

The Enemy at the Gate

*Habsburgs, Ottomans and the
Battle for Europe*

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Contents

Maps	viii
Illustrations	xiv
Acknowledgements	xv
Preface	xix

Introduction: The Terror in the East	i
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PART ONE

1 A Call to Arms	13
2 Turks and Tartars	35
3 A Plague on the Land	55
4 Taking the Road to War	77

PART TWO

5 The Adversaries	97
6 'Rise Up, Rise Up, Ye Christians'	119
7 The Pit of Hell	145
8 'A Flood of Black Pitch'	162
9 A Holy War?	188
10 Storming Buda	201

PART THREE

11 The Age of Heroes	227
12 Myth Displacing History	245
Coda	266
Notes	269
Bibliography	301
Index	327

Introduction: *The Terror in the East*

In the fiftieth chapter of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon tells us: 'After pursuing, above six hundred years, the fleeting Caesars of Constantinople and Germany, I now descend . . . on the eastern borders of the Greek monarchy.' He describes the 'genius of the Arabian prophet' and how the 'spirit of his religion' led to the decline and fall of the eastern empire. Gibbon concludes that 'our eyes are curiously intent on one of the most memorable revolutions which have impressed a new and lasting character on the nations of the globe'.

Yet this Arab, Muslim dominion, which at its greatest extent stretched westwards from Arabia to the Atlantic and northwards into the deserts of Central Asia, lasted for roughly three and a half centuries.¹ What replaced it came from much farther east. Both Christian and Muslim legend were agreed about its origins: a land ruled by two giant kings, Gog and Magog, a kingdom where the mountains were full of terrible and deadly warriors, 'the number of whom is as the sand of the sea.'² The universal hero Alexander the Great had preserved the civilised world from their ravages by building a great wall pierced by only two huge iron gates. This was all that saved the west from catastrophe.

This story appears both in the Qu'ran and in the *Alexander Romance*, written in Greek in the sixth century CE, and it is possible to sense historical roots for the myth. There really were *great walls* in China, designed to keep out the nomads, and there is ample justification for the successive waves of barbarian peoples migrating westwards. Alexander's rampart and the Iron Gates was a plausible explanatory fiction.³ The terror from the east was nomadic Turks from the steppes. They first entered the world of Persian civilisation, then overwhelmed the Byzantine empire and finally pushed on into the south-east of

Europe. The Turks were mysterious in a way that the Arabs were not. The Romans had known about Arabia, divided it into Arabia Felix and Arabia Deserta, and marked Arabia on the map. But the vast eastern world north of Parthia and Persia was an unknown.

For Rome these eastern peoples had all been ‘Scythians’, numberless, menacing riders mounted on shaggy ponies. Gibbon wrote of

the Turks or Turkmens, against whom the first crusade was principally directed. Their Scythian empire of the sixth century [BCE] had long since disappeared; but their name was still famous among the Greeks and Orientals; and the fragments of the Scythian nation, each a powerful and independent people, were scattered over the desert from China to the Oxus and the Danube: the colony of Hungarians was admitted into the republic of Europe and the thrones of Asia were occupied by slaves and soldiers of Turkish extraction . . . a swarm of these northern shepherds overspread the kingdoms of Persia: their princes of the race of Seljuk erected a splendid and solid empire from Samarcand to the confines of Greece and Egypt; and the Turks have maintained their dominion in Asia Minor till the victorious crescent has been planted on the dome of St Sophia [in Constantinople].⁴

* * *

In the summer of 2005, an exhibition at the Royal Academy in London depicted *Turks*. It was *A Journal of a Thousand Years* from the sixth to the seventeenth centuries.⁵ Looking at the extraordinary objects displayed – carvings, painting, friezes, ornaments, bronze doors, it was immediately clear that these many tribes of Turcic-speaking peoples had a culture in common. This was not solely an Islamic culture – it was the tenth century before the Turkmen tribes began to accept Islam – and they carried into their new faith many remnants of the old folk beliefs. We regard, perhaps following Gibbon, the Arab world as sempiternal, the powerhouse and the heart of Islam. Yet by the eleventh century, Arabs were no longer the dominant and dynamic force. Arab scholarship certainly remained a powerful intellectual force, notably in science, mathematics and invention, but the power that sustained Muslim culture was now Turkish.

The impact of Islam upon the Turcic peoples was both dramatic and profound, but it did not obliterate all the social and cultural

patterns that had survived among the Turks from earlier times. Islam, in practice rather than theology, displayed many local variations. The Turks, like all the Central Asian peoples, grew up on the edge of the Chinese cultural zone, something that is evident in many of their earliest artefacts; Arab culture by contrast had grown up on the fringes of the Hellenistic world, and there were numerous Christian and Jewish Christian settlements in Arabia before the coming of Islam. Turks were latecomers into Western Asia, and had little in common with the cultures that bordered the Mediterranean – Arab, Greek, Roman. The Turks who entered the Middle East possessed a distinct, double heritage: first, by their origins which they traced back to the mythical Oghuz Khan, and beyond him to Noah; and, second, to their rebirth as Muslims, from the eleventh century. We need to understand this complex double nature, if the Ottomans are to become intelligible.

* * *

This book is first of all about Europe's fear of the Turks and then, by the end, about fear itself. To understand this process, it is important to know that the Turks did not suddenly appear out of nowhere in 1453. The point that Turks entered the European memory was almost four centuries earlier: we can place it exactly – after the Battle of Manzikert in eastern Anatolia, close to Lake Van, on 19 August 1071. Carole Hillenbrand, who has already transformed our view of the crusading period, has now identified the true significance of Manzikert and its echoes through history.⁶ The shock of the battle was captured by an eyewitness, the historian Michael Attaleiates:

It was like an earthquake: the shouting, the sweat, the swift rushes of fear, the clouds of dust, and not least the hordes of Turks riding all around us. It was a tragic sight, beyond all mourning or lamenting . . . the entire imperial army in flight . . . the whole Roman state overturned.⁷

The Turks' entry into Western Asia came in phases. First it was as slaves or mercenaries. The Seljuk Turks, victors at Manzikert, went on to capture Jerusalem, which prompted Pope Urban II's call for the First Crusade in 1096. Other Turks, the slave soldiers of Arab rulers,

rebelled against their masters and founded the Mamluk sultanate that ruled Egypt from 1250 to 1517, only to be replaced by still another set of Turks, the Ottomans. With the rise to power of the Ottomans, a kind of state organisation which was at the same time both uniquely Turcic and distinctly Islamic eventually ruled a territory equivalent in scale to that of the Roman empire; and proved almost as enduring.

The sense of the Turk as the enemy of Christendom antedates the arrival of the Ottoman Turks in Europe in 1354. One channel of communication was through Hungary. In the twelfth century the kings of Hungary already had close connections with the politics of Constantinople. They were closely allied with the Byzantines by marriage and common interests. The stories of Manzikert and of another Byzantine defeat almost a century later at Myrioccephalon (1176) in western Anatolia were transmitted to the west via Hungary: Bela III, King of Hungary, had been educated at Constantinople and sent his own troops to the failed campaign of 1176. There had even been plans for the union of Byzantine and Hungarian kingdoms. In March 1180, the ten-year-old Alexius, the son of the Emperor Manuel Comnenus, was married by proxy to the daughter of King Louis of France, so there was a second channel of communications to the west.⁸

From Manzikert onwards, Western Europe was aware of the rising Turkish power in the east. Four centuries after the battle was fought, one of the miniatures painted by the French artist the Maître de Rohan for Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* (*On the Fates of Famous Men*) showed the moment that the Byzantine Emperor Diogenes Romanus was taken prisoner by the Seljuk Turk leader Alp Arslan. Although he painted the Turks wearing western plate armour – having had no notion what Turkish armour would look like – he did at least know that the Turks carried curved sabres quite unlike the straight European broadswords. The bottom half of the image shows the Byzantine emperor on all fours, being used by Alp Arslan as a footstool to mount his horse.

The Ottomans, meaning the *sons of Osman*, were one of the minor Turkish tribes that had followed the Seljuks into Anatolia.⁹ In 1324, Orhan, Osman's son, was a client of the Seljuks, and granted land in the far west of their domain, close to Constantinople. Being in close proximity to a dangerous enemy made this a perilous frontier posting.

But the Ottomans thrived as border warriors, *gazi*, sparring with the Byzantines, and slowly increasing their territory, as well as impressing their enemy with their military prowess. The connections between Orthodox Byzantines and Muslim Ottomans soon became more direct. By 1346, Orhan had married the daughter of Emperor John VI and in 1352 the Ottomans were invited to garrison Gallipoli, on the European side of the Sea of Marmara, for the Emperor. By 1360, the Ottomans held more land on the European shore than they did in Asia. In that year their capital was moved to the city of Hadrianopolis, which they renamed Edirne.

Within forty years of their first settlement in north-west Anatolia, still overshadowed by Byzantine might, the Ottomans had turned the tables. Now Constantinople was in fear of its belligerent Turkish neighbours. So, too, were the Christian principalities inland like Bosnia, Albania and Serbia; many Christians accepted the new Ottoman Sultan Murad I as their overlord instead of the decrepit and enfeebled Byzantines. In 1389 Murad and his Christian vassals defeated Lazar, the Prince of Serbia, in an epic battle on the field of Kosovo Polje. But while the battle was in progress the Sultan was murdered by a Christian pretending to be a renegade and when the Serbs were defeated, Lazar was executed as a reprisal. Western Europeans were quickly informed as to the rise of a new power in the mountainous regions (*Balkan* in Ottoman Turkish) of the south-east.¹⁰ Two years after Kosovo, the Turks reached the Danube and captured the fortress of Nicopolis; Europe reacted by launching a crusade.

The Crusade of Nicopolis in 1396 was disorganised and badly led: the result was a catastrophic defeat. However, it was the aftermath of the battle which produced the greatest impact in Europe. Jean de Froissart described in Book 4 of his *Chronicle* how, after the battle, the Sultan ordered the execution of many of his noble prisoners, harsh recompense for the slaughter of Ottoman prisoners by the French. A miniature in one edition of Froissart shows the bodies of the decapitated men beginning to pile up before the Sultan, who wished to make an example that his enemies would not forget. The watercolour in Loqman's sixteenth-century Ottoman court history, like Froissart, shows the Turk as a fearsome enemy. By the time the Ottomans finally captured Constantinople in 1453, the image of their implacable cruelty had been formed and reinforced over almost three generations. The

fear had its roots even farther back in time, on the field of Manzikert in the summer of 1071, so far back indeed that it was in *time out of mind*. Yet it had not been forgotten.

* * *

An old Roman military road ran from Constantinople through the Balkan mountains to Belgrade (Singidunum) on the Danube. Upriver was Buda (Aquincum), and still farther upstream Vienna (Vindebona). The sense of 'being Roman' remained long after the empire had vanished, but the visible evidence of Rome's long presence – like the remaining pillars of 'Trajan's Bridge' across the Danube near the Iron Gates – was a reminder of the empire. The Christian states of the Balkans and Hungary and the Ottomans all regarded themselves as the inheritors of the Roman past. For the Ottomans as for the Seljuks, the Roman empire belonged to them by right of conquest, and had, they believed, become their patrimony. In *Europe: A History* Norman Davies points to the 'daring' of Murad in claiming the title *Sultan i-Rum*, which his successors bore until the end of the Ottoman Empire in the twentieth-century.¹¹ In conquering Constantinople in 1453, Murad's descendant Sultan Mehmed II 'the Conqueror' believed that he was restoring the former unity of the eastern Roman empire, *Rum* in Ottoman Turkish, in both Asia and in Europe.

Ottomans regarded the Holy Roman Emperors of the west as usurpers to a title which belonged by right to them. They would refer to the Habsburgs as mere dukes of Austria, or, at best, as a petty king. This curious mirror image – of two rival claimants to the same estate – underpinned the developing rivalry between the two dynasties. The Habsburgs believed that their duty lay in restoring 'Rome' eastwards, for one of their proudly borne titles was King of Jerusalem; the Ottomans believed that it was their destiny to reclaim the Roman empire westwards, from Constantinople. This gave an added potency (or virulence) to the contest.

This definitive struggle between East and West was rooted in the claim to be the heir to a long defunct empire. Explanations based on *realpolitik*, economic rivalry, or competing ideologies (religious faith) might seem a lot more intelligible, but in the context of the fifteenth century, which is where it began, it was a significant issue. Both Ottomans and Habsburgs were new to power, and both claimed

authority from their ancient origins. Their carefully constructed genealogies both led back to Noah, and beyond: they were necessary fictions. The Habsburgs only began their long continuous tenure of the imperial title when Frederick IV, Archduke of Austria, was crowned Frederick III, Holy Roman Emperor, in Rome by Pope Nicholas V, with the crown of Charlemagne. That was on 16 March 1452. Just over a year later, on 24 May 1453, the young Sultan Mehmed II took Constantinople by storm. At that point, despite his imperial title, Frederick was a powerless nonentity while the Ottomans were rapidly becoming a dominant military power in the east.

The contest was delayed because at the time that the Habsburg Frederick III and the Ottoman Mehmed II both assumed the supreme title of Roman Emperor, a powerful state still separated them. Between Vienna and Constantinople was the Kingdom of Hungary, ruled by one of the most skilful generals of the age, a Transylvanian noble named John Hunyadi, but known as the 'White Knight' because of his highly polished armour that gleamed like silver. When Mehmed advanced to attack Belgrade three years after the capture of Constantinople, it was Hunyadi's well-led army that threw him back in disarray in July 1456. However, the White Knight died of plague three weeks after the battle, and his second son, Matthias Corvinus (his eventual successor), was only twelve years old.

It was 1458 before Matthias was elected King of Hungary and for thirty-two years under his leadership Hungary expanded its territory in both east and west: both Habsburgs and Ottomans were cowed by him. But after his death in 1490, the power of Hungary crumbled and in the second decade of the sixteenth century the Habsburgs and Ottomans for the first time faced each other directly. Two young and supremely ambitious rulers committed themselves to the struggle.

In January 1519 the old Emperor Maximilian I had died and was succeeded by his grandson, Charles of Habsburg, already ruler of Spain in succession to his other grandfather, Ferdinand of Aragon, and beneficiary of the rich lands of Burgundy and the Low Countries. With Maximilian's death Charles also inherited the Habsburg lands in Austria and Germany. In the following year, Sultan Selim I, who had conquered the Levant, Egypt and the Arab lands for the Ottomans, died, leaving his only son Suleiman I to succeed him.¹²

Selim had already proclaimed himself 'the conqueror of the world'

and his son intended to make good that claim. Suleiman was six years older than Charles, but they shared an imperious sense of destiny. In a letter to Sigismund I, King of Poland and Lithuania, Suleiman described himself as the ruler of a vast domain

Padishah [King of Kings] of the White [Mediterranean] and the Black Sea, of *Rumeli* [the 'Land of the Romans], Anatolia, Karaman, the provinces of Dulkadir, Diabakir, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Persia, Damascus, Aleppo, Egypt, Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, and all the lands of Arabia, of Yemen, and of the many lands conquered with overwhelming power by my noble father and magnificent grandfathers.¹³

Charles V had stated his own claim a few years earlier:

Roman King, future Emperor, *semper augustus*, King of Spain, Sicily, Jerusalem, the Balearic Islands, the Canary Islands, the Indies and the mainland on the far shore of the Atlantic, Archduke of Austria, Duke of Burgundy, Brabant, Styria, Carinthia, Carniola, Luxembourg, Limburg, Athens, and Patras, Count of Habsburg, Flanders and Tyrol, Count Palatine of Burgundy, Hainault, Pfirt, Roussillon, Landgrave of Alsace, Count of Swabia, Lord of Asia and Africa.

At least three of these – Jerusalem, Athens and Patras – were firmly in the possession of Suleiman. The obvious areas of conflict would be the Mediterranean, and in the huge Hungarian kingdom, overripe for takeover. Its young king Louis, King of Bohemia and Moravia, elected ruler of Croatia and Dalmatia, lacked the resources of his powerful neighbours to both west and east. No crusade would be mounted to save Hungary from an Ottoman assault.

* * *

In a secular age there is perhaps a temptation to diminish the religious dimension of the struggle between Christendom and Islam, as Suleiman I (with some anxiety) prepared to launch his war of conquest. Yet the Habsburg–Ottoman contest was a clash of faiths: Charles V was the leader of the Christian world (eventually sanctified by papal coronation). Suleiman was the leader of most of the Muslim world, protector of the holy shrines of Mecca and Medina, possessor of the

emblematic treasures of the Prophet Mohammad. Late in his life he would have the following inscribed upon the mosque that bore his name in Istanbul-Constantinople:

Sultan Suleiman has drawn near to God, the Lord of Majesty and Omnipotence, the Creator of the World of Dominion and Sovereignty . . . who is His slave, made mighty with Divine Power, the Caliph, resplendent with Divine Glory, who performs the Command of the Hidden Book and executes its decrees in all regions of the inhabited Quarter: Conqueror of the Orient and the Occident with the Help of Almighty God and his Victorious Army, Possessor of the Kingdoms of the World . . .

There was no possibility for compromise.¹⁴ Charles V advised his son Philip II of Spain never to surrender any Habsburg territory: 'If your predecessors with the Grace of God held on . . . you should trust that He will assist you to keep what is inherited.'¹⁵

In 1521, a year after he had succeeded his father, Suleiman reopened Selim's wars of conquest.¹⁶ But instead of striking in the east he took up where his great-grandfather, Mehmed II 'the Conqueror', had failed in 1456. The young Sultan marshalled his forces outside his capital Constantinople-Istanbul and then marched north to the Danube and the White Fortress of Belgrade. This time there would be no salvation from Hungary, and on 29 August 1521 the fortress – the advance rampart of Christendom – fell to Suleiman's army. Five years later, in 1526, the Sultan slaughtered the army of Hungary on the battlefield of Mohács and in the late summer of 1529 his soldiers would stand before the walls of Vienna. The struggle between Ottoman and Habsburg continued for two and a half centuries. Its resonance lasts into the present.



I

A Call to Arms

In the evening of 6 August 1682 the sultan's gardeners dug a narrow trench beside the Imperial Gate of the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. At intervals they planted seven long crimson poles, each as thick as a man's arm; the top section was elaborately carved and gilded, and from the golden globe at the apex hung a cascade of black and coloured horses' tails. These were the *tuğ*, the ancient banners of the steppe warriors from whom the Ottoman Turks were descended.¹ Normally they were kept within the inner Treasury deep in the heart of the palace; but brought out into the light of day and planted before the palace gate, their meaning was unmistakable. Mehmed IV, the Khan of Khans, Commander of the Faithful, Padishah, the son of warriors, the father of warriors, had placed his *tuğ* before his 'tent' and was leaving on campaign. That *campaign* might mean no more than a summer's hunting, but the ritual had never lost its deeper meaning and on that evening it was a resonant call to arms.²

In the late summer of 1682, a very great war was intended. The decisive meeting in the small council chamber of the second court of the palace lasted most of the day. But in the end there were no dissenters: the sultan's Chief Minister, the Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa of Merzifon, had silenced all those who opposed him. The council agreed that not only would the Ottoman army march west against the Habsburgs, with their capital in Vienna, but, most significantly, it would be headed by the sultan himself. The presence of the sultan directed the whole force of the empire against their adversary. Mehmed

had led the army north before and the empire had gained territory; his leadership may have been notional rather than practical but the symbolism was potent. From the moment that the *tuğ* were planted in the ground, an elaborate ceremonial of war-making began.

First the 'lord of the two continents', like his distant nomadic ancestors, established his war camp just outside the great Byzantine triple walls of Constantinople, or Istanbul as the city was also known by 1682. A small army of labourers began transforming a patch of rough grazing land, called Çirpeci Meadow and frequented only by goats and sheep, into a perfect parade ground without a single pebble or other obstruction. Soon the wagons of the Imperial Corps of Tent Pitchers and Tent Makers began to arrive, with hundreds of men to erect the imperial encampment in accordance with an exact plan. Its epicentre would be the complex of the sultan's pavilions, and close to them, the tents of the Grand Vizier, then the military commanders, and then those members of the court and lesser officials who travelled with the sultan. Finally, the tent men would string an embroidered screen (*zozak*) from poles surrounding the rust-red tents in the sultan's enclosure, symbolically cutting it off from the camp outside just as the ramparts of Topkapi kept the clamour of Istanbul at a distance.

To any westerner, a war camp suggested a dirty, disorderly collection of rudimentary bivouacs hastily erected on the line of march, peopled by raucous and dangerous ruffians. An Ottoman encampment, by contrast, was a perfect model city, but made of broadcloth, canvas, silk, brocade and embroidery rather than brick and stone. A century before, a Habsburg ambassador to Constantinople had observed wryly, 'Any one who knows the conditions which obtain in our own camps, will find difficulty in believing it, but the fact remains that everywhere [among the Turks] was complete silence and tranquillity . . . there was the utmost cleanliness, no dungheaps or rubbish, nothing to offend the eye or nose.'³ More recently an English chaplain, Dr John Covel, described Sultan Mehmed IV's encampment set up outside the palace at Edirne in 1675. It consisted of almost sixty tents, and in the largest of them was 'a throne studded with gems and on which lay rich needlework, and on the floor – as in the other tents – were luxuriant carpets, and the interior was covered with rich fabrics. The fourth tent, entered through a corridor, was the personal

tent of the sultan. Here was a bed, at the head of which stood a Qur'an stand.⁴

The war camp so rapidly erected in 1682 looked much the same. This nomadic palace lacked none of the facilities of Topkapi itself. Every function of the court had its travelling counterpart. There was a tower-like tented Pavilion of Justice echoing the Tower of Justice at Istanbul, from which the sultan and his special guests could look down on the throng below. Close by there was a tent for ceremonial executions like the spot beside the palace gate. There were tents for latrines, for baths, or for ritual ablutions; vast tents for ceremonial events, audience chambers, withdrawing rooms, reception rooms, dressing rooms; marquees for feasting and entertainment, even a tent that could house the body of a dead sultan, as happened when Sultan Suleiman I had died campaigning in Hungary in 1566. Even the sultan's favourite horses had their own tented stables.⁵

Ottomans had a passion for the open air. Often the sultan or one of his officials would decide to hold an alfresco meal in the palace grounds, on the shores of the Bosphorus or in the forests beyond the city. By the time they arrived, an array of pavilions would be ready, with food and drink prepared, and at evening the little cluster of tents would be lit by hundreds of tiny lamps and lanterns. By Mehmed IV's time, the Imperial Corps of Tent Pitchers and Tent Makers numbered almost a thousand men, who occupied a rambling former palace close to the centre of the city. In the former audience chambers and public rooms hundreds of men would sit cross-legged, sewing and embroidering new tents or repairing the old. The smaller store chambers were filled with thousands of tents, ranging in size from the vast imperial pavilions to a tiny bathing enclosure, all carefully folded and packed, labelled by size, condition, colour and purpose, each one inventoried to be available at a moment's notice.⁶

The largest tents were enormously heavy, requiring six to ten men simply to carry and then many more to erect them.⁷ All the imperial chambers had an outer layer, made of close woven canvas, usually dyed red or light green, which kept out the rain or snow, and an inner layer of much finer cloth, often embroidered or decorated. The soldiers' tents were much smaller and less elaborate, often made of wool felt, like the tents of the nomads on the Asian steppes. Within, officers cosseted themselves with carpets, embroidered hangings and

furniture; but even the tents for the ordinary soldiers were well made and comfortable, much more than the crude bivouacs used by western armies. Each unit of five or ten men was supplied with shelter from the elements and a sheepskin for each soldier to sleep upon. The soldiers of the Divine Light were well cared for.

For the campaign of 1683, the imperial tent makers supplied more than 15,000 tents large and small, and every other provision was on the same scale. No possible need for an army at war was neglected. Infantrymen did not carry their weapons on the march: the muskets, spears, bows and quivers of arrows together with their rations were loaded on to camels, or stacked in carts each pulled by two bullocks. Ottoman soldiers were not forced to forage or live off the land. Fresh supplies of food were waiting at each night's encampment, while they carried with them wagons loaded with rice and flour. On the move, the army had its own flocks of sheep driven ahead of the soldiers, with the butchers ready to slaughter the livestock and prepare the meat at each night's halt.

The war camp steadily extended around the palatial imperial core. Radiating out in neat concentric circles were the tents of the infantry and the household cavalry, but in addition, as solid evidence of warlike intent, were the artillery and the engineers' lines: a sultan going hunting never took the cannon with him. Each area of the camp was different, with every detachment marking its presence by its distinctive badges and banners – painted or embroidered swords, dragons, herons, hounds, elephants – in reds, blues, black and greens. Every aspect of life in camp was regulated. Even the field latrines were dug to a prescribed pattern: surrounded by a rectangular tent, open to the sky, and with a red painted wooden seat concealing the pits beneath. Each group of seven or eight soldiers had their own cook tent, and outside each one the famous copper cauldrons used to cook the soups, rice, pilaffs or stews that provided an excellent and sustaining diet. The Habsburg ambassador Ghislain de Busbecq thought that 'the two things from which the Turks derive the greatest benefit [in war] . . . [were] rice among grains and the camel among beasts of burden, both of which are exceedingly well suited for the distant campaigns they make'.⁸ Luigi Fernandino, Count Marsigli, captured and held by the Turks, was amazed at the 'excessive luxury' by western standards of the soldiers' meals served each day.⁹ In Islam good order, cleanliness

of body (*natheef*) and spirit were ordained by God, and enforced by the sultan, His servant.

Lined up wheel to wheel in the artillery enclosure was every size of gun from the little two-man field piece, which was carried on a single camel, to massive bronze siege guns pulled by long teams of oxen. These heavy guns were the hardest to move, and when the war was on a distant frontier the time it would take to move them by river or by land would determine the period available for campaigning. War north of the Balkans was entirely governed by weather and by the seasons. The great plain of Hungary, the Lowlands (*alföld*), was the westernmost extension of the Asian steppe, surrounded by hills and mountains on every side except the east. To the west were the Alps, running down to the Danube at Vienna; to the north, the mountainous spine of Central Europe, rising from the Czech and Slovak lands in the west, then eastwards along the Carpathian chain. South of the Danube was *balkan*, the mountain, the Turkish word that eventually gave the whole region below the great river its collective name. But between the Balkans and the foothills of the Carpathians was an endless plain, in winter a bland, empty featureless landscape, sparsely dotted with towns and villages. In early spring the dead earth became lush grassland on which the thousands of Ottoman horses could graze all the way to the boundaries of Christian Europe. But the new season had a negative aspect, for the same rivers and streams that produced the grass to feed the horses also flooded huge areas of low ground, in places creating a morass, which slowed the progress of the wagons carrying the impedimenta of the Ottoman armies to a few miles each day. The heavy guns simply became immovable, unless they could be taken north by river.

But the Ottomans had a secret weapon. Beside the guns in the camp lay the engineers' encampment, full of huge cranes, pontoons, coils of rope, baulks of timber for bridging the network of rivers that the army had to traverse, as well as all the mysterious equipment used for undermining enemy fortifications. Western fortifications were superior, but few armies in the west could equal the skill and resourcefulness of the Ottoman engineers.

What was happening in the encampment outside the great walls bespeaks a silent question. Why was the sultan and the huge array heading north-west to fight the Habsburgs for the first time in

eighty-seven years? There had been great campaigns against the Habsburgs but seldom led by the sultan in person. There seemed no reason for it. The truce between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans had endured, imperfect no doubt, but nothing had happened that would have justified this massive response. Habsburg diplomats held hostage at the Ottoman court sent letter after letter of warning back to Vienna, that war really was coming, that this was no empty gesture. But they could advance no convincing reason why.

Although the Habsburgs had a strong sense of their imperial status and destiny, their material resources were more limited than their aspirations. The problem was always money, and, to a more limited extent, the fragmented nature of their domains. Leopold could not even instruct his own subjects and be sure they would obey his command. To get support from the states of the Holy Roman Empire, an Emperor had to cajole, persuade or even bribe a set of prickly, argumentative and self-interested electoral princes, local rulers and assemblies. The fundamental rift – between Catholic and Protestant – still influenced Europe's internal politics, and Protestant states felt no natural inclination to come to the aid of a Catholic Emperor. That was within the Holy Roman Empire, over which Leopold had some power. The possibility of rallying Europe as a whole – including the arch enemy France – to follow the Habsburgs' lead was infinitesimal.

Although western pundits would point to every scrap of evidence of Ottoman decline, when it came to making war the Turks' power to launch an attack was considerably greater than Europe's power to organise resistance. The Emperor Leopold had nothing like the authority of Sultan Mehmed IV to decree war, or to summon an army to rally more or less as ordered to a distant destination. In the crudest possible terms, when the sultan made a call to arms, a hundred thousand men would obey without question; when the Emperor rallied his armed might, he would be lucky if a fifth of that number arrived at the battlefield.

* * *

As the camp filled up, whole districts of the city and its suburbs, normally thronged with soldiers, were emptying. There was the great barracks besides the Şahzade Mosque, the household cavalry lines just

beyond the old Byzantine walls, the arsenals where the cannon and muskets were produced at Tophane, near the Bosphorus. In these military communities, traders, shops, even the mosques, all lived indirectly off the salaries paid by the sultan. Each day as detachments left to join the camp, the streets grew strangely silent. Most foreigners saw only the exotic splendour of the Ottoman host and not the elaborate system that underpinned it. Busbecq, in his day, had shrewdly observed both. He noted how the cavalymen were 'mounted on splendid horses, excellently groomed and gorgeously attired' . . . 'Look at those marvellously handsome dresses of every kind and every colour; time would fail me to tell you how all around is glittering with gold, with silver, with purple, with silk, and with velvet; words cannot convey an adequate idea of that strange and wondrous sight: it was the most beautiful spectacle I ever saw.'¹⁰

They were an inspiring sight in their silks and brocades, heron's plumes and chain mail. But they were also highly effective in the right circumstances. Most of the cavalry held a fief (*timar*) like the medieval feudal cavalry of Western Europe or the hussars (*husaria*) of seventeenth-century Poland. Military service was the duty they owed for their estates, and they were summoned to join the army for a single fighting season. The elite Turkish horsemen were the six regiments of the sultan's permanent palace cavalry (*alti-bölük sipahileri*), all paid, trained and armed by the Ottoman state. All these heavy cavalry (*sipahis*) were renowned for their skill with sword, mace or war axe, but the powerful recurved bow was their most devastating weapon. From a distance, like the horsemen of the steppes, aiming and shooting at full gallop, they showered both enemy infantry and cavalry with well targeted arrows that could pierce plate armour. In a hand-to-hand mêlée with western horse, their speed and swordsmanship were deadly. So, while cavalymen in Western Europe were abandoning their breastplates and helmets, as hand-to-hand fighting became less common, cuirassiers and dragoons facing the Turks along the eastern frontier still fought encased in steel from head to thigh, to protect them from the *sipahis'* arrows and sabres. In addition to the *sipahis* were thousands of the dowdy but effective irregular light horse (*akincis*) who served the sultan for the slaves and booty they might collect, and the allies, notably the horde of Tartars, superb raiders and the terror of the west, led by the Khan of the Crimea.

As remarkable, if less flamboyant than the palace cavalry, were the professional infantry, the famous (or infamous) janissaries. For many in the west, the mere name was sufficient to inspire terror. For two hundred years the corps of janissaries (*ordu*), 'the new troops' first established in the fourteenth century, had been the key to the Ottomans' extraordinary success in war. From the fourteenth century, almost all of them would have shared a common origin. The janissaries were Christian children forcibly recruited (*devshirme*) from the villages of the Balkans, then trained and converted to Islam. The janissary regiments became their family, and the sultan their father and brother. But by 1682, the ranks were filled with the sons and nephews of janissaries eager to gain the lifetime salary and pension. The janissary bore, lifelong, the marks of his status upon his body. If a Christian, circumcised upon enrolment, he became a Muslim. Once trained, the symbol and number of his detachment were tattooed on his right arm and right leg, signifying full admission to the order.¹¹ Their grim purpose was to identify the bodies of janissaries killed in action, but they also marked those entitled to salaries and rations. Each janissary battalion (*orta*), notionally of three hundred men, was divided into detachments of fifty to seventy janissaries living and eating together as a single unit.

The number in barracks was steadily reducing with a growing minority choosing to marry and live outside with their families. In doing so they sacrificed their claim to bonuses and promotion, but they gained the invaluable right to open businesses and engage in trade. A business run by a janissary had the power of the order standing behind it, and a natural reservoir of comrades as customers. They were becoming an economic as well as a military and political power in the city. Many janissaries prospered as the monastic exclusivity of the order lessened. Promotion was still through the ranks, and sometimes by exceptional courage in battle. There were constant complaints that the highest posts went to favourites of the court, but many ordinary janissaries also rose through talent to senior positions. Over the centuries the corps provided the empire with 79 grand viziers and 36 admirals of the fleet. The sultan himself was symbolically enrolled in the order and tattooed with the number 1.

Exactly how many janissaries and other soldiers were stationed in the capital fluctuated over time. The salary and muster rolls were often

illegally enlarged, with corrupt officials living off the proceeds. Fanciful claims that the state supported 200,000 were grossly exaggerated, but probably about a tenth of that number were in and around the capital in 1682. At the heart of the main janissary barracks was a huge drill ground called Et Meydan, Meat Square. Each week, they paraded there in full equipment to practise the prescribed battlefield manoeuvres. Rushes, sudden mass attacks, sword play and archery became second nature, but they also trained with the heavy Turkish flintlock trench muskets, more like the wall-mounted guns on a fortress than lighter weapons used in western armies. Many janissaries were trained as sharpshooters: with the powerful powder charge and much greater range and killing power of their weapons, considerably more accurate than European matchlock firearms, they were a devastating weapon.

We talk of the janissary 'order' as if it were a single, uniform entity. Certainly every individual was taught to be conscious of the honour of his detachment and of the order as a whole, but in reality the strength of the janissaries (and their weakness) was that they were 'bands of brothers', of between ten and fifteen men. You trusted your brother-in-arms, tattooed like you with the emblem of your detachment. That came first; then loyalty to the battalion and its officers; ultimately there was loyalty to more distant figures, like the general (*aga*) of the janissaries and the sultan himself. But although janissaries would fight with extraordinary courage, they were also intractable if given orders of which they did not approve. They did not give blind, slavish obedience, as every wise janissary officer knew. Much the same could have been said of the veterans of the Roman legions more than a millennium before. Well led, the legions were capable of super-human achievements; but they would perform listlessly if they lost their centurions and decurions. Janissaries were different because they shared not only military bonds but also the exhilaration of a common faith in Islam. They were the warriors of the sultan, but also the inspired soldiers of God, their zeal and fervour encouraged by the Bektashi dervish preachers who were attached to every unit. They had to be won over and cajoled by their commanders, like wild and mettlesome horses: use some stick but also the titbits of honours, rewards and plunder. But ultimately each janissary fought and died as a warrior (*gazi*) of the True Faith.

Busbecq first saw the famous janissaries in Ottoman-occupied Pest. Their drab appearance came as a surprise to him:

The dress of these men consists of a robe reaching down to the ankles, while, to cover their heads, they employ a cowl which, by their account, was originally a cloak sleeve, part of which contains the head, while the remainder hangs down and flaps against the neck. On their forehead is placed a silver gilt cone of considerable height, studded with stones of no great value . . . To tell you the truth, if I had not been told beforehand that they were Janissaries, I should, without hesitation, have taken them for members of some order of Turkish monks, or brethren of some Moslem college. Yet these are the famous Janissaries, whose approach inspires terror everywhere.¹²

Most artists, Ottoman or western, depicted the janissaries as dressed in standard, sometimes brightly coloured, uniforms. Janissary officers certainly wore long robes, with brocades and fur trimmings, but the ordinary soldiers' uniforms were the drab wools and felts that Busbecq described: 'nothing very striking in their attire'. But if their clothes were plain, their famous bonnets, with the broad white flap which served to keep the sun off a soldier's neck, were decorated with plumes and crests, 'and here they let their fancy run riot, particularly the veterans who brought up the rear. The plumes which they inserted in their frontlets give the appearance of a moving forest.'¹³ But every plume, every badge or decoration, was in fact a mark of honour or long service, or, most prized of all, a distinction granted for bravery. Busbecq obviously saw battle-hardened veterans who had proved their prowess in battle.

By 6 October 1682, the huge encampment was finally complete and crammed with the janissaries and the palace cavalry. A few days later, at the end of the month of Ramadan, the sultan left the Topkapi Palace in procession, preceded by his *tuğ* held high for all in the streets to see, and took up residence in his war tent. This procession was the final and conclusive sign that the march to war was about to begin.¹⁴ At every stage the elaborate ceremonial was observed and well-informed foreigners had no doubt as to what it portended. The newly arrived Habsburg envoy Count Caprara knew that war against his master, the Emperor Leopold, was being prepared. He had been sent

to provide reinforcement to his luckless predecessor, Baron Georg Christoph Kunitz, who had languished in Istanbul since 1680. Kunitz and Caprara sang the same song – the Emperor wanted to prolong the twenty year truce due to expire in 1684 – but no one at the Ottoman court was willing to listen. Yet protocol meant Caprara and Kunitz had no alternative but to accompany the sultan and his army on their march north. At best they might hope to smuggle messages of warning back to Vienna. What Caprara saw and what he understood we know from the diary which his secretary, Giovanni Benaglia, kept of their journey, observing acutely what he and the ambassador saw around them. Kunitz, too, kept a graphic account of his effective captivity.¹⁵

Westerners often talked wonderingly about the warlike qualities of ‘the Turks’ and their natural bellicosity. But as the war camp made clear to all who saw it, the real power of the Turks was the seriousness and extraordinary invention with which they approached the business of a great war. Although battle was a lottery, in Istanbul the process of making war had been reduced to a formula. Of course, no one could control events. Food and fodder would arrive late, guns would get stuck in the mud, bridge building would be delayed by bad weather, supply boats would sink on the often treacherous rivers. But the system was extraordinary in its all-embracing vision. It even calculated how long a janissary’s shoes would last before they needed resoling, so that there would be additional cobblers conscripted to carry out repairs when the marching column arrived. Just as the moveable palace was supported by all the trades that served the sultan in the capital, so, too, all the army’s supporting services travelled with the troops, or were sent ahead to wait at each night’s resting place. Not since the heyday of the Roman empire had war on the frontier been so regulated, planned and organised.¹⁶

Did these men live up to their fearsome reputation? They were better equipped, better supported and better fed than their future opponents. The janissaries and the palace cavalry were trained professionals, but what distinguished them was how and why they fought. In the Ottoman ranks, among the janissaries (and the *sipahis*), matters were different from the armies that would confront them. Serving and living together for long periods, fiercely loyal to the emblems and badges of their units, strong and hardy fighters, nevertheless they fought as individual warriors. The tales told around the janissary soup

kettles were of heroes, past and present. In their barracks in Istanbul old soldiers stayed close to their units, and became a living memory for great deeds in the past. Officers seeking to rouse their men would evoke that history. Each unit went into battle incited by the music of the *mehter*, the band which, like the pipers of the Scottish clansmen, stirred the bellicose spirit of men facing death. Huge kettledrums thundered, smaller drums crashed out an insistent faster rhythm, and over all the steady clash of cymbals announced a charge.

The charge was what they talked about in barracks, and what they had practised on the drill ground. Each man chanted the battle cry in unison, a single roar rising from thousands of throats growing louder and louder as they closed with the enemy. As they rushed forward, muskets were laid aside; bows slung for the last stages of the assault; each man, a heavy sabre (*kiliç*) or a fearsome Janissary yataghan – a curved short sword which could lop off a head with a flick of the wrist – in hand, fixed his gaze upon a foe as he dashed the last few metres into the enemy line. In those moments each janissary was an individual bent on killing those he faced. Once launched, his charge could not be recalled: either it succeeded or it was driven back. The janissary style of war had evolved over two centuries, changing with the enemies and battles that they had to fight. In the fourteenth century, they had been the solid, disciplined heart of the Ottoman battle line, fighting behind a screen of excitable, expendable auxiliaries, or a line of wagons, drawing in the enemy on to their muskets, spears and swords. In battle they could halt the charge of armoured knights, then run forward to shatter an enemy in disarray.

But war had changed. Between 1550 and 1600, after the Turks had taken control of most of Hungary, war increasingly became the slow business of besieging towns and fortresses in the borderlands between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, or in the Kingdom of Poland further north.¹⁷ The janissaries, together with the Ottoman's artillerymen and engineers, were evolving to meet these changing demands of war.¹⁸ In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many of the notable encounters had been on the battlefield, but by the seventeenth century, in the western theatre of war, most of the conflicts followed the same pattern. There were relatively few pitched battles and increasingly each campaign would involve siege and storm of walled towns, blockhouses called *palanka*, and even modernised

fortresses, built along Western European lines. The janissaries gradually developed some of the specialist skills necessary for this kind of war. They became what in later centuries would be called assault battalions, or storm troops. Extraordinary individual courage was needed to attack over a broken wall or through a ragged breach in the fortifications, into a hail of enemy fire. Their single task was to attack and attack again until the objective was taken. Huge bonuses were paid to those who braved a hail of enemy fire to secure the breach. Similarly, those who fought underground, in the sepulchral battles with enemy sappers burrowing into the Turkish tunnels, could become rich men.

Carefully selected janissaries were trained in the use of hand-thrown bombs and grenades. The men who put aside their muskets for the final assault carried a bag of small clay or rough glass spheres filled with gunpowder. These bombs looked very like large pomegranates – which gave them their name in Spanish (*granata*) and French (*grenade*) – with a short fuse protruding like the fruit's stalk. European armies also used grenades, but they were made with an iron case and contained less explosive; the Ottoman grenade could be thrown further and each janissary grenadier could carry more into the *mêlée*.¹⁹ In the final moments of the desperate hand-to-hand fighting a hail of Ottoman grenades could simply blow apart a defensive line. The grenade was a weapon especially well suited to the janissary style of war. It could only be used at close quarters, like swords, spears and halberds, and it brought firepower into the final and most perilous moments of combat. It was new, but also honourable and traditional; in later years, grenadiers in western armies were regarded as exceptionally courageous, simply because they were in such peril, heading an assault against the heaviest enemy fire.

Western armies were developing in a different direction from the Ottomans. Where the Ottomans had relied on firepower and field fortifications to defeat the power of the armoured knights and men-at-arms, in the west the pikeman with a three- or four-metre spear had become the master of the infantry battlefield. The thousands of pikemen in battle never moved above a walking pace; the key to success was keeping formation and keeping in step. The pike was a weapon only of use on the battlefield, as a defence against cavalry or used offensively against other infantry. But learning to use the pike instilled

discipline. As western commanders discovered, a mob of three thousand individuals armed with spears or pikes was very different from three thousand men acting in unison.

In the west the development and spread of printing had made it possible to circulate treatises on the art of war, produced by the thousand, read by amateurs and professionals alike. With the drill book in one hand and an obedient clutch of recruits, it was possible to train adequate pikemen and even musketeers in the space of a few weeks. Teaching a janissary to use the Turkish bow could take years. The skills of the janissaries and the sultan's cavalry adapted to some extent to changing circumstances but they never changed in their essentials. Bravery and skill in arms were the most desirable qualities. In the west, by contrast, discipline and good order became prized above all else: foot soldiers were increasingly trained to manoeuvre to words of command, or drumbeats. Experienced and well-trained western infantry could change direction, unit by unit, move forward, backward, to the side; they could form dense columns or, in a few minutes, long lines.

The long reign of the pikemen with their four-metre spears had ended with the Thirty Years War in 1648 and musketeers were increasingly taking their place. Gradually, western generals had begun to develop tactics that could challenge the dominant power of the Ottomans. The sultan's splendidly arrayed palace cavalry may have been an inspiring sight, but it was less impressive to a trained eye. Like the western infantry, new weapons and equipment had appeared in western armies after 1648. Horsemen were armed with an array of different firearms: pistols, muskets, carbines designed for mounted use. Drab though the Habsburg cuirassiers and dragoons might appear in their black breastplates and open helmets, they gave western horsemen the beginnings of what the Ottomans had long possessed: firepower plus mobility. But they were still not the equal of their adversaries. The *sipahis'* sabres, designed for devastating, slashing cuts, took and kept an edge better than western weapons; *sipahis* took great pride in being able to hack off the points of enemy pikes. They made little use of firearms; some said it was because firing muskets and pistols covered their fine robes with greasy powder marks. But the new Habsburg cavalry, cuirassiers and dragoons were becoming increasingly effective against the Turks, as they took the measure of

their foe. They still carried heavy swords for hand-to-hand combat, but their new power really came from the guns which they carried.

Another new device was even more effective against the Ottoman horsemen. Bayonets only came into general use in Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century, but a rudimentary type was used by the Habsburg infantry much earlier, from the 1640s. This was a long steel shaft with a spear point hinged under the musket barrel. Extended, it would, in theory, keep Ottoman horsemen at least a sword's length away from the musketeer, although it offered much less protection than the longer pikes. But an Italian general in Habsburg service, Raimondo Montecuccoli, encouraged a further development. He turned the traditional *Schweinsfeder*, a short spear used for hunting wild boar, into a musket rest with the addition of a steel hook on which to lay the weapon. In the hands of the musketeer this doubled as a short pike for protection against cavalry as well as making musket fire more accurate. The ultimate defensive measure was the so-called 'Spanish Rider', a solid three-metre beam of timber, with sturdy mounts at each end and slotted to take the *Schweinsfeder* pointing forward at 30 and 45 degree angles. Rapidly assembled, they became a freestanding, impenetrable barrier of sharp spikes: no horse would charge such an obvious danger. For centuries archers had hammered sharpened stakes into the ground to guard themselves against a cavalry charge, but this security came at the price of complete immobility. Only the protection of the long pikes had allowed them some power of manoeuvre. Now, for the first time, musketeers could protect their flanks against an Ottoman cavalry charge by deploying these ancestors of the barbed wire entanglements which would transform the battlefield centuries later.²⁰

But nothing could protect the westerners from the Turks' arrow fire. Their bows had a much longer range than any musket: the Ottoman record for an arrow shot was 800 metres. For most purposes in the 1680s, the bow was still a better weapon than any gun, but it demanded long training and constant practice to become expert. It required great strength to draw the bow string, and constant control to achieve accuracy, and cavalry bowmen had to manage their horses at full gallop by pressure of their knees alone. In western armies, raw recruits could be trained to become expert infantry musketeers in a space of a few weeks. But that was their only skill. The best of the

Ottoman infantry were astonishingly versatile. They could fight with sword, spear, yataghan, bow or musket. Each janissary would choose his favourite weapons from the common armoury: when they paraded, there was no uniformity of equipment nor did they march in step like western soldiers. The janissaries had limited skills of manoeuvre: they would rush forward in attack, but only in the time-honoured fashion.

Well led and well motivated, despite all rumours of their 'decline' the janissary corps was still formidable, in the right circumstances. But no Ottoman commander could control or direct his janissaries in the way that a western general could command his infantry. For the Ottomans as the seventeenth century was drawing towards its close the battlefield was increasingly alien and unfamiliar territory. The old verities had been overturned: the janissary hero, first into the breach, first over the wall, was still the acme, but he was becoming increasingly irrelevant in the new art of war.

* * *

A few reliable eyewitnesses provided Europe with its knowledge of the armed might of the 'dreadful or dangerous' Turk.²¹ From the last quarter of the sixteenth century there was a steady flow of books, pamphlets and newsletters on the Ottomans, but most of them written by authors who worked largely from hearsay. One cannibalised another, spreading the same tales and stories, and often pictures, across territorial and linguistic borders. Works in Latin could be read everywhere by the educated, and in continental Europe were often elaborately illustrated. Thus the French antiquarian (and accomplished draughtsman) Jean-Jacques Boissard's *Lives and Portraits of the Turkish Sultans* (*Vitae et Icones Sultanorum Turcicorum*) could be found on scholars' bookshelves across Europe. It was naturally to Boissard's work that the English pedagogue Richard Knolles turned when writing his *Generall Historie of the Turkes*, published for a much wider audience (in English rather than Latin), in 1603. But Boissard in turn had based much of his book on a number of earlier authors and artists. Unreliable and frequently contradictory, these were sometimes the best sources available; and the very few eyewitness accounts were trusted even more slavishly.

In more than a century only three writers on the Ottoman east combined literary ability with an acute sense of observation, and a

long acquaintance with this strange and often baffling world. All three were more than travellers passing through; their stay was measured in years not months or days. They were expatriates whose lives were changed radically by their long residence among the Turks.²² Each of them gained renown across Europe for their writings on the Ottomans, published in many editions and translations. The longest lasting has already made an appearance: Ogier Ghislain de Busbecq, the acknowledged natural son of the Lord of Busbecq, born in Flanders in 1520 or 1521 at his father's castle close to the French border. He was his father's favourite child, but bastardy made his social position ambivalent. Busbecq escaped its constraints largely by his drive and forceful intellect. He served the Holy Roman Emperor on many minor missions, so he was a natural choice as a Habsburg imperial emissary to the court of Sultan Suleiman I. It was also a hardship post: his predecessors had been terrorised, imprisoned and threatened with a worse fate.²³

Busbecq's *Letters of the Turkish Embassy* was a European bestseller. It appeared in Latin, French, German, Dutch and Spanish, and, notably, in English. Often other writers simply took Busbecq's observations and paraded them as their own knowledge. Three hundred years after his stay in Istanbul, his work was still in use as an accurate and contemporary source, and it remains in print to this day.²⁴ There is an earthy freshness to Busbecq's *Letters*, all written to Nicholas Michault, a fellow imperial diplomat and a friend from his student days in Venice. He seems to have made few changes to his original drafts when they were published but he was plainly impatient with those in the west mistaking the nature of the Ottomans; Busbecq emphasised what his fellow Christians should learn from them.

Busbecq's letters present a man of invincible curiosity who, kept under effective house arrest, filled his courtyards and stables with a menagerie, which he studied and observed. Busbecq was greedy for sensation, keen to see this new and exotic eastern world. He wrote ruefully to Michault, who had asked about what he saw in the great city: 'I do not generally do so unless I have dispatches from the Emperor for presentation to the Sultan, or instructions to protest against the ravages and malpractices of the Turkish garrisons. If I wished from time to time to take a ride through the city with my custodian, permission would probably not be refused . . . What I enjoy is the country

and the fields, not the city – especially a city which is almost falling to pieces, and of whose former glory nothing remains except its splendid position.’ Busbecq observed minutely, whether it was flowers and plants, scenery or human beings. His letters, in all their many editions, were unadorned by engravings and devoid of censorious comment. The plainness of his texts is odd, because he had brought with him in his ambassadorial entourage a talented young Danish artist, Melchior Lorck (Lorichs), who was able to move about freely while his master was constrained by the demands of protocol. The drawings and engravings that he produced eventually became a book, published posthumously in 1626; both echoed Busbecq’s pen portraits, but also transmuted them into something more exotic. Lorck used the sights of Istanbul as he would models in a studio. He depicted a world of objects frozen in time, whether they were mosques, palaces, princes, sultans or ordinary people.²⁵

Another duo had preceded Busbecq and Lorck in the city. It is almost inconceivable that Busbecq had not read Nicolas de Nicolay’s depiction of the Ottoman world, published in Lyons in 1567.²⁶ The artist was born in the Dauphiné in south-eastern France in 1517. In 1551 the French king Henri II had sent his ambassador of ten years’ standing, the Count of Aramont, back to the court of Suleiman with an enlarged retinue. In its ranks was France’s official mapmaker and draughtsman, Nicolas de Nicolay.²⁷ From the age of twenty-five he had spent his life as a mercenary soldier-cum-traveller, journeying and warring from the Baltic in the north to Greece in the east. Eventually, it was his self-taught skill as a draughtsman that turned his career to mapmaking and took him on the embassy to the Ottoman world. Nicolay was sent, in effect, as a kind of spy. He was required to draw the ports and landmarks that they passed on the voyage out, and in particular the approaches and shore defences to Istanbul. Unofficially, he sketched everything else that came under his gaze. After his stay in the east ended in 1555 there were further journeys and more than a decade passed before, in 1567–8, he published an account of his travels to the east, complete with more than sixty engravings of costumes and some scenes from local life.

Nicolay freely admitted when his illustrations were not true to life. The images of women, like the ‘great lady and wife unto the Great Turk’ or a ‘Gentlewoman of the Turks, being within her house’ were

certainly not what they seemed. He described how a palace eunuch from Ragusa, 'a man of great discretion and a lover of virtue', bought some suitable clothes from the market, dressed up two prostitutes and the artist drew his imaginary great ladies. Much of what he described was what he saw with his own eyes, like the famous wrestlers ('as I have seen them in Constantinople') but much was at second hand.²⁸ Some was pure imagination, like two men wearing vaguely Roman styles of dress, or pilgrims to Mecca, carrying distinctly western fringed flags.²⁹

Once he described his model in detail. A *delly* (*deli*) was a daredevil Balkan light horseman, and Nicolay said that he saw his first *deli* 'in Adrianople, being then with the Lord of Aramont, in the house of Rustum Pasha, to whom the said Deli was retainer, who not only at my request but also in the hope of some present, did follow us to our lodging'. His appearance was remarkable: 'his doublet and his long hose . . . were of the skin of a young bear, with the hair outward. Upon his head he had a long cape after the Polish or Georgian fashion, hanging down over one of his shoulders made of leopard's skin well spotted, and over the same before the forehead for to show more fearful, was fastened a long tail of an eagle, and the two wings nailed upon the target.' Nicolay asked where he was from and the dragoman translated that he was Serbian but his grandfather was 'a descendant of the Parthians' and, although he pretended to be a Muslim, 'yet was he from his birth of heart and will a Christian, and the better to make me believe it he said in the vulgar Greek . . . the Lord's prayer, the salutation of the Angel and the symbol of the Apostle. Furthermore I asked him why he did apparel himself so strangely and with such great feathers, his answer was that it was to appear to his enemies the more furious and fearful. And as for the feathers, the custom among his people that none other was permitted to wear them as had made some memorable proof [of their valour] . . . the true ornament of a valiant man of war.'³⁰ This perfectly describes his 'pretty Delly'.

What was real and what was imagined in Nicolay's *Navigations*? It is very hard to be sure, and to most readers its barbaric extravagance seemed unquestionably correct. They expected nothing less. It was an instant success, and Italian, French and English translations quickly followed, with each edition using the complete set (and sometimes some additions) in Nicolay's original portfolio. The poses and types

that he published to illustrate the eastern costumes of his own day became the model for many later engravings and woodcuts.³¹ But Nicolay, like Melchior Lorck, was entranced with the bizarre, because to his artist's eye they produced more powerful and appealing images. Strange and unusual stories had a similar appeal, so he listened to fanciful tales about the sexual practices of the Persians, the grotesque self-mutilations of the Calenderi or the lesbian excesses aroused by the steamy heat of the Turkish bath (*hamam*). It was the same eager credulity that had caused travellers in earlier centuries to report anthropophagi, or men with heads like dogs.

The third eyewitness was very different from both Busbecq and Nicolay. Paul Rycaut was the son of a successful Huguenot merchant who had left Antwerp for London in about 1600. Peter Rycaut made a fortune in trading with Italy and the western Mediterranean, and settled on the proceeds in English society. Knighted, he supported King Charles I and made large loans to the Royalist cause during the Civil War. After the king's defeat, the new republican government forced him to leave the country. Paul, born in 1629, was the youngest of his ten sons, educated at Cambridge and at the university of Alcalá de Henares in Spain, a result of his father's extensive connections with the Spanish crown. He travelled in Italy, again using the extensive Rycaut network of connections, until he joined the court of the exiled Charles II in Brussels. When the king was restored in 1660, the young Rycaut became secretary to the Earl of Winchelsea who was being sent as ambassador to Constantinople.

He was thirty-two years old when he came to the Ottoman empire and for the next forty years it remained central to his livelihood, reputation and interests.³² In all he spent seventeen years living first in Istanbul and, from 1667, as the English consul in Smyrna, a main port for the English trade with Anatolia and the Levant. He began the book in Istanbul, and read much of it aloud, he tells us, to the ambassador. His intention was to write a scientific study, based on the best available sources, read and revised by those with expert knowledge. He tells his readers, 'I present here a true system or model of the Turkish Government and Religion; not in the same manner as certain ingenious travellers have done, who have set down their observations as they have obviously occurred in their journey; which being collected for the most part from relations [stories told to them] and discourses

of such who casually intervene in the company of passengers, are consequently subject to many errors and mistakes.³³

Rycaut, by contrast, five years resident in 'the Imperial City', with 'constant access and practise with the Chief Ministers of State' can 'penetrate farther into the Mysteries of this Politie, which appear so strange and barbarous to us, than hasty Travellers could do, who are forced to content themselves with a superficial knowledge'. His self-promotion gained him admission to the Royal Society, and a lifelong reputation as the expert on all matters Ottoman. He did indeed, as he says, 'gain a familiarity and appearance of friendship'. He told his patron, Lord Arlington, that the Turks were 'men of the same composition with us, [who] cannot be so savage and rude as they are generally described'.³⁴

And yet sometimes they *were* 'savage and rude', a mystery he could not fathom. In the end, Rycaut was baffled by the Ottoman world he had described, concluding by thanking God that his sovereign was King Charles II, and 'thanking God [to be born] in a country the most free and just in all the world; and a subject to the most indulgent, the most gracious of all the Princes of the Universe'. Like the Ottoman pashas and viziers on whom he had depended, he too had to flatter his sovereign in the hope of preferment, just as they did their sultan. And, like them, he was disappointed. Like them, he had lived in perilous times. His father's wealth had almost vanished in England's political revolution; he had wandered in exile. Like Busbecq and Nicolay before him, his account was tinged by his own memories: the illegitimate Busbecq, the soldier of fortune Nicolay, and the first-generation Englishman all gained their reputations from their encounters with the Ottomans. All found, as Rycaut suggested, a common humanity, and at the same time a fearsome and alien nation.

These three expatriates were the closest Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came to understanding the Ottoman world. They described a state that had conquered lands that were formerly ruled by Christian sovereigns, that dominated the trade with Asia, whose corsairs even raided the coasts of Atlantic Europe, and whose savage attacks struck as far west as Linz on the borders of Germany. They looked at the military power of the Turk, weighed its strengths and weaknesses, but still saw a most dangerous enemy.

They were right, because the Ottomans challenged the whole of

Europe: as a military power, as a political force and as a competing religious faith. The last is obvious and, in the seventeenth century, all-pervasive. Only a few countries, however, faced all three challenges; some, like France and Sweden, even saw the merit of a good relationship with the Ottomans, on the principle that 'my enemy's enemy is my friend'. The French were locked in a desperate struggle with the Habsburgs that had begun in the early sixteenth century; while the Swedes were battling the Russian czars for dominance in the Baltic, supporting the Turks could be a cheap and convenient way of hurting a mortal foe. England and the Netherlands both had trading interests in the Mediterranean, which were never easy to manage with the imperious Ottoman authorities. There was no one, single, simple European response to the Turk, yet even those who were not outright enemies still regarded the Ottomans with trepidation.³⁵

Looking back over three centuries to the events of 1682 and to the years that followed, it is immensely hard to understand the Ottoman state, its intentions and its motives. Its inner political life was at least as complicated as its western competitors', and the stakes were higher. Failed or unpopular statesmen would still pay with their heads for failure, as they had at the English court of Henry VIII. But this fate was not inevitable. Mehmed Köprülü came back from exile in 1656 to establish a dynasty of Grand Viziers that lasted well into the eighteenth century. The Ottoman empire regularly experienced political purges, periods of mob rule, regional revolt, military rebellion, assassinations and political murder until the very end of Ottoman monarchy in the twentieth century. There was no contemporary parallel, no state in the western world so powerful, with such a complex bureaucratic structure, governed through so ruthless and untrammelled an autocracy, and eliciting such all-pervasive fear.³⁶