Today Belgium is a postcolonial and post-industrial state with only a minor stake in global trade and financial markets. But some 150 years ago the newly independent kingdom was an international economic heavyweight, exporting steel, weapons, machines and capital to nearly all corners of the world. One place that attracted the attention of this nation of heavy industry was the rapidly changing Ottoman Empire. There, Belgian interests morphed from those of petty traders and merchant-bankers to the large-scale infrastructural projects overseen by venture capitalists in the major cities of the empire. On the eve of the First World War an intricate complex of investments worth millions of francs and spanning railways, mines, public utilities, and the imperial sovereign debt connected both polities.

Retracing the commerce-finance nexus that united empire and kingdom, this talk proposes a different reading of the ‘diplomacies’ that lurked behind it. Instead of only asking how diplomacy benefited capital, it considers the ways diplomacy was (re)shaped by and made subordinate to the imperatives of trade, industry and finance. The private interests that Belgian (and later Ottoman) entrepreneurs pursued deeply influenced the ways in which the ‘bilateral’ was conceived (foreign policy), enacted (foreign decision making), and became ‘embodied’ (diplomats). The relations that tied two so ostensibly dissimilar partners were mediated through the interests of capital and changed the perceptions, behaviours, and attitudes of Belgian and Ottoman state and non-state elites. Belgian diplomats became financiers, and financiers became diplomats. Levantine merchants entered the Ottoman diplomatic apparatus, and imperial bureaucrats built investment portfolios. Amplifying the complex sets of shifting transnational class alliances – between high officials, Palace dignitaries, MPs, diplomats, engineers, and bankers – that informed the ebb and flow of formal diplomacies between Brussels and Istanbul, the history of Euro-Ottoman competition and collaboration appears distinct from the familiar geo-political and economic picture pitting the Ottomans against the ‘Great Powers’.

25th National holiday organized by L’Orient in honour of HM the Sultan. Anniversary of the accession of HM the Sultan in Brussels, August 31, 1903.

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