The Fall of Constantinople

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Five hundred years ago Constantinople—long a bastion of the Western world—fell to the armies of the Grand Turk. G.R. Potter gives his account of how the last remnants of the Byzantine Empire finally disappeared.

The plight of Constantinople in 1453 bore a close resemblance to that of West Berlin in 1953. The Ottoman Turks, eastern representatives of a religion, a culture and a way of life utterly different from that of the West - had penetrated far into Europe, reaching the Danube and bringing the Balkans under their sway. Communications between the West and the capital of the dismembered Byzantine empire were far from easy, a narrow sea-passage being with difficulty kept open, while in the city itself Greeks, Venetians and Genoese were almost as much rivals as allies. Yet this outpost of the West was of enormous importance: so long as it remained Christian there was always a hope that the oriental menace could be fought back and, in any case, the government controlling the bridgehead between Europe and Asia, commanding the entry and exit of the Black Sea, must be in a position of considerable power. The city was great. The New Rome, to which Constantinople had transferred the capital of the Empire, had been celebrated through the ages for its beauty, wealth and strength. Within its incomparable walls, improved by both Theodosius and Heraclius, were palaces among which the Emperor’s was but the greatest and most magnificent; churches, of which the Basilica of Sancta Sophia, the Holy Wisdom, was the most renowned; the Hippodrome, where down the centuries crowds had watched their favourite charioteers drive to victory and had themselves fought out their bitter factional quarrels; while everywhere the city was adorned with baths, aqueducts, fountains and other public monuments.

The Holy Orthodox Church, with the Patriarch of Constantinople at its head, had separated itself from Rome in the eleventh century, thus completing tendencies at work since the days of Gregory the Great; it claimed to have kept the true original Christian faith and creeds from which the Catholic Church of Rome had deviated. It is true that the “schism” between East and West had been “healed” at Florence in 1439 when the Patriarch Joseph and the Emperor John VIII Palaeologus had agreed to accept the supremacy of the Pope and to adopt the Roman use for the celebration of the sacrament, the Roman addition to the Creed and the Roman teaching about the Procession of the Holy Ghost. But this agreement, the triumph of Pope Eugenius IV, had been repudiated by the people of Constantinople, led by their esteemed monks; years later it remained only as the memory of a misguided enterprise, even though in December 1452, the terms of the Union were once more recited to a silent congregation, including the Patriarch Gregory and the Emperor, in the great Basilica. This attitude of isolation from Rome and hostility to the Roman Church was later to
be adopted by the leaders of the many religious Christians among the peoples of Russia. From Byzantine experience the rulers of Russia learnt that the Holy Orthodox Church could be made at once an instrument of education in submission and a symbol of Eastern European exclusiveness. Having inherited services of singular beauty, the cult of sacred ikons, a married clergy, celibate bishops and numerous monasteries and nunneries, Russia could not forget what had happened in the city from which so many of its religious observances derived, and round which so much of its political interests were entwined.

The conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks was, ultimately, as certain as anything can be, since the tide of conquest had long since left the city an isolated island in an infidel ocean, dependent on the regular arrival of men and supplies from the west. At the best of times, these neither could nor did arrive easily; and when the only appeal that could be made was that, in the common Christian interest, a great metropolitan see should not be abandoned, many were prepared to let a few idealist Crusaders do the fighting while others reaped the reward of their efforts. While the city was admirably defended by its walls, towers and earthworks, the inhabitants were far too few in number to man any but selected points, and those inadequately. The population of the city, as elsewhere in Europe, seems to have fallen in the fifteenth century. At sea, a powerful oar-propelled Turkish fleet was in being: it was, indeed, not entirely able to prevent Venetian galleys from bringing food and comfort to the besieged, who could not therefore be reduced by starvation, but it was sufficient to necessitate a major effort to keep open communications with Constantinople, and at a time when the inducements to make one were slight. It followed, therefore, that the city must be taken by land-assault, and not reduced by the slow process of starvation. On the other hand, a great hostile force could not remain for many months on end outside a town without becoming the victim of disease, as Charles the Bold was to learn at Neuss; while for their part, the rulers of Constantinople had had long practice in the means of maintaining adequate supplies of food for the populace within the walls. It is true that once a blockade had been established, reinforcements and supplies could come by sea only with great difficulty, but the possibility remained, and had, indeed, once been demonstrated in action. If the city was to be captured a breach must be quickly made in the walls, through which fighting men could be poured in overwhelming numbers. Speed was essential. Western Europe was uncomfortably conscious of duties and obligations to its fellow Christians, who formed an enclave of like-minded people in what was rapidly becoming an Asiatic Eastern Europe; and a large scale relief expedition, often talked of, needed but time to be slowly assembled. Through Constantinople to northern Italy, too, came a good deal of oriental overland trade—silks and perfumes, spices and fruits were luxuries highly esteemed by people condemned to a monotonous unseasoned diet, and with no effective means of keeping beasts alive over the winter.

All through the fifteenth century the Ottoman Turk, his power based upon the mountains of Anatolia, had been extending his hold over much of the Balkan peninsula: the battle of Varna (November 11th, 1444), in which Ladislas of Hungary and John Hunyadi of Transylvania were overthrown, and the second battle at Kossovo in 1448 in which the Hungarians were again defeated, had left Sultan Murad II (1421-1451) without an enemy who could take the field south of the Danube. The middle of the fifteenth century saw the last protagonists of East and West suitably matched. In 1448 Constantine XI followed his deceased brother John Palaeologus on the throne of Justinian, and in 1451 Mohammed II reigned in the place of his father. The two rulers admirably personified their respective causes. Constantine,
always hesitant about his duty and policy religiously observant of the ceremonial of his church, dignified, devoted to the ancient traditions of his house, timidly conscious of the dangers that surrounded him, was personally courageous in the face of danger but wholly unable to initiate a wise policy or to follow consistently the advice of any minister. Committed to the West, yet unable to secure men or money from his friends there, suspected by the Greek populace of the city whose confidence in the holy ikons and in the assurance of divine help by a miracle made them singularly complacent, watching with impotent dismay the rivalries of the Venetians and the Genoese, who together might have given him security, he was the Unready of the Byzantine story.

Mohammed II, later known as the Lawgiver and the Conqueror, was twenty-one when he obtained the despotic power that only a Sultan could wield, absolute master of the lives and property of his many subjects, a soldier both by training and inclination. No one brought up amid the luxury and intrigue, the servility, cruelty and arbitrary indifference to humanity of an oriental court could be otherwise than harsh and selfish, and Mohammed II was both these things. Sometimes he revealed a generous trait of impulsive feeling for his fellow soldiers, but terrible cruelties were countenanced and even ordered by him. Possessed of a lively mind, by Islamic standards he was well educated. Impulsive, active and nervous, fulfilling to the letter and according to the letter the precepts of the Koran, he early determined to renew the Holy War against the enemies of the prophet and to wipe out the last physical reminder of an empire that had once been great.

The pretext upon which the siege of Constantinople began was an almost perfect example of the relationship between wolf and lamb. Although the Sultan was undisputed master of the Asiatic side of the Bosphorus, with the covenanted right of marching his men to and from Adrianople without hindrance or delay, he began in 1452 to build a great castle on the European shore at Rumili Hissari, in defiance of treaty obligations and manifestly threatening the city. His answer to a temperate protest from the Emperor was to declare war at the end of August 1452. It was not the first time that Constantinople had been menaced with a siege, but it had never before yielded, except to the fellow Christians of the Fourth Crusade, who had occupied it in the early thirteenth century. The city was much smaller than modern Istanbul, occupying only the European side of the Golden Horn, the narrow channel that joins the Black Sea to the Bosphorus and the sea of Marmora and thus, through the Dardanelles, to the Mediterranean. Across the water was the Genoese quarter of Galata, ostensibly in friendly hands, but in fact a trading station almost indifferent to the fate of the capital.

The great city had water on three sides and, so long as the Venetian galleys were intermittently masters of the Mediterranean, could not thence be attacked in force. The Turk has never been at home anywhere save on land, and such temporary sea power as he later acquired was due to the purchase of Western ships and to renegade Christian admirals. It was, therefore, from the western or land side that an enemy would hope to penetrate. There the hand of man had attempted to complete the work of nature. Right across the peninsula ran the famous triple walls; one, a crenellated and rather light structure, was for preliminary or auxiliary defence, but the other two were as perfect as such works could be. They were high and thick and strengthened by tall towers: they could neither be scaled nor battered down by any medieval instruments, and efforts to undermine them had always proved failures. If bricks, stones and mortar could keep out the foe, these could. By 1453, however,
the new weapon of artillery had developed just beyond the experimental stage. For well over a century, the composition of gunpowder had been known, but the casting of gun barrels for its effective use was a much newer thing; now it was beginning to be generally understood. Mohammed II, ever willing to profit by the ingenuity of others, found renegade Christians, and one Urban in particular, willing to sell their knowledge; and the Sultan easily secured labourers and raw materials for his purpose. Thus, he was able to place in position outside the walls a number of guns of varying sizes, three of which impressed themselves on all the chroniclers, for they threw solid stone balls over two feet in diameter. In time the heaviest walls would be bound to give way before such incessant pounding at close range, although, in fact, the resistance of the fortifications astonished many observers. While attempts were being promoted to effect a breach by artillery fire, the possibilities of direct assault by storm troops were not overlooked; scaling ladders, portable shelters, every kind of hook and pick and other equipment were available in abundance. In short, preparations for the attack were undertaken with the greatest possible thoroughness.

A Turkish army of perhaps 150,000 men, including 12,000 fanatical and highly trained Janissaries, creatures of the Sultan chosen for their strength and ability and trained to warfare from childhood, assembled unmolested within sight of the city in April 1453. The Emperor Constantine XI had made every possible effort to secure help from Western Europe, submitting to some humiliation in the process, but apart from a few men from Venice and, later, some ships with provisions from Genoa, nothing effective was forthcoming. Turkish ships were prevented from sailing up the Golden Horn by a boom placed across its entrance, and the transportation of a number of Turkish ships behind the Genoese quarter overland in sections was a spectacular performance rather than a serious contribution to the attack. Within the city, less than 10,000 able-bodied citizens faced fifteen times their number outside, and at the same time had to secure the physical needs of many non-combatants. It is true that women and girls toiled alongside the men at repairing the damage done to the walls by the enemy, so assiduously that the defences were often as good, at any rate superficially, by the next day as they had been before the attack; but there were also many priests, monks and nuns whose religious duties kept them fully occupied. One main reason for the success of the final assault was that the thin line of defenders was tired: there were never enough men to go round. Genoese and Venetians, too, were unwilling to co-operate with one another, and their rivalries at one time became so acute as to need the personal intervention of the Emperor.

For over five weeks, after the first serious assault on April 18th, the bombardment never ceased, and on May 18th a high movable turret came into action, menacing from above the citizens on the walls. It was by then clear that the Venetian relieving fleet, which had been confidently spoken of, would not arrive, that food supplies were becoming difficult, although there was no danger of starvation, and that the saints were unlikely to work miracles. Indefatigable and determined, Mohammed II upheld the spirits of his men by his own example, inflicting terrifying punishments on those who shirked or hesitated, and promising great rewards to those who survived. Any who died in the righteous cause of the Holy War were assured of a passage to paradise; for the survivors was reserved a three-days’ sack of the accumulated wealth of the civilized world.

The weakest point in the defences lay near the centre. There, in the area known as the Mesoteichon, and close to the military gate of St. Romanus, the little river Lycus flowed
under the walls. This presented an opportunity which the Turkish commanders had not overlooked; the Sultan's splendid tent was pitched opposite this point and, when continuous bombardment had softened resistance, the pick of trained and rested warriors were kept ready for the assault. At the same time a most valuable diversion was effected further north. Near the palace of Porphyrogenitus was a blocked-up postern gate whose position made it difficult to guard or to watch; a successful attack at this point, although contained by the defenders, caused great alarm. On May 28th the Emperor, accompanied by the greatest and best known of the nobles and clergy, had attended one of the now rare services in St. Sophia by way of preparation for the end that all foresaw. If the exposition of relics or the utterance of noble sentences could have saved the city, they were not wanting.

The end came on Tuesday, May 29th. The commander of the imperial forces was the popular Genoese general, John Justiniani, who combined immense military knowledge and resourcefulness with tremendous energy and a personality that was loved and trusted by all. So far his dispositions had been successful. But the last attack of the picked Janissaries, led by Mohammed, aided by good fortune and forced home with relentless determination and overwhelming weight of numbers, succeeded in scaling the outer wall, swarming over the enclosure and through the last line of masonry that lay between them and the heart of the city. The commander, Justiniani, was mortally wounded at the outset, and his retirement to have his wounds dressed took the heart out of many of his followers. Constantine himself atoned for the somewhat feckless statesmanship of his reign by perishing in the general combat with the invaders: the manner of his death is not known, and whether his body or that of another was dragged from a heap of slain for the Sultan's delectation none could say for certain. His niece, and in some sense the representative of his family, Sophia, later married Ivan III, Tsar of Moscow, thus enabling fanciful Muscovites to claim that the New Rome had been transferred to their city. After the Emperor's death, although hundreds sold their lives dearly in the streets, the complete occupation of the city was accomplished relatively soon.

The sack and partial destruction of a great city is, at all times, a terrible thing, and in this instance Constantinople was at the mercy of the long pent up ferocity of unrestrained barbarians. The looted churches were either dismantled or desecrated: Hagia Sophia became a mosque, and remained so, until the abolition of the Sultanate in the present century made a somewhat different attitude on the part of the Turkish government possible; the celebrated mosaics were hidden from human eyes and the library dispersed or wantonly destroyed. How much was lost in the wild orgy of destruction can only be surmised from surviving catalogues and inventories of precious objects, most of which never re-appeared. The numbers of citizens casually killed, as distinct from the slaughter of those who were in arms defending their homes, was probably not great, for prisoners were valuable, the complete depopulation of the city most undesirable, and the Genoese in Galata claimed and received the treatment due to neutrals.

Mohammed's victory immensely enhanced his power and prestige. His soldiers worshipped the man who had led them to success and wealth, and the implicit obedience, common in the east, could combine well with the memories of the ritual of slavery that had surrounded the Byzantine emperors. It became almost a rule of state that the younger brothers of a Sultan must be removed, lest there should be a rival of the same family round whom malcontents might gather. The Sultan had long since learned that baptized Christians could
be induced to serve him for money, and the step from that to conversion, which made the convert the equal of every other Moslem, was not a great one. In any case, the Eastern church was no menace to a tolerant ruler, and the Koran allowed, almost encouraged, a contemptuous toleration of the submissive subject of alien faith. A new Patriarch was therefore set up in the person of George Scholarius, known as Gennadius, partly to enable some normality to be restored to the church service, but partly, too, because he had long been known as a fierce and uncompromising opponent of Rome, where Pope Nicholas V was encouraging a new Crusade.

If some of the former inhabitants should return, to accept and obey the new government, they would find work in plenty, if only upon rebuilding, together with guarantees of personal protection and even a degree of favour. A great new palace was to be erected, for the Sultan intended to make the captured city the permanent home of his dynasty and the seat of government of the whole Ottoman Empire. Many did so return, and the city slowly resumed something of its metropolitan, international aspect—so much so that, when the day of true Turkish nationalism was to dawn, it was to Ankara, in Asia Minor, and not to Istanbul, that the new regime looked. Among those attracted to Constantinople were a number of Armenians who were allowed to have their own Patriarch, and who attained a degree of prosperity that made them the objects of hatred and massacre within living memory.

One of the commonest popular historical errors is the belief that the Italian Renaissance was notably stimulated by, or even owed its origins, to, the fall of Constantinople. The Greeks, it used to be said, fled from the city carrying with them precious manuscripts which, sold at a great price to avid Italian humanists, enabled these at last to understand the Greek language and so to bring about a revival of learning. Unfortunately for this theory, Manuel Chrysoloras, born a century before 1453, and his successors, had been teaching Greek in Florence since the later years of the fourteenth century; the search for manuscripts had been going on for a generation, and so many had been found or bought, that assimilation and comprehension, rather than expansion, were the needs of the moment. Scholars and their agents had never experienced any serious difficulty in visiting Constantinople in Venetian or Genoese ships, purchasing books, and having them transcribed. Very few Greek scholars, in fact, left their city. The young Mohammed had been brought up to respect scholarship and was himself not entirely unlearned. History and law appealed to him especially, but he welcomed the traditional ways of study and teaching. Italy was shocked by the loss of a great intellectual centre and lamented the codices that had been consumed in flames; but for the origins of the Renaissance we must look elsewhere, and its story could be adequately told with only a passing reference to the events of 1453. It was the Constantinople of the Byzantine Empire, not the Constantinople of the Turks, to which scholarship owed so notable a debt.

The conquests of Mohammed II were by no means limited to the great one of 1453, though they were conditioned by it. It was because he was secure on the Bosphorus that he could, and did, turn his conquering sword elsewhere. In modern Greece, Macedonia, Achaia and the Morea, Christian rulers continued to exist for a while as the intimidated tributaries of the Ottoman overlord. But on the pretext that some payments were in arrears, the Morea was entered in 1458 and, soon after, Athens admitted the Sultan. A series of complicated intrigues followed, not worth unravelling, for by 1462 the whole of the mainland, with the exception of few Venetian towns such as Coron, Navarino and Lepanto, was under Turkish
control. Even the islands, more difficult to wrench from Venetian maritime hands, were divided, and the long downward career of the Queen of the Adriatic was started.

From Serbia and Bosnia envoys had come to Constantinople, once it was taken, to promise submission, but John Hunyadi, ruler of Transylvania, had consistently encouraged resistance to the Ottomans, whenever possible, and had ambitions in Hungary as well. To thwart his schemes Mohammed led a strong force of men and guns against the White City, Belgrade, in 1456. He failed to enter the city, but Hunyadi died in camp, and the lands south of the Danube were left securely in the conqueror's hands. Matthias Corvinus, now effective master of Hungary, gained a respite by recognizing the fait accompli, and Bosnia, together with Herzegovina, so long linked to its fortunes, soon followed its Serbian neighbour into submission. Albania was overrun in 1468 on the death of the amiable and versatile ruffian, Skanderbeg, and the full significance of the victory at Constantinople was now apparent to the west. When on May 3rd, 1481, the Sultan died at the age of fifty-one, he was already threatening southern Italy, and he left the way open for his successors to threaten Vienna. All down the ages since, Constantinople has provided the key to what became known as the Eastern question, and to this day the events of 1453 powerfully influence the policy and aims of Moscow and the Mediterranean powers alike.

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