



The Last Muslim Conquest: The Ottoman Empire and its Wars in Europe

by Gábor Ágoston.

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Two narratives dominate popular images of the Ottoman Empire in Western historiography: first, its conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and second, its collapse during the First World War. For most of the five centuries between these events, however, the Ottoman Empire was one of the world's most powerful states, governing an expanse of contiguous territory from Northwest Africa to Southeast Europe to an ever-shifting border with Persia.

Gábor Ágoston's monumental book traces the history of the Ottoman Empire during the acme of its strength, from its conquest of the Byzantines to its late seventeenth-century stalemate in the Balkans, when it posed an existential threat to central and western Europe, three times threatening Vienna and overpowering several Christian armies and kingdoms.

In his book's title, historian Ágoston defines the significance of the Ottomans' struggles in the Balkans and central Europe to continue the expansion that marked the first seven centuries of the Islamic world, and only Spain and Sicily reversed conquests by Muslim armies. The Ottoman juggernaut, as seen by both Orthodox and Catholic rulers in Eastern Europe, was not quite unstoppable, but it was certainly to be feared and fought.

The book's fourteen chapters follow the historical arc so common in imperial histories: foundation, formative victories, conflicts with peers and near-peers, overreach, and an equilibrium punctuated by modest declines and sporadic revivals of imperial fortunes.

The initial centuries of the Ottoman Empire were driven by holy wars, with campaigns led by sultans and their chief lieutenants, funding by plunder, and justified on religious and dynastic grounds. Using highly functional and effective systems of tribute, redistribution of looted wealth and lands, and a division of labor between military and state elites, the Ottomans built the largest and most effective empire of their time. Able to marshal vast armies and navies, collect revenue, and coordinate logistics in every corner of their far-flung domains, the Ottomans were vastly superior in resources to any one of their main rivals, whether the Habsburgs, the Russians of Muscovy, or Persia. With careful military or commercial alliances, such as that with France, the Barbary States of North Africa, Venice, or dependent Christian kingdoms in the Balkans, Ottoman power could be projected with even more strength.

Ottoman capacity was impressive in other areas, as well. Their diplomats and spies effectively used information and access to manipulate other European powers, with the prospect of facing the seemingly endless resources of Istanbul an incentive to encourage treaties, ceasefires, and agreements rather than continue unremitting conflict. Ottoman infrastructure was also highly developed, with the best road network in the world since the fall of the Roman Empire, a combination of decentralized and centralized recruitment of military forces, and a naval building program that ensured superiority against almost any combination of European naval powers, except when, as at the 1571 Battle of Lepanto, there was a coalition—albeit one that did not endure past this Christian victory.

Ágoston effectively examines not just the internal dynamics of the Ottoman Empire, using new sources on the internal operations of the court, armies, economic system, and diplomatic corps, but the impact on other European powers of the long-running conflict with the sultans. The embrace of military innovation, improvements in battlefield tactics, and enhancements in fortifications and defenses by the Habsburgs and other Christian powers owe substantially to the ongoing threat of Ottoman assaults. Defending against Ottoman power became a driving force in the development of Western armies during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, at a time when the Ottomans, confident in their own strength, allowed the decentralization of the empire to accelerate even as the sultans became less powerful and less likely to lead campaigns themselves.

The failed siege of Vienna in 1683 was not an absolute point marking a hard break; there had been Ottoman defeats prior to this point, and there would remain Ottoman days of victory thereafter. However, this would be the last attempt by Istanbul to take a major Europe city; their goal thereafter was to maintain their conquests against Christian counterattacks. By the end of the seventeenth century, Ottoman superiority led first to parity, and then to relative decline. By the late 1700s, the slow rollback of Islamic conquests had begun, with only modest results from Ottoman efforts to restore their previous superiority on the battlefield.

The author argues convincingly that in victory and in defeat, the Ottoman Empire was essentially a European state, albeit an Islamic one in its religious and historical practices. With an increasing percentage of their population, economic strength, and cultural vitality based in southeastern Europe, the Ottomans perhaps looked nostalgically east to their Turkic homeland and south to Mecca, but the engine of their empire was European, as were their chief rivals.

This is an impressive book, well written, making good use of both Ottoman and Western sources, and crafted to keep the reader engaged. As with any manuscript that covers such an extensive breadth of time, there are points at which one might ask for more detail or a better explanation, especially for decisions made at the highest levels. However, this is arguably not a failing, but instead an encouragement for other scholars to expand on the questions raised in this volume.

This book is a major contribution to understanding the trajectory of the Ottoman Empire, focused on the centuries-long wars it fought in Southeastern Europe, with echoes on peripheral zones of conflict. The Ottoman Empire was created through warfare against Christian states: first the Byzantine Empire, then against Catholic and Orthodox states in southeastern Europe. Just as the Middle Ages should no longer be recounted without frequent references to Constantinople, so must European history include a more careful integration of the Ottoman narrative.