

Shifts in Power: The Ottoman Sieges of Vienna, 1529 and 1683

HIST 134b: The Ottoman Empire: From Principality to Republic by way of Empire

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout Ottoman history, there was a notion known as the *kızıl elma*, known in English as the “red apple”; it designated the next territorial goal for the Empire.¹ If those in power wanted to create support for conquest, they could designate a place as the new *kızıl elma* to gain support. Because of the nature of the term, it was extremely flexible. However, for a large portion of Ottoman history, it was one city: Vienna. Vienna was the capital of Hapsburg Austria, which was the country that led the Holy Roman Empire. Capturing the city would be both a militaristic and symbolic victory. The Ottomans attempted to capture the city twice, once in 1529 and once in 1683, but both times, they failed. To the rest of Europe, these sieges signified Muslim aggression against the Christian world and defined how Europe viewed the Ottomans.² There are reasons why both sieges could have succeeded and why they ultimately failed. Because of different historical contexts behind each time, each attack has a distinct explanation. Hence, these sieges must be discussed separately.

In 2007, the author Caroline Finkel attempted to establish a basis for why the sieges happened and what led to their downfall in her book *Osman's Dream*. She claims that attacking Vienna in 1529 was simply the next city for Süleyman after capturing the Hungarian capital of Buda, and it failed due to the terrain of Central and Southeastern Europe, which impeded the Ottoman army.³ She sees the 1683 siege as the idea of Grand Vezir Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Paşa and asserts that its failure was due to Kara Mustafa's poor defense of an unexpected attack by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.⁴ Regarding the 1529 siege, the author Palmira

¹ Géza Dávid, “Ottoman Armies and Warfare, 1453–1603,” in *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, ed. Suraiya N. Faroqhi and Kate Fleet, 1st ed., vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 279, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781139049047.014>.

² Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: The History of the Ottoman Empire* (New York, UNITED STATES: Basic Books, 2007), 125, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brandeis-ebooks/detail.action?docID=782126>.

³ Ibid., 123-4.

⁴ Ibid., 283-7.

Brummett adds that after Buda, there were only so few invasion routes, and Vienna was the best city of the ones available.⁵ Géza Dávid confirms Finkel's theory for failure, adding that the city is farther from Istanbul than previous Ottoman targets.⁶ Regarding the later siege in 1683, A. N. Kurat disagrees with Finkel partially, explaining that there were tensions between the two powers and the conflict was bound to happen, but agrees that Kara Mustafa had a role in its failure.⁷ Generally, while some historians may disagree with each other about the sieges, there are distinct themes between all sources in why each siege happened and why they failed.

For both attacks on Vienna, the Ottomans believed they had the advantage. In 1529, the Ottomans were simply advancing on Vienna after capturing Hungary. However, poor conditions and an underestimated enemy were the main culprits of their failure. While the Ottoman military showed tremendous success prior to Vienna, these factors stalled their momentum. The later siege was initiated by political tensions, which the Grand Vezir took advantage of. While poor conditions were a minor factor in 1683, Austria's allies and the Ottomans' poor planning were much more significant in the second failure.

⁵ Palmira Brummett, "Ottoman Expansion in Europe, ca. 1453–1606," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, ed. Suraiya N. Faroqhi and Kate Fleet, 1st ed., vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781139049047.007>.

⁶ Dávid, "Ottoman Armies," 279.

⁷ A. N. Kurat, "The Ottoman Empire Under Mehmed IV," in *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 5 (Cambridge University Press, 1961), 511, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521045445>.

PART I: THE OTTOMAN SIEGE OF 1529

At the dawn of his sultanate in 1520, Süleyman I reigned over a vast empire, stretching from the Danube in the northwest to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in the south.⁸ Almost immediately after being designated sultan, Süleyman directed his conquests toward Europe, conquering the strongholds of Belgrade and Rhodes within two years of coming to power.⁹ The aggressive expansion of Ottoman power in Europe would only continue, and after the Ottomans captured Belgrade, Hungary was exposed to Ottoman conquest. Süleyman began his campaign into Hungary in 1526, advancing into the Hungarian capital of Buda on the eleventh of September after the Hungarian king's death and a decisive victory at Mohács.¹⁰ After capturing Buda, most of Hungary's territory fell to Ottoman rule, but the Hungarian crown remained independent. The crown became vital to the Ottomans' control over Hungary after two competing candidates claimed it. One of the contenders was John Zápolya, who was elected and crowned King of Hungary in November 1526 due to being related to the former king through marriage.¹¹ The other claim was from Ferdinand I, the Hapsburg archduke of Austria, who was also elected king of Hungary in 1526 by a faction favoring his dynasty in November due to his relations to the former king as well.¹² Ferdinand then drove Zápolya out of Buda in September of the next year and was crowned there.¹³ These events were of vital importance to the Ottomans, for Zápolya was more favorable to the Ottomans, meaning they could have gained control over Hungary even while Zápolya held the Hungarian crown. In contrast, Ferdinand would not let such a conquest happen, therefore impeding the Ottomans' progress in Europe. Hence, it was

⁸ Brummett, "Ottoman Expansion," 49-51.

⁹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁰ Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 123.

¹¹ Ibid., 123.

¹² Ibid., 122-3.

¹³ Ibid., 123.

only rational that the Ottomans continue their campaign towards Vienna, for if they were able to capture the city, they could gain control of Hungary as well as Austria.

The Ottomans had many advantages over the Hapsburgs, for they had control over their other borders and had strategic and military dominance. By sieging and capturing Rhodes in 1522, the Ottomans had near-full control over the Eastern Mediterranean, with only the islands of Cyprus and Crete escaping their grasp.¹⁴ Moreover, they had control over their southern and eastern borders. In the east were the Safavids, who Süleyman's predecessor, Selim I, defeated during his reign.¹⁵ The sole major power to the south was the Mamluk sultanate, who Selim I also had conquered by 1517, securing the southern front and expanding Ottoman territory greatly.¹⁶ Thus, there was only one unstable front: the northwest, where the Hapsburgs lay. Another reason to attack the Hapsburgs was that John Zápolya asked for an alliance with the Ottomans to secure the crown, and Süleyman promised it—but not the territory of Hungary—to Zápolya; however, this was secretly a temporary measure by Süleyman to stabilize the region.¹⁷ Hence, Süleyman felt secure enough to attack, especially considering the Ottomans did not perceive Ferdinand as powerful. To this, Finkel writes: “The Austria of Archduke Ferdinand was not perceived as any immediate threat by Süleyman and his advisers who associated Hapsburg might with Charles V and his wars in western Europe”.¹⁸ While Süleyman considered the archduke to be weak, he was not unprepared for battle. To siege Vienna, he amassed a large army, which has been compared to European armies of the seventeenth century in its strength.¹⁹ It is estimated that in 1527, there were roughly 24,000 garrison soldiers in the Ottomans’

¹⁴ Ibid., 118.

¹⁵ Brummett, “Ottoman Expansion,” 51.

¹⁶ Ibid., 51.

¹⁷ Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 124.

¹⁸ Ibid., 122.

¹⁹ Dávid, “Ottoman Armies,” 282.

European holdings, which was about 58 percent of all garrison soldiers in the Empire.²⁰ Moreover, between 1522 and 1525, 97 percent of all new cannon was of small or medium size, and a growing amount of weaponry was being built with bronze instead of iron, which was a more efficient material.²¹ Because the Ottoman army was large and well-equipped, it was extremely strong and well-prepared to take the city. However, they failed, for while the army was strong and the enemy was seen as weak, the journey was long and arduous.

During the sixteenth century, Ottoman sultans launched spring to autumn campaigns, taking advantage of warmer weather and favorable conditions to make their advances. However, having a relatively small amount of time to lead an army from Istanbul meant that sultans could only go so far. As mentioned before, Süleyman entered Buda in September 1526.²² Only a few months remained before the army had to return for the winter, but Buda was within reach. However, Vienna lies 250 kilometers west of Buda, which made it even more difficult for the army to launch a spring to autumn campaign against Vienna than it was for Buda.²³ It is said that in 1529, “it took almost four months for the Sultan’s forces to reach Buda from Istanbul, and another two weeks to reach Vienna, where they arrived in the last days of September”.²⁴ The army reached Vienna later than they had reached Buda, so they had less time to siege the city before winter came. Moreover, the journey to Vienna was on difficult terrain. One account of Balkan terrain describes it as “waterlogged for much of the year before the drainage schemes of modern times” due to the overabundance of rivers that flow through central Europe and the Balkans.²⁵ Hence, the army was exhausted and after just three weeks, the Ottomans retreated.²⁶

²⁰ Ibid., 298.

²¹ Ibid., 309.

²² Finkel, *Osman’s Dream*, 123.

²³ Dávid, “Ottoman Armies,” 279.

²⁴ Finkel, *Osman’s Dream*, 124.

²⁵ Ibid., 124.

²⁶ Ibid., 124.

Because of the retreat, Hungary marked the farthest the Ottomans would expand their borders to the northwest. Additionally, the first siege of Vienna marked one of the first times the Ottomans failed a campaign, which became a prelude for campaigns to come. Süleyman would attempt to take Vienna again three years later, but the closest he would get to Vienna would be Kőse, which lies eighty kilometers south of the city.²⁷ After that, Süleyman agreed to let Ferdinand have northern and western Hungary, but did not abandon his claims.²⁸ Thus, the siege of 1529 was a failed conquest, and while the Ottoman army was powerful, it was no match for the terrain, especially considering that the Ottoman campaigning period was to end only two months after they had arrived at Vienna. However, 1529 was not the only time they would attempt to capture the city, for the Ottomans attempted to take Vienna a century and a half later.

²⁷ Ibid., 125.

²⁸ Ibid., 125.

PART II: THE OTTOMAN SIEGE OF 1683

By Mehmed IV's accession in 1648, the Ottomans had extended their empire on every front except for the northwest and came to rule over approximately 25 to 30 million people.²⁹ During the new sultan's reign, Grand Vezirs held great power, and three members of the Köprülü line held the position between 1656 and 1683.³⁰ By the time the second siege occurred, the Hapsburgs and the Ottomans had been in a state of extreme tension for over a century. At the turn of the seventeenth century, the empires were fighting a war known as the "Long War".³¹ Moreover, the Hapsburgs intervened in Transylvania in the 1650s, which was an Ottoman vassal, and the Ottomans responded, leading to a war ending in a peace treaty in 1664.³² Essentially, the Ottomans and the Hapsburgs were rivals, and they would take any chance to go to war with each other. The treaty that ended the war between the two in 1664 included a clause that meant that neither empire could attack the other for twenty years after 1662.³³ The treaty's expiration date came at an optimal time for the Ottomans, for they came to peace with Muscovy and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1681, thus securing their northeastern front.³⁴ The Ottomans also had an extremely good reason for fighting the Austrians; they could attack with the stated intention of defending the Hungarians. After the peace treaty between the Hapsburgs and the Ottomans was signed in 1664, the Hapsburg leader, Leopold I, wished to secure his rule over the parts of Hungary he controlled.³⁵ To secure his control, the Austrian king became more dominant in his rule over Hungary and made the ongoing Counter-Reformation even more brutal

²⁹ Kurat, "Mehmed IV," 500.

³⁰ Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 253.

³¹ Virginia Aksan, "War And Peace," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, 1st ed., vol. 3 (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521620956>.

³² Kurat, "Mehmed IV," 510-1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 511.

³⁴ Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 282.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

against the Protestant Hungarians.³⁶ Due to Hapsburg persecution, many Hungarians began to see Ottoman rule as safer and sought refuge in Transylvania, an Ottoman vassal state.³⁷ One prominent voice of the disenfranchised Hungarians, Imre Thököly, appealed for cooperation with the Ottomans, and the Grand Vezir at the time, Kara Mustafa Paşa, saw it as a tool he could use to fulfill his plans against the Hapsburgs.³⁸ Thus, the culmination of circumstances allowed the second siege of Vienna to happen. The frontiers were stable except for the northwest, in which the Hapsburgs were persecuting people, offering a moral reason for the Ottomans to intervene. The reports of tension could be exaggerated by an ambitious Grand Vezir, and all that was needed was for the 20-year treaty to expire in 1682.

The Ottomans were not only in a good position diplomatically, but also in a favorable position militarily because, like with the 1529 siege, their army was strong. While the true size of Kara Mustafa's army is unknown, there are reports of approximately 200,000-500,000 men in the army, joined by 40,000-50,000 Tatars as well as Thököly's men.³⁹ However, these numbers were likely exaggerated, and another account records just under 25,000 troops, joined by 8,000 Tatars as well as Thököly's men.⁴⁰ For comparison, the total number of garrison troops in the entirety of Ottoman Europe in 1527, around the first time the Ottomans attacked Vienna, was 24,000.⁴¹ The Ottoman army had superiority once again, and while the terrain was a repeating issue, it was not the downfall of the army this time.⁴²

³⁶ Ibid., 283.

³⁷ Ibid., 283.

³⁸ Ibid., 283. In fact, Kara Mustafa was so adamant to attack the Hapsburgs that he went so far as to exaggerate the trouble on the border, solicit an opinion from the *şeyhulislam*, and when the *şeyhulislam* decreed that the war was not licit, he put the peace-seeking Hapsburg envoy under house arrest.-Ibid., 284.

³⁹ Kurat, "Mehmed IV," 513.

⁴⁰ Aksan, "War," 96.

⁴¹ Dávid, "Ottoman Armies," 298.

⁴² Aksan, "War," 86.

Initially, the plan was for Kara Mustafa's army to capture the fortresses of Győr and Komárom on the Ottoman-Hapsburg border, but not to march on Vienna.⁴³ However, Kara Mustafa had bigger aspirations, and he instead directed the army towards Vienna without consulting the sultan, disregarding the two planned fortresses.⁴⁴ However, while Kara Mustafa was assembling his army and marching toward Vienna, the Hapsburgs and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, led by John III Sobieski, signed a mutual defense pact against the Ottomans, which made the Commonwealth's 1681 treaty untenable.⁴⁵ As the siege began, the Hapsburgs activated the mutual defense pact, and the Commonwealth's army, led by Sobieski, began to march to Vienna.⁴⁶ While setting up for the siege, the Ottomans left the west of the city relatively undefended, for the thickly-forested terrain would likely defy most relief forces.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, leaving a front open was their mistake, as Sobieski's army attacked the Ottomans from the west.⁴⁸ Moreover, Sobieski's army numbered 60,000, about double the Ottoman army, and the attack that followed became a rout for the Ottomans, who were forced to retreat.⁴⁹ ⁵⁰ The second siege had become a failure, and the Ottomans would never again directly attack Vienna.

The second siege's failure became much more consequential for the Ottomans, for it demonstrated that, as Finkel says, "the tide of Ottoman conquest was turning".⁵¹ The unsuccessful siege of Vienna began a sixteen-year long chain of defeats that ended in 1699 with a humiliating peace for the Ottomans.⁵² Following this defeat, the empire began to halt its

⁴³ Kurat, "Mehmed IV," 513

⁴⁴ Ibid., 513-4.

⁴⁵ Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 285-6.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 286. While the Bavarians and Saxons also sent troops to assist the Hapsburgs, neither had the official agreement that the Commonwealth had with the Hapsburgs.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 286.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 286.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 286-7.

⁵⁰ Aksan, "War," 96.

⁵¹ Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, 288.

⁵² Ibid., 288.

conquests and instead favored diplomatic initiatives.⁵³ Because of these defeats, the Ottomans had to reckon with the idea that they were no longer the unstoppable force they used to be. Instead, they had to maneuver politically and restructure their army to hold their power and position in Europe.

⁵³ Aksan, "War," 81.

CONCLUSION

The Ottoman sieges of Vienna must be treated as separate events to understand why each siege failed. In both sieges, the Ottomans thought they could succeed due to their militaristic dominance and favorable diplomatic position. However, in 1529, rough terrain and poor conditions plagued their advances and they were forced to retreat after only three weeks. The failure stalled Ottoman momentum in Europe. In 1683, Sobieski's forces were not planned for at all, and they struck at the Ottomans' weak point, turning the siege into an Ottoman rout.

The sieges of Vienna are vital in understanding European history, for it was a clash between Christians and Muslims. Vienna was one of the most important—if not the most important—city in Christian Europe during the Early Modern period, and if it was lost, it would signify a large defeat of not just the Hapsburgs, but Christianity. In Ottoman and Turkish history, the sieges are important for two separate reasons. The 1529 siege stalled Ottoman advances, and the 1683 siege began to signal that Ottoman rule in the Balkans was diminishing. Moreover, the differences in the leader of the siege signify a change of who holds power in the Ottoman Empire. While power did not shift too far from the sultan, the sultan held less power, as evidenced by the Grand Vezir leading the 1683 siege and diverting it to Vienna without the sultan's knowledge. Hence, the sieges exemplify larger shifts of power in the Ottoman Empire, and the failure of the sieges exhibit the changing status of power on the world stage.

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