and the countries maintaining offices on its territory”. This provided the legal basis for the European powers to maintain the offices; the countries also developed other legal arguments.

The UPU archives do not contain much material on this subject, as the International Bureau (IB) and Congress always refused to deal with it. However, another arbitration case dating from 1882, in which the IB adopted the same policy, will be mentioned. Thus, the UPU was entrusted with the problem by the Empire and always refused to take sides, believing the issue to be more political than technical, or rather, being unable or unwilling to go against the interests of the European powers.

The Empire, therefore, was never listened to: in addition to postal and economic reasons, the political factor of international prestige had become predominant, with each European power endeavouring to extend its political influence and maintain its prestige vis-à-vis both the Empire and the other powers, as part of the policy of influence and power in the Near East that was well known during this period.

This contribution aims to analyze this situation and the position, arguments and role of the UPU, which was not just technical, in a question relating to international politics; hence, the “diverging interpretations” of the idea of achieving “a single postal territory” and, in any case, its “ever incomplete realization”.