

The Political and Economic Impact of the Lake Fissure Eruption (1783-84) on the Ottoman Empire

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The 1780s was a catastrophic decade for the Ottoman Empire. Following on the heels of the devastating defeat at the hands of Russia in 1774, the empire witnessed one challenge after another. From the Russian annexation of Crimea to rebellion in Egypt and the onset of another war with Russia and Austria, the state faced increasing political and economic pressure. A mostly overlooked contributor to the crises of the decade was the impact of the Laki fissure eruption. Erupting over an eight-month period from June 1783 to January 1784, the Laki fissure released extreme amounts of sulfur dioxide into the atmosphere, affecting the climate for much of the world over the next several years. As a result, for the remainder of the 1780s the Ottoman Empire experienced numerous environmental disasters from low water levels on the Nile River to poor harvests throughout Anatolia and the Balkans. The economic pressure on the state from falling tax revenues and indemnity payments following the peace in 1774 was magnified by the Laki-resultant agricultural crisis affecting many areas of the empire in the years leading up to the war in 1787. Despite the depleted state treasury and the failure to obtain foreign loans, the Ottomans entered a multi-front war, forcing it to seek aid and support from the increasingly powerful provincial notables. This paper will add the environmental and subsequent economic consequences of the Laki fissure eruption to the discussion of the growing autonomy of provincial notables in the late eighteenth century. Building on Alan Mikhail's 2015 analysis of Laki's impact on Egypt, this paper draws on more recent scientific modelling of the eruption as well as sources, including memoirs, traveler accounts, and newspapers, from the period noting the environmental impact of Laki most notably in the Balkans and Anatolia.