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Late medieval Southeast Europe between Latin Christianity, Orthodoxy, and Ottoman Islam

Kurseinheit 3

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I THE IMPACT OF OTTOMAN EXPANSION ON SOUTHEAST EUROPE

1. Effects of war and conflict: slavery, destruction and demographic changes

The Ottoman expansion in the late Middle Ages had a great impact on how Southeast Europe developed during the subsequent centuries, leaving a distinct imprint on almost all societies and lands that were affected by it. Many of these changes have come to be associated with the dominant image of the region in public imagination and individuals tend to project them into the very distant past even though most of them were actually consequences of long-lasting evolution and processes that began well after the Ottoman conquest had ended. In this *Kurseinheit* we will attempt to focus only on the late medieval period that is usually clouded by impressions from later centuries and tends to get lost in the more general approaches to the overall history of the region. Despite the obvious significance of political events, the full complexity of the Ottoman conquest cannot be grasped without an insight into its social, religious, military, legal, cultural and artistic aspects. It is also important to note that this multifaceted process did not bring about an immediate revolution whereby all traces of the previous civilization were completely erased and replaced by the Ottoman and Islamic culture, but actually initiated a slow, gradual, progressive and continuous transformation of Southeast Europe that lasted well into the modern era. Historians and the broader public have tended to observe and label these changes either as “positive” and/or “negative”, either as resulting in “progress” or “deterioration”. It is easy to see how such terms in the context of this topic can be viewed as politically and ideologically motivated. They should, therefore, be set aside in order to enable a more nuanced and balanced evaluation of the conquest’s more “generative” properties that provoked, incited and resulted with change.

Before moving onto the more enduring social and cultural transformations that came with the implementation of the Ottoman administrative and legal structures, we should first turn towards the processes that preceded them and eventually enabled the Ottomans to apply their system in the conquered territories. The Ottoman expansion in Southeast Europe was primarily the result of a military enterprise, and as any conquest of its kind it brought along certain changes that could not ever be thorough or extensive in the first stages of the conflict, but were actually short-lived and temporary. This is because almost every war in human society seems to bring destruction, devastation and loss of human life, after which comes a period of peace, resulting with restoration and renewal. The wars that the Ottomans waged against the various princes in the region were not any different and should not be considered differently from other military campaigns. Unfortunately, due to the different perceptions of Ottoman legacy, obscured and complicated by nineteenth century romantic historiography, it has become increasingly difficult to establish a historically accurate and objective assessment of the conquest and its immediate aftermath.

Namely, there can be little doubt that Ottoman territorial expansion during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was followed by war, violence, disorder and destruction, which stands in stark contrast when compared to the more tranquil and relatively prosperous periods of the later centuries. As has been previously

demonstrated, the establishment of Ottoman power in Southeast Europe was strongly opposed not only by the local ruling elites, but also by the majority of the people who were uncertain of their destiny under a new system of administration and government. As a direct consequence of military activities many buildings were destroyed while great multitudes of people were taken as slaves into captivity. Not feeling safe in the times of war, which were followed by economic deprivation and famine, many sought refuge in migrating to safer areas located further away from the conflict zones in the border regions, resulting with substantial, although not complete depopulation of urban areas and the countryside. Once the territory was fully incorporated into the Ottoman Empire, the authorities undertook various active measures to repopulate the devastated areas and rebuild the destroyed structures, revitalizing their economic potential in the best interest of the Ottoman state.

Although this might seem fairly logical and straightforward, the fact that historians have used different sources to write about the same topic meant that they came to diametrically opposing and often ideologically inspired conclusions. This is particularly applicable to discussions surrounding the immediate effects of war and conflict. Voices of reason seem to be quite rare and a binary division dominates both the academic and non-academic discourse. Those that study the topic from a western medievalist perspective tend to present the Ottoman conquest as a devastating wave that destroyed everything that stood in its way, including the population. By augmenting the extent of the destruction they claim that the region experienced a demographic "catastrophe". On the other side, many Ottomanists can be considered as proponents of the seemingly more moderate "transition" theory whereby the conquest brought about no wholesale changes. They usually downplay the consequences of war and violence stating that the human existence continued unobstructed and that this allowed the region to maintain its predominantly Christian character throughout the whole period of Ottoman rule. Needless to say that such extreme views have to be moderated by a critical approach that will take into account arguments from both sides and return the discussion back to the sources. This will not be easy as some of the controversial issues are among the most contentious and intensively debated topics in historiography precisely because of a lack of sources or because of obvious drawbacks and limitations of the documents themselves. Take, for instance, the question of historical demography that dominates the debate. It is virtually impossible to estimate the exact number of the population that lived in Southeast Europe prior to the Ottoman conquest or immediately after it, and this has left the doors wide open for liberal approximations, wild guesses and speculations, some of which even estimate that the whole human losses amounted to more than half of the overall previous population, while others go completely in a different direction, stating that demographic changes during the Ottoman conquest were no different than elsewhere in Europe at that time.

Contemporary primary sources often give unquestionably highly inflated and implausible numbers. For example, in the beginning of 1462 the Hungarian King Matthias Corvinus complained somewhat dramatically to a Venetian ambassador that in the previous three years since the fall of Smederevo Turks had abducted more than

200,000 people from his Kingdom.¹ Although claims such as this one must not be taken at face value, and although specifying an exact figure of population losses on the basis of limited, and quite often insufficient contemporary records is extremely problematic, one should bear in mind that the available Ottoman sources also give evidence about the vast depopulation and desolation of the conquered lands directly after the conquest. The Ottoman *defters* list many villages and estates as being deserted, but these sources must also be approached critically and with a degree of caution. Despite giving valuable and reliable statistical material, they are not a census and do not include all the inhabitants of a certain area.

Diplomatic and narrative sources, of both western and Ottoman provenance, also testify about the devastating repercussions that Ottoman military activities in the initial phases of the conquest had on the destruction of fortifications and other buildings. For instance, medieval fortresses scattered throughout Southeast Europe represented strategic defence lines that the Ottomans naturally wanted to break in order to gain control over territory and resources. Therefore, they often laid siege to them, bombarding them sometimes with cannons, and after taking them, the military would keep garrisons only where necessary, completely destroying those castles they could not keep as they could possibly fall into enemy hands. This is not only confirmed by written evidence but also by archaeological excavations and the degree of destruction routinely corresponds to the intensity and duration of the fighting. Furthermore, border areas of open armed conflict, where the territory was actively contested between the two sides, were deemed economically sterile, and were not spared from the repercussions of war. The Ottomans would attempt to revive them only after the hostilities ended. In that sense, it is worth keeping in mind that sometimes the demographic reconfiguration was less spontaneous and more of a consequence of conscious state policy in securing and consolidating authority in newly acquired territories, in dealing with rebellious communities or repopulating abandoned settlements, allowing for a quicker and easier implementation of Ottoman administrative and legal practices.

One other noteworthy feature of the border warfare in Southeast Europe was ransom slavery that contributed to the overall devastation and desolation. While slavery was common in the region throughout the late Middle Ages, especially in Bosnia where most of the inhabitants were not considered faithful Christians and could be captured and sold on the Mediterranean slave markets without any repercussions, the period of the Ottoman conquest saw a relative increase in the practice of enslaving free people. This was mostly typical for those areas where frequent military activities weakened the grip of local authorities and instilled a general sense of anarchy. The majority of slaves were captured in armed conflicts, sieges and raids, by the Ottoman *akıncıs* or regular forces, with thousands of men, women, and children sometimes being brought to the market after a single military campaign. The more successful the raid was, the cheaper the cost of slaves would be. Âşıkpaşazâde describes that booty

¹ IVAN NAGY and ALBERT NYÁRY, *Magyar Diplomacziak emlékek – Mátyás király korából (1458–1490)*, Vol. I (Budapest, 1875), 112.

from such incursions was so plentiful that it caused a significant drop in prices on the slave markets in Edirne and Skopje:

Sultan Murad was aware that Belgrade was the gate to enter the land of Hungary. He intended to conquer this gate. He gathered an Islamic army and fell on Belgrade as if to attack it, but he crossed the river and began ravaging and destroying the Hungarian lands. The gazis gained enormous spoils. They sold one slave girl for a pair of boots. I as well took a nice six or seven-year-old boy for a 100 aspres, capturing seven more. There were more captives than soldiers. It was said that from the beginnings of Islam such a glorious battle did not occur. And so it was. I also participated in this raid. One day I arrived before the emperor and told him: "Lord emperor, in order to take these captives I should also have horses and money for traveling". The emperor gave me 500 aspres and two horses. With nine slaves and four horses I came to Edirne. I sold them each for 300 aspres, and some for 200 aspres. [...] It was such a raid that in Skopje a four-year-old boy was sold for 20 aspres. [...] By God, apart from the ones I cut down, I captured five living ones as well. I brought them to Skopje where I sold all five for 900 aspres.²

Information about slaves and slavery appears much more frequently in non-Ottoman sources that record various campaigns and instances when the unfortunate people were captured, usually providing very inflated numbers. In the account of his travels to the Holy Land, Bertrandon de la Broquière related the following credible experience he had near Plovdiv in 1433:

We rode through a beautiful plain which is between two mountains and runs along the said Maritsa River, being a good forty miles wide. On my path I met fifteen men who were connected with big chains around their necks and a good ten women who had recently been captured in the Kingdom of Bosnia during a raid that the Turks had made there. Two Turks were leading them for sale to Adrianople.³

Slavery was certainly legal and widespread throughout the Ottoman Empire where it represented a crucial source of labour but was also seen as a marker of high social status so that owning a slave became a matter of prestige in Ottoman society. Apart from campaigns, slaves were also sourced commercially through the activities of local Christians who kidnapped their co-religionists and then sold them mostly to the Ottoman Turks. These villainous characters came to be known by the Slavic term *robci*, essentially meaning "slavers", and they appear recurrently through the judicial records that are kept in the Dubrovnik State Archives. Usually, these would be court cases that have been filed against persons or groups who have been accused of seizing free men, women and children, in some instances whole families, and selling them to the Ottoman Turks. The cases were filed either by surviving family members and relatives,

² AŞIKPAŞAZADE, *Osmanoğulları'nın Tarihi*, eds. KEMAL YAVUZ and M. A. YEKTA SARAÇ (Istanbul, 2003), 198-200; GLIŠA ELEZOVIĆ, "Turski izvori za istoriju Jugoslovena", *Brastvo* 26 (1932), 67-69. Trans. Emir O. Filipović.

³ *Le Voyage d'Outremer de Bertrandon de la Broquiere*, trans. CHARLES SCHEFER, Paris 1892, 199-200. Trans. Emir O. Filipović.

or by the enslaved individuals themselves once they managed to escape captivity or gain liberty in some other way. Even though this practice was quite intensive at one time, it did not last long. As soon as the period of Ottoman conquests ended, this temporary custom was eradicated.

2. Cultural contacts and exchange, coexistence and cooperation

Beside its apparent destructive properties, war was also a powerful stimulant that prompted and encouraged adaptation, exchange and acculturation, especially in the border areas that were most affected by it. In traditional portrayals of the Ottoman conquest, the whole process was presented as a continuous and permanent war, without any rest or respite. The historiographical discourse was dominated by talk of conflict and antagonism, attack and defence, where things could only ever be good or bad, positive or negative. In that way historians disregarded the very considerable grey area in between the two. The Christians and Muslims of Southeast Europe in the late Middle Ages did not perceive each other exclusively as enemies with which there could be no interaction, partnership or cooperation. Theirs was not a history of uninterrupted mutual enmity and hostilities between two parties who only engaged through war. To the contrary, there are perhaps even more instances where the seemingly opposing sides collaborated, especially if it was politically and economically profitable for both.

The generally tolerant and inclusive disposition of the Ottomans, as well as their political pragmatism, allowed for cooperating with anybody who would be willing to assist them, and this facilitated sporadic truces and armistices which in turn resulted with coexistence and cultural interchange. As opposed to the ingrained image of reciprocal resentment between Christians and Muslims, many European states, particularly those with economic interests in the East, maintained respectful trade relations and diplomatic correspondence with the Ottomans ever since the middle of the fourteenth century. Momentary alliances between European powers and the Ottomans were not all that unusual and contemporary sources testify to the quite rich and intensive contacts that Italian princes had with the Ottoman sultans. The merchants of Genoa established close ties with the Ottoman emirs as early as 1352, gaining trading favours and privileges; Gian Galeazzo Visconti, lord of Milan, also maintained a correspondence with Sultan Murad I in the time leading up to the Battle of Kosovo in 1389; while Ladislaus of Anjou, King of Naples, relied heavily on the Ottomans to achieve his political goal of gaining the crown of the Hungarian Kingdom. Likewise, Lorenzo de Medici of Florence was an ally of Mehmed II and even commissioned a commemorative medal with his image that was sent to Istanbul as a token of appreciation and gratitude.⁴ Venice had a resident ambassador in Constantinople from 1454 and the Venetian painter Giovanni Bellini produced a famous portrait of Sultan Mehmed II.⁵

⁴ EMIL JACOBS, "Die Mehmed-Medaille des Bertold", *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 48 (1927), 1-17.

⁵ LOUIS THUASNE, *Gentile Bellini et Sultan Mohammed II. Notes sur le séjour du peintre vénitien a Constantinople (1479-1480)* (Paris, 1888).