

# Foreign Language Acquisition and Learning of Late Ottoman Ambassadors and Consuls (1885-1910)

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## Abstract

The Ottoman Foreign Ministry underwent profound adjustments and transformations during the institutionalization process in the late Ottoman Empire. These developments significantly influenced the training of diplomats within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, particularly from the latter half of the nineteenth century onwards, enhancing the professional competence and training of Ottoman diplomats. In this sense, this article aims to thoroughly examine the impact of institutionalization process within the Ottoman Foreign Ministry on diplomats' acquisition and learning of foreign languages. The primary source for this study will be the registry files (sicill-i ahval) from the Ottoman Archives. Employing a prosopographic approach, the study will analyze the foreign language proficiency of late Ottoman ambassadors and consuls, along with their methods of language acquisition. By doing so, this article seeks to advance our understanding of the process of professionalization and specialization within Ottoman diplomacy.

**Keywords:** Ambassador, consul, foreign language education, modern education, Ottoman diplomats

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## Introduction

One might argue that the reasons for differences in state diplomacy over time can be attributed to the individuals who shape diplomacy, the treaties they create, and the requirements of the changing international order. However, diplomatic interactions have always been influenced by national interests or *raison d'état*. When analyzed in the context of the Ottoman Empire, the concept of diplomacy began to evolve due to the establishment of the global balance of power system and subsequent shifts in that balance. The reciprocity-based notion of diplomacy started to replace *ad hoc* diplomacy. On the other hand, reciprocal diplomacy was gradually adopted in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>1</sup> There were two main avenues by which the Ottoman Empire

<sup>1</sup> During the classical period of the Ottoman Empire, there was also a reciprocity in the *ad-hoc* diplomatic approach. Ottoman envoys sent in response to foreign envoys arriving in Ottoman territories were symbols of reciprocal diplomacy. Therefore, when discussing the concept of reciprocal diplomacy, the principle of reciprocity during the classical period should not be overlooked.

moved toward reciprocal diplomacy. The establishment of permanent embassies served as the initial focal point, followed by the transformation of the *reisülküttab office*<sup>2</sup> into a structured foreign affairs organization, marking the second pivotal development.

European states were advancing diplomatic relations through permanent embassies that they began to establish in Istanbul in 1454, in contrast to the dialogue that the Ottoman Empire conducted with foreign nations through temporarily appointed ambassadors during its classical period.<sup>3</sup> Temporary ambassadors, who were briefly dispatched overseas and returned to their home nation upon completion of their duties, served as the Ottoman Empire's diplomatic envoys until the end of the eighteenth century (Kuran 1988: 9; Tuncer 2010: 13). The concept of establishing permanent embassies in European capitals was introduced during Sultan Selim III's reign as an alternative to the practice of *ad hoc* diplomacy. In this regard, the Ottoman Empire designated its initial resident envoys to London, Berlin, Vienna, and Paris, in that order. Thus, the Ottoman Empire upgraded its diplomatic ties with Europe to the point where permanent embassies were built during Sultan Selim III's reign (Erdem 2008: 397-399). This change is a crucial sign of the modernization of Ottoman diplomacy and its shift to a more permanent and effective participation in international affairs.

The establishment of the Ottoman Foreign Ministry (*Hariciye Nezareti*) in place of the *reisülküttab* was another milestone in the Ottoman Empire's shift to reciprocal diplomacy (Findley 1970: 334-357; Findley 1972: 388-416; Gürpınar 2014). The conditions of the period led Ottoman administrators to establish a modern foreign affairs office that responded to the needs of the time and paralleled its counterparts in Europe to sustain diplomatic activities. The institution of *reisülküttab*, which operated under the Grand Vizier and lacked an institutional framework before the 1800s, underwent a notable transformation starting in that era. During this period, the Ottoman Empire's survival increasingly depended on a robust and successful foreign policy (Findley 2008: 13). Consequently, the state needed to transform the office responsible for foreign affairs into a more capable and institutional organization. For this reason, parallel to the reform movements initiated during the reigns of Sultan Selim III and Mahmud II, and the growing competence of the *reisülküttab* in foreign affairs since those periods, the office of the *reisülküttab* was restructured into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1836, aiming to pursue an effective foreign policy and maintain an active presence in the international arena (Hariciye Yearbooks 1302/1885: 137; Lalor 1972: 92). In this context, a significant step towards ensuring well-organized handling of foreign affairs was the creation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Soysal 1999: 315).

These advancements in the diplomatic field ensured that interstate ties became more professional and served as the cornerstones for the modernization of Ottoman diplomacy. The creation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs made it possible to manage foreign policy within a more institutional framework, even though the establishment of permanent embassies allowed

2 In the Ottoman Empire, it was initially a position responsible for the correspondence and record-keeping of the Imperial Council (*Divan-ı Hümayun*). In 1836, it evolved into an office responsible for foreign affairs, see Ahişalı 2007.

3 The Republic of Venice founded the first permanent resident embassy in Istanbul in 1454. The embassies of Austria in 1546 and France in 1536 opened after it, see İpşirli 1995; Dönmez 2006. For a table detailing the dates that foreign powers established their permanent embassies in Istanbul, see Zeynep Bostan 2021.

the Ottoman Empire to maintain more effective diplomatic relations through permanent representatives in the international arena.

The enhancement of diplomats' qualifications—the primary actors in the foreign ministry—was another aspect of this institutional change in the Ottoman Empire's diplomatic arena. Making major advancements in the qualifications of diplomats was aimed to impart an institutional and professional character. One of the state's main objectives was raising the professional standards of diplomats who represented the empire overseas. For this reason, the educational paths of newly appointed diplomats underwent considerable improvements in the nineteenth century. The shifting global balance of power and the increasing complexity of the international system necessitate that diplomats be multilingual. In this sense, this article claims that proficiency in foreign languages is crucial for the late nineteenth century's Ottoman diplomats, as it enhances effective communication, facilitates successful negotiations, and increases overall efficacy in international relations. Mastery of multiple languages is posited to provide diplomats with deeper insights into the cultures, political landscapes, and social dynamics of other nations, thereby safeguarding national interests and securing strategic advantages in the global arena (Topaktaş 2014: 105-125; Kurtaran 2015: 115-131). Within this context, one of the key elements that enabled candidates for diplomatic positions in the empire's overseas representations was their proficiency in foreign languages during the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

What distinguishes the Ottoman Foreign Ministry from other contemporary organizations is the stipulation for its employees to possess proficiency in Western languages, particularly French, known as “the language of diplomacy” (Davison 1995: 172-177; Davison 1999: 320; Lewis 2002: 118). In the nineteenth century, political interactions among nations often necessitated interpreters for those unfamiliar with this diplomatic lingua franca, underscoring the rising importance of French proficiency among Ottoman diplomats stationed abroad. Consequently, the determinants shaping diplomacy are intricately linked to the foreign language skills of diplomats. In this regard, the main aim of this article is to investigate the foreign languages acquired and learned by late Ottoman diplomats, either through attending modern schools established within the Ottoman Empire or through studying abroad. Furthermore, this article aims to demonstrate that the foreign language proficiency of the late Ottoman diplomats significantly contributed to their effective execution of diplomacy, enabling them to conduct diplomatic affairs without the need for intermediaries.

The study focuses solely on ambassadors and consuls, who held the highest positions in embassies and consulates because, investigating the foreign language proficiency of all Ottoman diplomats is beyond the scope of this article. The *sicill-i ahval* files, which contain personal information about diplomats, are housed in the Sicill-i Ahval Catalogue of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Ottoman Archives (HR. SAİD.) (Sarıyıldız 2004; Sarıyıldız

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4 One of the primary reasons for the failure of the first resident Ottoman ambassadors was their insufficient proficiency in foreign languages. This linguistic barrier significantly hindered their ability to effectively communicate, negotiate, and understand the political and cultural nuances of the host countries, ultimately compromising their diplomatic missions. For this reason, the permanent resident ambassadors appointed in the late nineteenth century were required to speak one or more foreign languages.

2009: 134-136; Kütükoğlu 1988: 141-157). During the study, these files were reviewed to discover the foreign language proficiency of the ambassadors and consuls. These records include biographical details such as birthplace, father's name, educational background, and foreign language skills, as well as career-related information such as education received, appointments, promotions, fines, and dismissals. However, it is important to bear in mind that the *sicill-i ahval* files do have limitations since they were created by individuals themselves and may include subjective or personal remarks. Nevertheless, they remain valuable resources for understanding the personal backgrounds of civil servants employed by foreign or Ottoman central organizations.

In the Ottoman Archive, there are a total of 138 personal files of diplomats who served as ambassadors and consuls, as documented in the HR. SAİD. catalog. The contents of 38 of these files do not include information about the foreign languages known by the diplomats. For this reason, 38 diplomats who did not provide information about their foreign language proficiency were excluded from the study, which focused on the remaining 100 individuals who did provide such information. This study collectively assesses the personal files of these diplomats, resulting in a group biography rather than individual biographies. It discusses the similarities and differences in the foreign languages they acquired and the methods through which they did so. In this regard, prosopography<sup>5</sup> is the primary method used in this study.

The first section of the article focuses on diplomats' foreign language proficiency, while the second section investigates higher education of diplomats at modern schools, both within Ottoman territories and abroad. By addressing these two aspects, the article aims to highlight the evolving expectations placed upon Ottoman diplomats during the modernization period. It underscores how linguistic skills and formal education became essential components of their professional development in an increasingly interconnected world.

## Diplomats' Foreign Language Proficiency

The sixth article of the third chapter of the General Code of Personal Registries (*Sicill-i Ahval Kanunname-i Umumiyesi*) outlines how civil servants should indicate their language proficiency in their personnel registry files (BOA. Y. EE. 113/13). According to this article, civil servants were required to list the languages they were proficient in, specifying their level of proficiency. If they only understood a foreign language without being able to speak or write it, they were instructed to state, "I am familiar with these languages and I understand them". For those who could speak and write in a language, they were required to state, "I can speak (*tekellüm*) and write (*kitabət*)" (BOA. Y. EE. 113/13: 2-3; Mert 2000: 100). Declaring proficiency in "writing" implies the ability to write and also possibly speak the language while "speaking" indicates the ability to read and possibly speak it. Using the term "familiar" suggests understanding the spoken or written language to some extent.

5 Prosopography is the technique of analysing the life of a group of people collectively. It is carried out on a group of people with a common educational, cultural, professional and political background. For comprehensive information on this method, see Stone 1971; Acun 2002; Verboven, Carlier, and Dumolyn 2007. For a recent prosopographic study, see also Bektaş 2023.

Although the notions of “writing, speaking, and being familiar” were preferred to demonstrate the foreign language proficiency of government servants in the *sicill-i ahval* registers, some officials went beyond these concepts and simply used the phrase “I know”. Therefore, all foreign languages mentioned by the diplomats in their files are considered to be spoken fluently, regardless of their degree and level. This is because the diplomats examined in this study typically expressed the languages they knew with words other than the phrases specified in the General Code of Personal Registries and simply used the phrase “I know”. Accordingly, the following lists the foreign languages spoken by the diplomats whose *sicill-i ahval* files are examined in this article.

**Figure 1.** Languages Known by Diplomats Other Than Turkish (*multiple selection*)

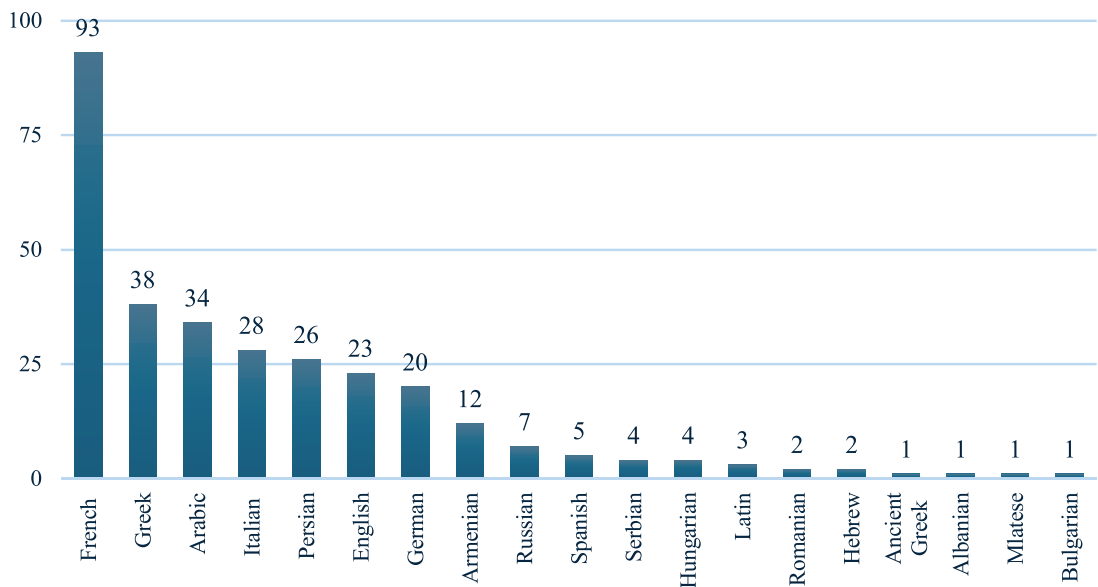
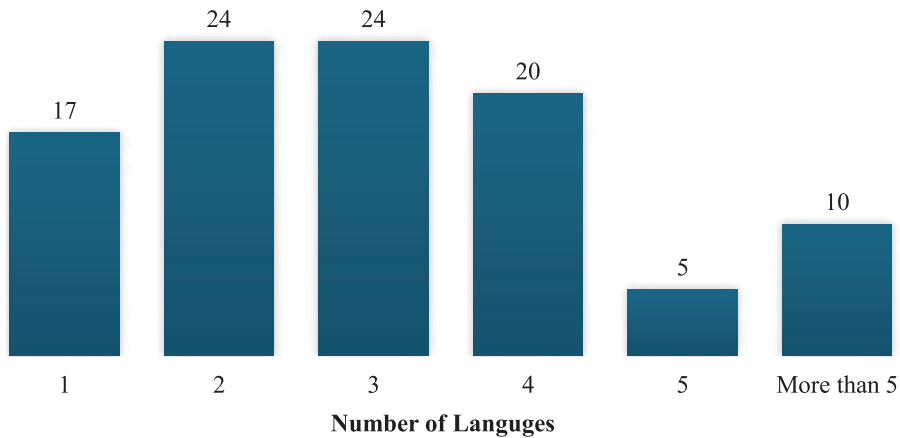


Figure 1 shows that 93 of the diplomats analyzed in this study, or 93 out of 100, spoke French. However, considering that knowing French was a prerequisite for becoming a diplomat at the time, the fact that 7 diplomats did not report knowledge of French is either exceptional or indicates that these diplomats did not feel the need to mention their French proficiency. Following French, the most commonly spoken languages among diplomats are Greek, Arabic, Italian, Persian, English, German, Armenian, Russian, and Spanish.

Upon conducting a religious status analysis of the diplomats who knew Armenian and Greek, it was found that only two out of the twelve who knew Armenian were Muslims, and fourteen out of the thirty-eight who knew Greek were Muslims. The existence of Greek and Armenian speaking Muslims demonstrates that interethnic coexistence was valued and that Muslim subjects were conversant in the languages of the communities in which they lived.

**Figure 2.** Number of Languages Spoken by Diplomats Besides Turkish

Also, as shown in Figure 2, each diplomat speaks at least one language other than Turkish. Seventeen diplomats speak one language other than Turkish; twenty diplomats speak four languages; five diplomats speak five languages; and twenty diplomats speak two or three languages. Ten respondents said they could speak more than five languages. Additionally, eight diplomats claimed to speak six languages, while one claimed to speak seven. The empire's Jewish national, Nesim Alhaym Efendi, was the diplomat with the greatest number of foreign language skills. Nesim Alhaym Efendi stated that he knew a total of nine languages: French, German, English, Russian, Serbian, Greek, Spanish, Hungarian, and Bulgarian (BOA. HR. SAİD. 21/ 4). On average, diplomats speak three languages other than Turkish.

When evaluating diplomats' foreign language aptitude, it is essential to consider the likelihood of growth or decline after the gathering of *sicill-i ahval* records regarding the languages they are familiar with. For instance, one of the diplomats analyzed, Cetinje Ambassador Ahmed Feyzi Bey, stated in his personnel registration file that he took private lessons for almost a year, and during his stay in Petersburg, he learned enough Russian to express himself (BOA. HR. SAİD. 13/7). However, given that he stopped using Russian once he returned home, it could be said that Ahmed Feyzi Bey's already limited knowledge of Russian declined. In his personnel registry record, the same ambassador also admitted that he was "losing the Arabic language day by day while he was speaking freely" (BOA. HR. SAİD. 13/7). It is likely that he gradually lost his proficiency in Arabic.

In addition, although the *sicill-i ahval* records were personally prepared, they were checked for accuracy by the state officials. In this context, it is possible that diplomats may have sometimes listed foreign languages they did not know well as if they were highly proficient, and sometimes they may have humbly omitted languages they knew very well from their files. For instance, although not identified in the sample group, Ahmed Cevad Pasha, who held an important position in the Ottoman bureaucracy and served as the grand vizier, claimed to be "familiar" with Arabic in his personal registry file (BOA. DH. SAİDd. 2/1006.) However, Ahmed Cevad Pasha comes from a line of ulema (Mercan 1998: 5). He listed only three foreign languages in his file: writing in Turkish, speaking in French, and familiarity

with Arabic. However, the Pasha is also known to have been proficient in other languages, including Greek, Persian, and Italian (Mercan 1998: 123). Perhaps Ahmed Cevad Pasha was humble about the languages he knew, or perhaps he chose not to list them because he believed he did not know them well enough to warrant noting them in his file.

The remainder of the article will address where and how diplomats acquired their foreign language skills, after highlighting the significance of the registry files in providing information regarding the diplomats' language proficiency. The data shows that diplomats acquired foreign languages in two ways: through studying overseas and through modern educational institutions established in Ottoman territories.

## Higher Education of Diplomats at Modern Schools in Ottoman Territories

One of the most important factors enabling diplomat candidates to learn foreign languages was attending modern schools, which began to emerge in the first half of the nineteenth century and spread during the second half. When exploring the institutions providing modern education in the early nineteenth century, the Translation Office of the Sublime Porte (*Bab-ı Ali Tercüme Odası*) emerged as the first attempt at foreign language instruction. While various researchers have proposed different dates for the establishment and institutionalization of the Translation Office, which was created to train individuals fluent in foreign languages for bureaucracy, the generally accepted view is that it was founded in 1821 (Heper 1982: 248; Akyıldız 1993: 74; Findley 1941: 155; Hurewitz 1961: 150). The Translation Office evolved into both a school and the first professional post where bureaucrat and diplomat candidates seeking entry into state service could gain practical experience. Eleven of the diplomats examined in the study indicated that their initial position after completing their higher education was at the Translation Office. These diplomats began their careers with the *mülazemet* (waiting time for professional internship or assignment) at the Translation Office and were expected to be fluent in at least three or four foreign languages, predominantly French. In that context, the Translation Office made a significant contribution to the French language proficiency of diplomats. By gaining practical experience and enhancing their foreign language skills at the Translation Office, diplomats also developed the necessary abilities to advance to senior positions within the Ottoman Foreign Ministry.

Apart from the Translation Office, *Mekteb-i Maarif-i Adliye* (School for Legal Education) is another initiative that contributed to foreign language learning. Established in 1838 to educate civil servants for the Ottoman bureaucracy, The *Mekteb-i Maarif-i Adliyye* featured a program for learning foreign languages initially focused on Arabic and Persian, later including French (Akyüz 2007: 149). However, none of the diplomats in our sample stated that they attended this school.

Founded in 1859, *Mekteb-i Mülkiye-i Şahane* (Civil Service Academy) ensured that individuals aspiring to work as diplomats, bureaucrats, and administrators in the state hierarchy received the appropriate education (Szyliowicz 1971: 371-398). Since its establishment, *Mekteb-i Mülkiye-i Şahane* has been a top choice for applicants seeking positions in the

state’s diplomatic and administrative staff.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Madrid Ambassador Hüseyin Hüsni Sermed Efendi mentioned that he had completed his education through private tutors, as *Mekteb-i Mülkiye* had not yet been founded during his years of education (BOA. HR. SAİD. 1/ 18). This highlights that after its establishment, candidates aspiring for state offices turned to *Mekteb-i Mülkiye*. Twelve diplomats from our group indicated that they attended *Mekteb-i Mülkiye* for their higher education. The school was popular among students of the time for its programs in foreign languages, particularly French. Besides French, *Mekteb-i Mülkiye* also offered instruction in Persian, Greek, Arabic, and English. A third of the total class hours at *Mekteb-i Mülkiye* were dedicated to foreign languages, as indicated in the table below, which displays weekly hours for foreign language courses and other subjects. This underscores the school’s significant role in foreign language education during that period.

**Table 1.** According to the 1898 Education Yearbook (*Maarif Salnamesi*), the Curriculum of the *Mektebi Mülkiye*

First Year (Weekly Hours)		Second Year (Weekly Hours)		Third Year (Weekly Hours)	
Foreign Languages	Other Subjects	Foreign Languages	Other Subjects	Foreign Languages	Other Subjects
6	18	6	18	6	18

Source: *Salname-i Nezaret-i Maarif* (Maarif Yearbook), 1316/ 1898, p. 75-78.

Another development that promoted the expansion of foreign language education was the transformation of *Mekteb-i Maarif-i Adliye* into *Mekteb-i Maarif-i Aklam* or *Mahrec-i Aklam* (Law Schools) in 1862. *Mahrec-i Aklam* was a modern school program designed for senior students graduating from Istanbul’s secondary school (*rüşdiye*) who aimed to pursue careers in government service. The curriculum of this secondary school spanned one year. In the final graduation exam held at the end of the academic year, particular emphasis was placed on evaluating the graduates’ proficiency and knowledge of foreign languages (Sarıyıldız 2002: 251). Graduates, especially those proficient in French and demonstrating merit, often secured positions in the Sublime Porte offices.<sup>7</sup> Six of the diplomats examined in our study indicated that they received their education at *Mahrec-i Aklam*. The importance of *Mahrec-i Aklam* in fostering foreign language proficiency is exemplified by Mahmud Nedim Bey’s statement that he studied Arabic, Persian, and French there.

6 For a study highlighting the significance of foreign language education in *Mekteb-i Mülkiye* for domestic politics, see Şahin 2024.

7 Out of the 27 students who graduated from the institution, 10 were appointed to the high-paying positions of Sublime Porte, and they all speak French and have competence, see Osman Ergin, *Türkiye Maarif Tarihi 2, 1939-1943*, (Istanbul: Eser Press, 1977), p. 397. In addition, the diplomats included in the scope of the study, Niş Consul Mustafa Nazım Bey and Vienna Ambassador Mahmud Nedim Bey listed the courses he took at the *Mahrec-i Aklam* School as Arabic, Persian, calculus, history, geography, calligraphy, and French. See BOA. HR. SAİD. 1/ 29. 15 Şaban 1305/ 27 April 1888- Mustafa Nazım Bey; BOA. HR. SAİD. 22/ 27. 4 Şaban 1328/ 11 August 1910- Mahmud Nedim Bey.



Robert College, founded in 1863, is noteworthy for being the first private school established by Americans in Ottoman lands (Haydaroglu 1993: 125; Gurtunca 2019). It marks a turning point in Ottoman educational history, especially in the realm of foreign language instruction. For instance, the table below illustrates that during the school's three-year preparatory program, the weekly hours devoted to foreign languages exceeded the total hours allocated to other subjects.

**Table 2.** The Preparatory Curriculum of Robert College for the Year 1896

	First Year (Weekly Hours)		Second Year (Weekly Hours)		Third Year (Weekly Hours)	
	Foreign Languages	Other Subjects	Foreign Languages	Other Subjects	Foreign Languages	Other Subjects
First Semester	12	12	15	11	15	12
Second Semester	16	11	15	9	15	12
Third Semester	16	11	15	9	15	12

**Source:** Washburn, George. 2011. *Robert Koleji Hatıraları: İstanbul'da Elli Yıl*. İstanbul, Meydan Yayınları, p. 23.

*Mekteb-i Sultani* and French schools marked the initial turning point in the spread of French within the Ottoman educational system, while Robert College played a crucial role in the promotion of English. Although there were many Turkish students at Robert College, only one diplomat among those evaluated claimed to have attended the institution.

The Language School (*Lisan Mektebi*), established in 1866 as a part of *Mahrec-i Aklam*, played a crucial role in foreign language education within the Ottoman Empire (Balcı 2008: 85). Its primary objective was to dissuade students from enrolling in foreign schools to learn French. However, the school faced closure on three occasions: it was first shut down, and subsequent attempts to reopen in 1879 failed, leading to a second closure. Due to a shortage of staff proficient in foreign languages, it reopened in 1883 and continued until 1892 (Hariciye Yearbooks 1301-1302: 605-607; Hariciye Yearbooks 1306: 658-659; Balcı 2008: 92-93).

The five-year curriculum of Language School began with preparatory courses in speaking and writing in the first year. Cultural subjects such as history and geography were introduced from the second grade onwards. The third year emphasized French language instruction, while the fourth year focused on advanced speaking skills. In the final year, students delved into diplomatic nuances, including translating legislation into French, engaging in discussions, and handling practical experiences (Hariciye Yearbooks 1301-1302: 605-607; Polatçı 2009: 50-51). Originally founded to teach French, the Language School later expanded its curriculum to include other foreign languages. Upon the demand of Subhi Efendi, the then-Minister of

Education, Greek and Bulgarian classes were introduced in 1867 to facilitate the translation of *Düstur* into Armenian, Greek, and Bulgarian (Balçı 2008: 86). Mastery of multiple foreign languages became essential for employment in institutions such as embassies, consulates, and the Translation Office (Balçı 2008: 85-89). Among the diplomats we studied, the only one known to have attended the Language School is Tulca Consul Hüseyin Nazmi Bey. After completing his studies at Koca Mustafa Pasha Rüşdiye, he enrolled in the Language School and subsequently joined the Translation Office after five years of study, despite not acquiring a diploma due to the school's closure (BOA. HR. SAİD. 16/ 16).

The Ottoman government decided to establish a new school in Istanbul because *Mahrec-i Aklam* and the Language School were no longer adequate for teaching foreign languages (Şişman 1989: 11). With this aim, *Galatasaray Mekteb-i Sultanisi* (High School) was founded in 1868, based on the French educational system (Engin 2016: 15). At this school, where French was excellently taught, Arabic, Persian, Armenian, Greek, Bulgarian, English, German, Italian, and Latin were also offered as elective subjects. In this sense, it is possible to assert that high school offered opportunities for those who wanted to learn languages other than French. From 1868, graduating students from Galatasaray began to form the state's workforce of foreign language speakers (Kuneralp 1997: 115-116; Balçı 2008: 85-87). Twenty-nine of the diplomats whose backgrounds were investigated claimed to have attended the *Mekteb-i Sultani*. These future diplomats studied French at Sultani along with several other foreign languages, including Arabic, Persian, Armenian, and Greek.

Laws had also been created to advance foreign language instruction. In 1869, the Regulations of Public Education Law (*Maarif-i Umumiye Nizamnamesi*) was established, and it had a considerable impact on the development of foreign language education. The most significant change brought about by the legislation implemented in the area of foreign language teaching was the decision to teach French alongside Arabic and Persian in modern schools at the secondary school (*rüşdiye*) and institutions of higher education (*idadi* and *sultani*) levels (Demiryürek 2013: 131).

One of the first private schools, *Darüşşafaka*, which was founded in 1873 to educate orphans, offered educational standards nearly equal to those of *Mekteb-i Sultani*. By teaching Arabic, Persian, and French, this school significantly improved the instruction of foreign languages (Çakır 2007: 41). Another institution that provided instruction in foreign languages was the Commerce School (*Ticaret Mektebi*), founded in 1883 (see Özkul 2017: 5-41). The school's curriculum included French as a required subject and Arabic, Italian, Greek, and English as elective subjects (Ergin 1977: 1138). Brindisi Consul Selim Gürcü Efendi, a graduate of *Ticaret Mektebi*, claimed to be fluent in French, Spanish, Italian, Greek, and Arabic (BOA. HR. SAİD. 13/ 3). Foreign language instruction was continued in 1910 in the Branch of Foreign Languages (*Elsine Şubesi*), which was established under the Faculty of Literature (*Darülfünun Edebiyat Şubesi*). The Elsin Branch offered instruction in a variety of foreign languages, including French, Russian, English, German, Arabic, and Persian (Dölen 2008: 6-7; İhsanoğlu 1993: 524-525).

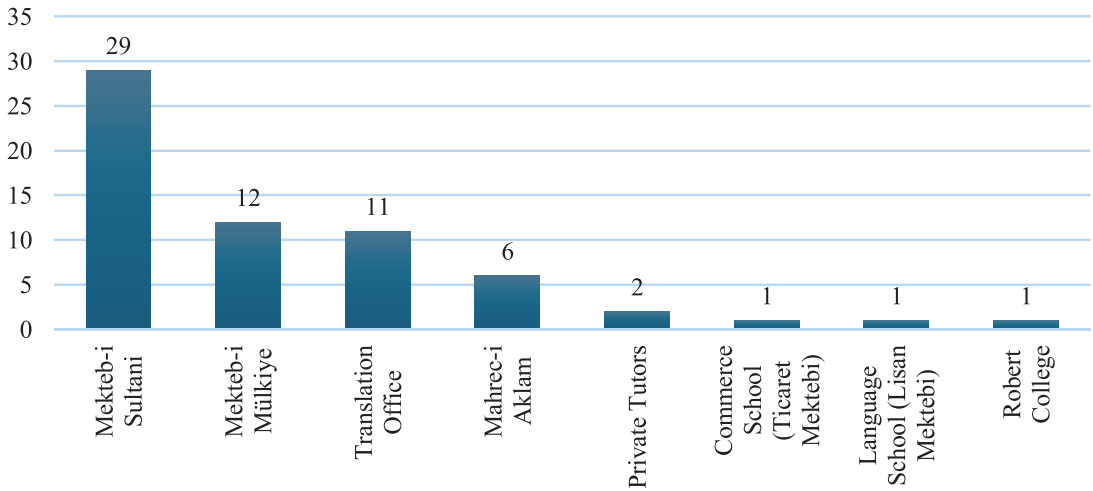
**Figure 3.** Modern Schools in Ottoman Lands Where Diplomats Trained

Figure 3 shows that 29 of the 100 diplomats attending modern schools within Ottoman borders indicated that *Mekteb-i Sultani* was their preferred educational option. *Mekteb-i Mülkiye* was the second most popular modern school after *Mekteb-i Sultani*. Other modern educational institutions favored by diplomats for their careers included the Translation Office, *Mahrec-i Aklam*, the Language School, the Commerce School, and the Robert College.

Furthermore, individuals had the option to acquire a foreign language outside of contemporary schools by taking lessons from private tutors. An examination of the places where diplomats received their higher education revealed that all diplomats, except for two, graduated from colleges and universities that provided a modern education. Two diplomats claimed that they had received their higher education through private tutoring. One of these diplomats, Sadullah Pasha, declared that he knew French, German, and Persian, while the other diplomat, Hüseyin Hüsni Sermed Efendi, stated that he knew French, German, and English (BOA. HR. SAİD. 1/ 24; BOA. HR. SAİD. 1/ 18). The proficiency of these diplomats in multiple foreign languages demonstrates that taking private lessons was one method of learning a foreign language. Diplomats who completed their education through private tutoring shared the trait of having prominent fathers. For example, Vienna Ambassador Sadullah Pasha was the son of Kurdistan Governor Muftuzade Esad Pasha (BOA. HR. SAİD. 1/ 24). Additionally, some diplomats completed their primary education by taking lessons from private tutors. For instance, the father of Turnu Severin Consul Stepan Efendi, who had completed his primary education through private tutoring, was a money changer (BOA. HR. SAİD. 3/ 25). In this instance, it is reasonable to conclude that children from upper-class households had a greater chance of completing their education with private tutors.

## Higher Education of Diplomats Abroad

Sending students to Europe was another method of teaching a foreign language to Ottoman subjects in addition to the instruction provided in contemporary schools in Ottoman lands. Since the early nineteenth century, the practice of sending students to Europe with the goal of learning a foreign language—initially introduced during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (1808-1839)—had become more systematic (Erdoğan: 37). Initially, the state selected students for overseas education from among those working in state-run institutions. Later on, it is known that the state sent orphans to study abroad, for whom it took financial responsibility.

The Ottoman Empire did not make any distinctions between its subjects when sending students abroad, granting non-Muslims the right to education overseas as part of the rights provided to non-Muslim subjects by the Tanzimat Edict. Non-Muslims had equal opportunities; for instance, nine out of ten students sent overseas for study in 1840 were non-Muslims, and between 1839 and 1876, 73 out of 144 students sent to France were of Armenian, Greek, and Bulgarian descent (İhsanoğlu 1992: 374). Individuals could also apply voluntarily to authorities for education abroad, and non-Muslim subjects were also granted this opportunity throughout the process (Erdoğan 2009: 101). Hence, it is reasonable to assume that students sent abroad for education came from diverse social backgrounds.

During the Tanzimat era, the majority of students seeking education abroad were sent to France, although their fields of study and destinations varied. The longstanding ties between the Empire and France, the spread of French influence in Ottoman territories, the presence of modern engineering and military education institutions, scientific and artistic centers in France, and the widespread knowledge of French all contributed to France's prominence in international education (Kaçar 2009: 128-129; Ayhan 2021: 72). Another reason for France's popularity was the ease with which students could travel there via Marseille, facilitated by the emergence of private ferry companies during that period (Erdoğan 2013: 139).

The *Mekteb-i Osmani*, established by the Ottoman Empire in Paris, was another factor contributing to France's status as the most favored destination for Ottoman students studying abroad. Founded in 1857, the *Mekteb-i Osmani* aimed to provide a structured foreign language education, bringing together Ottoman students under supervised conditions (Şişman 1986: 106; Şişman 2004: 25). Following its establishment, Ottoman students were predominantly sent to this school for foreign language education. Although the *Mekteb-i Osmani* could not be compared to contemporary institutions in Istanbul such as *Mekteb-i Sultani*, *Mekteb-i Mülkiye*, *Mekteb-i Harbiye*, and *Darülfünun* in terms of modernizing the Ottoman educational system, it holds a significant place in Turkish educational history (Chambers 1968: 313-314). It was envisioned that through this institution, Ottoman students would acquire the necessary qualifications before continuing their studies in French colleges.

The first academic year of *Mekteb-i Osmani*'s three-year curriculum was entirely dedicated to learning French. In the subsequent two years, students advanced their French skills through classes taught in French, covering subjects like history, geography, and mathematics. Therefore, *Mekteb-i Osmani* served not only as a school teaching French to Ottoman students but also as a transitional institution preparing them for further studies in French institutions.

Two ambassadors included in this study, Mahmud Esad Pasha of Paris and Hüseyin Hüsni Pasha of Petersburg, both indicated that they attended *Mekteb-i Osmani* for their higher education (BOA. HR. SAİD. 4/ 1; BOA. HR. SAİD. 5/ 30). Hüseyin Hüsni Pasha stated proficiency in French, while Mahmud Esad Pasha claimed knowledge of German, Arabic, and Persian in addition to French.

The Ottoman Empire established regulations for the administration of the *Mekteb-i Osmani* based on administrators' reports and the students' feedback on their performance. However, despite these regulations, the intended benefits of *Mekteb-i Osmani* could not be realized, and the decision to close the institution was taken in 1864 (Chambers 1968: 326; Şişman 2004: 86). Nevertheless, the practice of sending students to France continued after the closure of *Mekteb-i Osmani*. For instance, during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876-1909), out of the 315 students sent abroad, 172 were sent to France (Erdoğan 2013: 362). However, due to their involvement in anti-government activities organized by the Young Turks in Europe and various political activities, the Abdulhamid II administration prohibited students from traveling abroad for academic purposes after 1875 (Yıldırım 2005: 36; Gençoğlu 2014: 33). Other factors contributing to the decline in overseas education included the diminishing necessity and high costs associated with studying abroad, as Ottoman contemporary educational institutions expanded (Erdoğan 2013: 52). Following this decision, students were encouraged to enroll at *Darülfünun* for a modern and professional education (Unat 1964: 15). It was only after the World Depression of 1873–1896 that students began to be sent abroad again, though in smaller numbers (Erdoğan 2013: 126-127). Although France was initially the most popular destination for international education, after 1892 it was decided that sending students to Germany and Vienna would be more appropriate than France. This decision was made because students sent to Paris were often distracted by the city's abundant entertainment options and showed more interest in other activities rather than focusing on their education (BOA. DH. MKT. 51/ 37).

A regulation enacted in 1894 established the initial criteria for selecting students to be sent overseas for their education. According to the rules, students had to be between the ages of 20 and 26, have completed high school in the Ottoman Empire in a relevant field of study or have received specialized training in that field, possess good moral character confirmed by their school administrators, be free from any conditions that might hinder their education, and have advanced proficiency in Turkish. The regulation further stipulated that selected students pass a centralized exam administered by the Ministry of Education. Eligibility to take this exam depended on being selected by their current institution or by submitting a personal petition.

Furthermore, in accordance with the same regulation, it was decided to provide students with a monthly stipend and a travel allowance ranging from 250 to 300 francs, depending on the destination country. The regulation also specifies that if students fail to enroll in the designated school abroad or are expelled for non-compliance with school regulations and fail their studies, all allowances and expenses incurred would be reclaimed based on an agreement signed by the student and their family (BOA. Y. A. RES. 73/ 6).

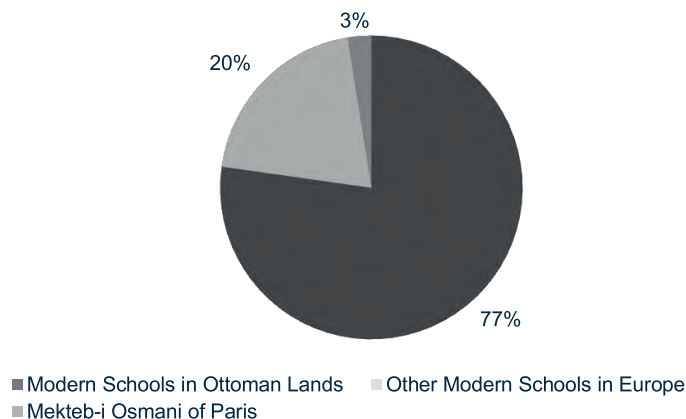
During the Constitutional Era, the number of students sent abroad increased, and the range of countries they were sent to expanded. Despite the decision in 1892 to prioritize sending students to Germany and Vienna over France, 176 out of the 341 students sent abroad

for education between 1908 and 1911 were still sent to France (Ayhan 2021: 74). Furthermore, earlier oversight of students was challenging, but after 1908, procedures were implemented to closely monitor these students. For instance, the legislation passed in 1909 aimed to streamline student supervision, clearly defining who would be sent abroad for study and under what conditions. As per this regulation;

- 1) The age for those studying in a teacher’s school abroad should be between 17 and 25, while the upper limit for other schools is 28,
- 2) They must have a medical certificate confirming good health for studying abroad.
- 3) A statement affirming the student’s tenacity, perseverance, and high moral character must be approved by the administration of their most recent school.
- 4) They are required to return to the country immediately after completing their studies abroad and work for at least five years with a salary designated by the Ministry of Education. If they choose not to serve in the state, all costs and allowances received will be recovered from them or their guarantor.
- 5) Expenses and allowances provided to students who fail to focus on their studies or engage in frivolous employment while abroad will be recovered from them or their guarantors (Tanin Newspaper, 17 August 1909: 4; Şişman 2004: 25).

Foreign language instruction overseas is facilitated not only through government funding and state policies but also through individual initiatives. The proportion of students who attended educational activities abroad using their own means was often relatively low. For instance, in 1856, the Ottoman government covered the expenses of 42 out of 47 students who went to study in France, while only five students financed their education independently (Şişman 1986: 135).

**Figure 4.** Where Diplomats Trained



Of the 100 diplomats investigated, 18 stated they received their education in Europe. Among these diplomats, Ambassador Mahmud Esad Pasha in Paris and Ambassador Hüseyin Hüsnü Pasha in Petersburg mentioned they were sent to Mektebi Osmani in Paris by the government for educational purposes (BOA. HR. SAİD. 5/ 30; BOA. HR. SAİD. 4/ 1). Other diplomats were able to study abroad at their own expense.

## Conclusion

This article has explored an overlooked facet of Ottoman diplomatic history, shedding light on critical aspects of the institutional reform within the Ottoman bureaucratic system during the nineteenth century and its aftermath. It has particularly demonstrated the correlation between the evolving educational framework and the professionalization of Ottoman diplomacy, particularly emphasizing the pivotal role of foreign language learning and acquisition among Ottoman diplomats.

The nineteenth century witnessed significant transformations in the conduct of Ottoman diplomatic affairs, where proficiency in foreign languages emerged as indispensable. This underscored the essential role of foreign language education in shaping diplomatic careers and international relations. The study has highlighted the institutional reforms aimed at modernizing education, focusing particularly on the establishment of institutions dedicated to teaching Western languages alongside Arabic and Persian. These initiatives were crucial in preparing graduates for effective service in Ottoman diplomacy.

Educational restructuring within the Ottoman Empire during this period saw the establishment of pioneering institutions such as *Mekteb-i Osmani*, *Mekteb-i Mülkiye*, *Mahrec-i Aklam*, *Lisan Mektebi*, and *Mekteb-i Sultani*, which played pivotal roles in training diplomats proficient in multiple foreign languages. The fact that there were diplomats who completed their education by taking private lessons in addition to modern institutions led to the conclusion that it was not compulsory to be educated in official institutions in order to take part in the Ottoman diplomatic staff. Furthermore, the practice of sending students abroad for education became institutionalized, significantly enriching the qualifications of diplomats with exposure to diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

While acknowledging the limitations in verifying the accuracy of language proficiency through personal registry files, this study underscores the role of these documents as certified records by state authorities. The diplomats studied in this context are recognized for their proficiency in various languages particularly French, and including Arabic, Persian, English, German, Russian, Serbian, and Spanish, often mastering an average of three foreign languages alongside Turkish.

In this article, it has been determined that the *Mekteb-i Sultani* held a position of priority, despite variations in the educational institutions where diplomats acquired their foreign language skills. *Mekteb-i Sultani* was firstly followed by modern schools abroad and then *Mekteb-i Mülkiye* and *Mahrec-i Aklam*. Furthermore, the Translation Room of the Sublime Porte often served as the initial workplace for many diplomats and as an institution where they either acquired or refined their foreign language competencies.

In conclusion, Ottoman diplomats of the late nineteenth century actively pursued advanced language education both domestically and internationally, leading to the dominance of modern-educated diplomats within the Ottoman Foreign Ministry. The group of multilingual and highly skilled diplomats revolutionized Ottoman foreign policy, adopting modern diplomatic techniques and enhancing professionalism within diplomatic circles. The integration of these educated diplomats marked a transformative era characterized by enhanced efficacy in Ottoman foreign affairs.

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