



Banditry in Western Anatolia

Summary :

Banditry in western Anatolia resulted from the interaction among several factors within Ottoman society and economy. Particularly important in this context were the various institutional reforms, the relationships between state and society, and the integration of the Empire into the world economy.

Date

16th - 20th centuries

Geographical Location

Western Asia Minor

Names

1. General

Banditry in the Ottoman Empire resulted from changes in the state's military and fiscal organisation and the Empire's integration into the world economy starting in the XVIth century. The bandit groups consisted of current mercenaries, ancient soldiers, nomads and peasants in a continuously redefined area of state-subject relationship.¹

In the Ottoman Empire's classical period, the *timar*-holding (military fief) *sipahi* (cavalry soldiers) formed the backbone of the Ottoman army and most of the military expenses were met by way of *timar* assignments, that is, through the collection of state taxes by the *sipahi* from *timar* assigned to them in the provinces. During the XVIth century, each military campaign caused the growth of the number of troops in the growing territorial scope. As a result, the State Treasury was frequently in need of ready cash for the military's upkeep, especially in time of war. Therefore, the government was faced with the major task of reorganizing state finances to meet the challenging needs of changing times.²

2. Banditry in the 16th century

The major changes that had taken place beginning with the 1580s were brought about mainly by the decay of the *timar* and *has* (state's domain), held earlier by **beys**, **pashas** (**paşa**), and other officials. They came about at a swiftly growing rate, under the direct control of the State Treasury. Once under government control, most of the *timar* and *has* revenues were farmed out by **iltizam**; that is, the state, instead of assigning the revenues of **sancaks** to pashas or beys as *has*, farmed them out as *mukata'a* (tax farm) to **mültezims** or to governors who acted as mültezims.³

The treasury also tried to reduce expenditure on armed forces stationed in the provinces and more governors were expected to provide and pay for their own military retinues. *Sekban sarıca* (Anatolian mercenaries) or *levend* (vagrant peasant) troops began to be maintained by the local governors as part of their retinues. Therefore, a sizable number of armed bands roamed the Anatolian countryside in search of employment. Moreover, in order to survive they exacted illegal taxes called *salgun* from the peasants in spite of the government's attempt to secure its tax base and thus protect the peasants.⁴

In this context, the mercenaries who became vagrant during peace and the peasants exploited by increased arbitrary tax burdens started to engage in banditry activity in the Ottoman countryside. The famous **Celali rebellions**⁵ emerged in this context as threat to the central authority. At the end of the XVIth century certain leaders of mercenary troops were able to traverse all of Anatolia, and set siege to major fortified towns. Nevertheless, Celali leaders whose main pretext for rebellion was the need to feed their mercenaries, could be integrated into the system by the government. When they were given public office, the need for rebellion disappeared.⁶

3. Banditry in the 19th century



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Another period in which the state military and fiscal organisation underwent transformation resulting in banditry was the XIXth century. The destruction of the Janissary troops in 1826 and Mahmut II's consequent efforts to create a general conscription system led to the increase of banditry activity in the empire. The former Janissaries continued their career as bandits and the subjects, who faced the direct control of the central state for the first time, began to desert and join the bandit groups. Particularly after the Ottoman-Russian War of 1828-1829, the soldiers who could return to their homelands in search of employment often became bandits. Moreover, the conquest of Algeria by France in the 1830s caused the unemployment of young people who were sent regularly to Algeria from [İzmir](#). They found refuge with the bandits active in the hinterland of İzmir.⁷

The fiscal transformation brought about by the **tanzimat period** also led to further development of banditry in the Ottoman provinces. The peasants who faced the new taxation structure and the notables who lost their ancient privileges resisted the military and fiscal centralisation attempts of the Tanzimat governments.⁸ During the 1840s and 1850s the government could not even collect the taxes imposed on the [Aydn-İzmir](#) region.⁹

Banditry intensified especially in the second half of the XIXth century. Particularly in the hinterland of İzmir around [Ödemiş](#), Çine, [Bayındır](#), Milas, [Tire](#), and [Nazilli](#), it was the bandits themselves who were the actual masters of the region. The government, which could not prevent banditry and was in need of soldiers, forgave the bandits in return that they join the army that would fight in the [Ottoman-Russian War of 1877-1878](#). The bandits accepted the offer. Nevertheless, after the war they continued with their usual activities in the region.¹⁰

4. Kidnappings

The integration of the Ottoman lands into the world economy also agitated the Ottoman subjects in the countryside. Foreigners, due to their increased numbers and extensive economic activity in this period, became a target for bandits, especially in the less well-policed countryside. The usual method was to kidnap persons and release them in exchange for a ransom. Between 1880 and 1902, a large proportion of these kidnappings, eight out of twenty-one, occurred in the [Province of Aydn](#), the majority of these in or near İzmir.¹¹

Fritz Charnaud was kidnapped on September 21, 1885, at [Salihli](#) ("Saladin, 60 miles from Smyrna"); he was released for a ransom of TL 1500 (TL 18 000 had at first been demanded). Three of the gang were killed and a fourth mortally wounded.

Messrs. R.C.H. and W.J. Wilkin and O. Whittal were kidnapped on September 24, 1887, near İzmir; one captive was released to negotiate. The ransom finally agreed upon was TL 800 (the demanded sum had been TL 3000); O. Whittal eventually died of privation during his captivity.

M. Waligorski, French entrepreneur of the [İzmir-Kasaba railway](#), was captured by a gang of five men (three Montenegrines and two Bosnians, former workers of the railway company) in August 1896 not far from [Alaşehir](#), probably as an act of personal revenge. He was released within 24 hours, in exchange for a ransom of TL 4000 paid by the company.

Captain Marriott was kidnapped at Köyceğiz on October 25, 1896; although the brigands demanded a ransom of TL 15,000, the local authorities paid TL 120 and granted a "free pardon" to the culprits.

James Whittal was captured on November 19, 1898, between İzmir and [Burnova](#); he was released for a ransom of TL 500.

Messrs. Alphons Mille and Menoti were kidnapped by a gang of five brigands at a distance of 12 km from İzmir on January 4, 1901. They were released on January 7 for a ransom of TL 1000 (original demand: TL 5000). The culprits were arrested after some days and most of the money was recovered.

The abduction of a German called Richter, who was captured by a band of robbers, took place at the foot of Mount Olympus



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(probably by Nif Dağ, present Kemalpaşa Dağı, east of İzmir) in about 1910. The ransom was paid by friends and the owners of the factory of optical instruments for which he worked.

Despite being accompanied by a guard at the time of his kidnapping, a Belgian, Lucien Tak, farmer at Çıplak near Tire, was kidnapped while en route to Tire by a brigand called Güllükçe. The ransom demanded was TL 5000, but the victim had no relatives and little money. He was released upon the payment of TL 2700, brought together by the local Belgian community: TL 100 from the Belgian poor relief fund (armenkas) and the rest consisting of loans that would ruin him.

On June 3, 1914, the ethnic Greek (but Ottoman subject) Yanni Sokianos, employed in "Abbott's Emery Mines Ltd." was captured at Aziziye (three hours by railway from İzmir) by Turkish brigands and released for a ransom of TL 350 (originally TL 3000 had been demanded, but the firm had refused to pay).

Baron van Heemstra, owner of tobacco-plantations in Malkacık and Oğlananası (one hour by train from İzmir plus one hour's drive), was attacked by five armed men returning from Malkacık. He was held hostage at the Nymph Dağ (Nif Dağı) and the kidnapers demanded a ransom of TL 10.000. The ransom was paid and the baron was released on May 23. A member of the band, Hadgi Vassili, was denounced to the authorities in Akhisar. The gang-leader Andrea (Captain Andrea) was overmastered, and Costa, another member, was arrested two days later. The rest escaped to Papazlı. In November 1911, Athanase Tromara, a member of the Andrea gang who had escaped from the [Bodrum](#) prison to Athens, sent a menacing letter to the baron in which he demanded that he restore to him his valuables confiscated by the Turkish authorities or TL 65.

5. Brigand gangs and leaders

Banditry had perhaps never been absent in rural western Anatolia. Brigands known as [zeybek](#) and [palikaria](#)¹² were very active in the second half of the XIXth and in the beginning of the XXth century. The most notorious Turkish bandit-leaders of the time were Çakırcalı Ahmed, killed in December 1883, and Çakırcalı Mehmed, who reportedly acted as a sort of Robin Hood, robbing the rich while distributing the booty among the poor. The government, unable to suppress his activities, tried to pacify him and his gang by offering a fixed annual income (in 1905) and later (in 1908) a "neutral zone" near Muğla, containing a [çiftlik](#) and including a monthly salary of TL 20. In October 1909, he was reported as arrested near Ödemiş. This was certainly not true. He finally died in a surprise attack by government troops in the mountains near Milas in 1911. Hacı Mustafa, Mehmed's cousin, succeeded him as gang-leader.

"Captain" Gheorghios, "Captain" Dhimos (both in the surroundings of Bornova and Buca), Kara Ali, Arnavut Ahmed, Arnavut Kazım, Tekeoğlu, Costa, and Çerkes Sami were also active in the region. The Dutch consul had the impression that these and other gangs of brigands had divided the whole province of Aydın among themselves, although conflicts between them must have sometimes led to bloodshed. In the period shortly before the Young-Turkish "revolution" (in July, 1908), acts of banditry seem to have increased because of bad harvests due to drought and the increased tax burden: the Dutch consul in İzmir reported on the plundering of wagons loaded with grain in Aleppo, and on customs stores robbed for the same reason in Beirut in November 1907.¹³

1. Uluçay, Ç., *18 ve 19. Yüzyillarda Saruhan'da Eşkiyalık ve Halk Hareketleri* (İstanbul 1955).

2. İnalçık, H., "Military and Fiscal Transformation in the Ottoman Empire 1600-1700", *Archivum Ottomanicum*, vol 4(1980), p. 312.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

4. İnalçık, H., "Centralisation and Decentralisation in Ottoman Administration" in: Thomas Naff and Roger Owen (eds), *Studies in Eighteenth Century Islamic History*, (Southern Illinois University Press 1977).

5. Akdağ M., *Celali İsyanları*, (Ankara 1963), Akdağ M., *Türkiye'nin İktisadî ve İçtimaiî Tarihi*. vol 2, 1453-1559 (Ankara 1971).



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6. Barkey, K., *Bandits and Bureaucrats: the Ottoman Route to State Centralisation* (New York 1994).
7. In 1829, the "romantic" bandit of the Aydın region Atçalı Kel Mehmet appeared as a threat to the local government. While he was a poor peasant, the fact that he could not marry with the landlord's girl he liked made him the Robin Hood of the region. Even the people of Tire, Bayındır and Ödemiş acknowledged his authority in the region; therefore he declared himself as the *vali* (provincial governor). After a series of unsuccessful attempts, the government forces could capture him by means of collaboration of the local notables. Uluçay, Ç., *Atçalı Kel Mehmet* (İstanbul 1968).
8. Uzun, A., *Tanzimat ve Sosyal Direnişler*, (İstanbul 2002); İnalçık, H., "Application of the Tanzimat and Its Social Effects", *Archivum Ottomanicum*, vol. 5(1973), 97-127; İnalçık, H., *Tanzimat ve Bulgar Meselesi*, (İstanbul 1992).
9. One of the most important bandits of the mid of XIXth century was Katırcıyani. In the 1850s his gang engaged in numerous activities: they kidnapped traders, landlords and peasants in exchange for ransom, and attacked caravans and post offices. He had a large network of anchorage and many helpers: innkeepers, grocers and keepers of coffee shops. He also collaborated with foreign merchants and some local governors. Yetkin, S., *Ege'de Eşkiyalar*, (İstanbul 1996), pp. 55-60.
10. Ibid, pp. 49-62.
11. Schmidt, J., "Banditry and the Dutch Colony in the Vilayet of Aydın" in *Through The Legation Window 1876-1926, four essays on Dutch, Dutch-Indian and Ottoman History* (Istanbul 1992), pp. 2-6.
12. *Palikari* (Greek): brave young man.
13. Ibid., pp.10-13.

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Glossary :

	bey
The title of bey means actually "chieftain," and was traditionally applied to leaders of Turkish tribal groups, in the Ottoman Empire also to administration or military officials. The regions or provinces where beys ruled or which they administered by them were called beylik.	
	iltizam
The system of tax farming in the Ottoman Empire, according to which the taxes owed to the state were farmed by auction to private individuals, who had the right to collect them.	
	mültezim
Tax farmer; the term was used also for those who collected taxes and dues on behalf of the Ottoman Treasury.	
	pasha (paşa)
A title of high rank in the Ottoman political, administrative and military system, typically granted to governors of provinces and high army officials.	
	sancak (liva)
Medium sized unit of provincial administration of the Ottoman state, throughout its history. A subdivision of the early Ottoman eyalet (or beylerbeylik) and the later Ottoman vilayet. In the late Ottoman Period it was known also as mutasarrıflık.	
	tanzimat
The 19th-century reforms in the Ottoman Empire, which were inaugurated in 1839 with the edict of Hatt-i Şerif and came to an end with the Constitution of 1876. The reforms, which were considered an effort for the modernization and liberalization of the state, concerned every aspect of the political, social and economic life in the Empire. Of particular importance were the ones that equated legally Muslim and non-Muslim subjects.	