

Chapter 10

The Narh Prices of Various Comestibles in the First Half of the 19th Century

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ABSTRACT

Since the food prices are the essential needs of people, they have usually been a topical issue in every period. Therefore, this issue mobilized the administrators of aforementioned period, and necessitated to take measures on this issue. Perhaps one of the most significant measures were the narh (price fixing) system. In this study, narh prices of various comestibles have been approached according to dated 1241-1826 and numbered 09264 in the book of senior accountant (Başmuhasebe Kalemi Defteri). The purpose of study is to prove the given importance of the stability of food prices by Ottoman administration comparatively and to contribute to the studies that have been conducted or will be conducted. The documents in the Ottoman Archives of Turkish Presidency (COA in Turkish) have been used as a study method and other works have been used as well in terms of integrity of the topic. As a result of the study, it is found that Ottoman Empire prioritized the price stability in the comestibles, especially to the benefit of her people.

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INTRODUCTION

Narh expresses the upper limit that is determined by the state in the prices of goods and services. The core of narh is the price stability. Price stability, on the other hand, provides the regulation of production, the abundance of goods in the markets and the first-hand delivery of goods from producers to consumers. Price stability is considered as one of the main objectives of economic policy.

Ottoman Empire followed a supply-oriented economic policy by paying regard to the welfare level of people. In the Ottoman political economy of classical period, supply-oriented economic policies based on justice became a priority for ruling class. Due to this, “ibadullahın terfi-i ahvalı” expression was frequently emphasized. This expression means improving the conditions of the servants of Allah economically and socially. Therefore, providing this expression was considered as a criterion of “success” for all the administrators, notably sultan himself. In this regard, Ottoman thinkers evaluated the life as a whole by contrast with European mercantilists, they did not treat economic issues differently from social, political and moral issues and they approached to these issues in an integrity rather than individualism (Bulut, 2012, pp. 69-70). Administration had a tight control on both land and labor factor in the agricultural field with the purpose of providing the production system and satisfying the essential needs of people. Especially providing the essential comestibles to state and society was determined as priority and the prices were not set by the market (Bulut, 2012, pp. 77-78).

The aim of this study is to reveal the importance of price stability in basic foodstuffs of Ottoman Empire in the light of concrete archival documents. The study is considered important because it can offer solutions to similar economic problems of today. This study differs from its peers. Because the subject has been put forward on the concrete document without going into much detail. The regimentation of the book of senior accountant at the door of treasury (Bab-ı Ali Başmuhasebe Defteri) in the Ottoman Archives of Turkish Presidency (placed in D.BŞM.d9 and numbered 09264 book) has constituted the topic of this study. Narh book contains the various prices of foodstuffs and the prices of items belonging to the shopkeepers. These prices were compared with the other prices of Anatolia. As a result of the study, it was understood that price stability was given importance especially in basic food products in the Ottoman State, and there was no compromise in the conditions that disturbed price stability.

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