

North Africa in the Foreign Policy of Catherine II¹

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Abstract. The 18th century was in many ways a transformative era for the Russian Empire, characterized by substantial internal reforms and notable foreign policy achievements. Amidst sweeping modernization efforts, Russia secured significant victories on the international stage. Under Peter I, Russia “opened a window” to Europe, while Catherine II’s reign expanded the country’s geopolitical reach to the Black Sea, facilitating access to fertile southern territories and establishing crucial maritime routes for international trade. These strategic advancements enhanced Russia’s influence and strategic capacities considerably.

During Catherine II’s reign, Russia also made its first forays into North Africa, a region previously beyond the Empire’s strategic horizon. Before gaining access to the Black and Mediterranean Seas, Russia had virtually no contact with the countries of North Africa. However, the geopolitical landscape of Catherine’s era made interaction with Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Tripoli a possibility.

This article investigates the main foreign policy initiatives of Russia in North Africa during the latter half of the 18th century. These efforts served as ancillary operations to Russia’s overarching conflict with the Ottoman Empire. Throughout the Russo–Turkish Wars, Russia exploited separatist movements within the Ottoman periphery to weaken its adversary strategically. In times of peace, Russian priorities shifted to safeguarding merchant vessels in the Mediterranean from attacks by Barbary corsairs – specifically from Tunisia, Algeria, and Tripoli. To mitigate these threats, Russia exerted diplomatic pressure on the Sublime Porte and sought to negotiate peace agreements with North African states. Nevertheless, these early Russian engagements in North Africa were tentative and often marked by limited success and instances of diplomatic adventurism, leaving several initiatives unrealized.

Utilizing archival documents from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire (AVPRI) and the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RGADA), this article provides a detailed examination of Russia’s diplomatic decision-making and negotiations with North African states. While prior Russian and foreign scholarship has analysed specific events and countries in this context, this study seeks to offer a more holistic understanding of Russia’s foreign policy objectives and actions in North Africa during the 18th century.

Keywords: Russian Empire, North Africa, barbarian states, Egypt, reign of Catherine II, Russian–Turkish relations, trade in the Mediterranean Sea

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In recent years, Africa has gained increasing significance in Russian foreign policy, with Russia aiming to revive the level of relations it maintained with many African nations during the Soviet period. There is also a growing scholarly interest in exploring the history of Russia's engagements with the continent's countries and peoples.

The question of when Russia first “came” to Africa depends on the point of reference. Ties were initially formed in the 16th century between the Patriarchates of Alexandria and Moscow, though these were strictly religious. Under Peter the Great, a Madagascar expedition was launched but never reached African shores. One could argue that Russian-African cooperation began in the 1770s, following the First Archipelago Expedition and subsequent voyages by Russian naval officers to the Maghreb region. Alternatively, Russia's first diplomatic mission in Africa – the Consulate General in Alexandria – was established in 1784 and opened in 1785. A key milestone was the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, which laid the legal groundwork for trade expansion and the appointment of consuls to the Mediterranean. Therefore, the roots of Russian-African cooperation as a distinct foreign policy focus trace back to the reign of Catherine II (1762–1796).

This article aims to identify Russia's primary interests in North Africa during the latter half of the 18th century and to trace how these interests were advanced. The research hypothesis proposed is that Russian-African cooperation emerged under Catherine II's reign as a result of expanding trade and wars with the Ottoman Empire.

Numerous studies have addressed Russia-Africa relations in the 18th century, but they tend to focus on specific foreign policy aspects or individual countries. For instance, D.N. Kopelev (2017) discusses Peter I's expedition to Madagascar, while V.N. Shkunov (2012) examines the Russian Empire's trade ties with Africa. A.G. Ragnshtein (2013) explores piracy in the Mediterranean Sea. The development of relations with the Regency of Tunis during this period has been studied by N.A. Zherlitsyna (2014) and N. Kazdaghli (2018). Additionally, T.Yu. Kobishchanov (2009), I.M. Smilyanskaya (2011), and D.V. Frumin (2004, 2009) have contributed works on the Middle East and Egypt's role in Russian foreign policy in the 18th century. However, there remains a notable gap in comprehensive research focused on North Africa's role in Catherine II's foreign policy.

This article summarizes and systematizes the key findings from previous research, utilizing an extensive range of archival materials. The study draws on collections from the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Empire (AVPRI), including fonds No. 5 “Secret Opinions of the Collegium,” No. 48 “Relations between Russia and Genoa,” No. 89 “Relations between Russia and Turkey,” and No. 90 “Constantinople Mission,” as well as fund No. 19 “Finance” from the Russian State Archives of Ancient Documents (RGADA).

Africa in Russia's foreign policy before Catherine II

Prior to Catherine II's reign, Russia's interactions with Africa were irregular and limited. The country had little detailed knowledge of the continent's geography or its contemporary conditions. It was only in 1713, during Peter I's rule, that Russia published its first map of Africa (Davidson, Filatova, 2010, p. 14). For instance, an early 18th-century geography textbook listed countries such as "Barbaria, Egypt, Biledun, Gerid, Saraduni, Ethiopia, Abyssinia, and Monomotapa."² These entities appeared on European maps from the 17th and 18th centuries, though their borders were often undefined and varied according to the cartographers' understanding and biases. There was also confusion surrounding the names Abyssinia and Ethiopia: sometimes they were used interchangeably, other times Abyssinia referred to East Africa, while Ethiopia was depicted as stretching from the Horn of Africa down to South Africa and along the Gulf of Guinea coast – highlighting that Europeans were primarily familiar only with Africa's coastal regions.

Information about the internal political situation in Turkey's African territories was obtained from Russian envoys stationed in Istanbul. For instance, in 1746, it was reported that Osman Bey³ had fled Egypt for Constantinople following a conflict with other beys. Seeking to reclaim his authority, he requested from the Ottoman Porte ten warships and twenty thousand troops, promising to increase payments to the sultan's treasury. Although the Porte initially consented, it later reconsidered, fearing that such support might trigger Egypt's permanent secession. Consequently, the report's author noted: "Despite using all its power and exceeding its capabilities, the Porte was never able to conquer that country."⁴ Similar dispatches were sent to the Collegium of Foreign Affairs in 1750.⁵ Additionally, the newspaper *Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti* occasionally published brief articles on North African states; notably, the January 16, 1728 issue provided a detailed account of the internecine war in Morocco.⁶

Individual Russians traveled to Africa as early as ancient times. Since the era of the Golden Horde, people from Eastern Europe who were captured during wars and raids found themselves on the continent (D'yakonov, 2009, p. 4). Some of these individuals even rose to prominent positions, such as Kasim Bey, originally from Little Russia, who became governor of an Egyptian province at the end of the 18th century. Certain captives, after joining the military and administrative elite in North African states, managed to maintain connections with their homeland. For example, Murad Bey and

² *Geografiya ili kratkoe zemnogo kruga opisanie* [Geography, or a Brief Description of the Globe]. 1716. Printed by order of His Majesty the Tsar at the St. Petersburg Printing House, St. Petersburg. P. 84 (in Russian).

³ Osman Bey was a prominent leader of the Egyptian beylicate during the 1730s and 1740s, holding the title "Sheikh al-Balad," or elder of the country. In 1743, he was ousted from Egypt by Ibrahim Bey and Ridwan Bey.

⁴ AVPRI, Fond 90 (*Constantinople Mission*), List 1, File 278 (1746), Sheets 147-148.

⁵ *Ibid*, File 324 (1750), Sheet 87.

⁶ *Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti*, January 16, 1728, No. 5, pp. 1-2 (in Russian).

Ibrahim Bey sent gifts to their native Georgia; there are accounts suggesting they considered forming an alliance with Russia through the mediation of Heraclius II, who was king of the Kingdom of Kakheti and, from 1762 to 1798, of the unified Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti (Hathaway, 2008, p. 220).

Information about North African countries also reached Russia through pilgrims visiting holy sites in Egypt, with travel accounts preserved since the 15th century. In the 18th century alone, travelers such as John Lukyanov (1701), Macarius and Sylvester (1705), Andrey Ignatiev (1707), Hippolytus Vishensky (1708), Vasily Grigorovich-Barsky (1727 and 1730), and Archimandrite Constantine (1795) left valuable observations on Egypt's landmarks, people, climate, and trade.⁷

A notable Africa-related development during the early 18th century was the Madagascar expedition organized under Peter I in 1723–1724. Russia had received word of a “pirate king” in Madagascar seeking the protection of European powers. Recognizing the island's strategic location, Peter I aimed to capitalize on this by establishing a stopover point for Russian ships en route to India. Prepared in secret, the expedition departed from Reval in 1723 but was forced to return due to adverse weather and ship damage, leading to its postponement. The undertaking was questionable from the start due to a lack of reliable information about the situation in Madagascar. According to historian D.N. Kopelev, the Jacobites at European courts deliberately exaggerated the power and influence of the pirates on the island in an attempt to overthrow George I (Kopelev, 2017, pp. 51–52). In his letter to the pirate leader, Peter I addressed him, without naming him, as “His Most Honorable Majesty, King and Ruler of the Glorious Island of Madagascar,” and concluded with “Your friend”.⁸ However, information about the “pirate king” arrived in Russia too late. By the time the expedition was dispatched, piracy in the region was waning, and many sea robbers had left Madagascar. Thus, even if Russian ships had reached the island, they would not have found any “king” there. The Madagascar expedition illustrates how unfamiliar Russia remained with Africa in the early 18th century.

Following Peter I's reign, Africa ceased to be a priority in Russian foreign policy because access to both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean remained blocked by the Ottoman Empire and its vassal, the Crimean Khanate. However, this did not mean that Russian elites had forgotten about Africa. In the 1740s, the Collegium of Commerce reviewed a Dutch initiative to establish trade routes to Persia through Russian territory. At the time, the main trade routes between Persia and Europe passed through the Ottoman Empire, with goods transported overland to the Levant (the eastern Mediterranean region of the Ottoman Empire) and then shipped to Europe. The Dutch sought

⁷ *Egipet glazami rossiyan XV-XVIII vekov* [Egypt Through Russian Eyes in the 15th-18th Centuries]. 2013. A Collection of Travels. Moscow, Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Pp. 172-220 (in Russian).

⁸ *Rossiia i Afrika* [Russia and Africa]. Documents and materials, 18th century, 1960. 1999. Vol. 1. Moscow, Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. P. 11 (in Russian).

to establish an alternative route bypassing the Ottoman-controlled ports by traveling through the Caspian Sea and Russia. While deliberating on granting the Dutch permission, members of the Collegium believed that this new route would reduce costs and eliminate the risk of attacks by African corsairs: “With the help of God Almighty, these nations will turn to Russia via the Baltic Sea, and from Russia via the Caspian Sea to obtain Persian goods <...> thus avoiding such unnecessary losses, excessive freight costs, and dangers.”⁹ Ultimately, these plans failed due to political instability within Persia.

Reports from Collegium officials indicate that news of African corsair activity in the Mediterranean reached Russia. Nevertheless, concrete political steps to protect Russian-flagged ships in the Mediterranean were only taken during Catherine II’s reign.

The African question in relations between Russia and the Ottoman Empire during Catherine II’s reign

In the 18th century, mercantilism prevailed in Western Europe, and this economic approach, shaped by the broader process of Europeanization, was also adopted in St. Petersburg. It was widely believed that a nation’s prosperity depended on exporting more goods than it imported, thereby accumulating wealth from foreign trade within its borders. Consequently, the ruling elite placed great emphasis on promoting exports. The successful outcome of the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1774, which resulted in Russia acquiring key outposts in Crimea and the Northern Black Sea region, created significant opportunities to expand Russian exports to Mediterranean markets. Since the Baltic Sea route was considerably longer and the main grain-producing regions capable of supporting grain exports were located in southern Russia, Catherine II’s government prioritized the development of Russian trade with the Mediterranean. Protectionism, the other major economic policy of the era, aimed to safeguard domestic merchants’ interests and explore new trade routes. These economic motivations helped revive Russia’s interest in North Africa during the latter half of the 18th century.

At that time, much of North Africa – including Egypt, Tripoli, Tunis, and Algiers along with their subordinate territories – was formally under Ottoman rule. However, from the 17th century onward, the Janissaries increasingly asserted political influence by supporting local leaders, thereby limiting the authority of the Ottoman-appointed pashas. The elected rulers, known as beys or deys, exercised a degree of autonomy in both domestic and foreign affairs. The only fully independent state in the region was the Sultanate of Morocco, which, along with Tunis, Algiers, and Tripoli, was part of Barbaria.¹⁰

⁹ RGADA, Fond 19 (Finance), List 1, File 236 (1725, etc.), Sheet 46.

¹⁰ Between the 16th and 18th centuries, Europeans used the name Barbaria to describe the Mediterranean coastline of North Africa, stretching from Morocco to Egypt.

The barbarian cantons¹¹ generated substantial income through piracy by selling seized cargo and collecting ransoms for captives. European states often attempted to placate North African corsairs with payments to prevent attacks, but the cantonal rulers frequently broke peace agreements and demanded additional sums. Efforts by European powers to address piracy through military force faced opposition from the Ottoman Empire and required maintaining costly military deployments in the region. Consequently, major European powers, such as Austria, France, and Great Britain, preferred diplomatic engagement via their representatives in Istanbul. For instance, the 1732 peace and trade treaty with Great Britain obligated the Ottoman Porte to severely punish corsairs attacking English vessels and to return all seized property.¹² Consuls were appointed to North African countries to negotiate the ransom of captives and captured ships. Although the number of captives in Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis reached several thousand in certain years of the 18th century, this figure was notably lower than in the previous century (Davis, 2001, pp. 98–100).

European powers did not agree on how to handle piracy, which was not exclusive to North African states but also practiced by the Knights of Malta, inhabitants of the Archipelago (Aegean Islands), and various Italian states. During numerous conflicts, rival factions employed sea raiders, which contributed to the continued prosperity of piracy in the Mediterranean.

Discussions about promoting and expanding Russian trade in the Mediterranean began even before the Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1774 and the annexation of Crimea in 1783. In 1763, M. Davydov, a merchant from Smolensk, proposed establishing merchant offices and appointing consuls to Alexandria and Cairo, along with incorporating large trading companies.¹³

A particularly significant initiative was put forward by the merchant Vladimirov in 1763, who submitted a plan to the royal court for founding a company to conduct trade from St. Petersburg in the Mediterranean. This project received Catherine II's approval. As this was nearly Russia's first venture into Mediterranean trade, the Admiralty assigned Vladimirov a military frigate and crew to protect merchant vessels from sea robbers during the company's initial years.¹⁴ When the first merchant ship was dispatched accompanied by a warship, the Russian envoy in Constantinople, A.M. Obreskov, was instructed to "secure sultan's decrees for both frigates, which could be given to their captains to present to Turkish commanders whenever one or both frigates entered harbors or territories under their control, as well as to the African governments themselves, so that their subjects, aware of the sultan's friendship and respect for us, would neither interfere with nor attack our frigates in any way."¹⁵

¹¹ In 18th-century Russian sources, the term "canton" was also applied to the Barbary States of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli.

¹² A Collection of Treaties Between Great Britain and Other Powers. 1790. *Chalmers George*. Vol. 2. London. P. 437.

¹³ *RGADA*, Fond 19 (Finance), List 1, File 348 (1743), Sheet 4 (back page).

¹⁴ *Ibid*, File 305 (1763, 1766), Sheet 4.

¹⁵ *AVPRI*, Fond 90 (*Constantinople Mission*), List 1, File 450 (1763), Sheet 72.

However, most of these initiatives failed to produce tangible results because establishing a trading company required significant involvement from Russian merchants, who lacked the necessary capital, experience, and willingness to assume substantial risks. In a desperate effort to boost Russian trade in the Mediterranean, Catherine II dispatched six military frigates loaded with goods at public expense in 1776, aiming “to make our merchants aware of the opportunities for their own gain and provide a successful example for them to emulate.”¹⁶ The plan was for the ships to sell their cargo in Constantinople and then return to Kerch – already under Russian control – carrying goods from the Ottoman Empire. The practice of sending warships to escort merchant vessels continued thereafter, particularly as part of Catherine II’s policy of armed neutrality.¹⁷

Russia was deeply concerned about the threat posed by pirates, despite the fact that the first Russian ship was not captured by them until 1786. The presence of Russian vessels in the Mediterranean alarmed the Ottoman Empire, which suspected that Russia’s stated aim of protecting its merchant ships from African corsairs was a cover for broader ambitions. For instance, in 1776, the Ottoman Porte refused entry to a Russian warship in the Black Sea, fearing it might be used to interfere in Crimean affairs. In 1782, Catherine II instructed the Russian envoy in Constantinople, Ya.I. Bulgakov, to clarify to the Turks that “the presence of our military ships in those waters individually can have no other purpose than to<...> address the imminent and very real danger posed to our merchant flag by African corsairs.”¹⁸

In addition to providing military escorts for its ships, Russia, following the examples set by England and France, applied diplomatic pressure on the Ottoman Empire. Victories in wars against the latter enabled Russia to secure favorable terms for protecting its trade. Article 11 of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, signed on July 21 (July 10, in the old style), 1774, guaranteed “free and unhindered navigation for merchant ships belonging to the two contracting Powers in all seas bordering their lands...”¹⁹ Russia received the same commercial privileges in Ottoman territories as Britain and France. The treaty also permitted Russia to appoint consuls and vice-consuls in various Ottoman possessions, a right Catherine II utilized by establishing a consulate in Alexandria. According to Article 12, “when the Russian Imperial Court wishes to conclude commercial treaties with the African cantons – Tripoli, Tunis, and Algiers – the Ottoman Porte undertakes to use its power and influence to ensure the fulfillment of these treaties and to act as guarantor that the cantons will observe all stipulated conditions.”²⁰ This provision allowed Russia to freely develop relations with these African states, backed by guarantees from the Ottoman Empire.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, File 673 (1755), Sheet 40.

¹⁷ The policy of armed neutrality (1779–1783), initiated by Russia and supported by most European states, aimed to protect the safety of ships flying neutral flags during the American War of Independence by escorting them with military vessels.

¹⁸ *AVPRI*, Fond 90 (*Constantinople Mission*), List 1, File 888 (1782), Sheets 37–38.

¹⁹ Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire since 1649, 1830, Vol. 19, covering 1770–1774. Saint Petersburg: Printing House of the 2nd Section of His Imperial Majesty’s Own Chancellery. Pp. 960–961 (in Russian).

²⁰ *Ibid*.

The terms of trade within Ottoman territories were detailed in the Treaty of Commerce signed between Russia and the Ottoman Porte on June 21 (June 10, in the old style), 1783. Besides general provisions concerning navigation, residence and protection of Russian merchants, tariffs, and sales, Article 60 addressed the threat posed by corsairs from the barbarian cantons, requiring the Porte to “strictly ensure that the Pashas, Commandants, and other Officers in the Ottoman Empire guard and protect Russian consuls and merchants.”²¹ Article 61 obligated the Porte to assist in the release of captives and the recovery of cargo seized by pirates.²² The Treaty of Jassy, signed between Russia and the Ottoman Empire on January 9, 1792 (December 29, 1791, in old style), reaffirmed all prior agreements and additionally required the Ottoman Empire to compensate Russian merchants from its treasury within two months following a Russian envoy’s request, should the African cantons refuse to comply.²³

These treaties established a favorable legal framework for Russian ships navigating the Mediterranean Sea, but in practice, enforcing their provisions proved quite challenging. Firstly, the Ottoman Empire lacked sufficient control over the African cantons, which operated with considerable autonomy. In private discussions with Russian envoys in Constantinople, the Reis Efendi and Kapudan Pasha acknowledged that “their orders are not respected in the barbarian cantons.”²⁴ Secondly, the Ottoman Empire was often unwilling to pay compensation for Russian ships captured by corsairs, frequently offering various excuses. Russian Mediterranean trade was largely conducted through intermediaries, with crews on Russian-flagged ships mainly composed of Greeks and Italians.²⁵ As a result, African corsairs, citing their conflicts with Italian states, refused to return seized cargo. Consequently, Russian ministers and consuls along the Mediterranean coast were instructed to “strictly recommend that ships flying the Russian flag should not carry any papers from powers at war with the African cantons.”²⁶

Payments for the captured cargo were significantly delayed, as the Ottoman Empire consistently tried to minimize the amount of compensation owed. In 1794, I. Yakovlev, the first dragoman of the Russian embassy in Constantinople, had to negotiate with Turkish officials over the sum. Initially, he set the claim at 782,000 piastres, hoping that “through the usual bargaining with the Turkish ministry, a more reasonable amount could be secured.”²⁷ However, the Porte agreed to only 112,000 piastres. After

²¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. 21, covering 1781–1783, p. 652.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 653.

²³ *Ibid.*, Vol. 23, covering 1789 – November 6, 1796, p. 291.

²⁴ AVPRI, Fond 90 (*Constantinople Mission*), List 1, File 893 (1782), Sheet 5.

²⁵ Zherlitsyna N.A. 2023. *Rol' stran Magriba (Alzhira, Tunisa, Tripolitani i Marokko) v sopernichestve Rossii s evropeiskimi imperiyami v kontse XVIII – nachale XX vekov* [The role of the Maghreb countries (Algeria, Tunis, Tripolitania, and Morocco) in Russia's rivalry with European empires in the late 18th and early 20th centuries]. Doctoral dissertation in history: 5.6.7., defended on April 19, 2023. Zherlitsyna N.A., Moscow. P. 89.

²⁶ AVPRI, Fond 90 (*Constantinople Mission*), List 1, File 1205 (1795), Sheet 98.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, File 1131 (1794), Sheets 224–225.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, File 1204 (1795), Sheet 2.

Russian persuasion, Çelebi Mustafa Efendi proposed 200,000 piastres, while Yakovlev insisted on 250,000. The Ottoman side continued to push for a reduction to 225,000 piastres for another week. Ultimately, in January 1795, Russia received just 230,000 piastres for the ships captured at the war's outbreak.²⁸ It took several years before the Ottoman Empire fully complied with its obligations under the peace treaties and the treaty of commerce.

Overall, the Ottoman Empire complied with Russian demands and even issued firmans to the barbarian states, ordering them to leave the Russian merchant fleet unharmed. However, the Porte was reluctant to enforce strict compliance so as not to damage its relations with these vassal states. Since the 16th century, Algerian corsairs had served in the Ottoman navy (Wolf, 1982, p. 18) and were highly valued for their extensive experience in Mediterranean navigation. The Ottoman Empire actively employed them in operations against the Russian fleet. In 1787, the Russian Collegium of Foreign Affairs was informed by the Constantinople embassy that the Algerians were outfitting four ships to support the Porte, while the Tunisians and Tripolitans were arming two ships each.²⁹ During the 1791 Battle of Cape Kaliakra, the second-in-command of the Turkish fleet after the Kapudan Pasha was the Algerian Pasha Said Ali. In the notable 1770 Battle of Çeşme, after the Kapudan Pasha went ashore, command of the Ottoman fleet passed to Cezayirli Gazi Hasan Pasha, who had previously served in Algeria. Reports from Constantinople occasionally noted that the Algerians were recruiting personnel from Ottoman provinces and that the Porte was sending cannons and other naval supplies to North Africa.³⁰

However, despite these close ties between the Ottoman Empire and the cantons, Russia managed to defend its interests effectively through diplomacy. By contrast, Austria struggled greatly – and only with Russian assistance – to secure compensation for its captured ships, while the Porte refused to guarantee the safety of Genoese “vessels against the barbaresques”.³¹

The Russian Empire's early direct engagements with Africa

Russia's engagement with North African countries began following Russian naval victories in the Mediterranean under the leadership of A.G. Orlov. The Ottoman Empire's defeats prompted the North African states to pursue cooperation with Russia as a means to strengthen their autonomy from Ottoman control.

Egypt held particular significance for Russian diplomacy in Africa. As previously mentioned, Russia was aware of the persistent unrest in Egypt and hoped that the Egyptian beys might become allies in its conflict with the Ottoman Empire. Catherine

²⁹ AVPRI, Fond 5 (*Secret Opinions of the Collegium*), List 5/1, File 582 (1787), Sheet 354.

³⁰ AVPRI, Fond 90 (*Constantinople Mission*), List 1, File 975 (1785), Sheets 209 and 272.

³¹ *Ibid*, File 1204 (1795), Sheet 73.

II closely monitored the anti-Ottoman uprising of 1768–1773, led by the Mamluk ruler of Georgian origin, Ali Bey al-Kabir. In July 1770, Ali Bey declared himself sultan and proclaimed Egypt's independence. However, cooperation between Russia and the Egyptian rebels progressed very slowly. It took Russia several years to discern the Egyptian ruler's intentions and establish lasting contact with him. Only in August 1771 did the commander of the Russian fleet, A.G. Orlov, begin a hesitant correspondence with Ali Bey. By then, Ali Bey's associate, Muhammad Bey Abu al-Dhahab – together with the Palestinian emir Zahir al-Umar – had already seized much of Syria from Ottoman control. Despite the Egyptian rebels' notable successes, Orlov delayed his response to Ali Bey's letter of November 22, 1771, for six months. This delay was likely due to Orlov's disappointment with previous interactions with Greeks and other Mediterranean groups, his waning influence with the Empress, and his cautious approach toward Muslims (Smilyanskaya, Velizhev, Smilyanskaya, 2011, p. 363). Ultimately, the opportunity for effective cooperation was missed. Aid reached Ali Bey only when he was in a desperate situation. Muhammad Bey betrayed him, defected to the Ottoman side, and was granted the title of Sheikh al-Balad, effectively becoming Egypt's ruler. Ali Bey was forced to seek refuge in Acre with Zahir al-Umar.

Nonetheless, the support from the Russian fleet served as a powerful propaganda tool for the Egyptian ruler and his ally Zahir al-Umar (Kobishchanov, 2009, p. 18). They circulated rumors about the imminent arrival of the main Russian naval forces, which were greatly feared within the Ottoman Empire following the destruction of its entire fleet at the Battle of Çeşme. Naval artillery bombardments and landings from Russian ships significantly weakened enemy morale, enabling Russia's allies to capture Sidon and Jaffa with relative ease. However, A.G. Orlov was unable to provide Ali Bey and Zahir al-Umar with substantial ground forces, as he lacked such resources himself. Upon returning to Egypt in 1773, Ali Bey was defeated and soon died from his wounds. After his death, Russian support continued for Zahir al-Umar in Syria and Lebanon. In September 1773, the Russian fleet assisted in the capture of Beirut. The local Druze even acknowledged Russian protection and participated in the blockade and assault on the city, though their reliability was questionable, as most Druze militia fled during the siege of Beirut (Kobishchanov, 2009a, pp. 7–8).

Following the conclusion of the Russo-Turkish War in 1774, Zahir al-Umar could no longer rely on Russian aid. Abandoned by most of his associates, he died in 1775 during the Ottoman and Egyptian Mamluk siege of Acre. It is important to note that while the Russian fleet provided limited support to the anti-Ottoman rebels, their ultimate defeat was largely due to internal divisions and many leaders' willingness to negotiate with the Porte. Consequently, the Ottoman Empire gradually reasserted control over the rebellious provinces.

Although the uprisings led by Ali Bey and Zahir al-Umar ultimately failed, Russia continued its efforts to influence Egyptian affairs. Under Article 11 of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, St. Petersburg gained the right to appoint consuls to various Ottoman provinces. The first Russian consulate in Africa was established in Alexandria in 1784.

In her instructions to the inaugural consul, Baron Kondraty von Tonus³², Catherine II tasked him with gathering intelligence on Egypt's political structure and its level of dependence on the Ottoman Empire, assessing trade conditions, and exploring opportunities to expand commercial relations with Russia. This interest was partly driven by French attempts to establish a trade route to the Indian Ocean via Suez, Cairo, and the Nile. Baron von Tonus was also responsible for reporting on current developments, negotiating prisoner ransoms, and liaising with Christian communities.³³ Throughout his tenure, the Russian consul provided the Collegium of Foreign Affairs with valuable information about French commercial activities in Egypt, conflicts between the beys and the sultan, and even acquired maps of the Red Sea from a Venetian merchant.³⁴

After the war with the Ottoman Empire broke out in 1787, Tonus sought to persuade its vassals and Egypt's co-rulers, Murad Bey³⁵ and Ibrahim Bey,³⁶ to align themselves with Russia. Many of the Mamluk beys came from Georgian, Abkhazian, or even Slavic backgrounds. The consul conducted negotiations with the beys through aforementioned Kasim Bey, who spoke Russian. However, despite their origins, the Mamluks pursued their own interests, and Russia remained wary of them due to previous experiences. Furthermore, those who had converted from Orthodox Christianity to Islam lost the protection of Russian authorities, as Article 25 of the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca regarding the liberation of slaves did not apply to those who voluntarily embraced Islamic law.³⁷ Tonus accepted Murad Bey and Ibrahim Bey's assurances that they were prepared to oppose the Ottoman Empire if Russia offered support, even though their position in Egypt was unstable. The joint rule of Murad Bey and Ibrahim Bey was characterized by higher taxes and arbitrary governance, which led the Ottoman Porte to fear another uprising in Egypt. In 1786, Sultan Abdul Hamid I ordered Admiral Cezayirli Gazi Hasan Pasha to remove the co-rulers and install a new governor in Egypt, loyal to Constantinople. The rebellious beys were forced into Upper Egypt, while Ismail Bey, a former associate of Ali Bey, assumed control of the country.

In this context, Tonus proposed to Catherine II that Egypt be severed from the Ottoman Empire, a suggestion she found intriguing and promptly endorsed. Through a secret order dated February 17, 1788, the Baron was directed to instruct Russian ships to refrain from attacking vessels flying the Egyptian flag and to prepare documents acknowledging Egypt's independence and its potential involvement in the war against

³² Kondraty von Tonus, born in Austria, had been serving Russia since 1780 after transferring from the Polish royal service.

³³ AVPRI, Fond 89 (*Relations between Russia and Turkey*), List 89/8, File 964 (1785), Sheets 1-4.

³⁴ *Ibid*, File 967, Sheets 10-22.

³⁵ Murad Bey (c. 1750–1801), originally a captive from the Caucasus – either Circassian or Armenian – was sold to Muhammad Bey, an associate and later rival of the rebellious Egyptian ruler Ali Bey al-Kabir. After Muhammad Bey's death in 1775, Murad Bey became the leader of the Egyptian Mamluk army.

³⁶ Ibrahim Bey (c. 1735–1817), of Georgian origin, was captured by Ottoman bandits and sold into Mamluk service. Following Muhammad Bey's death, he formed an alliance with Murad Bey. Despite their ongoing rivalries, the duumvirate of Murad and Ibrahim governed Egypt until 1798. Ibrahim Bey lost control over Egypt, an Ottoman vassal state, after the Mamluks were defeated by Napoleon's forces in the battles of the Pyramids and Heliopolis.

³⁷ Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire since 1649, 1830, Vol. 19, covering 1770–1774. P. 965.

the Ottoman Empire.³⁸ According to the plan, Tonus traveled to Egypt to engage directly in the unfolding events and to arrange the supply of Egyptian rice for the Russian fleet operating in the Mediterranean Sea (Smilyanskaya, Velizhev, Smilyanskaya, 2011, p. 740). Upon arriving in Cairo, the Russian envoy presented Catherine II's proposals at Ismail Bey's court but failed to persuade his associates and was subsequently detained.

This failure can be attributed to Russia's insufficient support to the Egyptian beys even when they rose against the Ottoman Porte; Russia promised only "several cannons with ammunition" and "disguised men to teach them how to shoot,"³⁹ which was clearly inadequate for a full-scale independence struggle. Plans to dispatch a Russian fleet under Admiral S.K. Greig to the Mediterranean were thwarted by Sweden's entry into the war. Upon realizing that Russia would not provide substantial assistance, Ismail Bey ceased his attempts to incite rebellion against the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, fearing that his connections with Baron von Tonus might compromise his standing at the Ottoman court, he ordered the execution of the Russian consul in September 1789 (Frumin, 2009, p. 13).

Both before and after this episode, the Russian Empire showed little inclination to establish consulates in other North African countries. Russia primarily conducted its trade through intermediaries due to its underdeveloped merchant fleet. Russian merchants preferred the reduced risk of selling goods to foreigners within Russia. Because each new consulate entailed additional expenses, the Collegium of Commerce suggested that consuls should pay for their own appointments.⁴⁰ With the exception of Egypt, Russia's trade relations with North African countries were sporadic (Shkunov, 2012, p. 86), and when necessary, Russia utilized the services of consuls from other powers, who readily agreed in exchange for consular fees.

The Russian consulate in Morocco was established only at the end of the 19th century. During the reign of Catherine II, communications with the Sultan of Morocco were managed through intermediaries: initially via S. Lucas, the secretary of the British Embassy in Tangier, and L. Booth, the British consul in Gibraltar. Later, these correspondences were handled by Russia's chargé d'affaires in Tuscany, D. Mocenigo, as well as Russian naval officers. A similar approach was used in relations with the Regency of Tunis. Initially, Russia relied on the services of the Swedish representative in that African country. In 1780, the Dutch consul in Tunis, A.G. Nissen, requested the Russian envoy in Istanbul, A.S. Stakhiev, to appoint him as an honorary consul. This development is regarded as the starting point of formal political relations between Tunis and Russia (Kazdaghli, 2018, p. 121).⁴¹

³⁸ AVPRI, Fond 89 (*Relations between Russia and Turkey*), List 89/8, File 980 (1788), Sheet 1.

³⁹ *Ibid*, Sheet 3.

⁴⁰ AVPRI, Fond 5 (*Secret Opinions of the Collegium*), List 5/1, File 593 (1775), Sheet 223.

⁴¹ At the start of the 19th century, A.G. Nissen's request was approved following the capture of a Russian merchant vessel by Tunisian pirates in 1803. Thereafter, six successive generations of his family served as representatives of Russian interests in Tunis (Zherlitsyna, 2014, p. 31).

In private discussions, Ottoman officials sought to persuade Russian envoys in Constantinople of the benefits of appointing their own consuls in Africa. The reaction to this idea is clearly reflected in the remarks of V.P. Kochubey, who was envoy to Constantinople from 1792 to 1797: “Considering their notorious barbaric customs, who can assure that the Russian consul would not suffer the same fate as other consuls – being imprisoned, chained, and forced to pay ransom, gifts, and so forth...”⁴² Due to concerns over the safety of Russian nationals, permanent consular relations between Russia and these barbarian states were never established despite Russia’s frequent contacts with them. Instead, interactions were managed through the Ottoman Empire or Russian representatives in Istanbul or Italian states. For example, after the execution of Tonus in Egypt, Russia relied on the services of the Austrian consul C. Rossetti for its affairs there.

The initial political contact with Morocco was established in 1778 when Sultan Mohammed III ben Abdallah initiated the opening of Moroccan ports to European vessels. During his command of the Russian Mediterranean fleet from 1776 to 1779, Captain 1st Rank T.G. Kozlyaninov met the Moroccan ambassador in Livorno, where both parties showed interest in expanding their relations. Kozlyaninov saw Morocco as a potential strategic base for the Russian fleet en route to the Mediterranean (Bulatov, 2021, p. 101) and consequently dispatched two frigates to Tangier. These ships transported the Moroccan ambassador to the city and returned with letters from the sultan addressed to Catherine II. Between 1778 and 1783, Sultan Mohammed III ben Abdallah corresponded several times with the Russian Empress, expressing his wish to establish peace and trade ties.⁴³ Nevertheless, progress in negotiations was slowed by the lack of a permanent Russian envoy to Morocco, and broader rapprochement was complicated by the Moroccan Muslim population’s allegiance to the Ottoman Empire during the Russo-Turkish wars.

In 1784, negotiations were held with Tripoli through A.S. Mordvinov, the Russian Minister Plenipotentiary in Genoa, regarding a treaty of perpetual peace, friendship, and commerce. The draft treaty presented by the Tripolitan ambassador, Sidi Kaid Ahmed Haji, consisted of five articles, one of which required Catherine II to acknowledge Tripoli’s independence and guarantee protection against any Ottoman claims.⁴⁴ In response, the Collegium of Foreign Affairs determined that “the disclosure of this article was premature and even detrimental to the interests of Your Imperial Majesty, reinforcing and spreading the belief at many courts that all of Your Imperial Majesty’s policies are directed at the overthrow of the Ottoman Empire<...> Therefore, it would

⁴² AVPRI, Fond 90 (*Constantinople Mission*), List 1, File 1205 (1795), Sheet 252 (back page).

⁴³ *Rossiia – Marokko: istoriya svyazei dvukh stran v dokumentakh i materialakh (1777–1916)* [Russia–Morocco: The History of Relationships Between the Two Countries in Documents and Materials (1777–1916)], 1999, Moscow, Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Pp. 133–149 (in Russian).

⁴⁴ AVPRI, Fond 48 (*Relations between Russia and Genoa*), List 48/2, File 2 (1784), Sheet 25.

be preferable to make this fifth article a separate secret clause.”⁴⁵ In return for support from the Russian Empire, the Bey of Tripoli offered “full ownership and absolute control over one of his two ports along the coastline between Barca and the Ottoman Empire’s Alexandrian borders.”⁴⁶ However, Russia lacked information about these ports and their suitability for accommodating merchant and military fleets. The Collegium of Foreign Affairs also feared that acquiring such a port might provoke a negative response from other powers, particularly Spain,⁴⁷ leading Russia to suggest keeping the port clause confidential, too. The terms proposed by Russia did not align with the Bey of Tripoli’s expectations. As a result, negotiations were halted and later resumed multiple times but ultimately failed to reach an agreement.

As we can see, Russia’s policy in the region was notably cautious. Catherine II aimed to avoid conflicts with other European powers while securing trade privileges comparable to those enjoyed by France and England. For instance, the Empress advised K. von Tonus to negotiate a favorable trade agreement with Egypt, modeled after the French treaty. Similarly, in instructions to A.S. Mordvinov, it was stated that “... regarding trade, he should accept all the most advantageous terms, particularly those already granted to the more favored nations, namely the French and English.”⁴⁸

Another significant barrier to the Russian Empire’s expansion into North Africa was the scarcity of reliable information about the region’s states. Russian perceptions of the African cantons were largely shaped by interactions with Europeans and through translated historical and geographical works (Zherlitsyna, 2014, p. 10).

Under Catherine II, efforts to study the region intensified, largely driven by Russian naval officers who frequently traveled incognito, posing as nationals of various European countries. Although their visits were brief, they gathered valuable data on winds, shoals, and currents, which helped update existing regional maps. During their Mediterranean deployments in the 1770s, Russian sailors produced over 40 maps of the southern Mediterranean (Frumin, 2004, p. 21). Notably, in 1778, while visiting Tangier, the commander of the Russian frigate *St. Paul*, N.S. Skuratov, not only documented Morocco and its people but also created “a plan of the Tangier roadstead with the exact position of the coast and measurements.”⁴⁹ The travels of S.I. Pleshcheyev⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, Sheet 118.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, Sheets 24–25.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, Sheet 116.

⁴⁸ AVPRI, Fond 48 (*Relations between Russia and Genoa*), List 48/2, File 14 (1784), Sheet 37.

⁴⁹ *Rossiya – Marokko: istoriya svyazei dvukh stran v dokumentakh i materialakh (1777–1916)* [Russia–Morocco: The History of Relationships Between the Two Countries in Documents and Materials (1777–1916)], 1999, Moscow, Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. P. 22.

⁵⁰ Pleshcheyev S.I. 1773. *Dnevnye zapiski puteshestviya, iz Arkhipelagaskogo, Rossii prinadlezhashego ostrova Parosa, v Siriyui k dostopamyatnym mestam, v predelakh Ierusalima nakhodyashchimsya: s kratkoi istoriei Alibeevykh zavoevaniy* [Daily Notes of the Travel from the Russian-Owned Archipelago Island of Paros to Syria and Notable Sites within Jerusalem’s Borders, Including a Brief History of Ali Bey’s Conquests]. St. Petersburg (in Russian).

and M.G. Kokovtsov⁵¹ were especially important, as they later published their travel accounts, significantly enriching knowledge about the region.

M.G. Kokovtsov's work is linked to Russia's initial attempts to establish relations with the Regencies of Tunis and Algiers. During his time in North Africa, he engaged in negotiations with high-ranking officials, including deys, despite lacking formal authority to do so. However, meaningful agreements were unlikely, as these barbarian states demanded annual tribute for peace – terms the Russian Empire refused to accept.⁵²

Conclusions

During the reign of Catherine II, Russia began to develop relations with North Africa, focusing on two main objectives: first, to ensure safe navigation for Russian-flagged ships in the Mediterranean Sea; and second, to find new allies in opposition to the Ottoman Empire. However, Russia was unable to fully realize these aims. The ruling elite had limited knowledge of North Africa, relying heavily on European sources for information, which delayed decisive action and led to unsuccessful negotiations with North African states.

Notably, Russia exercised great caution in its foreign policy toward the region. The Russian Empire was unwilling to strain relations with other European powers over its North African engagements and aimed to emulate their approach by securing equal privileges from the Ottoman Empire.

Nevertheless, Catherine II successfully addressed the issue of Russian-flagged merchant ships being seized by barbarian corsairs, securing favorable peace treaties and a treaty of commerce. She maintained correspondence with the Sultan of Morocco, while the rulers of Egypt and Tripoli sought alliances with her. Although Russian ships were captured by Tunisian and Algerian corsairs, Russia managed to obtain compensation for these losses.

The establishment of a consulate in Alexandria, the Russian Empire's first diplomatic mission in Africa, was a pioneering move. At the time, direct trade with North Africa was minimal and mostly conducted through intermediaries, so Russia relied on consuls from other countries to safeguard the interests of its nationals in the region.

⁵¹ Kokovtsov M.G. 1786. *Opisanie Arkhipelaga i Varvariyskogo berega; izyavlyayushchee polozhenie ostrovov, gorodov, krepostey, pristaney, podvodnykh kamney i meley; chislo zhitel'ey, veru, obryady i navyikh s prisovokupleniem drevney istorii, i s tremya chertezhami*. [Description of the Archipelago and the Barbary Coast; detailing the positions of islands, cities, fortresses, ports, underwater rocks and shoals; the number of inhabitants, their faith, rituals, and customs, accompanied by ancient history and three maps]. St. Petersburg (in Russian). Kokovtsov M.G. 1787. *Dostovernnye izvestiya o Alzhire, o nravakh i obychayakh tamoshnego naroda, o sostoyanii pravitel'stva i oblastnykh dokhodov; o polozhenii Varvariyskikh beregov; o proizrasteniyakh i o prochem; s vernym chertezhom. Sochinenie Rossiyskago Ofitseravse to namesteobozrevshago* [Reliable Reports on Algiers, on the Customs and Traditions of the Local People, on the State of the Government and Regional Revenues; on the Condition of the Barbary Coasts; on Vegetation and Other Matters; with an Accurate Map. Written by a Russian Officer Who Observed Everything On Site]. St. Petersburg (in Russian).

⁵² Zherlitsyna N.A. *Op. cit.* P. 165.

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