The Hunter and the Empire: A Study of Sultan Mehmed IV and the Ottoman State at a Crossroads (1648-1687)

Introduction

The thirty-nine-year reign of Sultan Mehmed IV (1648–1687) stands as one of the most profound and dramatic contradictions in the long history of the Ottoman Empire. It was an era that commenced amidst the nadir of dynastic prestige, with a child sultan enthroned in the bloody aftermath of his father's deposition and murder, the state teetering on the brink of administrative and financial collapse.[1] From this crucible of chaos, however, emerged a period of remarkable, if brutally executed, restoration. Under the stewardship of a dynasty of powerful Grand Viziers from the Köprülü family, the empire experienced a startling revival of fortune, stamping out internal corruption, reasserting central authority, and embarking on a new wave of military expansion that pushed its European frontiers to their greatest ever extent.[1] Yet, this zenith was fleeting, culminating in a catastrophic military overreach before the walls of Vienna in 1683—a failure so complete that it permanently altered the balance of power in Southeastern Europe and initiated a long, painful imperial retreat.[1]

This report will argue that the character of the Sultan himself was inextricably linked to this dramatic arc of revival and collapse. Mehmed IV, known to posterity as *Avcı*, "the Hunter," cultivated a persona that was at once pious, peripatetic, and largely detached from the daily administration of the state.[1] This very detachment, born of a traumatic childhood and a conscious rejection of the sedentary, palace-bound style of his immediate predecessors, was paradoxically a precondition for the success of the Köprülü-era revival. By ceding unprecedented executive authority to his viziers, he created the political space necessary for their radical reforms. Simultaneously, his cultivation of a martial, *gazi* (holy warrior) identity provided the ideological legitimacy for their aggressive foreign policy. However, this same system of delegated power left him unable to restrain the hubris of his own creation, making him the inevitable scapegoat when the Vienna gambit failed so spectacularly. His reign was not one of simple, linear decline, but a complex and turbulent epoch of revival, overreach, and the violent inauguration of a new geopolitical reality for the Ottoman state.

Part I: The Sultan - Avcı Mehmed, the Pious Hunter

To understand the trajectory of the Ottoman Empire in the latter half of the 17th century, one must first construct a detailed biographical and psychological portrait of the monarch who presided over it. Mehmed IV was far more than the simplistic caricature of a ruler distracted by leisure. He was a product of his violent upbringing, a ruler who witnessed the rawest expressions of power politics from a tender age, and an active agent in a sophisticated project to reshape the ideology of the Sultanate itself. His personality, passions, and political identity were central to the unique character of his long and consequential reign.

The Child Sultan in a Serpent's Nest (1648-1656)

The formative years of Mehmed IV's reign were defined by an atmosphere of extreme political volatility and personal danger. The brutal power struggles he witnessed and was forced to participate in directly shaped his subsequent approach to rule, fostering a deep-seated aversion to the intrigues of the Topkapı Palace and a lifelong reliance on singularly powerful figures to whom he could delegate the burdens of governance.

A Traumatic Accession

In August 1648, Mehmed IV ascended the throne at the age of just six.[1] His accession was not a peaceful succession but the result of a violent coup d'état. His father, Sultan İbrahim, whose reign was marked by erratic behavior and mental instability, was overthrown by a powerful coalition of court officials and Janissary officers.[2] Ten days later, İbrahim was executed, becoming the second Ottoman sultan in a single generation to be murdered, following the regicide of Osman II in 1622.[7] This event was a stark illustration of the profound crisis gripping the Ottoman dynasty. The prestige of the sultanate had been severely eroded, and the ruler's life was no longer sacrosanct. The young Mehmed was thus placed at the head of an empire in turmoil, beset by administrative decay, a severe financial crisis, raging revolts in Anatolia, and humiliating military defeats at the hands of the Venetians.[1] His enthronement was less an assumption of power and more his installation as a pawn in a lethal political game.

The Regency and the Battle of the Valides

With a child on the throne, real power was initially wielded by a regency. The dominant figure was Mehmed's grandmother, the formidable Kösem Sultan.[2] As the wife of Ahmed I, mother of two previous sultans (Murad IV and İbrahim), and regent during their minorities, Kösem had been a central force in Ottoman politics for nearly half a century, commanding vast networks of patronage and influence.[8] However, the new reign brought a new power into the palace: Mehmed's mother, Turhan Hatice Sultan. Though young and initially inexperienced, Turhan, as

the *valide sultan* (mother of the reigning sultan), refused to be a mere figurehead.[4]
This set the stage for a bitter and deadly rivalry between the *büyük valide* ("grandmother") and the *valide sultan*. Each woman began to consolidate her own faction within the palace and among the military, turning the imperial court into a battleground.[8] The conflict was not merely personal but structural. It posed a fundamental question about the nature of authority during a minority: did power belong to the most experienced and established female member of the dynasty, or to the one whose legitimacy was directly tied to the reigning child-sultan? Kösem, recognizing the existential threat Turhan posed to her long-held supremacy, allegedly began to plot against her grandson. The plan was to depose Mehmed and replace him with his younger half-brother, Suleiman, whose mother was deemed more pliable and would not challenge Kösem's authority.[1]

A Child's Consent to Murder

In September 1651, Turhan Sultan discovered the plot. In a ruthless preemptive strike, she rallied her supporters within the palace guard. To legitimize her actions and neutralize her rival permanently, she sought the formal approval of the one person whose authority, however symbolic, was absolute: her nine-year-old son. Mehmed IV was made to sign his own grandmother's death warrant.[1] That night, Kösem Sultan was cornered in her quarters and strangled to death by Turhan's men, reportedly with a curtain cord.[8]
The murder of Kösem Sultan was a watershed moment. It was more than a palace intrigue; it was a violent redefinition of the locus of female power within the Ottoman court. Kösem's authority had been personal, built over decades of political maneuvering. Turhan's victory established a new, more institutionalized precedent: the supreme and unchallengeable authority of the reigning sultan's mother, an authority derived directly from her son's legitimacy. For the young Mehmed, this event was a brutal, indelible lesson. He was made the instrument of this political transformation, learning at a tender age that power was absolute, that it was secured through bloodshed, and that even the closest familial bonds were secondary to the preservation of the throne. This early exposure to the deadly consequences of factionalism and intrigue likely instilled in him a profound desire to distance himself from the treacherous environment of the court, a desire that would later manifest in his peripatetic lifestyle and delegation of power.

The Cultivation of a Gazi Monarch

Upon reaching maturity, Mehmed IV embarked on a deliberate and sophisticated political project to restore the eroded legitimacy of the Sultanate. He consciously crafted a new royal persona, one that stood in stark contrast to the perceived effeminacy and sedentary nature of his immediate predecessors. By reviving the ancient ideal of the pious, mobile, holy warrior—the *gazi*—he sought to re-infuse the office of the Sultan with the martial and

religious vigor that had characterized the empire's golden age of expansion.
This project was a direct response to a crisis of legitimacy. The 17th century had seen sultans relegated to a largely ceremonial role, often dominated by powerful valide sultans or Grand Viziers, and confined to the gilded cage of the Topkapı Palace.[7] His own father, İbrahim, had been deposed in part for his perceived lack of manliness and his inability to control the women of the harem.[7] Mehmed IV's response was to construct an image of himself as the antithesis of this decline.

A Pious Ruler

Central to this new persona was a pronounced and public display of piety. Contemporaries consistently described Mehmed IV as a particularly religious ruler.[6] He cultivated the title of *gazi*, or "holy warrior," linking his reign directly to the many conquests carried out by his viziers.[6] This was not merely a title but was reflected in his personal conduct and state policy. He famously prohibited the consumption of alcohol and closed down manufacturers, a move that aligned with the strictest interpretations of Islamic law.[11] More significantly, he became a key patron of the Kadızadeli movement, a puritanical religious revival that sought to purge Ottoman society of what it considered un-Islamic innovations.[7] By aligning himself with this powerful social and religious current, he positioned himself as the defender of orthodoxy and the leader of a moral and spiritual renewal of the empire.

The Move to Edirne

The most powerful symbolic act of this transformation was Mehmed IV's decision in 1663, at the age of twenty-two, to effectively relocate the imperial court from Istanbul to the old Ottoman capital of Edirne.[7] Istanbul had become the heart of the empire's vast bureaucracy, a place of political intrigue and administrative routine. Edirne, by contrast, was the historic launchpad for Ottoman campaigns into the Balkans. By taking up residence there, Mehmed was making a clear statement: he was rejecting the model of the sedentary, administrative monarch in favor of the mobile, warrior-sultan of the past. He was physically and ideologically repositioning the sultanate on the frontier, at the vanguard of the Islamic world's struggle against Christian Europe.[7]

Crafting the Imperial Image

To ensure this carefully constructed image was projected throughout the empire and beyond, Mehmed IV employed an official court chronicler, Abdurrahman Abdi Paşa. The chronicles produced under his patronage were not neutral historical records; they were instruments of royal propaganda.[7] These official narratives deliberately and consistently depicted the Sultan

as the embodiment of martial virtue: constantly on horseback, leading hunts, practicing with the javelin, and participating in military campaigns.[7] While his actual command role was often limited, the narrative was paramount. This image was powerfully reinforced by his personal participation in the 1672 campaign against Poland, where he was present at the conquest of the fortress of Kamaniça.[1] For a 17th-century sultan to lead his army in person was a rare and potent act, one that lent tangible credibility to the *gazi* persona he so carefully cultivated. This entire project can be understood as an ingenious solution to a political dilemma created by the rise of the Köprülüs. When Mehmed's mother, Turhan Sultan, granted Köprülü Mehmed Pasha unprecedented executive power, she effectively outsourced the day-to-day governance of the empire.[1] This left a vacuum in the traditional role of the Sultan. If the Grand Vizier was to run the state and command its armies, what function was left for the monarch? Mehmed IV's answer was to transform the Sultan's role from an executive to a symbolic and ideological one. He became the spiritual heart of the revived expansionist state, while his viziers served as its practical, administrative arm. This created a powerful symbiosis: the military victories of the Köprülüs validated Mehmed's *gazi* persona, while his persona, in turn, provided the religious and ideological justification for their wars, framing them as holy endeavors for the faith. This dynamic synergy was a cornerstone of the stability and success that defined the Köprülü era.

The Hunter's Domain: Passion, Politics, and Piety

No aspect of Mehmed IV's reign is more famous than his all-consuming passion for the hunt, a devotion so profound that it earned him the enduring moniker *Avcı*, "the Hunter".[1] To dismiss this obsession as a mere escape from the duties of state, however, is to misunderstand its central importance to his mode of rule. For Mehmed IV, the hunt was not a distraction from politics; it was a primary venue for its practice. It functioned as a mobile court, a powerful tool for projecting royal authority, and a direct instrument for implementing his pietistic social agenda.

The Passion and the Moniker

Mehmed IV's dedication to hunting was legendary. He was a brilliant rider and an expert in the use of weapons, skills honed through countless hours spent in the fields and forests of the Balkans.[11] In Ottoman culture, the hunt was not seen as a frivolous pastime. It was traditionally considered a form of war rehearsal, a way for the ruler and his court to maintain their martial skills and physical prowess.[15] A sultan who was a skilled hunter and horseman embodied the ideals of strength, power, and masculinity that were central to the dynasty's nomadic Turkic origins.[16] Mehmed's moniker, therefore, was not initially a pejorative but a title that affirmed his connection to this warrior tradition.

A Mobile Court

The Sultan's hunting expeditions were far from solitary affairs. They were massive, state-level operations, involving thousands of courtiers, soldiers, and palace officials.[16] To support these grand events, tens of thousands of Christian and Jewish peasants (*reaya*) were forcibly conscripted from the surrounding regions to act as beaters, driving game towards the Sultan's party.[7] By conducting these hunts primarily from his favored residence in Edirne, Mehmed IV effectively ruled from a mobile court that was constantly on the move throughout the empire's European provinces.[12] This peripatetic lifestyle had a significant political effect: it made the Sultan's presence a tangible reality for his subjects in the Balkans, projecting imperial power far beyond the confines of Istanbul.

Hunting as a Tool of Islamization

Crucially, these vast, temporary gatherings of people became a unique arena for Mehmed IV to advance his deeply held religious convictions. He used the hunts as opportunities to actively promote his policy of Islamization. In the presence of thousands of his non-Muslim subjects, he would encourage, facilitate, and sometimes compel conversions to Islam.[7] These were often staged as public ceremonies, where the Sultan personally presided over the religious transformation of Christian and Jewish peasants, prisoners of war, or members of ambassadorial retinues.[7] The scale of this conversion campaign was so significant that in 1676, the court was compelled to compile a specific legal text, "The Statute of the New Muslim," to provide a standardized procedure for these new converts to follow.[7] This provides a clear and undeniable link between his personal pastime and his broader state policy of religious and social purification.

The common criticism that Mehmed IV "devoted himself to hunting rather than to affairs of state" [2] is, in this light, a fundamental misreading of his reign. This critique, which gained currency primarily after the military disasters of 1683, views his actions through the lens of subsequent failure.[12] For much of his rule, while the empire was victorious, his hunting was seen as an integral part of his martial persona. More importantly, the hunts were not an abdication of his duties but a parallel system of administration and social engineering. They provided a unique space where the Sultan could bypass the formal state bureaucracy and personally enact his vision of a pious, Islamized society on a micro-level. For Mehmed IV, hunting *was* an affair of state.

The Fall from the Throne (1683-1693)

The final years of Mehmed IV's reign were a dramatic and swift reversal of the fortunes that had characterized the preceding decades. The very system of delegated power that had been

the foundation of the Köprülü revival proved to be its undoing. This system, which relied on the Grand Vizier's success to legitimize the Sultan's detached role, left Mehmed IV unable to prevent the disastrous Vienna campaign and made him the inevitable scapegoat for its calamitous failure.

The Road to Vienna

Despite the martial image he had so carefully cultivated, Mehmed IV was not the driving force behind the 1683 campaign to conquer Vienna. On the contrary, available sources indicate that he personally opposed the grandiose scheme of his Grand Vizier, Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha.[2] However, after nearly three decades of Köprülü rule, executive power, particularly in matters of war and foreign policy, had become so concentrated in the office of the Grand Vizier that the Sultan's objections were insufficient to halt the momentum. Kara Mustafa, buoyed by the successes of his predecessors and eager to achieve a conquest that would surpass them all, was able to push forward with his plan.[17] The Sultan's inability to prevent the campaign highlights the fundamental shift in the Ottoman power structure that had occurred during his own reign.

Defeat and Scapegoating

The catastrophic rout of the Ottoman army at the Battle of Vienna on September 12, 1683, was a shattering blow to the empire's military power and prestige.[1] The defeat was total and humiliating. In the immediate aftermath, Mehmed IV acted swiftly to deflect blame from the throne. He held his Grand Vizier solely responsible for the disaster. On December 25, 1683, on the Sultan's orders, Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha was executed in Belgrade, and his head was sent to Mehmed IV in Edirne as proof.[7] This act of scapegoating, however, was not enough to contain the political fallout from the defeat.

The Great Turkish War and Deposition

The failure at Vienna was not an isolated event; it was the catalyst for a much wider conflict. The victory galvanized the Christian powers of Europe, who, under the auspices of Pope Innocent XI, formed a powerful military coalition known as the Holy League in 1684.[20] This alliance launched a devastating, multi-front counter-offensive that became known as the Great Turkish War.[1] The Ottoman armies, demoralized and overstretched, suffered a series of crushing defeats. Most of Ottoman Hungary, a core European province for 150 years, was lost in a few short years.[5] The final blow came in August 1687, when the Ottoman army was annihilated at the Second Battle of Mohács, a battle fought on the same field as the great victory of Suleiman the Magnificent in 1526.[5]

This defeat shattered the army's morale and discipline. The soldiers mutinied, blaming the Sultan for the years of disastrous warfare and for the viziers he had appointed.[5] The mutinous army marched on the capital. Faced with the collapse of his military and the loss of support from the state leadership, Mehmed IV was powerless. On November 8, 1687, he was deposed and replaced by his brother, Suleiman II.[2]

The deposition of Mehmed IV revealed the fundamental fragility of the political settlement that had defined his reign. The system, which balanced a symbolically active but administratively passive Sultan with a powerful, autonomous Grand Vizier, was entirely dependent on the vizier's ability to deliver success. Once that success failed so spectacularly, the entire structure collapsed. The army, which had been re-disciplined and empowered by the Köprülüs, turned that power against the throne, becoming the ultimate arbiter of political change. They deposed the Sultan not for his hunting or his piety, but because he was the ultimate authority who had presided over the system that led them to ruin. Mehmed IV spent his final years in retirement, living under surveillance in the palace at Edirne, where he died of natural causes in January 1693.[2]

Part II: The Empire - Revival, Overreach, and Retreat

The trajectory of the Ottoman Empire during the reign of Mehmed IV is a dramatic narrative of near-collapse, stunning revival, unprecedented expansion, and catastrophic retreat. This period witnessed the state's administrative and military apparatus being torn down and rebuilt on a new foundation, its armies pushing its frontiers to their furthest extent in Europe, and its capital being physically and socially reshaped by religious fervor. Ultimately, the very forces that propelled this revival would lead to an overreach so profound that it set the empire on a course of irreversible geopolitical decline.

The Köprülü Restoration: A New Foundation of Power (1656-1683)

The rise of the Köprülü family to the Grand Vizierate was not merely a change in personnel; it represented a fundamental restructuring of the Ottoman state. Their tenure was a calculated political experiment, born of desperation, that created a new, vizier-centric model of governance. This model temporarily arrested the empire's decay by shifting the center of political gravity from the fractious imperial palace to the executive office of the Grand Vizier, the Sublime Porte.

The Empire in Crisis (Pre-1656)

The first eight years of Mehmed IV's reign, the period of his minority, were a time of profound crisis. The state was effectively leaderless, with power contested between the factions of

Kösem Sultan and Turhan Sultan, and with the chiefs of the Janissary corps dominating the administration.[2] This political instability had devastating consequences. The treasury was empty, leading to high inflation and the imposition of new taxes, which in turn fueled popular uprisings in Constantinople and across Anatolia.[1] Bribery and corruption were rampant.[12] The military situation was equally dire. The ongoing war in Crete was stalemated, and in 1656, the Venetian navy inflicted a crushing defeat on the Ottoman fleet just outside the Dardanelles, establishing a blockade that threatened the capital with food shortages and cut off supplies to the army in Crete.[1] The empire was on the verge of disintegration.

The Rise of Köprülü Mehmed Pasha (1656-1661)

It was in this moment of existential threat that Valide Sultan Turhan Hatice, having secured her own power by eliminating Kösem Sultan, made a revolutionary decision. Recognizing that the existing system of factional court politics was unsustainable, she sought a strongman to whom she could delegate absolute authority. Her choice fell upon the aged but widely respected Köprülü Mehmed Pasha.[3] In September 1656, she appointed him Grand Vizier, but with a series of unprecedented conditions: he was granted absolute executive powers, security of office, and a promise of non-interference from any quarter, including the Sultan himself.[1] This was a conscious and radical delegation of power away from the traditional centers in the palace.

Köprülü Mehmed used this authority with ruthless efficiency. He initiated a brutal purge, executing thousands of officials—from viziers and provincial governors to military officers—whom he deemed corrupt, incompetent, or disloyal.[3] He suppressed the rebellion of Abaza Hasan Pasha and other provincial governors with extreme violence.[3] He reorganized the army and navy, restoring a semblance of discipline, and implemented fiscal reforms to stabilize the treasury.[4] A key political move was his advice to the young Sultan Mehmed IV to relocate the court to Edirne, effectively removing the palace from the day-to-day management of the state and insulating his own administration from its intrigues.[14]

The Consolidation under Fazıl Ahmed Pasha (1661-1676)

Before his death in 1661, Köprülü Mehmed ensured the continuity of his project by securing the appointment of his son, Fazıl Ahmed Pasha, as his successor.[13] This act transformed an emergency measure into a de facto dynastic principle of vizierial rule. Fazıl Ahmed proved to be as capable an administrator as his father but was far less brutal and more cultured.[3] He continued the administrative reforms, but with a focus on constructive policies. He famously reduced taxation and promoted education, earning him the epithet *Fazıl* ("the wise").[13] While serving as a provincial governor in Erzurum and Damascus before his vizierate, he had already demonstrated his acumen in crisis management and fiscal discipline.[26] As Grand Vizier, he led

a series of highly successful military campaigns that dramatically expanded the empire's frontiers.[1]

The Köprülü Household as a Power Center

The foundation of the Köprülüs' enduring power was the creation of their own household (*kapı*) as a parallel state apparatus. They systematically filled key administrative and military positions throughout the empire with loyal family members, sons-in-law, and clients who owed their careers and allegiance directly to the Köprülü family.[13] This patronage network ensured that their policies were implemented effectively and gave them a secure grip on power that was independent of palace factions. This system continued when Fazıl Ahmed died in 1676 and was succeeded by his adopted brother-in-law, Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha, who had been raised within the Köprülü household and was a product of its system.[1] For nearly three decades, the Ottoman Empire was effectively governed by a single, non-dynastic family, a unique political experiment that brought stability at the cost of concentrating immense power in the hands of the Grand Vizier.

Table: The Köprülü Grand Viziers under Mehmed IV

Grand Vizier	Term	Key Administrative & Political Reforms	Major Military Campaigns & Outcomes
Köprülü Mehmed Pasha	1656–1661	- Granted absolute authority by Turhan Sultan.1 - Purged thousands of corrupt/disloyal officials.3 - Reorganized army and navy, restoring discipline.4 - Suppressed internal rebellions (e.g., Abaza Hasan Pasha).3 - Stabilized state finances and curbed spending.4	- Defeated Venetian navy at the Battle of the Dardanelles (1657), breaking the blockade.14 - Successful campaigns restoring authority in Transylvania (1658) and Hungary (1660).1
Fazıl Ahmed Pasha	1661–1676	- Continued father's administrative reforms	- Austro-Turkish War (1663-64): Captured

		with less brutality.3 - Reduced taxation and promoted education, earning the epithet "Fazıl" (wise).13 - Patron of scholars and founder of a library.28 - Managed provincial crises in Erzurum and Damascus before his vizierate.26	key fortresses; secured favorable Peace of Vasvár despite defeat at St. Gotthard.24 - Cretan War: Conquered Candia (1669), ending the 24-year war with Venice.1 - Polish-Ottoman War (1672-76): Annexed Podolia; expanded empire to its greatest extent in Europe.1
Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha	1676–1683	- Adopted into the Köprülü household; continued their policies.3 - Imposed heavy taxes on Europeans, earning a reputation for greed.30 - Maintained supremacy of the House of Osman against foreign influence.30	- Russo-Turkish War (1676-81): Led campaigns in Ukraine, capturing Chyhyryn (1678) but ultimately concluding a peace that returned lands to Russia.1 - Supported Hungarian uprising against Habsburgs 1, leading to the Vienna campaign.

The Zenith of Expansion: War and Conquest

The internal stability and military reorganization achieved by the Köprülüs were not ends in themselves; they were the foundation for a renewed and highly aggressive phase of imperial expansion. Under the leadership of Fazıl Ahmed Pasha, the Ottoman war machine, which had been faltering for decades, was revitalized and unleashed against the empire's European rivals. In a little over a decade, Ottoman armies fought and won significant strategic victories against Venice, the Habsburg Monarchy, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, restoring Ottoman dominance and pushing the empire's borders to their furthest extent.

Conclusion of the Cretan War (1645–1669)

The first major military achievement of the era was the conclusion of the long and draining

Cretan War. The conflict with Venice over the island of Crete, its richest overseas possession, had dragged on since 1645, exhausting the treasuries of both empires.[32] The Ottomans had conquered most of the island early on, but the formidable fortress of Candia (modern Heraklion) had resisted for over two decades.[32] In 1666, Fazıl Ahmed Pasha dispatched a final, massive expeditionary force to end the stalemate.[32] This initiated the final and bloodiest stage of the siege, which lasted for another 28 months and resulted in staggering casualties on both sides.[32] Finally, in September 1669, the Venetian defenders negotiated a surrender.[1] The conquest of Crete was a major strategic victory, securing Ottoman control over the Eastern Mediterranean. However, it came at an immense human and economic cost, effectively crippling the Venetian Republic.[32]

Austro-Turkish War (1663–1664)

With the Cretan front stabilized, Fazıl Ahmed turned his attention to the Habsburg frontier in Hungary. In 1663, he launched a major campaign, leading the army in person. The primary achievement of this campaign was the capture of the strategically vital fortress of Érsekújvár (Nové Zámky) in modern-day Slovakia.[24] The following year, the Ottoman army suffered a significant tactical defeat at the Battle of Saint Gotthard on the Raab river.[24] Despite this setback, the overall Ottoman strategic position was so formidable that the Habsburgs were compelled to sign the Peace of Vasvár. The treaty was highly favorable to the Ottomans, recognizing their recent conquests and confirming their suzerainty over Transylvania, demonstrating that even in defeat, the revitalized Ottoman army could achieve its political objectives.[24]

Polish-Ottoman War (1672–1676)

The final and most significant expansion of the era occurred in the north. In 1669, the Cossack Hetman of Right-bank Ukraine, Petro Doroshenko, seeking to escape Polish and Russian domination, pledged his allegiance to Sultan Mehmed IV, making the Cossack Hetmanate a vassal of the Ottoman Empire.[1] This drew the Ottomans directly into the complex power struggles of Eastern Europe. In 1672, Sultan Mehmed IV and Grand Vizier Fazıl Ahmed Pasha led a massive army into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.[1] They swiftly captured the supposedly impregnable fortress of Kamieniec Podolski (Kamaniça), the key to the region.[1] The initial Peace of Buczacz in 1672 was a humiliation for the Commonwealth, forcing it to cede vast territories and pay tribute.[35]

The Polish Sejm rejected these terms, and the war continued under the brilliant leadership of John Sobieski (the future King John III).[35] Despite some Polish victories, most notably at the Battle of Khotyn in 1673, the Ottomans maintained the upper hand. The final Treaty of Żurawno, signed in 1676, confirmed the Ottoman annexation of the province of Podolia and

their control over most of Right-bank Ukraine.[35] This treaty marked the absolute zenith of Ottoman territorial expansion in Europe.[1]
This string of major victories against three formidable European powers in just over a decade had a profound psychological impact. It fostered a powerful "victory culture" within the Ottoman military and political elite. This culture, built on tangible successes, created a widespread belief in the superiority of the reformed Ottoman army and validated a strategic doctrine of aggressive, preemptive expansion. When Kara Mustafa Pasha came to power in 1676, the institutional and psychological momentum was overwhelmingly in favor of continuing this policy of conquest. The decision to attack Vienna seven years later was not made in a vacuum; it was the logical culmination of a period of unprecedented and sustained military success.

The Internal Realm: Piety, Plague, and Patronage

While Ottoman armies were redrawing the map of Europe, the heart of the empire was undergoing profound social and cultural transformations. The reign of Mehmed IV was characterized by a powerful wave of religious conservatism, a devastating urban catastrophe, and a major campaign of imperial architectural patronage. These were not disparate events; they were interconnected facets of a single, overarching project of state-led Islamization and social purification, driven by the personal piety of the Sultan and his mother, and enabled by the absolute power of their viziers.

The Kadızadeli Movement

The dominant social and religious force of the era was the Kadızadeli movement, a puritanical Islamic revivalist group that reached the peak of its influence under Mehmed IV.[3] The movement's leader, Vani Mehmed Efendi, was a charismatic preacher who became a close confidant of the Sultan and was appointed as the court preacher.[3] The Kadızadelis advocated for a return to the "pure" practices of the first generation of Muslims and railed against what they considered to be forbidden religious innovations (*bid'ah*).[6] Their targets were wide-ranging: they condemned the mystical rituals of Sufi orders, such as chanting and whirling; they attacked perceived moral laxity, including the popular consumption of coffee and tobacco; and they sought to enforce a strict, conservative social order.[3]
With the Sultan's patronage, the Kadızadelis' ideology was translated into state policy. Imperial decrees were issued closing taverns, banning wine consumption, and prohibiting certain Sufi ceremonies.[7] This state-sponsored puritanism created significant social friction, leading to violent clashes between Kadızadeli activists and their opponents, particularly the Sufi orders and more liberal intellectuals who viewed them as reactionary and backwards-thinking.[3]

The Great Fire of 1660

In July 1660, a catastrophic event provided a unique opportunity to physically reshape the imperial capital in line with this new conservative vision. A massive fire, the worst in Constantinople's history, raged for two days, destroying as much as two-thirds of the historic peninsula.[1] The human cost was immense, with an estimated forty thousand people killed and thousands more dying in the subsequent famine and plague.[1] The reconstruction of the devastated city, a massive undertaking personally overseen by Grand Vizier Köprülü Mehmed Pasha, became a vehicle for social and religious engineering.[14]

Imperial Patronage: The Yeni Cami and Spice Bazaar

The fire cleared a large area in the commercially vital Eminönü neighborhood, a district that had historically been home to a prominent Jewish community.[41] This was the site of the partially constructed Yeni Cami, or New Mosque. The project had been initiated decades earlier, in 1597, by Safiye Sultan, but was abandoned after her son's death in 1603 and had fallen into ruin.[41] After the fire, Turhan Sultan, Mehmed IV's mother, took up the project as a monumental act of piety.[41] The existing Jewish population was displaced through the compulsory purchase of their properties, a controversial act that physically enacted the "purification" agenda of the Kadızadeli movement by replacing a non-Muslim community with a grand symbol of Islamic power.[7]

The construction was completed between 1660 and 1665.[1] The Yeni Cami was the last of the great imperial mosques and a magnificent example of classical Ottoman architecture, featuring a grand central dome, elegant minarets, and an interior lavishly decorated with Iznik tiles.[43] The project was a massive *külliye*, or complex, which included not only the mosque but also a school, fountains, and the famous Spice Bazaar (also known as the Egyptian Bazaar).[43] The bazaar, an L-shaped structure with 85 shops, was constructed with funds from the Ottoman province of Egypt and became the city's new hub for the spice trade.[47] Crucially, the rents collected from the bazaar's shops were endowed to fund the upkeep of the mosque, directly intertwining this grand project of religious piety with the commercial heart of the empire.[48] The confluence of the Kadızadeli ideology, the opportunity presented by the Great Fire, and the patronage of the pious royal family thus resulted in a lasting transformation of the physical and social landscape of the capital into a more conservative, monumental, and overtly Islamic image.

The Vienna Gambit and the Great Turkish War (1683-1687)

The period of revival and expansion under the Köprülü viziers culminated in a strategic

blunder of historic proportions. The decision to besiege Vienna in 1683, born of the hubris of the "victory culture" that had taken hold in the Ottoman court, ended the era of restoration. The catastrophic failure of the campaign, the subsequent formation of a powerful European coalition, and the devastating military collapse that followed led directly to the overthrow of Mehmed IV and set the empire on a long-term trajectory of defensive warfare and territorial retreat.

The Siege of Vienna (1683)

In 1683, Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa Pasha, leveraging a Hungarian revolt against Habsburg rule as a pretext, marched a vast Ottoman army of over 100,000 men up the Danube with the goal of capturing Vienna, the Habsburg capital.[1] The siege began on July 14 and lasted for two months, bringing the city, defended by a much smaller garrison, to the very brink of collapse.[19] Ottoman sappers mined the city walls, and repeated assaults had opened huge breaches in the defenses.[51] However, Kara Mustafa made a series of critical tactical errors. Overconfident in his ability to take the city, he failed to adequately fortify his own camp against a potential relief force and concentrated his best troops on the siege itself rather than securing the approaches to his rear.[19]

The Battle of Vienna and the Rout

On September 12, 1683, a combined Christian relief army composed of Imperial, German, and Polish-Lithuanian forces arrived. Under the overall command of the Polish King, John III Sobieski, the allied army descended from the Kahlenberg Heights overlooking the city and smashed into the unprepared Ottoman lines.[1] The Ottoman defeat was total. The army was routed, abandoning its camp, its artillery, and its treasury. The battle was a decisive turning point in the long struggle between the Ottoman and Habsburg empires, shattering the myth of Ottoman invincibility that the Köprülü era had so carefully rebuilt.[19]

The Formation of the Holy League (1684)

The spectacular victory at Vienna sent shockwaves across Europe and galvanized the Christian powers into unprecedented collective action. In March 1684, at the instigation of Pope Innocent XI, a formidable new military alliance was formed: the Holy League.[5] Its core members were the Holy Roman Empire (led by the Habsburgs), the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Venetian Republic, which was eager to avenge its loss of Crete.[20] In 1686, the alliance was joined by Muscovite Russia, marking the first time Russia had formally entered into a Western European coalition against the Ottomans.[5] The League's explicit and unified aim was not merely to defend against Ottoman aggression but to launch an offensive

war to drive the Ottomans out of their European territories.[20]

The Great Turkish War and Imperial Collapse

The Holy League unleashed a multi-front war for which the Ottoman Empire was strategically and psychologically unprepared.[3] The consequences were immediate and catastrophic. Imperial forces under the command of brilliant generals like Charles of Lorraine and, later, Prince Eugene of Savoy, swiftly reconquered most of Ottoman Hungary.[5] The fortress of Buda, the capital of Ottoman Hungary for 145 years, fell to the League in 1686.[5] The following year, at the Second Battle of Mohács, the main Ottoman field army in Hungary was annihilated.[5] This final, crushing defeat triggered the deposition of Mehmed IV.

The defeat at Vienna and the subsequent Great Turkish War did not merely halt Ottoman expansion; they shattered the geopolitical and psychological foundations of Ottoman power in Europe. For the first time, the empire was forced to transition from its historic role as a feared aggressor, which set the strategic agenda, to a defensive power constantly reacting to the initiatives of a coordinated and increasingly technologically superior European coalition. This fundamental shift from offense to defense marked the true beginning of the "Eastern Question" and would define the empire's relationship with Europe for the next two centuries. The war itself would continue long after Mehmed IV's fall, concluding in 1699 with the Treaty of Karlowitz, which codified the first major, permanent cession of European territory in Ottoman history.[5]

Conclusion

The reign of Sultan Mehmed IV is a tragic paradox, a period in which the seeds of the Ottoman Empire's greatest territorial reach and its most profound crisis were sown simultaneously. The political system that defined his era—a detached, symbolically potent Sultan empowering a dynasty of absolute Grand Viziers—was a brilliant, if desperate, solution to the chaos he inherited. This unique settlement enabled the Köprülü family to impose order, purge corruption, and revitalize the state's military machine, leading to a stunning revival of imperial fortunes. The conquests of Crete, Hungary, and Podolia were real, tangible achievements that restored Ottoman prestige and projected an image of renewed, irresistible power.

Yet, this very system contained a fatal flaw: it concentrated immense executive authority in the hands of the Grand Vizier, unchecked by the traditional constraints of the palace and legitimized only by continuous success. The "victory culture" fostered by the triumphs of Fazıl Ahmed Pasha bred a strategic hubris in his successor, Kara Mustafa Pasha. The Vienna campaign of 1683 was the ultimate expression of this unchecked ambition, a gamble for historic glory that the empire could not afford to lose.

Its spectacular failure before the city walls shattered the brittle foundations of the Köprülü restoration. The defeat exposed the limits of the revitalized Ottoman military and triggered the

formation of a unified European coalition that the empire was unprepared to face. The subsequent collapse during the Great Turkish War was swift and brutal, permanently shifting the balance of power and forcing the Ottoman state into a defensive posture from which it would never fully escape. Mehmed IV, the Pious Hunter, began his reign as a child forced to sanction the murder of his grandmother and ended it as a deposed monarch watching his European empire crumble. His story is the story of the empire itself in the late 17th century: a brief, brilliant, and ultimately doomed resurgence, a reign defined by the dizzying heights of conquest and the irreversible depths of defeat.

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