

The Consolidator Sultan: Murad II and the Forging of the Pre-Imperial Ottoman State (1421-1451)

Introduction

When Sultan Murad II ascended to the Ottoman throne in the summer of 1421, he inherited not a secure empire, but a fragile and deeply scarred polity. The state was still reeling from the cataclysmic defeat inflicted by the Turco-Mongol conqueror Timur at the Battle of Ankara in 1402, an event that had shattered the Ottoman army and led to a decade-long civil war known as the Ottoman Interregnum.¹ Murad's father, Mehmed I, is rightly remembered as the "second founder" or "restorer" of the Ottoman state for having painstakingly reunified the fractured realm.¹ However, his brief eight-year reign was insufficient to fully heal the deep political fissures, quell the ambitions of rival Anatolian principalities, or eliminate the persistent external threats that viewed the Ottomans as vulnerable.² The state Murad inherited was, in the words of one contemporary, in "a time of trouble and confusion," its very survival far from guaranteed.⁴

This report posits that the reign of Murad II represents the pivotal, and often underappreciated, period of consolidation that transformed this precarious state into a formidable and centralized power. He was the great consolidator who laid the indispensable groundwork for the grand imperial ambitions of his more famous son, Mehmed II, the future conqueror of Constantinople. This transformation was not the result of a single grand strategy but was forged in the crucible of constant crisis. It was achieved through a pragmatic and often brutal combination of military campaigns that secured the Balkan frontier, the ruthless suppression of internal dynastic rivals, and, most critically, the institutionalization of a new power structure centered on the *devşirme* system. This system created a slave elite—the Janissaries and palace administrators—whose loyalty was directed solely to the sultan, providing the stable foundation upon which a true empire could be built.⁴ Murad II was not merely the father of the conqueror; he was the architect of the conquest.

Table 1: Chronology of Key Events in the Reign of Murad II (1421-1451)

Date(s)	Event
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1421	Accession to the throne; rebellion of Düzmece Mustafa begins.
1422	Siege of Constantinople; rebellion of Küçük Mustafa.
1423-1430	War with the Republic of Venice.
1425	Consolidation of rule in western Anatolia; annexation of Aydinids, Mentеше, etc.
1426	Completion of the Muradiye Mosque in Bursa.
1430	Capture of Thessalonica from Venice.
1436	Completion of the Muradiye Mosque in Edirne.
1439	Annexation of Serbia after the capture of Smederevo.
1440	Unsuccessful siege of Belgrade.
1443	Crusader forces led by János Hunyadi capture Niš and Sofia.
1444 (June)	Signs the Peace of Edirne (Treaty of Szeged) with the Hungarian-led coalition.
1444 (August)	Abdicates the throne in favor of his 12-year-old son, Mehmed II.
1444 (Nov)	Recalled to command, leads the Ottoman army to a decisive victory at the Battle of Varna.
1446	Returns to the throne after a Janissary revolt in Edirne.
1448 (Oct)	Defeats János Hunyadi's crusader army at the Second Battle of Kosovo.
1450	Unsuccessfully besieges the Castle of Krujë in Albania.
1451 (Feb)	Dies in Edirne; succeeded by his son Mehmed II.

Part I: The Sultan – A Portrait of Murad II

Chapter 1: The Crucible of Rule: Securing a Contested Throne (1421-1425)

Murad II's reign began not with ceremony but with immediate and existential threats to his authority. Ascending the throne at the young age of 17, he inherited a state that, while reunified by his father, remained perilously fragile.¹ For the first three years of his rule, his

claim was relentlessly challenged by a coalition of internal rivals and external powers who sought to plunge the Ottomans back into the chaos of civil war.²

Accession and the Rebellion of Düzmece Mustafa

The first and most dangerous crisis came from Murad's own uncle, Mustafa Çelebi, known to Ottoman chroniclers as *Düzmece Mustafa* ("Mustafa the Impostor").² In a classic display of Byzantine statecraft aimed at weakening its most powerful neighbor, the Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus released Mustafa from confinement and actively supported his claim to the throne.⁵ In exchange for this support, Mustafa promised to cede significant Ottoman territories, including the strategic port of Gallipoli, to the Byzantines upon his victory.⁷ Landed in the Ottoman European provinces by Byzantine galleys, Mustafa's rebellion gained alarming momentum. Many Ottoman soldiers, particularly the frontier lords, flocked to his banner. He swiftly defeated and killed the veteran general Bayazid Pasha, whom Murad had sent to quell the uprising, and triumphantly entered the European capital of Edirne, where he declared himself sultan.⁷ With Rumelia (the Ottoman Balkans) under his control, Mustafa crossed the Dardanelles into Anatolia to confront Murad. It was here that the young sultan demonstrated his nascent strategic acumen. Murad skillfully outmaneuvered his uncle, and Mustafa's forces, perhaps sensing a shift in fortune, began to defect in large numbers.⁷ A critical element in Murad's success was his ability to forge a tactical alliance with the Genoese commander Giovanni Adorno, whose naval support allowed Murad's army to cross the straits and besiege Mustafa in Gallipoli.⁴ Trapped and abandoned, Mustafa was captured and executed in early 1423, extinguishing the most severe threat to Murad's reign.³

Punishing Byzantium and the Second Rebellion

Having eliminated his uncle, Murad turned his full attention to punishing the Byzantine emperor for his "unprovoked enmity".⁷ In 1422, he marshaled his forces and laid siege to Constantinople itself, a clear statement of his intent to end the Byzantine threat permanently.¹ The Byzantines, unable to match Ottoman power in the field, resorted once more to their strategy of fomenting internal Ottoman division. They instigated a second rebellion, this time centered on Murad's 13-year-old younger brother, Küçük Mustafa ("Mustafa the Young").⁷ This uprising was actively supported by the powerful Anatolian principalities of Karaman and Germiyan, who were eager to throw off Ottoman suzerainty.² The strategy worked. Faced with a new dynastic threat in his Anatolian heartland, Murad was forced to abandon the siege of Constantinople to confront his rebellious brother.⁷ Demonstrating the ruthless pragmatism that would define his rule, he swiftly cornered, captured, and executed Küçük Mustafa, ending the second rebellion in as many years.³ By 1425, with both pretenders eliminated, Murad moved decisively to consolidate his power.

He annexed the perennially troublesome Anatolian beyliks of Aydin, Germiyan, Mentеше, and Teke, bringing western Anatolia firmly under direct Ottoman control.⁵ This four-year period of intense crisis, from 1421 to 1425, was the crucible that forged his authority. By successfully navigating these intertwined threats, he not only secured his own throne but also preserved the very integrity of the Ottoman state.⁴

The events of these early years reveal a sophisticated and coordinated anti-Ottoman network. The challenges Murad faced were not a sequence of isolated incidents but a multi-front war. The Byzantine Empire's support for Düzmece Mustafa was a calculated attempt to reignite the Ottoman Interregnum. When this failed and Murad retaliated by besieging their capital, the Byzantines did not simply defend; they activated a second front by colluding with the Anatolian beyliks to prop up Küçük Mustafa.² This demonstrates that the European and Anatolian theaters were strategically linked by Murad's enemies. An Ottoman crisis in the Balkans was seen as an opportunity in Anatolia, and vice versa. Murad's ultimate success lay in his ability to prevent these two fronts from collapsing upon him simultaneously. His decision to lift the siege on the ultimate prize, Constantinople, to quell the more immediate dynastic threat in his heartland was a masterful act of strategic prioritization. It underscores that the newly reunified Ottoman state was still perceived by its neighbors as vulnerable enough to be dismantled by a concerted, multi-pronged assault.

Chapter 2: The Character of a Complex Sovereign

Understanding Murad II requires grappling with a fundamental paradox: the contrast between his personal inclinations and the brutal necessities of his reign. He was a ruler who projected the image of a pious warrior while reportedly harboring a deep desire for peace and scholarship.

The "Ghazi" King and the "Tired Warrior"

Murad II actively and successfully cultivated the public persona of a *ghazi* king—a holy warrior for Islam, characterized by piety, justice, and a simple, martial lifestyle.⁷ This was a vital tool for establishing and maintaining legitimacy, especially in an era of contested rule. He was seen to embody this ideal, for instance, by restraining his troops from widespread looting after the conquest of Thessalonica and by dismounting to pray for divine aid during the desperate moments of the Battle of Varna.⁷ This carefully crafted image garnered him immense support not only from his own subjects but also from the wider Muslim world, including the Mamluk Sultanate.⁷

Yet, this public image belied a more complex inner life. The great Ottoman historian Halil İnalcık described Murad as having a "delicate and equally complex mental structure," a thoughtful and unpredictable man who was not driven by an inherent lust for power and conquest.¹⁰ Other sources reinforce this view, portraying a ruler who "truly despised warfare

and loved peace" and who would have preferred to retreat from public life to pursue literature and intellectual pleasures.² This creates the image of the "Tired Warrior," a man forced by the relentless "circumstances of the time" to engage in 25 years of near-constant conflict, rather than by the kind of world-conquering ambition that animated his son, Mehmed II.¹⁰ A rare physical description from the contemporary French traveler Bertrandon de la Broquière paints a picture of a "little, short, thick man, with the physiognomy of a Tartar," grounding this complex historical figure in a tangible reality.⁷

A Synthesis of Force and Diplomacy

Murad's leadership style reflected this internal complexity, manifesting as a sophisticated synthesis of military force and pragmatic diplomacy. He did not simply continue the peaceful, consolidatory policies of his father, Mehmed I, but instead adopted a "measured military strategy" characterized by a "limited offensive approach".⁴ He consistently demonstrated a willingness to use diplomacy, reconciliation, and even appeasement when it served the state's interests.⁴ Contemporaries noted that he honored the treaties he swore, and unlike many rulers of his era, he did not seek the complete annihilation of a vanquished foe, eagerly accepting peace terms once offered.² This diplomatic pragmatism was, however, balanced by an unwavering capacity for decisive and ruthless action when required, as demonstrated by the swift executions of his uncle and brother to secure the throne. It was this dual approach—the ability to negotiate in good faith and to act without hesitation—that was the key to his success in both surviving the early crises and consolidating the empire.⁴

This deep contradiction between Murad's documented personality and the monumental outcomes of his reign suggests he can be best understood as a "Reluctant Architect" of empire. A ruler who "despised warfare" would not normally preside over a period of such significant military expansion and state-building. His actions, however, were largely reactive, especially in the early years. He inherited a state on the verge of disintegration, besieged by internal and external enemies, and was compelled to fight simply to preserve what his father had restored.² The profound institutional changes he oversaw, particularly the empowerment of the

devşirme class, were not born from a grand, pre-conceived vision of a new world order. Rather, they were the pragmatic solution to a pressing political problem: the need to create a power base absolutely loyal to the sultan, in order to counteract the fractious and unreliable Turkish aristocracy whose rivalries had fueled the chaos of the Interregnum.⁵ The powerful, centralized, slave-run state that he forged was thus the unintended, yet logical, consequence of his struggle to solve the immediate problems of dynastic security and state preservation. He built the foundations of the future empire not because he dreamed of its glory, but because it was the only way to secure its present. This re-frames Murad II from a mere placeholder before his famous son to the essential, if perhaps unwilling, creator of the very system Mehmed would later use to conquer Constantinople.

Chapter 3: The Abdication: An Unprecedented Interlude (1444-1446)

In August 1444, Sultan Murad II took the unprecedented step of voluntarily abdicating the Ottoman throne. This act, unique in the dynasty's history up to that point, was a complex event driven by a confluence of personal grief, political exhaustion, and a bitter power struggle within the Ottoman court.

The Official Narrative vs. a Palace Coup

The official story, repeated by many chroniclers, presents a straightforward and personal motive. In the years leading up to 1444, the Ottomans had suffered a series of sharp defeats in the Balkans at the hands of a crusader coalition led by János Hunyadi.⁵ These setbacks culminated in the signing of the Peace of Edirne (also known as the Treaty of Szeged) in June 1444, which established a ten-year truce on unfavorable terms for the Ottomans.⁵ Believing he had finally secured the empire's borders, the war-weary sultan, who was also said to be deeply depressed by the recent accidental death of his favorite son and heir, Şehzade Alaeddin Ali, decided to retire from public life.⁷ He abdicated in favor of his 12-year-old son, the future Mehmed II, and withdrew to a life of contemplation in Manisa.⁵

However, a more politically astute interpretation suggests that the abdication was, in effect, a palace coup orchestrated by a rising court faction.¹³ By the 1440s, the Ottoman court was deeply divided between two rival groups with starkly different visions for the empire's future. The first was the "conservative" faction, led by the immensely powerful Grand Vizier Çandarlı Halil Pasha, who represented the interests of the established Turkish aristocracy. They favored a cautious foreign policy, fearing that aggressive expansion in Europe would provoke a united Christian response that could prove disastrous.¹³ The second was the "expansionist" or "war" faction, composed largely of military commanders of *devşirme* origin, such as Zağanos Pasha, who was one of Mehmed's tutors. This group advocated for relentless conquest, with the ultimate prize being the capture of Constantinople itself. They saw the young, ambitious, and aggressive Mehmed as their champion.¹³ From this perspective, Murad's abdication was not a voluntary retirement but a forced political exile, a temporary victory for the expansionist faction that successfully installed their young candidate on the throne.¹³

Mehmed II's First Reign and the Crisis of Varna

The expansionists' triumph was short-lived. Spurred on by the papal legate, Cardinal Julian Cesarini, who argued that an oath sworn to a Muslim was not binding, the Christian powers broke the truce just months after it was signed.⁵ A new and formidable crusader army marched into Ottoman territory, creating a crisis that the 12-year-old sultan was ill-equipped

to handle. The Ottoman military establishment, particularly the elite Janissary corps, balked at the idea of being led into a life-or-death battle by an inexperienced child and his hawkish advisors. They demanded the return of the proven and respected warrior, Murad II.² Seizing the opportunity to reassert his faction's control, Çandarlı Halil Pasha formally recalled Murad. The young Mehmed II was compelled—likely by Halil himself—to write his famous letter to his father, which according to legend contained the line: "If you are the Sultan, come and lead your armies. If I am the Sultan, I order you to come and lead my armies".¹³ Murad returned, not as sultan, but as supreme commander of the army. In November 1444, he led the Ottoman forces to a crushing victory at the Battle of Varna, a triumph that utterly destroyed the crusader army and secured Ottoman dominance in the Balkans for a generation.¹

The Second Reign

Following the victory at Varna, Murad once again attempted to retire to Manisa, leaving Mehmed on the throne.³ However, the young sultan's rule remained unstable. The political tension culminated in 1446 with a Janissary revolt in the capital, Edirne. The soldiers rioted, ostensibly over matters of pay, but it is widely believed that the uprising was instigated by Çandarlı Halil Pasha as a pretext to permanently remove Mehmed from power.² The gambit succeeded. Murad was forced to return and formally reassume the throne, which he would hold until his death in 1451.⁵ Mehmed was sent back to Manisa as a provincial governor, deeply humiliated by the experience. He would never forgive Çandarlı Halil Pasha for orchestrating his downfall, and one of his first acts after finally succeeding his father and conquering Constantinople in 1453 was to have the powerful Grand Vizier executed, decisively ending the Çandarlı family's long dominance of the Ottoman state.¹³

The entire abdication episode served as an unintentional but revealing stress test for the evolving Ottoman political system. This unprecedented transfer of power from a seasoned ruler to a child created a constitutional crisis that laid bare the deep structural tensions within the state. The crisis exposed the primary political fault line of the era: the intense rivalry between the old Turkish nobility, represented by Çandarlı, and the new *devşirme* elite, represented by figures like Zağanos Pasha, who were coalescing around the young Mehmed. This was a battle for the soul and future direction of the Ottoman enterprise. The Janissaries, themselves the ultimate product of the *devşirme* system, ironically became the kingmakers. Their loyalty, it turned out, was not to the abstract person of the sultan, but to the stability of the state and the established authority of Murad II, who guaranteed their status and pay. Their revolt in 1446 was a profoundly political act, demonstrating that the Grand Vizier, backed by the military might of the Janissaries, could effectively overrule the sultan's will and even depose a sitting monarch in favor of his predecessor. This event cemented the political supremacy of the Çandarlı family for the remainder of Murad's reign and set the stage for the dramatic and bloody power shift that would occur after 1453, when Mehmed II finally broke their influence forever.

Chapter 4: The Patron and the Progenitor: Culture, Architecture, and Legacy

Beyond the battlefield and the council chamber, Murad II was a significant cultural figure whose patronage of art, architecture, and learning left a lasting imprint on the Ottoman state. His court in Edirne became a celebrated cultural center, reflecting his personal intellectual and artistic interests.⁸ His projects were not mere acts of piety or vanity; they were integral components of a broader strategy to define and legitimize the Ottoman dynasty as it transitioned from a frontier principality to a settled empire.

Strengthening Turkish Identity

In a high culture dominated by the literary and administrative traditions of Persia and the Arab world, Murad II made a conscious and politically significant effort to elevate the status of the Turkish language and identity.¹⁰ This was a crucial element of his consolidation strategy, aimed at strengthening the cultural bond between the ruling dynasty and its core Turkmen population in Anatolia, whose support was vital. A key part of this initiative was the promotion of the claim that the Ottoman dynasty descended from the Kayı tribe, one of the original Oghuz Turkish clans. This manufactured lineage was intended to bolster the Ottomans' legitimacy against powerful Turkic rivals like the Timurids and the Karamanids, positioning the dynasty within a noble and ancient Turkic tradition.¹⁰

Architectural Patronage: Bursa and Edirne

Murad's most visible legacy is his extensive architectural patronage, which physically manifested the dynasty's power, piety, and permanence in its key cities. He undertook major building projects in both the old capital of Bursa and the new capital of Edirne.

The **Muradiye Complex in Bursa**, completed around 1426, was the last great imperial complex built in the original Ottoman capital. A sprawling foundation (*külliye*), it included a mosque, a theological school (*madrasa*), a public bath (*hamam*), a soup kitchen (*imaret*), and, most importantly, a series of twelve tombs (*türbe*).¹¹ The complex became the primary necropolis for the Ottoman royal family, entombing dozens of princes, princesses, and consorts. This cemented Bursa's spiritual importance to the dynasty long after the seat of political power had moved to Europe.²¹ Murad's own tomb within the complex is a testament to his cultivated persona of piety; in accordance with his last will, it is a simple structure with an oculus in the dome left open to the sky, so that the rain might fall upon his grave.¹¹

In the European capital of **Edirne**, Murad's patronage was equally transformative. Between 1426 and 1436, he commissioned the **Muradiye Mosque**. Originally conceived as a lodge for the Mevlevi order of Sufi dervishes, it is renowned for its exquisite tilework.²³ The vibrant

blue-and-white hexagonal tiles that adorn its interior are among the earliest and finest examples of underglaze-painted tiles produced in the Ottoman Empire. The style and craftsmanship show a clear connection to the masters from Tabriz who had decorated the Green Mosque in Bursa, indicating a continuity of elite artistic production across the empire's capitals.²³ Furthermore, Murad began the construction of a new, more extensive palace in Edirne and commissioned the monumental

Üç Şerefeli Mosque. This mosque was an architectural watershed, featuring a massive central dome and four distinct minarets, one of which had three balconies (*üç şerefeli*), giving the mosque its name. Its design marked a crucial step in the evolution of classical Ottoman architecture, demonstrating a clear absorption of Byzantine structural concepts even before the conquest of Constantinople's Hagia Sophia.²⁴ This immense investment in Edirne signaled Murad's conscious decision to establish it as the primary and permanent imperial capital.²⁴ Murad's dual focus on Bursa and Edirne reveals a sophisticated architectural strategy that served both to legitimize the dynasty's past and project its imperial future. The construction of the grand Muradiye Complex in Bursa was a deliberate act of reverence for the dynasty's origins. By establishing it as the final resting place for the royal family, he was honoring the city of the founders, Osman and Orhan, and reinforcing the dynasty's historical roots in Anatolia. This would have resonated deeply with the old Turkish aristocracy and the broader Turkmen population. Simultaneously, his massive investment in Edirne—the new palace and the architecturally innovative Üç Şerefeli Mosque—was an unambiguous statement about the empire's future. Edirne was the capital of a European-facing power, the launchpad for the holy wars (*ghaza*) that defined its identity. The grander, more monumental style of his Edirne projects reflected the empire's growing confidence and power on the European stage. In this way, Murad's patronage was a brilliant balancing act. He used brick and mortar to physically construct the identity of a state that was at once proudly Anatolian and Turkish in its heritage, and increasingly European and imperial in its ambitions.

Part II: The Empire – Statecraft and Society in an Age of Transformation

Chapter 5: Securing the Frontiers: Military Campaigns and Foreign Policy

The foreign policy of Murad II was a masterclass in strategic prioritization, dictated by the vastly different political landscapes of his European and Asian frontiers. His reign was defined by a bifurcated grand strategy: aggressive consolidation in the Balkans and cautious containment in Anatolia.

A Dual Strategy for Two Fronts

In the **Balkan Theater**, Murad pursued a relentless policy of expansion and the imposition of direct Ottoman rule.⁵ He systematically dismantled the system of vassalage that his father had re-established, annexing territories and eliminating local dynasties in Serbia, Thrace, Macedonia, and Greece.⁶ This offensive posture was aimed at creating a secure, directly administered European heartland for the Ottoman state.

Conversely, in the **Anatolian Theater**, his policy was one of caution and restraint.⁵ This approach was dictated by the formidable presence of the Timurid Empire to the east, led by Timur's son, Shah Rukh, who styled himself as the protector of the Turkmen principalities.⁵ The memory of the disastrous defeat at Ankara in 1402 was still fresh, and Murad was determined to avoid provoking a similar conflict. Consequently, he left powerful and often hostile beyliks like Karaman—which frequently allied with his Balkan enemies—largely autonomous, content with extracting tribute rather than risking a full-scale war.⁵

This dual strategy was tested by near-constant warfare. A major early conflict was the **War with Venice (1423-1430)**, fought primarily over control of the strategic Aegean port of Thessalonica. After a grueling siege of nearly eight years, Ottoman forces captured the city in 1430, a victory that showcased the empire's growing naval and siege capabilities.⁵

Throughout the 1420s and 1430s, his armies continued their advance in the Balkans, annexing parts of Albania in 1422, the Anatolian beylik of Aydin in 1426, and finally all of Serbia in 1439 with the capture of the formidable fortress of Smederevo.⁷

The Hungarian Crusades and the Decisive Victories

The most persistent and dangerous threat to Murad's European ambitions came from the Kingdom of Hungary, often at the head of large, pan-European crusader coalitions. The central figure of this opposition was the brilliant Hungarian general and regent, János Hunyadi.¹ From 1441 to 1444, a formidable alliance of Hungarian, Polish, German, Serbian, and Albanian forces inflicted a series of sharp defeats on the Ottomans, capturing the cities of Niš and Sofia in 1443 and winning the Battle of Jalowaz in 1444.⁵ These setbacks directly led to the humiliating Peace of Edirne and were a major factor in Murad's decision to abdicate.

The tide turned dramatically at the **Battle of Varna on November 10, 1444**. Recalled from his retirement to command the Ottoman army, Murad confronted the crusaders led by King Władysław III of Poland and Hungary, with Hunyadi as field commander.¹ Although the crusaders initially gained the upper hand, the battle was decided when the young King Władysław, against Hunyadi's advice, led a reckless cavalry charge directly at Murad's personal guard of Janissaries.¹⁶ The disciplined elite infantry held their ground, repelled the attack, and killed the king.¹⁶ With its leader's head displayed on a pike, the Christian army collapsed. The victory at Varna was a monumental strategic and psychological blow to Christendom. It effectively ended the last major crusading effort to save Constantinople and

irrevocably sealed Ottoman dominance in the Balkans.¹⁶

Four years later, Hunyadi mounted one final grand offensive to avenge the defeat at Varna.

The two armies met again at the **Second Battle of Kosovo (October 17-20, 1448)**. Murad II once more personally commanded the Ottoman forces, with his now-teenage son Mehmed gaining his first major battlefield experience leading the Anatolian wing.²⁸ In a grueling, three-day battle of attrition, the larger, better-organized, and more disciplined Ottoman army systematically ground down and ultimately shattered the crusader force.⁵ The victory at Kosovo was even more decisive than Varna. It completely annihilated Hungary's capacity to launch offensive campaigns against the Ottomans and permanently secured the Balkan frontier. The path to Constantinople was now clear of any significant threat from the west.²⁸

Table 2: Major Military Engagements of Murad II

Date	Engagement/Campaign	Theater	Primary Opponent(s)	Key Ottoman Commander(s)	Strategic Outcome
1422	Siege of Constantinople	Balkans	Byzantine Empire	Murad II	Ottoman failure; siege lifted to deal with internal rebellion.
1422-1430	Siege of Thessalonica	Balkans	Republic of Venice	Murad II	Ottoman victory; city captured, consolidating control over northern Greece.
1439	Invasion of Serbia	Balkans	Serbian Despotate	Murad II	Ottoman victory; Smederevo captured, Serbia annexed as an Ottoman province.
1440	Siege of Belgrade	Balkans	Kingdom of Hungary	Murad II	Ottoman failure; Hunyadi successfully defends the key fortress.
1443	Battle of Zlatica (İzladi)	Balkans	Hungarian-led Coalition	Murad II	Ottoman victory, but

					with heavy losses; fails to stop the "Long Campaign."
1444	Battle of Varna	Balkans	Polish-Hungarian-led Crusade	Murad II	Decisive Ottoman victory; King Władysław III killed, Crusader army destroyed.
1448	Second Battle of Kosovo	Balkans	Hungarian-led Crusade	Murad II, Mehmed II	Decisive Ottoman victory; Hunyadi's army destroyed, ending major Hungarian threat.
1450	Siege of Krujë	Balkans	Albanian rebels (Skanderbeg)	Murad II	Ottoman failure; unable to capture the Albanian stronghold.

The dramatic reversal of fortune between the defeats of 1441-1444 and the overwhelming victories at Varna and Kosovo points to more than just tactical errors by the crusaders. It highlights the culmination of the institutional reforms Murad had nurtured throughout his reign. While Hunyadi's tactics were effective against traditional Ottoman armies, the battles of Varna and Kosovo demonstrated the decisive superiority of the new Ottoman military machine. The steadfastness of the Janissary corps, who formed an unbreakable wall at the center of the Ottoman line at Varna, was the critical factor in the king's death and the subsequent rout.¹⁶ At Kosovo, it was again the superior discipline, organization, and staying power of the professional Ottoman army that won the three-day battle of attrition.²⁸ The Janissaries, increasingly equipped with firearms under Murad's direction, represented a modern, professional standing infantry that the feudal levies and mercenary companies of the crusader armies could not ultimately match in a pitched battle.³¹ These victories were, therefore, the ultimate validation of Murad's military-institutional project. His long-term investment in the *devşirme* system and the professionalization of the Janissary corps paid its ultimate dividend on these battlefields, securing the empire for generations and proving the superiority of this new model of a centralized, slave-based army.

Chapter 6: The Evolution of the Ottoman State

The reign of Murad II was a period of profound internal transformation, characterized by a deliberate and systematic effort to centralize power in the hands of the sultan. This process involved fundamentally re-engineering the administrative and military foundations of the state, moving away from a reliance on a semi-independent Turkish aristocracy toward a new elite whose loyalty was absolute and indivisible.

Centralization and the Rise of the *Devşirme*

A core political dynamic of Murad's reign was the struggle between the centralizing authority of the palace and the centrifugal forces of the old Turkish notable families, like the powerful Çandarlıs.⁶ These aristocratic families had gained immense wealth, land, and influence during the early conquests and often acted as a check on the sultan's power. To counteract their influence, Murad systematically built up the power of a new elite composed of his personal slaves (*kul*), men who had no independent power base and owed their entire existence to his favor.⁶ The primary mechanism for creating this new elite was the **devşirme** ("child levy"). While the practice may have existed in a more ad-hoc form earlier, it was under Murad II that the *devşirme* was institutionalized, formalized, and made the foundational recruitment system for the most important positions in the state.³³ A "Devsirme Act" passed in the 15th century codified the practice into law.³⁶ The system involved the periodic levy of Christian boys, typically between the ages of 8 and 18, from the empire's Balkan provinces.³⁴ These boys were forcibly converted to Islam, sent to live with Turkish families to learn the language and culture, and completely severed from their roots.³¹ After this initial phase of assimilation, they entered a rigorous training system. The most intellectually gifted were selected for the palace school (the *Enderun*), where they were groomed for the highest administrative posts in the empire, including the office of Grand Vizier.⁴⁰ The majority, selected for their physical prowess, were enrolled in the Janissary corps.³⁹

The Janissaries Ascendant

The **Janissary** (*Yeniçeri*, or "New Force") corps, the elite infantry of the Ottoman army, grew immensely in power and prominence during Murad's reign, with its numbers increasing from approximately 2,000 to 3,000 soldiers.³⁴ They evolved into the first modern standing army in Europe: a salaried, professional force that lived in barracks, was subject to strict discipline, and marched to its own military music.³¹ Most critically, it was under Murad II that the

Janissaries became perhaps the first infantry force in the world to be widely and systematically equipped with firearms, giving them a decisive technological and tactical advantage on the battlefield.³¹ Their growing political influence was starkly demonstrated by their 1446 revolt in Edirne, which was the final catalyst for Murad's return to the throne and the deposition of the young Mehmed II.²

This rise of the *devşirme* class created the central political tension of the era: a deep-seated rivalry between the established Turkish aristocracy, represented by the Çandarlı family who dominated the Grand Vizierate, and the new slave elite, who were loyal only to the sultan.⁵ This conflict would simmer throughout Murad's reign and would only be decisively resolved when Mehmed II, himself a champion of the

devşirme faction, finally executed Çandarlı Halil Pasha in 1453.¹³

The institutionalization of the *devşirme* system under Murad II was nothing short of a revolution in statecraft. It was far more than a novel method of military recruitment; it was a radical re-engineering of the very foundation of state power. Traditional medieval states relied on feudal levies and tribal aristocracies for their military and administrative manpower. These groups, however, possessed their own lands, wealth, and local loyalties, making them inherent potential rivals to the central monarch.⁶ The Ottoman Interregnum had been a brutal lesson in the inherent instability of such a system. The

devşirme system was designed to eliminate this problem by creating a ruling class with no external ties. The recruits were severed from their families, their homelands, and their religion.⁴⁰ Their status, their wealth, and their very lives depended solely and absolutely on the sultan's will. They were, in the most profound sense,

kapıkulları—"slaves of the Porte".³¹ This brilliant and ruthless innovation created a class of administrators and soldiers whose loyalty was, by design, absolute and indivisible. It allowed the Ottoman sultans to bypass the traditional nobility and create a meritocratic (within its own brutal logic) and completely dependent state apparatus. This was the key that unlocked a degree of absolute monarchical power and state centralization that contemporary European monarchies, still constrained by their powerful feudal aristocracies, could not yet achieve. It was this institutional revolution, solidified under Murad, that truly distinguished the Ottoman state and enabled its explosive transformation into a world empire.

Chapter 7: Economy and Society in the Mid-15th Century

The political and military consolidation achieved under Murad II provided the stability necessary for a period of significant economic recovery and growth. As the empire's frontiers were secured and internal order was established, trade flourished and cities expanded, laying the economic foundation for the imperial age to come.¹³

Economic Recovery and the Agrarian Base

Murad's reign witnessed a notable economic expansion. The French traveler Bertrandon de la Broquière, visiting the Ottoman domains in 1432, estimated that the sultan's annual revenue had reached an impressive 2,500,000 ducats.⁴² The bedrock of this wealth remained overwhelmingly agrarian. The vast majority of the empire's population consisted of peasants working on small, family-held farms.³² The state, in theory, owned all agricultural land. Under the *timar* system, parcels of this land, along with the right to collect tax revenue from the peasants working it, were granted to cavalry officers (*sipahis*) in lieu of a salary. In return, these officers were responsible for local administration in peacetime and for mustering a certain number of armed retainers for the sultan's army in times of war. This system was the backbone of both the provincial administration and the military in the 15th century.⁴¹

Social Structure and Trade

Ottoman society in this period was broadly divided into two distinct classes. The first was the *askeri*, or the ruling class. This group included the military, the palace and government administrators, and the Islamic religious scholars (*ulama*). As servants of the sultan, they were exempt from taxation.⁴¹ The second, and much larger, class was the *rayas*, the tax-paying subjects who produced the empire's wealth through farming, craftsmanship, and commerce.⁴¹ Importantly, this was not a rigid caste system; social mobility based on ability and luck was possible, most notably through the *devşirme* system which could elevate a Christian peasant boy to the highest offices of state.⁴¹ Society was further organized into largely autonomous religious communities known as *millets* and professional guilds, which regulated economic activity, setting standards for quality and pricing.⁴¹

Trade was a vital component of the economy. The Ottomans' geographic position astride the crossroads of Europe and Asia gave them control over key segments of ancient trade routes, including the Silk Road.⁴⁴ Commerce with European maritime powers, particularly the Republic of Venice, was a cornerstone of the imperial economy. This relationship was complex and often contradictory, marked by periods of intense military conflict followed by the pragmatic renewal of mutually beneficial trade.⁴⁷ The Ottomans exported raw materials highly sought after in Europe, such as wheat, spices, raw silk, and cotton, while importing finished manufactured goods like fine textiles, paper, and soap from Venice.⁴⁷ Despite fighting a major war over Thessalonica, both states recognized their profound economic interdependence. As one Venetian ambassador famously remarked of the Ottomans, "being merchants, we cannot live without them".⁴⁷ Formal trade treaties, known as *ahd-nāme*, were periodically renewed to grant Venetian merchants privileges and regulate commerce, ensuring that the flow of goods and revenue continued even amidst geopolitical tensions.⁴⁸

The Ottoman-Venetian relationship under Murad II exemplifies a highly pragmatic and

sophisticated foreign policy that transcended a simple binary of "friend" or "enemy." They were, in essence, strategic "frenemies," locked in a symbiotic struggle for control of the Eastern Mediterranean. They fought fiercely over strategic assets like ports, islands, and trade routes, as the long war for Thessalonica demonstrated.⁵ Yet, they simultaneously nurtured a thriving commercial partnership that was essential to the economic well-being of both states.⁴⁷ This reveals an ability to compartmentalize their relationship: geopolitical and military rivalry occupied one sphere of interaction, while economic exchange occupied another. Neither side was willing to allow conflict in the former sphere to completely sever the profitable lifelines of the latter. This dynamic demonstrates a mature understanding of statecraft where vital economic interests could coexist with, and at times even override, deep-seated military and religious rivalries.

Conclusion

The nearly thirty-year reign of Murad II was the critical, formative period that rescued the Ottoman state from the precipice of dissolution and forged it into the formidable, centralized power that would dominate the next stage of world history. Inheriting a kingdom still fractured by civil war and surrounded by opportunistic enemies, he methodically consolidated its foundations, secured its frontiers, and revolutionized its institutions. His reign was the essential bridge between the restored principality of his father, Mehmed I, and the world empire of his son, Mehmed II.

Murad's personal character—that of the "Tired Warrior" who preferred peace but excelled at war—shaped a reign that was often reactive yet consistently effective. His actions were driven less by a grand expansionist ideology and more by the relentless necessity of preserving the state against constant threats. This pragmatic, crisis-driven approach led him to make the institutional choices that would define the Ottoman future.

His most profound and enduring legacy was the creation of a new ruling class. By formalizing the *devşirme* system and professionalizing the Janissary corps with modern firearms, he fundamentally altered the nature of Ottoman power. He replaced the unreliable loyalties of a landed Turkish aristocracy with the absolute devotion of a slave elite whose entire existence depended on the sultan's favor. This was the institutional key that unlocked the centralized, absolute authority necessary for imperial expansion.

Ultimately, Murad II's historical significance lies in his role as the great consolidator. He quelled the internal divisions that had nearly destroyed the state, he decisively defeated the crusading armies that sought to drive the Ottomans from Europe, and he built the administrative and military machine that his more famous son would inherit. Murad II was not merely the father of the conqueror; he was the architect of the conquest. He built the state that made the capture of Constantinople not just possible, but inevitable.

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