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Balkan or Border Warfare? Glimpses from the Early Modern Period

“Balkan’ had become shorthand for a geographic area but
also for a state of mind.”

Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers* (London 2001), 121

Abstract: At the beginning of the early modern period, the concept of Europe did not yet exist. Religion, not politics or geography, was the defining criterion. It was Christendom that people referred to – not Europe – when they wanted to introduce the concept of burden-sharing. In military terms, differences between Oriental and Occidental empires were less obvious; if anything, the Ottomans seemed to have a head-start in terms of centralization and professionalism. It was not the impact of Ottoman rule as such that created the conditions for “Balkan warfare”. It was the unsettled character of the borders between “East” and “West” that gave rise to a form of low-intensity conflict that might be said to provide a foretaste of what came to be known as Balkan warfare.

Keywords: Balkan warfare, Early Modern period, Ottomans, Habsburgs, Venice

Regular vs. irregular warfare

There is probably no hard and fast definition for what is often referred to as Balkan warfare, except a geographical one. If there is a popular image associated with that term, it is probably one not far from the anecdote recounted by Elizabeth Roberts in her history of Montenegro about the tribesman who offered to cut off his wounded (Russian) comrade’s head so that the Turks would not get it; and the postscript by a civilized Montenegrin teacher a few generations later, who pleaded with visitors to appreciate the improvement that his countrymen were no longer cutting off prisoners’ heads but only noses.¹

Put in structural terms, the salient features of “Balkan warfare” can probably be summed up as a preponderance of “irregular” troops and warfare, accompanied by a measure of brutality allegedly lacking in the more civilized or more central parts of Europe. In many ways this image of Balkan warfare is a

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¹ Elizabeth Roberts, *Realm of the Black Mountain* (London 2007), 172, 292.

product of the late nineteenth century when European warfare appeared to have been domesticated to brief, sharp, tournament-like engagements fought in an allegedly gentlemanly manner, like “duels among friends”.² We should not forget, however, that during the same period the Southern – rather than the Eastern³ – part of Europe was ravaged by insurrections and “counter-insurgency”, liberally sprinkled with massacres, from the original “guerrillas” of Napoleonic Spain⁴ and the Carlist Wars to the “brigantaggio” of the Italian “mezzogiorno” in the early 1860’s.⁵ The “Bulgarian horrors” of the late 1870’s that played such a prominent part in the lore of British election campaigns fit into that pattern rather easily.⁶ After the Congress of Berlin in 1878, multi-ethnic Macedonia⁷ continued to be racked by incursions of komitadji bands. Karl May, the popular German fiction writer, immortalized that image when he sent his first person hero Kara Ben Nemsi from the “Hollows of the Balkans” into the “Land of the Skipetars”.

That sort of nineteenth-century exceptionalism of course begs the question whether “Balkan warfare” in the early modern period was actually all that

² Egon Caesar Conte Corti, *Kaiser Franz Joseph I.*, vol. 2 (Graz 1952), 376 (Wrangel to Hess).

³ The Polish rising of 1830, at least, was conducted in a far more conventional style; whereas the one of 1863 was characterized as “one of the world’s earliest examples of urban guerrilla warfare” by Norman Davies, *God’s Playground: A History of Poland*, vol. 2 (Oxford 1981, 353). Jozef Pilsudski, *Erinnerungen und Dokumente*, vol. 3 (Essen 1936), 143, 159 – who tried to defend its legacy politically and morally, while criticizing its military activities – once characterized the 1863 rising as an “armed demonstration”, fuelled by the illusionary hope to trigger either an all-Russian revolution or an intervention by the Western Powers. Interestingly, for a Pole, Pilsudski felt he had to defend Russian terror against the civilian population as an appropriate activity that everybody who wanted to throttle a revolution – “be he Russian or English” – would always use (*ibid.* 144).

⁴ Charles Esdaile, *Fighting Napoleon: guerrillas, bandits, and adventurers in Spain, 1808–1814* (New Haven 2004).

⁵ Giordano Bruno Guerri, *Il sangue del Sud. Antistoria del Risorgimento e del Brigantaggio* (Milan 2010).

⁶ Richard Shannon, *Gladstone. Heroic Minister 1865–1898* (London 1999), 175, points out that initially Gladstone himself was quite surprised at the impact of the Balkan atrocities on British public opinion: “I have been astonished at its [the Bulgarian agitation’s] commencement and progress.” Hence “his lateness in perceiving it and tardiness in jumping on to it”. A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (London 2002), 404, notes that Gladstone’s “campaign-manager, Lord Rosebery, had attended Democratic rallies in the United States and modelled the meetings partly on American political conventions.” German novelist Dieter Schwanitz, *Der Campus* (Frankfurt/M. 1995) has also made use of the topic of the Bulgarian atrocities in his marvellous satire on trendy German university professors.

⁷ Because of Macedonia’s patchwork of ethnic groups, a multi-coloured fruit-salad was named after it in Mediterranean cuisine.

different from Central or Western European warfare.⁸ After all, “regular” troops were only just being invented by baroque states-in-the-making; the establishment of “standing armies” was a by-product of the ‘Forty Years’ War’ against Louis XIV (1672–1712);⁹ whereas the preceding Thirty Years’ War fought in the very centre of Europe certainly did have more than its share of atrocities of almost any imaginable sort. Massacres among “non-combatant” civilians were not confined to conflicts infused – or camouflaged – by religious tensions. Or, put the other way round: “The prospect of a sack, not salvation, underwrote every successful jihad or crusade.”¹⁰ In particular, the routine practice of allowing towns that were taken by storm to be sacked by the conquering army served the besieger’s interests as it provided a powerful incentive both for his men to fight – and for the enemy to surrender in time.¹¹ During the conquest of Buda in 1686 Imperial commanders took good care looting did not start before fighting had actually ended but then turned the town over to the victorious soldiers.¹²

It might be argued that most of the Balkans lent itself to irregular warfare because its mountainous terrain was unsuited to the ponderous manoeuvres of sizeable armies, including the artillery that could only be transported along the coast or the “broad Danube which provided the only easy route across Eastern Europe for any army equipped with siege weapons.”¹³ The Ottomans found Szigetvar a little bit too close to the Danube for comfort, as the Habsburg garrison sometimes tried to interrupt the traffic on the river. At one point during the 1550’s, the Ottomans complained that almost a thousand boats had been plundered by enemy raiders.¹⁴ The Imperial side could also float supplies downstream on the Drava, whereas the Turks tried to use the Sava to send siege guns

⁸ One more element missing in the early modern period was the sort of rural over-population that allowed men to be absent from the farm for extended periods throughout the year. That Malthusian situation was exacerbated by the early marriage age made possible by the networks of the extended, *zadruga*, family. Marie-Janine Calic, *Sozialgeschichte Serbiens 1815–1941. Der aufhaltsame Fortschritt während der Industrialisierung* (Munich 1994), 58–60.

⁹ Actually the term “Forty Years War” was coined a few years earlier by a French diplomat who correctly forecast a war of forty years if the Dutch persisted in their efforts to put a stop to French expansion in Flanders. See Herbert H. Rowen, “John De Witt and the Triple Alliance”, in Craig E. Harline, ed., *The Rhyme and Reason of Politics in Early Modern Europe. Collected Essays of Herbert H. Rowen* (Dordrecht 1992), 130.

¹⁰ Barnaby Rogerson, *The Last Crusaders. East, West and the Battle for the Centre of the World* (London 2009), 85.

¹¹ Lothar Höbelt, “Surrender in the Thirty Years War”, in Holger Afflerbach and Hew Strachan, eds., *How Fighting Ends. A History of Surrender* (Oxford 2012), 141–151.

¹² Ferenc Toth, ed., *Journal des campagnes du duc Charles V de Lorraine* (Paris 2017), 400.

¹³ Rogerson, *Last Crusaders*, 251.

¹⁴ James D. Tracy, “The Road to Szigetvar: Ferdinand I’s Defense of His Hungarian Borders, 1548–1566”, *Austrian History Yearbook* 44 (2013), 33; Klara Hegyi, “The Ottoman Network

upstream, towards Sisak and Zagreb.¹⁵ But they did find it rather difficult to carry heavy guns across the coastal mountain ranges when they wanted to lay siege to Venetian towns in Dalmatia. In 1657, they attempted to mount an attack on Kotor with less than a dozen cannon.¹⁶ On a large-scale map, the “thin green line” of Venetian strongholds along the Dalmatian coast might look dangerously exposed to the giant land mass of the Ottoman Empire. But the Venetians would usually manage to move reinforcements far more quickly by sea than their enemies could do so by land.

However, it would probably be going too far to reduce the notion of Balkan warfare to a matter of logistics only or to “deconstruct” it altogether. There do seem to be two elements connected with the presence of the Muslim Ottoman Empire that served to inject an extra element of brutality into early modern warfare, i.e. into the way combatants treated each other – rather than the way combatants treated the hapless civilians where rules of engagement were far less strict, as “the cultural and social assumptions of the soldiers themselves did little to restrain lawless behaviour against those who were outside of the bounds of internal loyalty and recognition.”¹⁷

First of all, the cultural divide between Orient and Occident, Muslim and Christian societies that is such a touchy subject of present-day polemics did to all intents and purposes worsen the fate of prisoners. True, there was a long-standing practice almost everywhere that prisoners of a certain stature would be ransomed by their captors. If someone offered to stand bail for them, they might even be furloughed to try and raise money on their own behalf.¹⁸ The brother of the Imperial Court Chamberlain, Count Hans Christoph Puchheim, who had been captured by the Swedes in 1639 spent years criss-crossing the “front” while trying to negotiate his release.¹⁹ In 1661, Transylvanians voting for a new Prince were faced with the choice of two candidates, Janos Kemeny and Michael Apafi, who had both become prisoners of war after George Rakoczi’s disastrous Polish campaign and had only recently returned from captivity in the Crimea.²⁰

of Fortresses in Hungary”, in Geza David & Pal Fodor, eds., *Ottomans, Hungarians and Habsburgs in Central Europe* (Leiden 2000), 164, 166.

¹⁵ James D. Tracy, *Balkan Wars. Habsburg Croatia, Ottoman Bosnia and Venetian Dalmatia, 1499–1617* (Lanham 2016), 176, 255, 262, 284, 291.

¹⁶ Marko Jacov, *Le guerre Veneto-Turche del XVII secolo in Dalmazia* (= Atti e Memorie della Societa Dalmata di Storia Patria, Venice 1991), 123. I want to thank Maddalena Guiotto (Trento) for bringing that book to my attention.

¹⁷ David Parrott, *The Business of War: Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge 2011), xxx, 36.

¹⁸ Geza Palffy, “Ransom slavery along the Ottoman-Hungarian frontier in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries”, in Geza David & Pal Fodor, eds., *Ransom Slavery along the Ottoman Borders (Early Fifteenth-Early Eighteenth Centuries)* (Leiden 2007), 57.

¹⁹ Lothar Höbelt, *Ferdinand III. Friedenskaiser wider Willen* (Graz 2008), 148 f., 161, 199.

²⁰ Maria Ivanics, “Enslavement, Slave Labour and the Treatment of Captives in the Crimean Khanate”, in David & Fodor, eds., *Ransom Slavery*, 193–219.

But what happened to the lowly “privates”? Unless they were also covered by some sort of exchange mechanism (or ‘cartel’), they were usually forced to take service with their captors. In that case they were sometimes transferred to a different “front” in order to decrease the likelihood that they would desert back to their former employers. Thus, Britons in French service who were captured at Tuttlingen in 1643 were sent to Hungary.²¹ During the ‘Glorious Revolution’ the remnants of James II’s Irish army were offered to the Habsburgs by William III who praised them effusively as “some of the choicest troops ever seen” but was so eager to get rid of them that he was even willing to pay for their transport to the continent.²²

However, while a number of renegades were prominent in the Ottoman service (quite apart from the janissaries, who were originally forcefully recruited from Christian families as boys), there is little evidence that prisoners of war from Christian armies were routinely inducted into Ottoman armies (or the other way round). The assumption is that more than the usual percentage of such prisoners of war were either summarily killed, or permanently enslaved by their captors for private gain.²³ Observers noted that as a result of the conquest of Buda by the Elector, the sedan bearers and gardeners at the Bavarian castle of Schleissheim consisted of Ottoman prisoners.²⁴ The Imperial resident was shocked when during the Candian War the Pasha of Bosnia not only sent 1800 heads as trophies to Constantinople after a battle in Dalmatia, but also made the few surviving prisoners do the dirty work of cutting their dead comrades heads off, cleaning them and treating them with salt so they would not rot on the way to the capital.²⁵

²¹ Höbelt, *Ferdinand III*, 218.

²² Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien (HHStA), Vorträge 7, 1689, fol. 28a (14 March 1689), based on a report by the Austrian resident in London about a conversation with William III. In fact, the Habsburgs would have preferred for them to be sent to Ragusa/Dubrovnik straight away. In fact, once the Irish arrived in Hamburg, they declared they had been deported against their will and would only fight for king James (HHStA, Kriegsakten 217, fol. 84-95, 102-5, reports 1 & 4 June 1689).

²³ That statement might, of course, be qualified by the observation that, technically at least, most of the Ottoman bureaucracy and armies consisted of slaves. Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge 2010), 92, argues that this kind of “political slavery” was actually the equivalent of feudal relations within the “patrimonial” stage of the Ottoman Empire: “The slave servants of the sultans became the new nobility of the land.”

²⁴ Janos J. Varga, “Ransoming Ottoman Slaves from Munich”, in David & Fodor, eds., *Ransom Slavery*, 169–181.

²⁵ HHStA, Turcica 126, Mai-Sept. 1654, fol. 48 v., 26 May 1654. Jacov, *Guerre Veneto-Turche*, 109, quotes a Turkish chronicle that puts the number at 1200 (plus 250 slaves). Previously, a

To put that episode into perspective: 1800 Venetians killed in battle did seem a disproportionate number considering the small size of the armies operating in Dalmatia.²⁶ Yet, contemporaries' disgust was directed less at the presumable massacre of prisoners than at its ritual character. Prisoners might be killed and robbed in Central Europe, too, but heads were publicly displayed as a deterrent only in the case of rebel leaders.²⁷ Indeed, that is presumably why the head of a famous turncoat, Giafer Aga alias Voin Tujcovich, who had apparently changed sides several times, was also sent to Venice a few years later.²⁸ The head of Hassan Pasha, who had been responsible for delivering 2000 heads to Constantinople a year earlier, was sent to Rudolph II as a trophy after the second battle of Sisak in 1593.²⁹ Of course, it might be argued that in the Ottoman worldview, all enemies of the padishah were supposed to be rebels. Still, killing prisoners, while at the same time organizing raids to bring in more captives, did seem to be economically counterproductive.

On the other side of the hill, Hungarian grandees used to sell Turkish captives to Venice as galley slaves at prices several times higher than the bounties paid to recruits which served as a standard per capita rate for ransom arrangements.³⁰ During the 1650's, when the Emperor wanted his Hungarian subjects to hand over their captives in preparation for a comprehensive settlement of grievances with the Turkish authorities, he was warned that most of these warlords would kill their prisoners rather than hand them over.³¹ Apparently, the Batthyany castle of Nemetujvar/Güssing was filled to overflowing with captives

Venetian report claimed the heads were put on display on the walls of the Ottoman outpost of Tenin.

²⁶ After the first battle of Sisak in July 1592, Hassan Pasha of Bosnia is said to have "sent 2000 heads to the Porte, with two hundred captives and five large cannon." (Tracy, *Balkan Wars*, 262)

²⁷ Just as there were massacres of rebels, like Alba's infamous reprisals in the Netherlands. Some sorts of ritual cruelty – like being burned at the stake vs. being impaled on stakes – were supposed to be specific to certain cultures, but were every now and then copied by their opponents.

²⁸ Jacov, *Guerre Veneto-Turche*, 125

²⁹ Tracy, *Balkan Wars*, 289.

³⁰ Geza Palffy, "Ransom Slavery, 35–83. The practice began when Venice started to buy convicts from its neighbours, including the Emperor, from the 1570s onwards, as their own citizens would no longer volunteer in sufficient numbers or accept to be drafted into service as oarsmen. Alberto Tenenti, *Venezia e i corsari 1580–1615* (Bari 1961), 147–163; Ruggiero Romano, "Economic Aspects of the Construction of Warships in Venice in the Sixteenth Century", in Brian Pullan, ed., *Crisis and Change in the Venetian Economy in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (London 1968), 65.

³¹ Höbelt, *Ferdinand III*, 243, 360.

during that period.³² Prisoners were freely sold and resold on both sides of the border. When a particular group of Hungarian captives was supposed to be ransomed after a longer period of tedious negotiations, the result was disappointing: only five could be located; the rest had in the meantime changed hands several times.³³ For all the brutality of the Thirty Years' War, no group of Christian, e.g. Swedish or French, prisoners seems to have met with quite such a fate, once they had survived the heat of battle (and pursuit). We do find reports, however, that some of the civilian hostages, e.g. Bosnian girls, captured by Christian raiders were also traded and sold as far away as Livorno.³⁴

The second element associated with the Ottoman way of warfare³⁵ was the widespread use of light cavalry of an East-European type. The function of those raiders from akindji to Cossacks can perhaps be compared to the bombing raids of the first half of the twentieth century: they were supposed to spread terror and ravage the hinterland of the enemy rather than hit any specific military targets. Alpine villages started building fortified churches as early as the 1470's to provide a minimum of protection in case of akindji raids. "On the border itself, the long-standing Ghazi tradition of incessant raiding brought low intensity attacks on a more or less permanent basis."³⁶ That sort of cavalry found its natural habitat not in the mountains of the Balkans but in the steppe of Eastern Europe but it was imported into the battle zone between Ottomans and Habsburgs – and sometimes re-exported to areas as far afield as the killing fields of Flanders. When Richelieu was on the point of declaring war on Spain in 1635, his counterpart, the Count-Duke of Olivares, had high hopes of the deterrent effect of Croatian and Cossack raids on French morale.³⁷ However, the Cossacks recruited by the Habsburgs during the 1630's were atypical in one respect: they insisted on proper and punctual payment.

³² Palfy, "Ransom Slavery", 41.

³³ HHStA, Turcica 126, May–Sept. 1654, fol. 93 v., 15 June 1654.

³⁴ Jacov, *Guerre Veneto-Turche*, 135; Tracy, *Balkan Wars*, 257, 342, mentions a report about Apulian merchants buying slave girls in Senj.

³⁵ Rhoads Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700* (London 1999).

³⁶ A. Wess Mitchell, *The Grand Strategy of the Habsburg Empire* (Princeton 2018), 125.

³⁷ Heinrich Günter, *Die Habsburger-Liga 1625–1635* (Berlin 1908), 436, 444 (Olivares to Onate, 16 Feb. & 7 April 1635); Lothar Höbelt, "Barocke Bomberflotten? Die 'polnischen Völcker' als habsburgische ergeltungswaffen 1635/36", in *Heeresgeschichtliches Museum* (Hg.), *Vom Söldnerheer zu UN-Truppen. Heerwesen und Krieg in Österreich vom 17. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (= *Acta Austro-Polonica* 3, Vienna 2011), 29–43; David Parrott, "The Causes of the Franco-Spanish War of 1635–59", in Jeremy Black, ed., *The Origins of War in Early Modern Europe* (Edinburgh 1987), 72–111.

Border warfare and the “Wild East” of Europe

The sort of “irregular” warfare associated with the Balkans does not just refer to guerrilla operations or cavalry raids accompanying regular campaigns but also includes the sort of border skirmishing that went on even during periods of peace or at least truces among the belligerents, a sort of “Wild East” of early modern Europe. In Balkan terms those belligerents consisted of the Ottoman Empire, the Republic of Venice and the Habsburgs (in their many incarnations from Holy Roman Emperors and Kings of Hungary to Dukes of Styria or Carniola). Actually “keeping the peace” on the porous and provisional borders of those three empires was first and foremost a matter of internal discipline, of asserting the centre’s authority over wayward frontiersmen.

If we ask ourselves which of those great powers was best qualified to exercise strict control over their vassals and subordinates, it is easy to spot the winner: in all likelihood it was Venice that was able to police its border best of all, the only cautionary note being that we know far less about Venetian warfare on land than about their glorious exploits at sea. As a city-state the Republic was used to running a tight ship. That is why Venetian diplomats were shocked to observe the tolerance Vienna emperors extended towards aristocrats accused of violating border agreements (or even of other criminal infractions): “In Germany one is not accustomed to inflict major penalties on gentlemen unless they are declared guilty of *lèse majesté*.”³⁸ As between Habsburgs and Ottomans, it is the Habsburgs, or rather their Hungarian (including Croatian) subjects who seem cast in the role of the main culprits. The sheer repetitiveness of restraining orders directed at Hungarian nobles to stop harassing the Turkish border garrisons is a tell-tale sign in that respect.³⁹

Still, in that case we are dealing with a difference of degree only. The Ottoman Empire did not always live up to its reputation as a disciplined if despotic centralized state, either. “While possessing the core of a standing army,

³⁸ HHStA, *Dispacci di Venezia*, vol. 89, no. 182, 18 June 1644: “[...] non accostumandosi in Germania di dar maggior castigo alli Cavalieri quando non sono dichiarati rei di Lesa Maesta.” In that case, the Venetian Ambassador was furious because the gentleman in question was Count Philipp Thurn, who as commander of the scenic Adriatic castle of Duino had opened fire upon Venetian ships (*Dispacci*, vol. 88, no. 97, 28 Nov. 1643). Fortunately for Austrian researchers, the dispatches of the Venetian ambassadors to the Imperial Court were copied by the Vienna archives before being returned to the Italians after 1866.

³⁹ While the amount of correspondence that survived in the collections of *Alte Feldakten* (AFA) in the Austrian War Archive (*Kriegsarchiv*) depends on the fortunes of the papers of individual commanders (there is very little e.g. on the wars against the Turks after 1683!), a short resume of the orders of the Aulic War Council can always be found in the “registratur” volumes of the “*Hofkriegsrat*”.

the system supporting it was unstable and contingent on victory.”⁴⁰ Quite apart from the mountain regions which it did not pay to administer properly, even in strategically important areas such as the river region between Vienna and Buda, standards of rule enforcement declined during the seventeenth century, especially during the interval between Murad IV’s death in 1640 and the rise of the Koprülü’s at the end of the 1650’s. Increasingly, centrifugal tendencies made themselves felt even in the one empire devoid of the feudal heritage that served to make “absolutism” such a questionable term in the rest of Europe.⁴¹ In the 1520’s, Luther had still warned German knights: “The Turk knows how to discipline and humiliate the nobility.”⁴² In the meantime, however, Western-European monarchies and Ottoman rulers seemed to be on converging tracks: European monarchies became more centralized at the same time as the Ottomans reached the outermost geographical limit of their expansion and fell prey to “Imperial overstretch.”⁴³

There is a fascinating exchange about common problems and different procedures to be found in the protocol of a meeting between an Imperial diplomat and the Pasha of Buda in 1652. The background to that visit was an increase in border raiding after 1648. The Peace of Westphalia in the West, coupled with signs of internal turmoil in the Ottoman Empire (like the successful janissary revolt against Sultan Ibrahim “the Mad” in 1648) had raised hopes among Hungarian nobles that the Habsburgs would use the opportunity to lead a crusade for the reunification of their kingdom. Military authorities in Vienna used that well-known longing to persuade the Hungarians to accept some 10,000 veterans of the Thirty Years’ War as reinforcements – not because they actually wanted to start a fight against the Turks but in order to shift the expense of their upkeep to the Hungarians.

In turn, among Hungarians nobles there was a strong undercurrent to push the Emperor into war against his will by provoking incidents over and above the usual expeditions to squeeze rent or tribute from their possessions beyond the provisional frontier running through Hungary. The Venetian am-

⁴⁰ Mitchell, *Grand Strategy*, 128.

⁴¹ Wolfgang Reinhard, *Geschichte der Staatsgewalt. Eine vergleichende Verfassungsgeschichte Europas von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich 1999), 51, argues the term has been “deconstructed” so much that it should no longer be used.

⁴² “Der Türke weiß den Adel zu mustern und zu demütigen” (Martin Luther: Vom Kriege wider den Türken).

⁴³ Tracy, *Balkan Wars*, 380, comes to a similar conclusion. Tezcan, *Second Ottoman Empire*, 197, 240, would argue that this “Second Empire” with its empowerment of local notables represented an improvement in terms of state-society relations. William Godsey, *The Sinews of Habsburg Power. Lower Austria in a Fiscal-Military State 1650–1820* (Oxford 2018), offers a somewhat similar argument for the Habsburg administration that knew when to rely on the cooperation – and the credit – of the estates.

bassador approvingly quoted a Hungarian aristocrat, Count Adam Forgach, the nephew of the Hungarian Palatine, Count Pal Pálffy. Forgach wanted to use every possible means to make the Emperor break with the Ottomans.⁴⁴ He argued for retaliation as the only possible means of defence against Turkish raiders who grew insolent if they did not have to fear any revenge (the report used the Italian term *vendetta* or “*vindita*”). The Emperor’s order to fight raiders only when they were caught “*in flagranti*” was impossible to execute. Only angels – or devils – might be able to do so.⁴⁵ Some of Forgach’s countrymen even added threateningly that if the Emperor did not declare war on Turkey, he was bound to lose the whole kingdom in a short time.⁴⁶

When Kara Murad, the then Pasha of Buda and former Grand Vizier, received Johann Metzger, a secretary of the Imperial War Council, he assured his visitor that the Turks had no grievances against the Germans, but regarded them as friends, as partners at least in what a later age might have called “peaceful coexistence”. In his view it was only the Hungarians that caused all the trouble.⁴⁷ But of course, once provoked, Turkish commanders could not be blamed for retaliating in kind. Once again, as with early strategic bombing doctrine, retaliation seemed to be the only available option. That sort of escalation had led to the Battle of Vezekeny, in present-day Slovakia, on 26 August 1652, famous because of the death of no fewer than four members of the powerful Esterhazy family in an ambush.⁴⁸

To demonstrate his good faith, Kara Murad Pasha offered to have the offending local commander, Mustafa Bey of Esztergom, beheaded in his guest’s presence if the Imperials would agree to do the same to Forgach, who was the commander of their border district north of Esztergom. This gracious offer proved to be embarrassing to the Imperial envoy. Gingerly, he tried to explain that Forgach could not be removed just like that. After all, as a member of an ancient noble family he actually owned the lands he was fighting for. If that is so, the Pasha replied, I have to say, my Mustafa is just as ancient and noble, too.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ HHStA, Dispacci 94, no. 154, 7 August 1648: “[...] vorrebbero in ogni maniera condur l’Imperatore a romper la guerra al Turco.”

⁴⁵ Kriegsarchiv (KA), AFA 135 VII/2, letter to Piccolomini, 13 July 1654.

⁴⁶ HHStA, Dispacci 96, no. 250, 16 April 1649: “[...] e sicuro di perdere in breve tempo tutto questo regno.”

⁴⁷ That attitude found a parallel a century earlier, in 1547, when Grand Vizier Rüstem Pasha had wanted to exclude the Zrinyi family from the truce of Edirne. (Tracy, *Balkan Wars*, 152)

⁴⁸ Laszlo Berenyi, “Die Schlacht bei Vezekeny (26. August 1652)”, *Burgenländische Heimatblätter* 64 (2002), 95–120; Lothar Höbelt, “Friedliche Koexistenz – unfriedliche Grenze: Der Hintergrund der Schlacht von Vezekeny 1652”, *Burgenländische Heimatblätter* 73 (2012), 1–34.

⁴⁹ HHStA, Turcica 125, Sept.-Dec. 1652, fol. 90 v., Metzger’s report of 23 Oct. 1652.

There is a footnote to that tongue-in-cheek offer, however. When rumours spread that Kara Murad wanted to have Mustafa Bey arrested nevertheless, the janissaries of Buda staged a mutiny. Mustafa left Buda quite jauntily and continued to be a thorn in the side of the Austrians for years to come.

The impression is that in practice, if not in theory, the autonomy of local commanders seems to have reached a similar stage on both sides of the border at that particular point in time. When referring to the last incidents along the Austro-Turkish borders in the early nineteenth century, Gunther Rothenberg commented: "This time, however, the incidents were not signs of an aggressive spirit, but merely the outward manifestations of the increasing disorganization and discontent in the Ottoman lands."⁵⁰ The same observation already holds true for mid-seventeenth century raiding when Ottoman centralism was no longer working and Habsburg centralism not yet. In both cases, the raiding on the frontier was also a result of trying to run a border on the cheap, with proper pay and provisions for the garrisons frequently withheld or in arrears. The small part of Hungary that remained in the Habsburg hands after the mid-sixteenth century was clearly unable to pay for more than at best a fourth of the frontier garrisons.⁵¹ As a result, many of the key fortresses were turned over to be administered by the neighbouring provinces of the Holy Roman Empire. Of course, "fortresses depended on supplies from populated hinterlands."⁵² Thus, on the Ottoman side, the situation seems to have improved after the hinterland of the garrisons had been expanded during the 1550s and 1560s.⁵³ Maybe the secret was "to fight as the Ottomans fought, by hiring low-paid raiders."⁵⁴ However, even on the Ottoman side, the economic situation seems to have deteriorated after the Long War of 1593–1606. David Parrott has summed up the dynamics of the "wild East" with respect to the Adriatic part of the Habsburg-Ottoman frontier: "The combination of a proportion of the male Uskok population performing virtually unpaid service in garrison, and the rest of the community dependent on land with limited agricultural potential, turned banditry and piracy

⁵⁰ Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Austrian Military Border in Croatia, 1522–1747* (Urbana 1960), 124 f.

⁵¹ Geza Palfy, "Border Defence Systems against the Ottoman Empire in Hungary", in David & Fodor, eds., *Ottomans, Hungarians and Habsburgs in Central Europe: The Military Confines in the Era of Ottoman Conquest* (Leiden, 2000), 41.

⁵² Tracy, "Road to Szigetvar", 28.

⁵³ Gabor Agoston, "The Costs of the Ottoman Fortress System in Hungary in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century", in David & Fodor, eds., *Ottomans, Hungarians and Habsburgs*, 211.

⁵⁴ Tracy, *Balkan Wars*, 166.

from activities connected with the defence of the frontier into a *modus vivendi*, with its own economic and social dynamics.”⁵⁵

The Uskoks settled in the area where all three Empires met in what has become a trouble-spot again in the late twentieth century, namely the Krajina and its surroundings, located at the crossroads between Venetian Dalmatia, Habsburg Croatia and Ottoman Bosnia. The implosion of the medieval kingdom of Hungary after the battle of Mohacs in 1526 had left a few isolated garrisons, precariously wedged between Venetian coastal strongholds like Zadar or Šibenik and the waves of the Ottoman advance. To make matters worse, at the very beginning, there was still a certain element of collusion between the Muslim superpower and their Venetian trading partners, both of them opposed to Habsburg hegemony in Europe (and in Italy, in particular). Accordingly, the Uskoks lashed out at both of them, but received only lukewarm and halting support from the Habsburgs. The first Uskok stronghold was Klis, a mountain fortress overlooking the harbour of Split. When Klis fell to the Ottomans in 1537, the centre of resistance moved to Senj on the Adriatic. Raiding could now also be conducted by sea.⁵⁶

Uskok herders and villagers were routinely uprooted and “displaced”. Both voluntarily and involuntarily, they moved from one side to another of an uncertain and shifting border. Their fighting men were recruited and dismissed according to the vagaries of great power politics in a three-cornered contest. Venice could only afford brief periods of fighting against the Turks, as between 1537 and 1540 or at the time of the Lepanto campaign in 1571–73. The Habsburgs in Vienna usually followed a more ambivalent strategy that combined a desire to avoid a full-scale confrontation with clandestine encouragement of anti-Turkish forces. The Habsburgs did not want to relinquish their claims on the whole of the Hungarian inheritance. That is why in 1562 they rejected a proposal to establish firm boundaries by dividing Hungary once and for all.⁵⁷ Thus, a broad frontier zone with overlapping claims of jurisdiction and tax-raising remained the norm. The cadet branch of the Habsburgs in Graz – with their links to powerful Croatian nobles – was even more committed to the defence of that frontier zone.

Venice, on the other hand, resented the raiding activities of the Senj Uskoks. In their 1573 treaty after the Battle of Lepanto, the Ottoman Empire had agreed not to send any of their warships into the Adriatic, in return for Venetian

⁵⁵ Parrott, *Business of War*, xxx (6).

⁵⁶ Tracy, *Balkan Wars*, 109, 160; Catherine W. Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj. Piracy, Banditry, and Holy War in the Sixteenth Century Adriatic* (Ithaca 1992). “Uskok” was the Serb term for refugee. Venetian reports spoke of Morlacchi.

⁵⁷ Tracy, *Balkan Wars*, 216. Maximilian II showed some interest in such a deal a few years later but by that time the offer had apparently been withdrawn.

protection of their commerce. Uskok activities threatened to undermine that agreement, or at least force Venice to pay indemnities to the Turks for the losses they had suffered at the hand of the raiders.⁵⁸ In 1615–17, Venice even fought an inconclusive war against the Styrian branch of the Habsburgs to force a resettlement of the Uskoks. Ominously, the Spanish viceroy of Naples, the Duke of Osuna, came to the Uskoks' help and actually fought a pitched battle against the Venetian fleet in the waters around Korčula.⁵⁹

Thus, the constellation of the 1520's, with Venice and the Turks combining forces against the Habsburgs, seemed to have come alive again. A generation later, however, both governments had switched sides, in their attitudes towards those doughty exiles and pirates. After the mid-1640's, the Vienna government of Ferdinand III, hard pressed as it was during the last years of the Thirty Years' War, desperately tried to keep on the good side of the Turks who reciprocated by restraining the Transylvanians from adding their forces to the Franco-Swedish anti-Habsburg coalition.⁶⁰ Venice, however, involved in the early stages of the Candian war, tried to stir up trouble along the "wild East" of the Habsburg Empire and thus create a "second front" for the Ottomans.⁶¹

Sources do offer us fascinating glimpses of Venetian agents recruiting Catholic Bosnians for a sabotage attack on the crucial bridge at Osijek⁶² or encouraging the Archbishop of Esztergom to subvert the peace the Emperor was trying to uphold.⁶³ The Venetians also bribed some of the powerful Croatian lords along the border, like the Frangipan or the Zrinyis, to continue raiding the Turks or at least provide the Venetian army with extra recruits.⁶⁴ The Emperor did not want to compromise Habsburg neutrality and banned these enterprises. In practice, though, his orders were difficult to enforce as the Zrinyis were in

⁵⁸ Mario Nani Mocenigo, *Storia della Marina Veneziana de Lepanto alla caduta della Repubblica* (Venice 1935), 93; Tenenti, *Venezia e i corsari*, 15.

⁵⁹ Luis M. Linde, *Don Pedro Giron, duque de Osuna. La hegemonia española a comienzos del siglo XVII* (Madrid 2005), 147; Nani Mocenigo, *Storia della Marina Veneziana*, 99–112.

⁶⁰ The influential Spanish ambassador, the Duke of Terranova, was even supposed to have said that at a pinch the Austrians would have to allow Turkish troops to cross their territory to attack the Venetian "terra ferma", rather than be involved in the fighting themselves (HHStA, Dispacci 91, no. 400, 12 May 1646).

⁶¹ Unfortunately, there is apparently no modern history of the Candian War. See G. Cozzi, "Venezia nello scenario europeo (1517–1699)", in G. Galasso, ed., *Storia d'Italia*, vol. XII: *La Repubblica di Venezia nell'età moderna 2* (Torino 1992), 5–200.

⁶² HHStA, Dispacci 96, no. 247, 9 April 1649, quoting a letter by the archbishop.

⁶³ HHStA, Dispacci 91, no. 474, 7 Dec. 1646.

⁶⁴ Nicolas Zrinyi had already offered his services to Venice in 1639 when the first sign of trouble with Turkey appeared on the horizon (HHStA, Dispacci 82, Nr. 119, 5 Feb. 1639).

possession of an Adriatic port of their own, Buccari.⁶⁵ Only a few years before, the Zrinyis had still been eyed suspiciously by the Venetians as likely to provide the Pope with troops to be used against Venice during the so-called War of Castro.⁶⁶ But the Ottoman attack on Crete turned those troublesome neighbours into potential allies of the embattled “Serenissima”.

These intrigues were linked with another aspect of Balkan military establishments, the so-called Military Frontier in Croatia, a cordon sanitaire that formed a curious example of religious heterodoxy within the Counter-Reformation Habsburg Monarchy, as it was administered by Styrian officers, most of them Lutherans in the early stages, and manned by mainly Orthodox refugees from the Ottoman Empire. This military enclave was heartily disliked by the Catholic Croatian aristocrats like the Frangipanis who accused its officers of harbouring runaway serfs. As a result, whenever the threat of war seemed to have receded, the Croatian estates petitioned for the abolition of the Military Frontier (or at least for a reduction of its privileges). Usually, the Vienna Court would make soothing noises in their direction – until a new crisis served to remind them of the usefulness of the Military Frontier, which proved its value not just as an “antemurale” against the Turks but as a bulwark against unruly Hungarians, too. Thus, Ferdinand III had been on the point of listening to the complaints of the Croatians when the war with George Rakoczi erupted in 1644; as a result, the “graničari” (frontiersmen) returned to favour. The same mechanism came into play in 1703/4 when his son Leopold I faced the rebellion of Ferenc Rakoczi, George’s grandson.⁶⁷

In the meantime, however, the Habsburgs had managed to reconquer Hungary. In 1698, after the Battle of Zenta and the peace of Rijswyk in the West, the Ottomans finally proved willing to enter into peace negotiations on the basis of *uti possidetis*. Most of the military experts in Vienna were keen on retaining the fortress of Peterwardein that would help to close the Danube to any Ottoman advance in future conflicts. Interestingly, there was a dissenting voice, based on the experiences of decades of border warfare. Count Ulrich Kinsky, the leading statesman of the monarchy at the time, argued that to avoid any future conflicts, it was far more important to turn the frontier zone quite literally into a desert: thus, in the future, the sort of raiding that had always sparked wars in the past, would be impossible. As a result, friction would be minimized and both

⁶⁵ HHStA, Dispacci 91, Nr. 374 & 375, 10 March 1646.

⁶⁶ Lothar Höbelt, “Der Kaiser, der Papst, die Lega und Castro: Eine Fallstudie zur österreichischen Neutralität”, *Römische historische Mitteilungen* 47 (2005), 217.

⁶⁷ Tracy, *Balkan Wars*, 305; Rothenberg, *Military Border* I, 77–79, 98–99. The 1643/4 dispute pitted the Frangipanis against the founder of the Schwarzenberg fortune, Count Louis, in his capacity as Colonel of the Varaždin border district.

sides would be able to enjoy “safety and quietness”.⁶⁸ A supplementary clause of the peace treaty was also supposed to provide for the return of all prisoners without any ransom. If owners refused to return their prisoners they were to be fined 200 ducats for every male and 300 ducats for every female prisoner.⁶⁹

Summary: Europe’s “Frontier”

Differences between European and extra-European styles of warfare certainly sharpened during the nineteenth century. The internal decomposition of the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, coupled with a certain infusion of European-style nationalism and a background of over-population, helped to put the Balkans into a sort of intermediate position on that scale. The Ottoman Empire was neither a great nor a European power – and yet, to some extent, it must still be regarded as both.

At the beginning of the early modern period, the concept of Europe did not yet exist. Religion, not politics or geography, was the defining criterion. It was Christendom that people referred to – not Europe – when they wanted to introduce the concept of burden-sharing. In military terms, differences between Oriental and Occidental empires were less obvious; if anything, the Ottomans seemed to have a head-start in terms of centralization and professionalism. It was not the impact of Ottoman rule as such that created the conditions for “Balkan warfare”. It was the unsettled character of the borders between “East” and “West” that gave rise to a form of low-intensity conflict that might be said to provide a foretaste of what came to be known as Balkan warfare. That endemic conflict included a naval component of Mediterranean piracy that stretches from the heyday of Khair-ed-Din Barbarossa and the Maltese knights in the early 1500s⁷⁰ to the American Marines and Tripoli in the early 1800s;⁷¹ there was the

⁶⁸ HHStA, Turcica 166, fol. 153 v. (conference on 17 August 1698). Count Ernst Rüdiger Starhemberg as President of the Aulic War Council, heatedly argued against Kinsky’s idea of abandoning Peterwardein (ibid., fol. 167–175). Of course, Peterwardein could also be regarded as a springboard for an attack on Belgrade in any future war.

⁶⁹ HHStA, Turcica 166, fol. 177 v., Instructions for the Imperial delegates to the peace conference, 26 Sept. 1698.

⁷⁰ Rogerson, *Last Crusaders*, 148 ff.; Rinaldo Panetta, *Pirati e Corsari. Turchi e barbareschi nel Mare Nostrum. XVI secolo* (Milan 1981); Miguel Angel de Burnus, *Los Barbarroja. Corsarios del Mediterraneo* (Madrid 2004), 106 (“corso di subsistencia”); Bruno Cianci, *Le Navi della Mezzaluna. La Marina dell’Impero Ottomano (1299–1923)* (Bologna 2015); Michel Fontenay, “Corsaires de la foi ou rentiers du sol? Les Chevaliers de Malte dans le ‘corso’ méditerranéen au XVII siècle”, *Revue d’Histoire moderne et contemporaine* 35 (1988), 361–84.

⁷¹ At the Congress of Vienna, Castlereagh was asked why Britain, who had tried to keep on good terms with the Barbary States during her wars with France and Spain, was apparently

unsettled border that for a century and a half – from 1541 to 1686 – cut across the overlapping claims of Hungarian nobles and Ottoman administrators;⁷² finally, there was the Ukrainian steppe where Tatar slave-raiding “was a nearly constant threat and inflicted heavy costs.”⁷³

Maybe the Ukraine was the authentic “Wild East” of the emerging Europe. Slave-raiding was said to be “the only sure means of subsistence” for the Crimean Khanate. The Ukraine and Russia did provide a flow of white slaves that is sometimes overlooked when concentrating on the early modern Atlantic slave-trade only.⁷⁴ The character of the Hungarian “frontier” was far less one-sided. Its endemic small-scale warfare cannot be blamed on one side alone.⁷⁵ Border raiding did supply an extra source of income for underpaid garrisons but cannot be said to constitute a mainstay of the economy. In Croatia the Habsburgs tried to keep control of events by instituting the famous Military Frontier; in Hungary proper no such cordon sanitaire was established before the eighteenth century. The Ottomans had effectively destroyed the Serb and Bulgarian nobility; in Hungary, they only succeeded in driving the aristocracy into a sort of internal exile in the Northern and Western counties of the realm. But the Hungarian magnates and their private militias retained the power to

only concerned with abolishing the international trade in black slaves, see C. Northcote Parkinson, *Britannia Rules. The Classic Age of Naval History 1793–1815* (London 1977), 174.

⁷² Rothenberg, *Military Border* I, 124, notes that “the last flurry of Turkish incursions” actually took place between 1835 and 1846, long after Metternich had proved himself to be a staunch defender of the Ottoman Empire. See Friedrich Spigl, *Repressaliengefechte an der kroatisch-türkischen Grenze in der Zeit von 1809–1845* (Vienna 1882). In my youth, the Austrian public was treated to a romantic TV-version of that milieu in a series about Omar Pasha alias Michael Latas (1806–1871), an Austrian officer who switched sides to join the Turks in 1828.

⁷³ Brian L. Davies, *Warfare, State and Society on the Black Sea Steppe, 1500–1700* (London 2007), 23.

⁷⁴ Ivanics, “Crimean Khanate”, 193; Rogerson, *Last Crusaders*, 95, claims: “In this period the soft steppe-land underbelly of Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine and Southern Russia was milked of about twenty thousand sad souls a year by Tartar raiders.” Charles King, *A History of the Black Sea* (Oxford 2004), 116, reduces that figure to 10,000 a year for the 16th century; the Cossacks favourite way of retaliation, at least during the 17th century, was piracy in the Black Sea. For a general overview see Manfred Pittioni, ed., *Die muslimische Sklaverei. Das “vergesene Verbrechen”* (Vienna 2018); Murray Gordon, *Slavery in the Arab World* (New York 1989).

⁷⁵ Marc L. Stein, *Guarding the Frontier. Ottoman Border Forts and Garrisons in Europe* (London 2007), has based his study explicitly on a comparison with the American concept of “frontier”, whereas Rothenberg, *Military Border* I, 125, emphasized the difference between “the seeds of democracy and social mobility” in Frederick J. Turner’s thesis and the “highly despotic and all-pervading paternal despotism” of the Austrian version; however, at least in the early stages the status of Austrian *granicari* obviously did have its attractions vis-à-vis Croatian serfs.

hit back. Thus, old-style European feudal customs had at least as much to do with the lawless character of the Hungarian “frontier” as the Asiatic traditions attributed to the Ottomans.⁷⁶

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⁷⁶ Ironically, during the 19th century the lack of an intermediate ruling-class – except for the Orthodox Church – may have reinforced the violent and chaotic nature of Balkan guerrilla warfare. In the early modern period it was the other way round.

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