Brandon J. Bates

Informative Research Paper

Winter 2003 Semester

Professor Mari Jorgensen

The Beginning of the End: The Failure of the Siege of Vienna of 1683

The Beginning of the End: The Failure of the Siege of Vienna of 1683

During the latter part of 1683, the Ottoman army, the most fearsome war machine to ever come out of the Middle East, took its position to besiege its next victim, Vienna. The mere presence of this legendary fighting force was enough to strike terror in the hearts of its foes. However, what the Ottomans initially classified as a sure victory resulted in one of the most ignominious defeats in the history of the Ottoman Empire. This resounding defeat marked, as most historians agree, the beginning of the end of this middle-eastern leviathan. Why did such a formidable force fail? The answer appears to be the result of a combination of factors: tactical disadvantages of the Ottomans, lack of unity, and strategic errors of Mustafa.

Upon their arrival, the Turks vastly outnumbered the Viennese troops. Davis estimates that Turkish army had a force of between 140,000 and 240,000 men versus a seemly small garrison of 11,000 Viennese soldiers and 5,000 civilian volunteers (139). Although the relief force consisting of Poles, Germans, and Austrians numbered, according to Davis, 75,000-80,000 strong, the Ottoman army still out numbered the enemy force by a factor of between 1.46:1 and 2.64:1 (139). Notwithstanding the numerical superiority of the Ottomans, they were at a severe tactical disadvantage. The most basic challenge inherent in any military campaign was that of securing continuous provisions. Granted, the army foraged for a portion of its food, but ammunition restocking required a supply line from the home front. Istanbul, the supply hub, was about 740 miles from Vienna and lay over mountainous terrain. Furthermore, Barker indicates that "most of the fighting men were feudal lords and servitors torn from their normal agricultural pursuits and forced to maintain themselves at their own expense […]" (195). Thus, each man was limited by his personal economic situation. The combination of these two factors, as I see it, created a severe limitation on the effective duration of any Turkish long-range operation.

In addition to logistical difficulties, tactically, the Ottoman army was out of its element and beginning to show its obsolescence. Barker, a noted authority on the subject, describes the Ottoman infantry formation and its intrinsic weaknesses:

> The standard position in battle was the customary oriental half-moon or oval arrangement, the object of which was to envelope the adversary by a pincer movement […]. The warriors did not advance in strictly ordered battalions but as large, irregular bands. Real maneuver was out of the question. If the ranks lost momentum, if they got themselves into the kind of difficulty from which Western units might escape by rapid shifting-about, they became helpless. They lacked the cement of tight organization." (196)

Thus, the Ottoman army's advantage depended upon a situation allowing it to both employ its signature pincer movement and maintain its momentum during the course of the attack. I do not think that the mountainous, heavily-wooded area surrounding Vienna created a propitious battle environment for the Turks. Because of the terrain, an effective pincer movement was impossible, and the tempo of the battle was determined more by the terrain than by the combatants. This was a battle in which flexibility was paramount, and flexibility was what the Turks lacked. Turkish enemies, however, were adapting to a more modern doctrine of warfare. Laffont notes that the European armies "were receiving more powerful weapons, more methodical training, [and] stricter discipline" while the Janissaries, the elite fighting force of the Turks, "were living on their reputation" (318). He then concludes that "these new [European] tactics made the individual soldier a cog in a much more complex and efficient war machine than the old-fashioned armies of the Ottoman Turks" (318). The result of Turkish reluctance to adopt new tactics and weaponry severely handicapped the Ottoman army and was a presage of what would ultimately lead to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.

Although united under the same flag and by the same basic religious beliefs, the unity of the Ottoman army during the campaign of 1683 ended there. Kara Mustafa, the Grand Vizier and commander of the Ottoman army, had the interesting challenge of engendering a sense of esprit de corps among the ranks of what Barker labels as the "ethnically kaleidoscopic Ottoman host" (187). I can see such a variety in the demographical cross section also creating special disciplinary problems. Levels of training and experience would have varied greatly within the ranks, thereby making any uniform doctrine for maintaining discipline difficult, if not impossible, to employ. As such, techniques useful for maintaining order among the aristocracy would have been completely inefficacious among the ranks of peasant conscripts. Sadly, soldiers looking to their commanders as a source of unification, found little to inspire them. So poor was the Turkish leadership during the campaign that one expert commented, "if the Ottoman leadership had not been so deficient, it is conceivable that the army's virtues would have at least balanced its defects" (Barker 195). Leadership problems were not confined solely to the lower echelons of the Ottoman host. The Grand Vizier, in particular, had an air of hubris and a bombastic demeanor that seemed to alienate those under his command. On one occasion it is reported that the Tartar Khan, the commander of the army of an Ottoman tributary state, refused Mustafa's order to make a preemptive strike against the advance section of the Polish relief army because "[that] despicable general", as the Tartar Kahn characterized him, never gave him "sufficient support or encouragement" and "always insulted him (Stoye 167). In fact, it appears that the lack of esteem felt for the Grand Vizier was such that during the final moments of the siege, when Kara Mustafa issued the order for all troops to gather at the heart of the Ottoman camp for a final defensive volley, the soldiers fled, effectively ending the battle

(Stoye 172). Thus, the lack of esprit de corps found its roots in cultural diversity and uninspiring leadership.

As a corollary to the discussion of the deficient leadership exhibited throughout the entire campaign, it is instructive to highlight some of Mustafa's fundamental strategic errors. I believe that his over-estimation of the power and effectiveness of his army constituted the tree from which all his subsequent mistakes branched. Expecting that the presence of the multitudinous Turkish ranks would create panic and fear in the minds of the Viennese denizens, Mustafa was justified in his presumption that Vienna would yield to him without much struggle, since such had been the case during numerous past sieges in Ottoman history. However, the Viennese chose a different route. In response, Kara Mustafa had two options: mount a full-scale attack on the city or maintain pressure on its inhabitants through starvation and token attacks. The first of the two options almost guaranteed success, while the second created an element of great uncertainty. In order for the second option to succeed, Vienna had to capitulate before a relief army arrived and Ottoman provisions were exhausted. Why, then, did Kara Mustafa opt for the latter of the two options? According to Barker, contemporary sources claim that "he strove to take Vienna intact, by means of a capitulation rather than by a general storm (in which the troops would have enjoyed the right of plunder), because he lusted after the treasures which he believed to be stored in the city" (Barker 71). His selfishness caused him to pursue a foolish course of action which gave the relief army just enough time to arrive before Vienna fell to the Turks. The delay would cost him the battle and, ultimately, his life. Another tactical blunder on the part of Mustafa was his failure to prepare sufficiently to defend against the relief army. Stoye relates that the King of Poland "noted that the Turks had been foolish in not trying to defend the routes across the Weiner Wald, and even more so in not fortifying their encampments around Vienna"

(166). Mustafa had a great vision of Ottoman conquest in Europe, but he lacked the level-headedness and prudence to bring his dreams to fruition. Consequently, he failed.

During the Siege of Vienna of 1683, the fate of Europe rested upon the shoulders of two opponents. The odds seemed to be stacked against the Ottomans, but had they planned more prudently and acted with greater rapidity, the outcome of the siege may have been different. Leitsch claims that "the Sultan and his supreme vizier, by attacking Vienna, contributed more to the downfall of the Ottoman Empire than any Ottoman politician had ever done by one single action" (40). Though it may seem caustic, it is an accurate assessment of the outcome. The main body of the Ottoman army was decimated and any hope that the Turks had of further European conquest was shattered. This pivotal battle not only marked the end of Ottoman territorial expansion in Europe, but also the beginning of what was to be a long decline of the Ottoman Empire, the end of which would not come until 1920 at the council tables of Sévres.

Works Cited

Barker, Thomas M. Double Eagle and Crescent: Vienna's Second Turkish Siege and Its Historical Setting. Albany : State University of New York Press, 1967.

Davis, Paul K. Besieged: An Encyclopedia of Great Sieges from Ancient Times to the Present. Santa Barbara : ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2001.

Laffont, Robert. The Ancient Art of Warfare. Vol. 1. Turin: ILTE, 1966.

Leitsch, Walter. "1683: The Siege of Vienna." History Today Jul. 1983: 37-40.

Stoye, John. The Siege of Vienna. Edinburgh : Birlinn, 2000.