# Sultan Mustafa II and the Ottoman Empire at the Dawn of a New Era (1695-1703)

# Introduction: The Sultan and the Storm

The accession of Sultan Mustafa II on February 6, 1695, was not merely a routine transfer of power within the Ottoman dynasty; it was a moment of profound and existential crisis for the empire he inherited. For twelve years, the Great Turkish War had raged, a conflict born from the disastrous failure at the gates of Vienna in 1683 that had systematically stripped the empire of its vast European territories and shattered its centuries-old reputation for military invincibility. Mustafa II ascended the throne at a critical juncture, a historical inflection point poised between the fading memory of classical Ottoman power and the harsh new reality of European military ascendancy.

This report analyzes the reign of Mustafa II as a pivotal, transitional period in Ottoman history. It argues that the sultan's personal ambition to revive the archaic role of the warrior-sultan-personally leading his armies into battle-was both a direct product of the crises he inherited and a primary catalyst for the empire's dramatic and painful transformation. His reign can be understood as a story of two halves, bisected by the catastrophic defeat at the Battle of Zenta in 1697. The first half was defined by his energetic, hands-on leadership and initial military successes; the second, by his psychological collapse, political withdrawal, and the subsequent unraveling of the state's internal order. The analysis is structured in two parts. Part I focuses on the personal and political journey of Mustafa II, tracing his arc from a determined reformer to a disillusioned and deposed figurehead. Part II examines the broader military, political, and socioeconomic state of the Ottoman Empire during this period, arguing that his reign was not simply a chapter of defeat but the moment of a fundamental and irreversible geopolitical realignment. By examining the intertwined fates of the sultan and his empire, this report will demonstrate how the eight years of Mustafa II's rule served as the crucible in which the Ottoman identity for the 18th century was forged.

# Part I: The Sultan - A Reign of Two Halves

The personal and political trajectory of Mustafa II is a study in contrasts, a dramatic narrative arc that encapsulates the broader fortunes of his empire. His reign began with a surge of energy and a clear vision to restore the glory of the sultanate, only to end in personal despair and political failure. The dividing line was the battlefield, and his story is best understood as a reign of two distinct, and unequal, halves.

#### The Making of a Warrior-Sultan

Born on February 6, 1664, in Edirne, Mustafa II was the son of Sultan Mehmed IV and Emetullah Rabia Gülnuş Sultan, a woman of Greek Cretan descent.<sup>2</sup> His birth in Edirne, the historical launching point for Ottoman campaigns into the Balkans, was symbolically fitting for a prince who would aspire to be a great military leader. <sup>5</sup> He received a comprehensive education that was notably superior to that of his immediate predecessors, preparing him not just for rule but as a cultured Ottoman gentleman.<sup>6</sup> His tutors included the esteemed scholar Vani Mehmed Efendi for religious studies and the master calligrapher Hâfiz Osman.<sup>2</sup> He developed a strong command of science, a passion for poetry—writing under the pseudonyms 'Gazi' and 'İkbali'—and considerable skill in archery and the javelin.<sup>3</sup> His political education was forged in the harsh realities of the late 17th century. He witnessed the calamitous final years of his father's reign, defined by the failure of the 1683 Siege of Vienna and the subsequent string of military defeats that led to Mehmed IV's deposition in 1687.9 He then observed the short, crisis-ridden reigns of his uncles, Suleiman II and Ahmed II, a period he saw as marred by the "succession of worthless viziers" and the erosion of central authority. This formative experience instilled in him a deep-seated determination to reverse the trend of sultans ceding power to their ministers and to restore a more direct, hands-on form of rule. This entire ruling philosophy was a direct reaction to the perceived failures of his immediate family. Having seen his father grow oblivious to the empire's crises while indulging in hunting, Mustafa II's accession was marked by a programmatic rejection of this detached leadership style.<sup>6</sup> His idealization of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent was the ultimate expression of this vision to restore a more austere and powerful sultanate. Unusually for a dynasty often marked by fratricide, he maintained a close and affectionate relationship with his full brother Ahmed, the future Ahmed III, a bond that would later facilitate his peaceful abdication.6

### The Ghazi's Gambit (1695-1697)

Upon the death of his uncle Ahmed II on February 6, 1695, the 31-year-old Mustafa did not wait for the customary invitation from the Grand Vizier. In a decisive and highly unusual move, he walked from the Crown Prince's apartments to the Sultan's residence in Edirne and summoned the state notables to pledge their allegiance.<sup>6</sup> This proactive seizure of power was

a clear signal of his intent to be an active, commanding ruler from the very outset.<sup>12</sup> Three days later, he issued a famous *hatti humayun* (imperial edict) that served as a public contract with his people and his administration. Declaring, "We have prohibited ourselves pleasure, delight and comfort," he explicitly criticized the eras of his predecessors and outlined his diagnosis of the state's weaknesses.<sup>3</sup> His prescription was personal sacrifice and a renewed commitment to holy war (*ghaza*). This was not a standard proclamation but a modern-style government program, a clear statement of his mission to restore Ottoman fortunes through his personal leadership.<sup>6</sup>

True to his word, Mustafa II became the last Ottoman sultan to personally lead his armies on campaign, a conscious revival of a tradition intended to boost morale and reassert central authority over the military. His first military act was to order the recapture of the island of Chios from the Venetians, which the Ottoman navy accomplished in February 1695, mere weeks after his accession. He then turned his attention to the Habsburg front. Despite opposition from statesmen concerned about the cost and risk, he launched his first Austrian campaign in June 1695. When his Grand Vizier questioned the wisdom of the sultan personally campaigning, Mustafa II famously replied: "I do not need money. I will eat stale bread if necessary. I sacrifice my body in the way of religion. Whatever trouble comes, I will be patient".

This initial period was marked by significant success, which seemed to validate his bold approach. The 1695 campaign saw the capture of the fortress of Lipova. <sup>16</sup> This was followed by a decisive victory over the Habsburg army under the command of General Veterani at the Battle of Lugos on September 21, 1695. <sup>17</sup> The Habsburg army was routed, and Veterani himself was killed and beheaded, a major propaganda victory for the new sultan. <sup>17</sup> This triumph earned Mustafa II the coveted title of 'Gazi' (holy warrior). <sup>11</sup> He followed this with a second campaign in 1696. On August 26, his forces engaged the Habsburg army, commanded by Augustus the Strong, at the Battle of Ulaş (Olasch). <sup>20</sup> While tactically a bloody draw, the battle was a strategic Ottoman victory, as it successfully forced the Habsburgs to abandon their siege of the vital fortress of Temesvár (Timisoara). <sup>20</sup>

These early victories, however, set a dangerous precedent. By rejecting the established model of delegating military command to the Grand Vizier, Mustafa II removed the political buffer that traditionally protected the sultan's prestige from the consequences of battlefield failure. A defeat could no longer be blamed on a subordinate who could be dismissed or executed. The victories at Lugos and Ulaş were therefore unequivocally *his* victories, silencing critics and reinforcing his personal authority.<sup>22</sup> This created a high-stakes, "all-or-nothing" political dynamic where his legitimacy became directly and inextricably tied to military success. The system was left with no shock absorber, setting the stage for the devastating psychological and political impact of a single, catastrophic defeat.

Table 1: Key Military Engagements of Mustafa II's Reign (1695-1697)

| Battle/Siege | Date | Location | Key        | Outcome | Significance |
|--------------|------|----------|------------|---------|--------------|
|              |      |          | Commanders |         |              |

|                            |              |                        | (Ottoman /                                    |                                 |  |
|----------------------------|--------------|------------------------|---|---------------------------------|--|
|                            |              |                        | Holy League)                                  |                                 |  |
| Battle of the              | Feb 9, 1695  | Oinousses              | Mezzomorto                                    | Ottoman                         | Naval victory  |
| Oinousses<br>Islands       |              | Islands,<br>Aegean Sea | Hüseyin Pasha<br>/ Zeno                       | Victory                         | that paved the<br>way for the<br>recapture of<br>Chios from<br>Venice. <sup>2</sup>                              |
| Battle of                  | Feb 18, 1695 | Chios, Aegean          | Mezzomorto                                    | Ottoman                         | Recapture of   |
| Chios                      |              | Sea                    | Hüseyin Pasha<br>/ Contarini                  | Victory                         | the strategic<br>island of Chios,<br>a major early<br>success for<br>Mustafa II. <sup>2</sup>                    |
| Capture of                 | Sep 1695     | Lipova, Banat          | Sultan Mustafa                                | Ottoman                         | Secured a key  |
| Lipova                     |              |                        | Garrison                                      | Victory                         | fortress at the<br>start of the<br>first major land<br>campaign. <sup>2</sup>                                    |
| Battle of                  | Sep 21, 1695 | Lugos, Banat           | Sultan Mustafa                                |                                 | Annihilation of  |
| Lugos                      |              |                        | II / General<br>Veterani (†)                  | Ottoman<br>Victory              | a Habsburg<br>army; death of<br>its commander;<br>earned<br>Mustafa the<br>title 'Gazi'. <sup>17</sup>           |
| Siege of Azov              | Ü            | Azov, Sea of<br>Azov   | Ottoman<br>Garrison /<br>Peter the Great      | Russian Victory                 | Russia<br>captured the<br>strategic port,<br>gaining its first<br>foothold on the<br>Black Sea. <sup>10</sup>    |
| Battle of Ulaş<br>(Olasch) | Aug 26, 1696 | Bega River,<br>Banat   | Sultan Mustafa<br>II / Augustus<br>the Strong | Strategic<br>Ottoman<br>Victory | Though a<br>tactical draw, it<br>forced the<br>lifting of the<br>Habsburg<br>siege of<br>Temesvár. <sup>20</sup> |
| Battle of                  | Sep 11, 1697 | Zenta, Tisza           | Sultan Mustafa                                | Catastrophic                    | Annihilation of  |
| Zenta                      |              | River                  |   |                                 | the main   |
|                            |              |                        | Eugene of                                     | Defeat                          | Ottoman army;  |

|  | Savoy | led directly to          |
|--|-------|--------------------------|
|  |       | the Treaty of            |
|  |       | Karlowitz. <sup>23</sup> |

#### The Shadow of Zenta (1697-1703)

The third Austrian campaign, launched in 1697, ended in a disaster that defined the remainder of Mustafa II's reign and Ottoman history for the next century. On September 11, 1697, at the Battle of Zenta, the Ottoman army was annihilated by Habsburg forces under the brilliant command of Prince Eugene of Savoy.<sup>24</sup> The sultan himself barely escaped with his life, his Grand Vizier Elmas Mehmed Pasha was killed, and the army effectively ceased to exist as a fighting force.<sup>10</sup>

For Mustafa II, the defeat was not just a military or political setback; it was a profound personal trauma. The event triggered a "great psychological depression" from which he never recovered. He reportedly refused to eat or drink for three days out of grief and despair. Completely disillusioned, he abandoned his warrior-sultan persona. He never went on campaign again and retreated into the seclusion of his palace in Edirne, leaving the affairs of state to others. His focus shifted from governance to personal pastimes like hunting, ironically mirroring the very behavior of his father that he had so vocally condemned at the start of his reign.

This personal failure to cope with defeat directly precipitated a systemic political crisis. In his despair, Mustafa II abdicated his responsibilities and handed over the reins of government almost entirely to his trusted former tutor, Şeyhülislam Feyzullah Efendi. This act was not a calculated political maneuver but an emotional reaction to his own trauma. It created a power vacuum at the head of the formal administrative structure—the office of the Grand Vizier—and filled it with an informal, unaccountable authority centered on the Şeyhülislam's household. This unstable power structure, born directly from the sultan's personal crisis, bred the widespread resentment, corruption, and nepotism that would lead directly to the terminal crisis of his reign.

#### The Fall of the Sultan

By 1703, the cumulative grievances against the sultan's absence and Feyzullah Efendi's corrupt rule boiled over into a full-scale rebellion known as the Edirne Incident. As a massive rebel army, swelled by disgruntled soldiers and citizens, marched from Istanbul to Edirne, Mustafa II found himself utterly isolated.<sup>27</sup> His belated attempts to placate the rebels, including the dismissal of Feyzullah Efendi, were too little, too late.<sup>27</sup>

Faced with an army of up to 80,000 rebels and with his own troops defecting to their cause, the sultan chose to avoid bloodshed.<sup>6</sup> On August 22, 1703, he was deposed, abdicating in

favor of his brother, Ahmed III.<sup>8</sup> In a final, poignant admission of his own fatal error, he advised his successor to maintain total control of the state and never delegate power as he had done.<sup>6</sup> Mustafa II was taken to the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul, where he died just a few months later, on December 29, 1703, reportedly from grief and the humiliation of his downfall.<sup>8</sup> His legacy is that of the last Ottoman sultan to personally command his armies, a final, tragic attempt to embody a bygone era. His reign represents a dramatic arc: an energetic and promising start undone by a single military catastrophe and a subsequent failure of personal resilience.

# Part II: The Empire at a Turning Point

The reign of Mustafa II was not merely a period of personal tragedy for the sultan; it was a fundamental and irreversible turning point for the Ottoman Empire. The events between 1695 and 1703 finalized a geopolitical realignment that had been developing for decades, forcing the empire to confront a new, diminished status in the European order.

#### The Great Turkish War: The Final Act

When Mustafa II took the throne in 1695, the Ottoman Empire was in the twelfth year of the grueling Great Turkish War against the Holy League—a formidable coalition of Habsburg Austria, Poland-Lithuania, Venice, and an emerging Russia. The war had already resulted in the loss of most of Ottoman Hungary and had stretched the empire's military and economic resources to the breaking point. Mustafa's initial victories offered a brief hope of reversing these losses, but the campaign of 1697 brought this hope to a brutal end.

#### The Battle of Zenta (1697): A Strategic Autopsy

The Battle of Zenta was the decisive engagement of the war, a tactical masterpiece for the Habsburgs and an unmitigated disaster for the Ottomans. The Ottoman army, personally commanded by Sultan Mustafa II, was intercepted by a smaller but highly disciplined Habsburg force led by Prince Eugene of Savoy as it was attempting to cross the Tisza River. Prince Eugene, a military genius of his age, recognized the extreme vulnerability of the Ottoman position and ordered a daring, late-afternoon surprise attack. The Habsburg forces executed a brilliant flanking maneuver, using a sandbar to get behind the Ottoman defenses and trap the bulk of the Ottoman army against the riverbank. The result was not a battle but a slaughter. Panic ensued in the Ottoman ranks, and the army was annihilated. An estimated 30,000 Ottoman soldiers were killed or drowned, compared to fewer than 500 casualties for the Holy League. The Grand Vizier, Elmas Mehmed Pasha, was killed by his own mutinous Janissaries on the battlefield. In a moment of unprecedented

humiliation, the victors captured the entire Ottoman treasury, all of its artillery, and the Imperial Seal of the Sultan, which had never before fallen into enemy hands.<sup>23</sup> The defeat was so total that it shattered any remaining Ottoman capacity to wage offensive war in Hungary and forced the demoralized sultan to sue for peace.<sup>33</sup>

#### The Treaty of Karlowitz (1699): The Geopolitical Shift

The peace congress that convened at Karlowitz (modern Sremski Karlovci, Serbia) was a historic moment of reckoning for the Ottoman Empire. For the first time, Ottoman diplomats negotiated with a coalition of European powers, accepted mediation from neutral parties (England and the Dutch Republic), and were forced to formally admit defeat.<sup>27</sup> The resulting treaty, signed on January 26, 1699, was based on the principle of *uti possidetis*—each power would keep the territory it currently possessed.<sup>35</sup> This formalized the massive territorial losses the empire had suffered.

The Treaty of Karlowitz is universally recognized as a watershed moment in European and Ottoman history.<sup>35</sup> It marked the definitive end of Ottoman expansionism in Europe and initiated a long and painful period of territorial retreat that would continue for two centuries.<sup>1</sup> The balance of power in Southeastern Europe had irrevocably shifted in favor of the Habsburgs, and the "Eastern Question"—the question of how to manage the decline of Ottoman power—began to emerge as a central theme in European diplomacy.

Table 2: Territorial Concessions of the Treaties of Karlowitz (1699) and Constantinople (1700)

| Territory/Region          | Ceded to         | Treaty    | Strategic/Economic<br>Significance  |
|---------------------------|------------------|-----------|---|
| Hungary &<br>Transylvania | Habsburg Austria | Karlowitz | Loss of a major province held for over 150 years; a crucial agricultural and strategic buffer zone was ceded to the empire's primary rival. <sup>34</sup> |
| Croatia & Slavonia        | Habsburg Austria | Karlowitz | Solidified Habsburg<br>control over the<br>western Balkans and<br>further pushed the<br>Ottoman frontier<br>south. <sup>34</sup>                          |
| Podolia                   | Poland-Lithuania | Karlowitz | Returned a key<br>territory in modern   |

|                                   |        |                       | Ukraine, reversing<br>Ottoman gains from<br>1672 and stabilizing<br>Poland's southern<br>border. <sup>34</sup>   |
|-----------------------------------|--------|-----------------------|--|
| Dalmatia & Morea<br>(Peloponnese) | Venice | Karlowitz             | Gave Venice control of key coastal territories and the Greek peninsula, strengthening its maritime power in the Adriatic and Mediterranean. <sup>34</sup>              |
| Azov                              | Russia | Constantinople (1700) | A major strategic victory for Peter the Great, giving Russia its first port and direct access to the Black Sea, breaking the long-held Ottoman monopoly. <sup>10</sup> |

# The Anatomy of a State in Crisis (1695-1703)

The military defeats were both a cause and a symptom of a deeper internal crisis that gripped the Ottoman state during Mustafa II's reign. The pressures of continuous warfare exacerbated existing economic and social problems, while the sultan's political choices after Zenta created a new and destabilizing administrative reality.

#### The Strained Treasury and Social Fabric

The Great Turkish War placed an immense and unsustainable strain on the Ottoman treasury, which ran persistent budget deficits throughout the late 17th century.<sup>15</sup> To fund the campaigns, the government imposed heavy new taxes and increased existing ones, driving many cultivators off their land and leading to widespread social unrest and local revolts, particularly in Anatolia and the Arab provinces.<sup>8</sup>

A key fiscal measure of this period was the widespread implementation of the *malikane* system, or lifetime tax farming, which began in 1695.<sup>27</sup> This system provided the state with large, immediate cash infusions in exchange for selling off the rights to collect taxes from a region for the lifetime of the buyer. While a desperate short-term solution, this policy had

profound long-term consequences. By ceding control over provincial revenue streams, the central government accelerated the decentralization of state power. It empowered a new class of entrenched regional elites (*ayan*) whose loyalty was transactional rather than institutional, sowing the seeds of the provincial autonomy that would characterize the 18th century. Furthermore, the system was rife with corruption; only a fraction of the revenue collected ever reached the central treasury, leaving the government chronically short of funds and often unable to pay its soldiers on time.<sup>27</sup>

#### The Parallel Government of Feyzullah Efendi

In the wake of his post-Zenta withdrawal, Mustafa II's delegation of power to Şeyhülislam Feyzullah Efendi created what was effectively a parallel government. Feyzullah Efendi wielded unprecedented executive power, directing both internal and foreign policy in a manner that far exceeded his traditional role and usurped the authority of the Grand Vizier. The sultan intended to use his trusted mentor to curb the influence of the powerful vizierial households that had dominated politics. 42

However, Feyzullah Efendi's rule quickly devolved into a system of extreme nepotism and corruption. He established his own household (*kapi*) as the dominant political force, monopolizing the highest posts in the religious-judicial establishment (*ilmiye*) for his sons and relatives and even securing a decree naming his son as his successor—a move unheard of in Ottoman history. This created deep and widespread resentment among the established ulema, military corps, and civil bureaucracy, whose paths to promotion were now blocked by the Şeyhülislam's family and clients. The Imperial Council, in the eyes of many, had become the "Feyzullah-zadeler Council" (Council of Feyzullah's sons), a symbol of the corruption at the heart of the administration.

# The Edirne Incident: The Empire Revolts

The Edirne Incident of 1703 was the violent culmination of all the simmering crises of Mustafa II's reign. It was not a simple mutiny but a broad-based uprising fueled by a confluence of grievances. The military was humiliated by the Treaty of Karlowitz and angered by chronic delays in pay.<sup>27</sup> The political class and the populace of Istanbul were furious at the sultan's prolonged absence in Edirne and the corrupt, unaccountable rule of Feyzullah Efendi.<sup>28</sup> The general population suffered under the weight of the ongoing economic crisis.<sup>27</sup> The revolt began in Istanbul on July 17, 1703, when the *cebecis* (armorers) mutinied over late pay.<sup>41</sup> It rapidly escalated into a mass movement, drawing in Janissaries, religious students, artisans, and ordinary citizens.<sup>28</sup> The rebels seized control of the capital and, in a crucial move, sought to legitimize their actions. They appointed their own grand vizier and sheikh al-islam and obtained a *fetva* (judicial ruling) from senior judges that declared Mustafa II unfit

to rule due to his neglect of the state and acceptance of the humiliating peace treaty.<sup>27</sup> This established a template for "legitimate" rebellion, where a coalition of military, clerical, and popular forces could claim to represent the public interest against a corrupt central authority. When the rebels marched on Edirne, the sultan's support evaporated, leading to his deposition.<sup>28</sup> The incident ended with the brutal killing of Feyzullah Efendi and the permanent return of the government to Istanbul, starkly demonstrating the diminished power of the sultanate in the face of powerful, organized factions within the capital.<sup>27</sup>

# Conclusion: The Intertwined Fates of Sultan and Empire

The reign of Sultan Mustafa II was the crucible in which the Ottoman Empire's 18th-century identity was forged. His personal story—the ambitious warrior-sultan who was psychologically broken by a single, overwhelming defeat—serves as a powerful metaphor for the empire's own traumatic experience during these years. The empire entered his reign still fighting to reclaim the expansionist glory of its classical age and left it irrevocably altered, forced to accept a new, diminished, and defensive role in the European state system. The Treaty of Karlowitz was the external manifestation of this profound shift, a diplomatic document that codified the new military and political reality on the ground. The Edirne Incident was its internal political consequence, a violent expression of the state's failure to manage the social and economic fallout of defeat and administrative corruption. Mustafa II's personal tragedy was not simply that he failed, but that he was the last Ottoman sultan who could realistically attempt to succeed as a conquering ghazi in the mold of his ancestors. His fall marked the definitive end of an era, paving the way for a new century defined not by conquest, but by defensive diplomacy, intense internal power struggles, and the long, complex process of adapting to a world where the Ottoman Empire was no longer the dominant power.

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