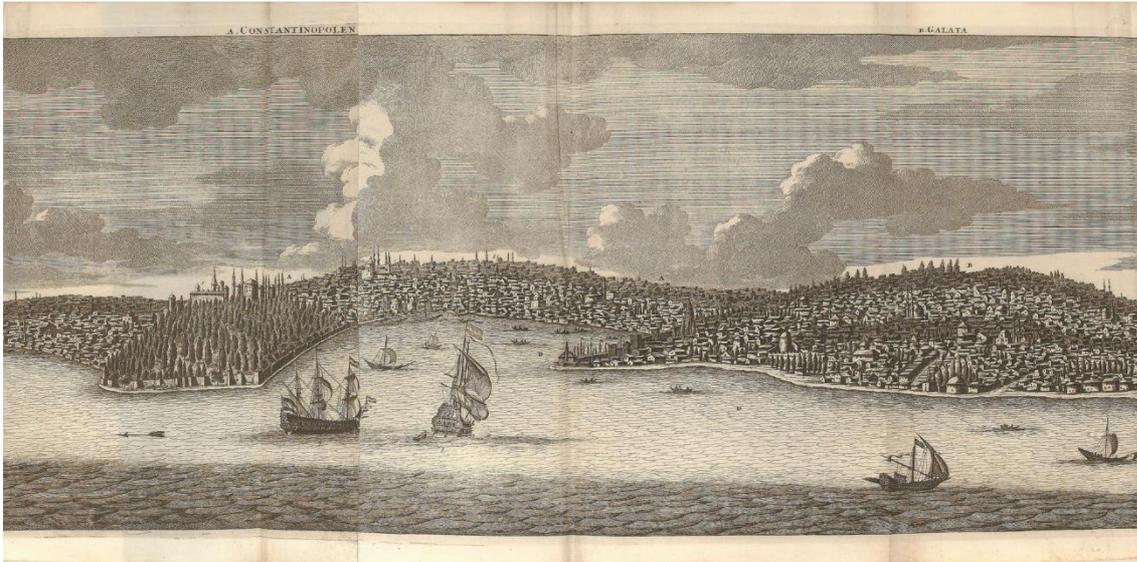


## 2. The Turks and the Plague in the 18th Century



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A study of European attitudes to the Ottoman empire reveals a complex set of politico-religious arguments. During the course of the Eighteenth Century, the view of the Turks gradually shifted, as they were seen to be in military decline and thus less dangerous. The clichés of Ottoman despotism and fanaticism became associated with stagnation but also with the plague, which had more or less disappeared from Europe after the outbreak which started in Marseille in 1720 but was still endemic in the Empire. It was mentioned by many travellers, who therefore had to undergo quarantine when they landed in a European port.

The usual explanation was climatic, but several authors associated it with what they called Turkish 'fatalism', by which they meant the Muslim belief in predestination. They claimed that, as the Turks believed that their fate was decided by God and there was nothing to be done, precautions were pointless; they therefore visited the houses of the sick and even wore dead people's clothes.

This connection was made in the influential account of the Ottoman Empire written by the Englishman Paul Rycaut who had represented the English Levant Company in Smyrna for many years.<sup>1</sup> The work went through several editions in the late Seventeenth Century. Montesquieu, who referred to Rycaut's precise definition of Ottoman despotism, also took over his connection between the plague and fatalism.<sup>2</sup> It is likewise found in several *Encyclopédie* articles, including Jaucourt's article TURQUIE. These important works helped to fix in people's minds the connection between the terrible disease and the religion most hated by the Christians.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Rycaut, *The History of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire*. ... (London, 1668), 116.

<sup>2</sup> *L'Esprit des Loix*, Book XIV, ch. XI.

The paroxysm came in the 1780s, at the time of the Russo-Turkish war and the political opposition between those who argued in favour of the Ottoman Empire as a necessary barrier to Russian expansion in the Mediterranean, and those who aligned with the Russian Empire and wanted to expel the Ottomans from both Europe and the Mediterranean. A vocal critic of the Ottomans was Constantin-François Chasseboeuf, an anti-religious *philosophe*, who took the name Volney as a homage to Voltaire. He visited Egypt and Syria in the 1780s and wrote a hostile account which emphasised what he saw as the misery and desolation caused by Ottoman rule. He claimed that the plague was not endemic to these countries but was brought from Constantinople (an argument already made by Baron de Tott who had been sent to Istanbul by the French government and wrote a hostile account of the Ottomans).<sup>3</sup> In his work on the Russo-Turkish War, Volney goes further in a violent diatribe, seeming to equate the Turks with the plague:

Qui jamais avant les Ottomans avait ouï parler sur la Méditerranée de lazarets et de peste? C'est avec ces barbares que sont venus ces fléaux; ce sont eux qui, par leur stupide fanatisme, perpétuent la contagion en renouvelant ses germes: ah! ne fût-ce que par ce motif, puissent périr leurs gouvernements! puissent à leur place s'établir d'autres peuples, et que la terre et la mer soient affranchies de leur esclavage!<sup>4</sup>

*Ann Thomson*  
Professor of European Intellectual History  
European University Institute  
ann.thomson@eui.eu

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<sup>3</sup> *Voyage en Syrie et en Egypte* (Paris, 1787), 229–33.

<sup>4</sup> *Considérations sur la guerre actuelle des Turcs* ('Londres', 1788), 83–84: 'Who before the Ottomans had ever heard in the Mediterranean of lazarettos and plague? Such scourges arrived with these barbarians; it is they who, thanks to their stupid fanaticism, perpetuate the contagion by renewing its seeds. Ah, if only for that reason, perish their governments, and may other people settle in their place and the land and the sea be freed from their slavery!', translation mine.