

What
Went
Wrong?

*Western Impact and
Middle Eastern Response*

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Introduction

What went wrong? For a long time people in the Islamic world, especially but not exclusively in the Middle East, have been asking this question. The content and formulation of the question, provoked primarily by their encounter with the West, vary greatly according to the circumstances, extent, and duration of that encounter and the events that first made them conscious, by comparison, that all was not well in their own society. But whatever the form and manner of the question and of the answers that it evokes, there is no mistaking the growing anguish, the mounting urgency, and of late the seething anger with which both question and answers are expressed.

There is indeed good reason for questioning and concern, even for anger. For many centuries the world of Islam was in the forefront of human civilization and achievement. In the Muslims' own perception, Islam itself was indeed coterminous with civilization, and beyond its borders there were only barbarians and infidels. This perception of self and other was enjoyed by most if not all other civilization—Greece, Rome, India, China, and one could add more recent examples.

In the era between the decline of antiquity and the dawn of modernity, that is, in the centuries designated in European history as medieval, the Islamic claim was not without justification. Muslims were of course aware that there were other, more or less civilized, societies on earth, in China, in India, in Christendom. But China was remote and little known; India was in process of subjugation and Islamization. Christendom had a certain special importance, in that it constituted the only serious rival to Islam as a world faith and a world power. But in the Muslim view, the faith was superseded by the final Islamic

revelation, and the power was being steadily overcome by the greater, divinely guided power of Islam.

For most medieval Muslims, Christendom meant, primarily, the Byzantine Empire, which gradually became smaller and weaker until its final disappearance with the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The remoter lands of Europe were seen in much the same light as the remoter lands of Africa—as an outer darkness of barbarism and unbelief from which there was nothing to learn and little even to be imported, except slaves and raw materials. For both the northern and the southern barbarians, their best hope was to be incorporated in the empire of the caliphs, and thus attain the benefits of religion and civilization.

For the first thousand years or so after the advent of Islam, this seemed not unlikely, and Muslims made repeated attempts to accomplish it. In the course of the seventh century, Muslim armies advancing from Arabia conquered Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and North Africa, all until then part of Christendom, and most of the new recruits to Islam, west of Iran and Arabia, were indeed converts from Christianity. In the eighth century, from their bases in North Africa, Arab Muslim forces, now joined by Berber converts, conquered Spain and Portugal and invaded France; in the ninth century they conquered Sicily and invaded the Italian mainland. In 846 C.E. a naval expedition from Sicily even entered the River Tiber, and Arab forces sacked Ostia and Rome. This provoked the first attempts to organize an effective Christian counterattack. A subsequent series of campaigns to recover the Holy Land, known as the Crusades, ended in failure and expulsion.

In Europe, Christian arms were more successful. By the end of the eleventh century the Muslims had been expelled from Sicily, and in 1492, almost eight centuries after the first Muslim landing in Spain, the long struggle for the reconquest ended in victory, opening the way to a Christian invasion of Africa and Asia. But meanwhile there were other Muslim threats to European Christendom. In the East, between 1237 and 1240 C.E., the Tatars of the Golden Horde conquered Russia; in 1252 the Khan of the Golden Horde and his people were converted to Islam. Russia, with much of Eastern Europe, was subject to Muslim rule, and it was not until the late fifteenth century that the Russians finally freed their country from what they called

“the Tatar yoke.” In the meantime a third wave of Muslim attack had begun, that of the Ottoman Turks, who conquered Anatolia, captured the ancient Christian city of Constantinople, invaded and colonized the Balkan peninsula, and threatened the very heart of Europe, twice reaching as far as Vienna.

At the peak of Islamic power, there was only one civilization that was comparable in the level, quality, and variety of achievement; that was of course China. But Chinese civilization remained essentially local, limited to one region, East Asia, and to one racial group. It was exported to some degree, but only to neighboring and kindred peoples. Islam in contrast created a world civilization, polyethnic, multiracial, international, one might even say intercontinental.

For centuries the world view and self-view of Muslims seemed well grounded. Islam represented the greatest military power on earth—its armies, at the very same time, were invading Europe and Africa, India and China. It was the foremost economic power in the world, trading in a wide range of commodities through a far-flung network of commerce and communications in Asia, Europe, and Africa; importing slaves and gold from Africa, slaves and wool from Europe, and exchanging a variety of foodstuffs, materials, and manufactures with the civilized countries of Asia. It had achieved the highest level so far in human history in the arts and sciences of civilization. Inheriting the knowledge and skills of the ancient Middle East, of Greece and of Persia,* it added to them new and important innovations from outside, such as the use and manufacture of paper from China and decimal positional numbering from India. It is difficult to imagine modern literature or science without the one or the other. It was in the

*The name Persia in its various classical and modern European forms comes from *Pars*, the name of the southwestern province of Iran, along the shore of the Gulf. The Arabs, whose alphabet contains no equivalent to the letter “p,” called it “Fars.” In the way that Castilian became Spanish and Tuscan became Italian, so the dialect of Fars, known as Farsi, came to be accepted as the literary, standard, and ultimately national language. In the classical and Western world, the regional name was also applied to the whole country, but this never happened among the Persians, who have used the name Iran—the land of the Aryans—for millennia and formally adopted it as the official name of the country in 1935. In speaking of past centuries, I have retained the accepted Western name.

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Islamic Middle East that Indian numbers were for the first time incorporated in the inherited body of mathematical learning. From the Middle East they were transmitted to the West, where they are still known as Arabic numerals, honoring not those who invented them but those who first brought them to Europe. To this rich inheritance scholars and scientists in the Islamic world added an immensely important contribution through their own observations, experiments, and ideas. In most of the arts and sciences of civilization, medieval Europe was a pupil and in a sense a dependent of the Islamic world, relying on Arabic versions even for many otherwise unknown Greek works.

And then, suddenly, the relationship changed. Even before the Renaissance, Europeans were beginning to make significant progress in the civilized arts. With the advent of the New Learning, they advanced by leaps and bounds, leaving the scientific and technological and eventually the cultural heritage of the Islamic world far behind them.

The Muslims for a long time remained unaware of this. The great translation movement that centuries earlier had brought many Greek, Persian, and Syriac works within the purview of Muslim and other Arabic readers had come to an end, and the new scientific literature of Europe was almost totally unknown to them. Until the late eighteenth century, only one medical book was translated into a Middle Eastern language—a sixteenth-century treatise on syphilis, presented to Sultan Mehmed IV in Turkish 1655.¹ Both the choice and the date are significant. This disease, reputedly of American origin, had come to the Islamic world from Europe and is indeed is still known in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and other languages as “the Frankish disease.” Obviously, it seemed both appropriate and legitimate to adopt a Frankish remedy for a Frankish disease. Apart from that, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the technological revolution passed virtually unnoticed in the lands of Islam, where they were still inclined to dismiss the denizens of the lands beyond the Western frontier as benighted barbarians, much inferior even to the more sophisticated Asian infidels to the east. These had useful skills and devices to impart; the Europeans had neither. It was a judgment that had for long been reasonably accurate. It was becoming dangerously out of date.

Usually the lessons of history are most perspicuously and unequivocally taught on the battlefield, but there may be some delay before

the lesson is understood and applied. In Christendom the final defeat of the Moors in Spain in 1492 and the liberation of Russia from the rule of the Islamized Tatars were understandably seen as decisive victories. Like the Spaniards and Portuguese, the Russians too pursued their former masters into their homelands, but with far greater and more enduring success. With the conquest of Astrakhan in 1554, the Russians reached the shores of the Caspian Sea; in the following century, they reached the northern shore of the Black Sea, thus beginning the long process of conquest and colonization that incorporated vast Muslim lands in the Russian Empire.

But in the heartlands of Islam, these happenings on the remote frontiers of civilization seemed less important and were in any case overshadowed in Muslim eyes by such central and vastly more important victories as the ignominious eviction of the Crusaders from the Levant in the thirteenth century, the capture of Constantinople in 1453, and the triumphant march of the Turkish forces through the Balkans toward the surviving Christian imperial city of Vienna, in what seemed to be an irresistible advance of Islam and defeat of Christendom.

The Ottoman sultan, like his peer and rival the Holy Roman Emperor, was not without political rivals and sectarian challengers within his own religious world. Of the two, the sultan was the more successful in dealing with these challenges. At the turn of the fifteenth–sixteenth centuries, the Ottomans had two Muslim neighbors. The older of the two was the Mamluk sultanate of Egypt, with its capital in Cairo, ruling over all Syria and Palestine and, more important, over the holy places of Islam in western Arabia. The other was Persia, newly united by a new dynasty, with a new religious militancy. The founder of the dynasty, Shāh Ismā‘īl Safavī (reigned 1501–1524), a Turkish-speaking Shi‘ite from Azerbaijan, brought all the lands of Iran under a single ruler for the first time since the Arab conquest in the seventh century. A religious leader as well as—perhaps more than—a political and military ruler, he made Shi‘ism the official religion of the state, and thus differentiated the Muslim realm of Iran sharply from its Sunni neighbors on both sides; to the East, in Central Asia and India, and to the West, in the Ottoman Empire.

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For a while, he and his successors, the shahs of the Safavid line, challenged the claim of the Ottoman sultans to both political supremacy and religious leadership. The Ottoman Sultan Selim I, known as “the Grim,” who reigned from 1512 to 1520, launched military campaigns against both neighbors. He achieved a substantial but incomplete success against the Shah, a total and final victory over the Mamluk sultan of Egypt. Egypt and its dependencies were incorporated in the Ottoman realms; Persia remained a separate, rival, and for the most part hostile state. Busbecq, the imperial ambassador in Istanbul, went so far as to say that it was only the threat from Persia that saved Europe from imminent conquest by the Turks. “On [the Turks’] side are the resources of a mighty empire, strength unimpaired, habituation to victory, endurance of toil, unity, discipline, frugality, and watchfulness. On our side is public poverty, private luxury, impaired strength, broken spirit, lack of endurance and training; the soldiers are insubordinate, the officers avaricious; there is contempt for discipline; licence, recklessness, drunkenness, and debauchery are rife; and worst of all, the enemy is accustomed to victory, and we to defeat. Can we doubt what the result will be? Persia alone interposes in our favour; for the enemy, as he hastens to attack, must keep an eye on this menace in his rear. But Persia is only delaying our fate; it cannot save us. When the Turks have settled with Persia, they will fly at our throats supported by the might of the whole East; how unprepared we are I dare not say!”² There have been more recent Western observers who spoke of the Soviet Union and China in similar terms, and proved equally mistaken.

Busbecq’s fears, as it turned out, were unjustified. The Ottomans and the Persians continued to fight each other until the nineteenth century, by which time they no longer constituted a threat to anyone but their own subjects. At the time, the idea of a possible anti-Ottoman alliance between Christendom and Persia was occasionally mooted, but to little effect. In 1523, Shāh Ismā‘īl, still smarting after his defeat, sent a letter to the Emperor Charles V expressing surprise that the European powers were fighting each other instead of joining forces against the Ottomans. The appeal fell on deaf ears and the emperor did not send a reply to Shāh Ismā‘īl until 1529, by which time the shah had been dead for five years.

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For the time being, Persia was immobilized, and under Selim's successor, Süleyman the Magnificent (reigned 1520–1566), the Ottomans were able to embark on a new phase of expansion in Europe. The great battle of Mohacs in Hungary, in August 1526, gave the Turks a decisive victory, and opened the way to the first siege of Vienna in 1529. The failure to capture Vienna on that occasion was seen on both sides as a delay, not a defeat, and opened a long struggle for mastery in the heart of Europe.

Here and there the Christian powers managed to achieve some successes, and one notable victory, the great naval battle of Lepanto, in the Gulf of Patras in Greece, in 1571. In Europe, indeed, this was acclaimed as a major triumph. All Christendom exulted in this victory, and King James VI of Scotland, later James I of England, was even moved to compose a long and ecstatic poem in celebration.³ The Turkish archives preserve the report of the Kapudan Pasha, the senior officer commanding the fleet, whose account of the battle of Lepanto is just two lines: "The fleet of the divinely guided Empire encountered the fleet of the wretched infidels, and the will of Allah turned the other way."⁴ As a military report, this may be somewhat lacking in detail, but not in frankness. In Ottoman histories, the battle is known simply as *Sıngın*, a Turkish word meaning a rout or crushing defeat.

But how much difference did Lepanto make? The answer must be very little. If we look at the larger question of naval power, let alone the far more important question of military power in the region, Lepanto was no more than a minor setback for the Ottomans, quickly made good. The situation is well-reflected in a conversation reported by an Ottoman chronicler, who tells us that when Sultan Selim II asked the Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha about the cost of rebuilding the fleet after its destruction at Lepanto, the Vizier replied: "The might and wealth of our Empire are such, that if we desired to equip the entire fleet with silver anchors, silken rigging, and satin sails, we could do it."⁵ This is obviously a poetic exaggeration, but a fairly accurate reflection of the real significance of Lepanto—a great shot in the arm in the West, a minor ripple in the East. The major threat remained. In the seventeenth century, there was still Turkish pashas ruling in Budapest and Belgrade, and Barbary Corsairs from North Africa were raiding the coasts of England and Ireland and even,

in 1627, Iceland, bringing back human booty for sale in the slave-markets of Algiers.

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Persia once again became a factor of importance in the struggle. Shāh ‘Abbās I, known as the Great, was in many ways the most successful ruler of his line. In 1598, returning to his capital after a victory against the Uzbeks of Central Asia, he was approached by a group of Europeans led by two English brothers, Sir Anthony and Sir Robert Sherley. Probably at their suggestion, he sent letters of friendship to the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor, and various European monarchs and rulers, including the Queen of England and the Doge of Venice. These missives produced little result. Of greater importance was a reorganization and reequipping of his armed forces, undertaken with the Sherleys’ and other Europeans’ help. Between 1602 and 1612, and again between 1616 and 1627, Persia and Turkey were at war, and the Persians won a number of successes. Distracted by this struggle in the East, the Turks were obliged, in 1606, to make peace with the Austrians.

The Treaty of Sitvatorok, signed in that year, is notable for a number of reasons. All previous treaties had been dictated by the Turks in their capital, Istanbul. This one was negotiated on neutral ground, on an island in the Danube between the two sides. Perhaps even more significant was the recognition of the Emperor as “Padishah.” Until then it had been the normal practice of the Ottomans to designate European rulers either by subordinate Ottoman titles such as *bey*, or more commonly by what they thought to be European titles. Thus, for example, Ottoman letters to Queen Elizabeth addressed her as “Queen (*Kraliçe*) of the Vilayet of England,” while the Emperor was addressed as “King (*Kıral*) of Vienna.”⁶ *Kıral* and *Kraliçe* are of course terms of European, not Turkish origin, and were used by Ottomans in much the same way as imperial Britain used native titles for native princes in India. Addressing the emperor as “Padishah,” the title that the Ottoman sultans themselves used, was a formal recognition of equality.⁷

While generally contemptuous of the infidel West, Muslims were not unaware of Western skills in weaponry and warfare. The initial successes of the Crusaders in the Levant impressed upon Muslim war departments that in some areas at least Western arms were superior, and the inference was quickly drawn and applied. Western prisoners

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of war were set to work building fortifications; Western mercenaries and adventurers were employed, and a traffic in arms and other war materials began that grew steadily in the course of the centuries. Even when the Ottoman Turks were advancing into southeastern Europe, they were always able to buy much needed equipment for their fleets and armies from Christian European suppliers, to recruit European experts, and even to obtain financial cover from Christian European banks. What is nowadays known as “constructive engagement” has a long history.

All this, however, had little or no influence on Muslim perceptions and attitudes, as long as Muslim armies continued to be victorious in the heartlands. The sultans bought war materials and military expertise for cash, and saw in this no more than a business transaction. The Turks in particular adopted such European inventions as handguns and artillery and used them to great effect, without thereby modifying their view of the barbarian infidels from whom they acquired these weapons.

There were some dissenting voices. As early as the sixteenth century, an Ottoman Grand Vizier in his retirement observed that while the Muslim forces were supreme on the land, the infidels were getting stronger on the sea. “We must overcome them.”⁸ His message received little attention. In the early seventeenth century another Ottoman official noted an alarming presence of Portuguese, Dutch, and English merchant shipping in Asian waters, and warned of a possible danger from that source.⁹

The danger was real, and growing. When the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama sailed round Africa into the Indian Ocean at the end of the fifteenth century, he opened a new sea route between Europe and Asia, with far-reaching consequences for the Middle East, first commercial, later also strategic. As early as 1502, the Republic of Venice, the prime European beneficiary of the eastern spice trade, sent an emissary to Cairo to warn the sultan of Egypt of the danger that this new sea route presented to their commerce. At first, the sultan paid little attention, but a sharp decline in his customs revenues focused his attention more sharply on this new problem. Egyptian naval expeditions against the Portuguese in eastern waters were

however unsuccessful and no doubt contributed to the defeat of the Egyptian sultanate in 1516–1517 and the incorporation of all its dominions in the Ottoman realm.

The Ottomans now took over this task, but fared little better. Their efforts to counter the Portuguese in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea were at best inconclusive. The lack of Ottoman interest in these developments is best illustrated by the response to an appeal for help from Atjeh, in Sumatra. In 1563 the Muslim ruler of Atjeh sent an embassy to Istanbul asking for help against the Portuguese and adding, as an inducement, that several of the non-Muslim rulers of the region had agreed to turn Muslim if the Ottomans would come to their aid. But the Ottomans were busy with more urgent matters—the sieges of Malta and of Szigetvar in Hungary, the death of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent. After two years delay they finally assembled a fleet of 19 galleys and some other ships carrying weapons and supplies, to help the beleaguered Atjehnese.

Most of the ships, however, never got there. The greater part of the expedition was diverted to the more urgent task of restoring and extending Ottoman authority in the Yemen, and in fact only two ships, carrying gun founders, gunners, and engineers as well as some guns and other war material, actually reached Atjeh, where they were taken into the service of the local ruler and used in his unsuccessful attempts to expel the Portuguese. The incident seems to have passed unnoticed at the time and is known only from documents in the Turkish archives.¹⁰ Whether through negligence or design, the Ottomans were probably fortunate in not challenging the Portuguese naval power in the eastern seas; their fleet of Mediterranean-style galleys would have fared badly against the Portuguese carracks and galleons, built for the Atlantic, and therefore bigger, heavier, better armed, and more maneuverable.

The impact of the new open ocean route between Europe and Asia on the transit commerce of the Middle East was less than was at one time thought. Throughout the sixteenth century, the Middle Eastern transit trade in spices and other commodities between South and Southeast Asia on the one hand and Mediterranean Europe on the other continued to flourish. But in the seventeenth century a new and—for the Middle East—far more dangerous situation arose. By that time Portuguese, Dutch, and other Europeans in Asia were no longer there

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simply as merchants. They were establishing bases that in time became colonial dependencies. As their power was extended from the sea to the seaports and even to the interior, the new European empires in Asia, controlling the points both of arrival and of departure in East–West commerce, effectively outflanked the Middle East.

The danger was not confined to West European expansion into South Asia. There was also the Russian expansion into North Asia where, again, Muslim rulers turned to the greatest Muslim power of the time, the Ottoman Empire, for help. There was some response. In 1568, the Ottomans drew up a plan to dig a canal through the isthmus of Suez from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea; the following year they actually began to dig a canal between the Don and Volga rivers. Their purpose, clearly, was to extend their naval power beyond the Mediterranean, on the one hand to the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, on the other to the Black Sea and the Caspian. But both operations, so it seems, were seen by the Ottomans as sideshows, and abandoned when they proved troublesome. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Ottomans withdrew from active participation on both fronts—against the Russians in North and Central Asia, against the West Europeans in South and Southeast Asia. Instead, they concentrated their main effort on the struggle in Europe that they saw, not without reason, as the principal battleground between Islam and Christendom, the rival faiths competing for the enlightenment—and mastery—of the world.

Western successes on the battlefield and on the high seas were accompanied by less resounding but more pervasive and ultimately more dangerous victories in the marketplace. The discovery and exploitation of the New World for the first time provided Christian Europe with ample supplies of gold and silver. The fertile lands of their new colonial possessions enabled them to grow new crops, including even such previous imports from the Middle East as coffee and sugar, and to export them to their former suppliers. The growing European presence in South and Southeast Asia accelerated and expanded this process, and old-established handicrafts faced the double challenge of Asian cheap labor and European commercial skills. The Western trading company, helped by its business-minded government, represented

a new force in the Middle East. Here again an occasional voice expressed some concern but was little heeded.

Yet these developments and the accompanying changes in both internal and external affairs aggravated old problems and created new ones of increasing range and complexity—monetary, fiscal, financial, and eventually economic, social, and cultural.¹¹

For most of the seventeenth century there were no major changes in the balance of military forces. Until almost the midcentury, Europe was absorbed in the Thirty Years War and its aftermath, while the Ottomans were preoccupied with problems at home and on their eastern frontier. A war with the Republic of Venice began in 1645, and at first went rather badly for the Turks. In 1656 the Venetians, who for some years had blockaded the Straits, were even able to send their fleet into the Dardanelles, and win a naval victory.

In that same year Mehmed Köprülü, an Albanian pasha, was appointed grand vizier. During his term of office (1656–1661) and that of his son and successor Ahmed Köprülü (1661–1678) the Ottoman state underwent a remarkable transformation. These skilled, energetic, and ruthless rulers were able to reorganize the armed forces of the Empire, stabilize its finances, and resume the struggle in Christian Europe. An area of intensive activity was Poland and the Ukraine, and it was here that, for the first time, the Ottomans came into conflict with Russia. By the Treaty of Radzin of 1681, the Turks gave up their claims on the Ukraine and agreed to give the Cossacks trading rights in the Black Sea. It was a portentous change, marking the emergence of a new and more dangerous enemy, and the beginning of a long, hard, and bitter struggle.

Meanwhile a new grand vizier had been appointed. Kara Mustafa Pasha was a brother-in-law of Mehmed Köprülü, and felt it his duty to restore the glory of the Köprülü vizierial dynasty. In 1682 he launched a new war against Austria, culminating in a second siege of Vienna, between July 17 and September 12, 1683. This second unsuccessful attempt to capture the city is best described in the words of the contemporary Ottoman chronicler Sıhhdar: “This was a calamitous defeat, so great that there has never been its like since the first appearance of the Ottoman state.”¹² One must admire the frankness with which the Ottomans faced unpleasant realities.

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The failure before Vienna was followed by a series of further defeats. In 1686, with the loss of Buda, a century and a half of Ottoman rule in Hungary came to an end. The event is commemorated in a Turkish lament of the time:

In the fountains they no longer wash
In the mosques they no longer pray
The places that prospered are now desolate
The Austrian has taken our beautiful Buda.¹³

The retreat from Vienna opened new opportunities. In March 1684 Austria, Venice, Poland, Tuscany, and Malta, with the blessing of the Pope, formed a Holy League to fight the Ottoman Empire. Russia joined the Catholic powers in this enterprise. Under Czar Peter, known as the Great, they went to war against the Ottomans and achieved signal successes. On August 6, 1696, Peter the Great captured Azov—the first Russian stronghold on the shore of the Black Sea.

By now the Turks were ready to discuss peace. The peace process began with secret negotiations between the Austrian chancellor and the newly-appointed Ottoman grand vizier, who—significantly—was accompanied by his grand dragoman, the Istanbul Greek Alexander Mavrokordato. In October 1698, the diplomats met at Carlowitz in the Voivodina, newly conquered by the Austrians from the Turks. Finally on January 26, 1699, with the help of British and Dutch mediation, a peace treaty between the Ottoman Empire and the Holy League was signed at Carlowitz. A little later a separate agreement with the Russians confirmed the cession to them of Azov.

The Ottomans had suffered serious territorial losses. They had also been obliged to abandon old concepts and old ways of dealing with the outside world, and to learn a new science of diplomacy, negotiation, and mediation. The war was not a total defeat and the Treaty was not a total surrender. In the early eighteenth century they were even able to make some recovery. But even so the military result was unequivocal—the shattering defeat outside Vienna, the devastating loss of lives, stores, and equipment, and of course the cession of territory. The lesson was clear, and the Turks set to work to learn and apply it.