



2009.11.01

Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Enemy at the Gate: Habsburgs, Ottomans and the Battle for Europe*. New York: Basic Books, 2008. Pp. xxv, 339. ISBN 978-0-465-01374-6.

Reviewed by Matt J. Schumann, Eastern Michigan University (mschuman@emich.edu).

Andrew Wheatcroft's *Enemy At the Gate* comprises three sections, and almost three different books between the same covers. It opens with the Ottoman approach to Vienna from October 1682 to July 1683, adding a few details of the Austrian response and a rich cultural and military background (13–93). The middle of the book contains a detailed account of the Ottoman campaign, focusing on the siege from the end of July to 12 September 1683, and a narrative of its aftermath from the Austrian siege of Buda in 1684 to a consideration of the potentialities of holy war against the Ottomans in the 1680s and 90s (97–224). The third section moves from the Austrian “age of heroes” in the 1680s and 90s to the Ottoman-Austrian alliance in World War I, addressing not only military, but cultural and political aspects of the war as viewed from a much later period (225–68). In the context of such a history, the very last paragraph of Wheatcroft's coda shines the most light on his narrative: it is another admiring reference to, and misappropriation of, Leopold von Ranke's famous mandate to reproduce history as nearly as possible, “wie es eigentlich gewesen [ist]” (268).

A distinguished researcher of printing and print culture at the University of Stirling, Wheatcroft displays exceptional awareness of the power of the printed word not only to crystallize and reproduce specific facts or news for a mass audience, but to preserve and especially propagate a particular opinion of a given subject. Throughout, he strives to distinguish between the actual siege of Vienna in 1683 and the one preserved in the Western imagination, noting print's power to distort and undervalue the humanity of the Ottoman Turks. He largely succeeds in this, but with some important caveats.

Ranke's challenge, taken directly from Wilhelm von Humboldt before him,¹ was to represent for readers in the present not only the facts of times past, but also the spirit that guided them. Wheatcroft does this in a peculiar fashion, mimicking to some degree the structure of Jill Lepore's history of King Philip's War—a conflict nearly contemporary with the Turkish siege of Vienna, and imagined in broadly similar terms by Anglo-Americans in Massachusetts and Connecticut.² Even more than Lepore, he gives a deep background to the siege of Vienna, starting with the Turks' entry into both Western territory and imagination following the battle of Manzikert in 1071 (3–4, 6); he reaches a climax in the middle of the book with contemporaneous accounts of the campaign, siege, and aftermath, then looks back from a distant future on the memory of the siege—in the play, *Metacomet*, in Lepore's case, and in Austria's imagined “age of heroes” in Wheatcroft's. The result, in effect, is as many as three different histories.

The first section of the book showcases Wheatcroft's knowledge not only of Ottoman politics, culture, and foreign relations, but also his insight into Western images of the Turk. Informed by everything from the precursors to the Crusades to the Mongol hordes, and from the Ottoman victories at Kosovo in 1389 (5) and Nicopolis in 1396 (89–90) to the failed first siege of Vienna in 1529 (58–59, 74), this section offers what might be called a deep history of the Habsburgs' fear of Ottoman power—and of the fears held by many people in the West, generally. Although it is possible through his numerous references to the work of Paul Rycout and others (32–33, 75–76, 81, 305–6) that he overstates the power of print on seventeenth-century Europeans—perhaps eighty to ninety percent of whom may have been illiterate—his careful description of the terror inspired by Turkish and Tatar warfare (47–54) would be enhanced only by a couple more paragraphs on *Türkenglocken*: the dreaded signal from village church bells to townsmen on the frontier that they would soon fall victim to an imminent raid.

In this background to the siege of 1683, Wheatcroft adds a perhaps inevitable sense of oriental mystery by failing to discover the causes of Kara Mustafa's campaign (80–83). He places the vizier's name on

1. Wilhelm von Humboldt, “On the Historian's Task” [1821], rpt. in *History and Theory*, 6.1 (1967) 57–71, with my commentary at *H-Diplo* (11 Apr 2007) <www.miwsr.com/rd/0924.htm>.

2. Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (NY: Knopf, 1998).

the campaign for good reasons in terms of the structures of Ottoman political responsibility (80–87, 199–200), but stops short of agreeing with opinions reported among “informed” Westerners at the time that the siege of 1683 was merely the latest outburst of Turkish aggression and barbarism. But what about the Ottoman perspective? The narrative and bibliography are sparse on the period’s international relations, overlooking the possibility that 1683 presented a unique opportunity for aggressive war given the alignments of other states, much as 1740 and 1756 would for another nemesis of Austria—Frederick the Great’s Prussia.³ Despite informing his audience that “the sultan [Mehmed IV] immersed himself in the manuscripts in the palace archives,” and that “the documentation [of earlier Ottoman campaigns] was extensive” (80), Wheatcroft cites only one page from one recent book on the paucity of Turkish records about the siege, and his own bibliography (301–26) lists no Ottoman archival sources. These might either have provided more clues about the campaign from the perspective of Ottoman officials or have substantiated his claim that there really is no documentation on the matter. In the absence of such research, the war’s causes naturally seem mysterious!

In the second section, Wheatcroft examines the siege from both sides with remarkable detail and sensitivity. His discussion of Turkish saps, mining, and grenade technology is impressive, and his narrative of the siege (111–87) makes for lively reading. He alerts readers early to the Austrian victory, but his account of the relief army is so spare that their arrival may surprise the modern scholar almost as much as it did the Turks! So too, the casualty figures for the defenders of Vienna come as a shock, adding an aura of competence to Turkish operations, even though the siege descended into a disease-ridden bloodbath long before its completion, rather than fitting stereotypes of mass slaughter *after* a successful siege.

As in Lepore’s case, the most problematic section of Wheatcroft’s book is the denouement. The military climax having passed, the focus returns to memory, imagination, and the printed word. Wheatcroft cherry-picks from over two centuries of Austrian memory of the “Age of Heroes” and increasingly well-documented shifts in Western opinion about the Turks and the Islamic world. In a macrohistory that brings Julius Caesar (99, 193) and the crusades into the account of a seventeenth-century war, Wheatcroft might be forgiven for outlining rather than thoroughly investigating the historical circumstances, choices, and values behind actions and actors. Nonetheless, his fascinating account of the historiography on Prince Eugene of Savoy will be of much use to future scholars (247–52). His explanation of other measures of reconciliation is also of interest, notably the Imperial Oriental Academy established in 1753 (262) and the lack of a major nineteenth-century war between two empires clearly entering a period of decline.

This history of the Ottoman siege of Vienna approaches a difficult subject with a challenging mixed methodology—challenging because military and cultural historians often read their sources with very different eyes. Wheatcroft tries to play to both audiences, and strikes fair balance between the vagaries of military operations and the intricacies of their reception in Western print culture. While military and diplomatic historians might cavil about the absence of archival sources and the concentration on cultural history in the first and third sections, this account of the siege in 1683 is quite accessible and worthwhile for an advanced undergraduate audience. Wheatcroft’s accounts of memory and print culture are less exciting and straightforward than his narrative of the siege, but will be useful to aspiring historians of culture, print, the written word, and transfers of knowledge. While *The Enemy at the Gate* markets itself as a history of Ottoman operations in 1683 and their reception in the West, it may better be described as a cultural history of the Austrian-Ottoman rivalry with the siege as *Hauptpunkt*, a metanarrative of how memory—especially popular memory informed by a political agenda—distorted and undermined Humboldt’s and Ranke’s ideal of presenting history “as it really was.”

3. By far the best summary of Frederick’s wars is Dennis Showalter, *The Wars of Frederick the Great* (NY: Longman, 1996). See also Reed Browning, *The War of the Austrian Succession* (NY: St. Martin’s, 1993), and Franz A.J. Szabo, *The Seven Years War in Europe 1756–1763* (NY: Longman, 2008).