

**Title: Board of Trade in the Levant**  
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## **Levant Trade**

From the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the economy of the Dutch Republic expanded and developed in most parts of the industrial sectors: agriculture, manufacture, and trade. In seven decades, the republic became an economic superpower. After 1672, the Dutch 'Golden Age' was over.

The Dutch dominated the exchange of goods between the Republic and the two main regions, the Baltic, and the Dutch East Indies. The trade with the Mediterranean was quite a different story indeed.

In the Mediterranean, the Dutch dominance in trade lasted a brief period. They had to compete with Venetian, French, and English traders. To counter the decline in the Levant trade, the Dutch parliament founded *the Board of trade in the Levant and of Navigation on the Mediterranean Sea*.<sup>1</sup> The board, established in 1625, was a federation of local trade colleges in the cities of Amsterdam, Hoorn, Rotterdam, and Middelburg. Earlier, in 1612, the Dutch Republic had obtained the right to hold an embassy in Istanbul and a consular system in the Ottoman Empire. Initially the Board was to manage all the Dutch Levant trade, including trade-protection, defence, and taxation. To defend its commerce in the Mediterranean from pirates, corsairs and foreign foes, the Dutch Republic had deemed it necessary to guard its interests. The Board arranged for finances to equip additional warships that were to secure the Dutch shipping in the Mediterranean. According to regulations about merchant vessels sailing through the Straits of Gibraltar, ships were fitted with cannons. Depending on their size the ships had 10 to 40 cannons.<sup>2</sup>

The Board advised the States-General on affairs concerning trade in the Mediterranean. The board financed its operations by taxation on cargo. The board had a string of connections that imaged a sea route along the shores of southern Europe: Lisbon, Cadiz, Malaga, Alicante, Marseille, Nice, Genoa, Livorno, Naples, Malta, Corfu, Zante, Aleppo, Malta, Cyprus, the 'Barbary states' in North Africa, Egypt, Tripoli, Smyrna (Izmir) and Constantinople (Istanbul).

Smyrna was an important port for the western traders. Earlier the route to Aleppo in Syria was too dangerous to travel because of piracy. The extension of the Silk Route to Smyrna was safer. Thus, the maritime extension of the Silk Route ended in countries like England and the Dutch Republic. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch Republic became an important trading partner of the Ottoman. From Smyrna the trade to the west consisted of silk, wool, cotton, dried fruit, carpets and much more.

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<sup>1</sup> *Directie van de Levantse Handel en van de Navigatie op de Middellandse Zee.*

<sup>2</sup> J.C. de Jonge, *Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche Zeewezen*, tweede deel, tweede stuk, (1835) 251.

To the east the Dutch transported textiles and ceramics. En route the wide array in cargoes increased as ships visited ports for their characteristic produce.

The value of the Smyrna Fleet of 1671-1672 was such that the amount would have enabled the English to wage war against the Dutch for a year at their expense. It would have saved king Charles II from having to ask parliament to finance his war, their relation being not on the best of terms.

From 1655 until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the board had an office in Amsterdam's city hall, the present-day royal palace, at the Dam in the centre of Amsterdam. The Dutch Board of trade in the Levant existed from 1625 till 1826.